THE TWO MOONS OF TRANQUILLIA — by ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

"A land that couldn't be . . . . yet was."

JANUARY

Weird Tales

15¢

QUINN

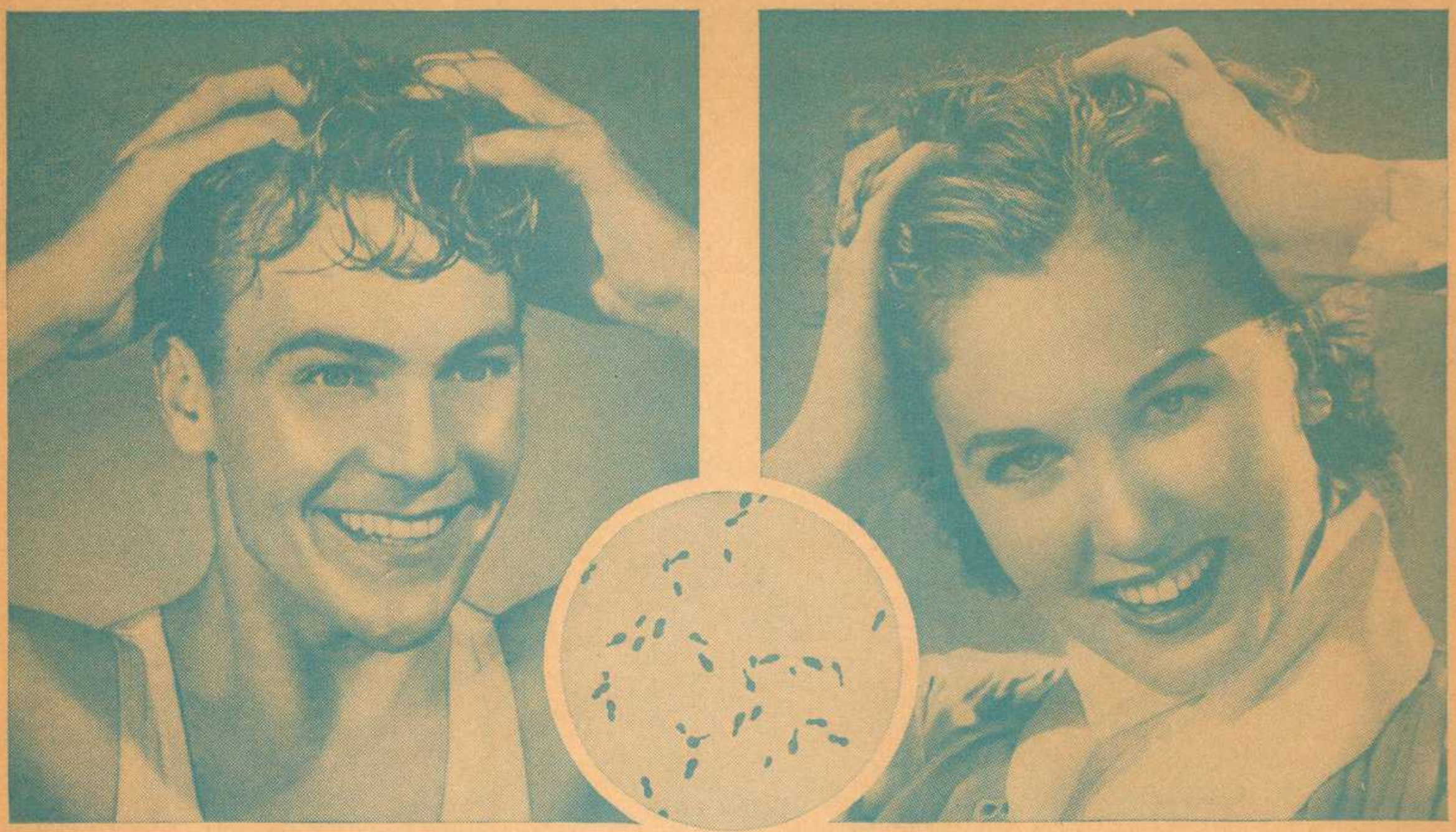
DERLETH

BLOCH

To live he must outwit the ageless guile of an ancient civilization.

QUEST OF A NOBLE TIGER

by Frank Owen



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ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1943 Cover by A. R. Tilburne

NOVELETTES

THE TWO MOONS OF TRANQUILLIA . . . . . Arthur Leo Zagat 34
He desperately wanted to see his son—but perhaps the boy was not to be found in this world

THE EAGER DRAGON . . . . . Robert Bloch 88
He was bequeathed a dragon's egg and thought the whole affair was ridiculous—until the egg hatched

SHORT STORIES

QUEST OF A NOBLE TIGER . . . . . Frank Owen 6
The flyer had fought with great courage against cruel enemies, but never before against such ageless guile

THE STATUE . . . . . James Causey 20
An innocent, lovely creation of art it was, with murderous hate in its pink marble heart

ONE-MAN BOAT . . . . . Alice-Mary Schnirring 27
Don't sail her alone, they warned, or you'll be shipmates with death

SAY A PRAYER FOR HARVEY . . . . . John J. Wallace 64
He was the little man who was there—anywhere he wanted to be

BINDINGS DELUXE . . . . . David H. Keller 70
It isn't polite to ridicule a woman. Nor is it at all safe, as you will find out!

SEVENTH SISTER . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 76
The elders laughed and remarked that nobody believed in conjures or voodoo any more—but under a quarter moon, who can tell?

McELWIN'S GLASS . . . . . August Derleth 105
The strange tale of a magician who discovers a sure way of seeing into the past and future—and wishes he hadn't

REPAYMENT . . . . . Seabury Quinn 112
The snakes resent wrong charming—the old man chattered—they will repay thee for this insult!

VERSE

AFTER AN AIR RAID . . . . . Dorothy Quick 26

SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS . . . . . Irwin J. Weill 68

THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB 120

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental

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173
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Vol. 36, No. 9

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.* LAMONT BUCHANAN, *Associate Editor.*

The Magic *of Mind*

WERE the great personages of the past victims of a stupendous hoax? Could such eminent men of the ancient world as Socrates, Pericles, and Alexander the Great have been deluded and cast under the spell of witchcraft—or did the oracles whom they consulted actually possess *a mysterious faculty of foresight?* That *the human mind can truly exert an influence over things and conditions* was not a credulous belief of the ancients, but a known and demonstrable fact to them. That there exists a wealth of infinite knowledge just beyond the border of our daily thoughts, which can be aroused and commanded at will, was not a fantasy of these sages of antiquity, but a dependable aid to which they turned in time of need.

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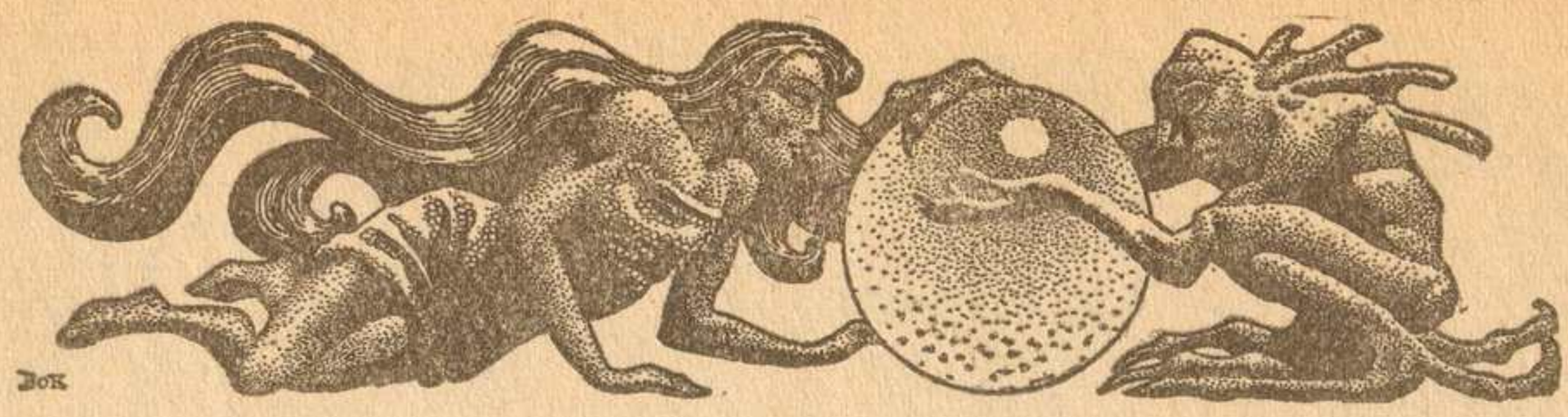

THE SHAPE OF THRILLS TO COME

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by Verne Chute

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VOCATION

by Seabury Quinn

SHE who had vowed her birthright away before she knew what life meant now cried out to the strange Presence lurking in the shadows!

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

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WEIRD TALES

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Quest of a Noble Tiger

For the unknown has ever been fearsome since the first man trod gingerly upon a strange new world

By FRANK OWEN

THE thing plunged downward like a dark star falling to earth. A moment before it had been Richard Trent, a Yank flying for China. Then in the space of the trembling of a leaf, machine-gun bullets had shattered the night's still blackness. His gasoline caught fire and the "Tomahawk" was enveloped in flames. In a split second, he had jumped clear of the plane, striking his head sharply as he did so. He was unconscious before he could pull the rip-cord of his parachute. And so he dropped through space, unaware that his body was hurtling toward the dust of a parched earth. His plane had been flying at eighteen thousand feet.

The air was bitingly cold and it served as a stimulant to revive him. He opened his eyes. Down, down, down he plunged. It was difficult for him to pull his thoughts together. His brain was in chaos. Memory eluded him. His hand went mechanically to the rip-cord and the parachute opened up like a white cloud above him. Against the sky it had a luminous quality, the reflection of starlight. There was no moon.

A strong wind was blowing, stalling his descent. Often he drifted many miles though he was in no condition to calculate direction. Nevertheless he was aware that he was drifting but he was not alarmed. He had been flying at approximately three hundred miles per hour, when his plane was attacked. Before leaping into space he had cut down the speed. His head ached viciously, and blood was trickling down his face from a gash in his forehead. The wound gave him no pain. Otherwise he was uninjured. Only that sharp headache annoyed him. It nauseated him but the cold air felt good against his forehead. Occasionally, the descent of the parachute would be arrested by a sudden vicious upswing of a wind channel, as though Kuan Yu, the God of War were striking out with his fists, flaying the very air itself even as the entire earth was being churned by his huge iron heels. Once the parachute collapsed and billowed around his head, for he was falling upward, but as it enshrouded him like folds of white cloud, he abruptly plunged downward again at a terrifying speed. Once more the parachute mushroomed and his descent was gentle and reasonably calm. But now he noticed a strange phenomenon. Silently one by one, the stars were disappearing into a terrifying void of blackness. There was little dampness in the air despite its coldness so no storm was approaching. Yet the stars continued to be blotted out as though they were white flowers and the gentle, smiling God of Longevity was walking about the blue meadows of the sky and gathering them as he walked.

Soon all color and brilliance was gone from the night, and only bleak, desolate blackness remained. Man drinks light with the atmosphere, so it was that Richard Trent's mouth felt parched, dry. Fear drove the moisture from his throat, until he could not have needed drink more if he had been in a Gobi sandstorm. But one single star visible in the dark would have slaked his thirst.

Meanwhile the descent had become more rapid. The cold grew less penetrating but the peril seemed to increase. For months Richard Trent had been a Flying Tiger. His exploits were world news. He had faced death in its cruelest forms without flinching. He had laughed in face of danger, yet now he was afraid when there was nothing to fear; afraid of blackness when he had crept about Chinese villages feeling his way along, not even a candle visible, and had never given it a thought. Now, without reason, horror, biting, in-

credible was eating into the very marrow of his bones.

HOW long he could have stood the suspense of an unknown terror, as though he were falling into a deep pit and the earth was closing in, is problematical, had his descent not abruptly ceased. He struck with a jolt and the parachute dragged him along a few feet. Even in the blackness, he found no difficulty disentangling himself. Thereafter he lay prone, endeavoring to draw his scattered wits together, and as he lay there gradually the panic abated. Even the air was calm, devoid of evil spirits. Fool, that he was! Flying Tiger! Bah! No Flying Tiger could have nerves like that. Yet the unknown has ever been fearsome since the first man trod gingerly upon a strange new world. Nearby he could hear the sound of a river splashing and gurgling along, a swift current that had little of the eerie about it. He was lying so close to it that occasionally a few drops splashed upon his face. For a moment he had the intense desire to rise and leap into it, to end this farce of terror, but for some unknown reason he refrained. However, he could not move far because of the danger of falling into the subterranean river or a rock crevice. With a start, he uttered a cry that echoed and danced over the rocks as it sped into distance. What if he had fallen into an extinct volcano? He would not be discovered in a thousand years. Then reason reasserted itself. Wherever this spot may be, it was not within an extinct volcano for the air was delightfully fresh and cool. Besides, a volcano is never extinct, it merely accidentally gets corked up by the force of its own spew.

He rolled over and lay on his back, to wait for daylight or whatever might come. And now above him he could see the stars through a narrow ribbon of light, and they cleansed his mind of the last vestige of fear. Whatever it was, he'd face it. He was curious too. Adventure always has a pleasing expression. Since the air was so clear he was in no danger of suffocation. The water of the river was probably fresh, so he was in no danger of thirst. Before hunger could overtake him, he'd be able perhaps to climb back into the world of men once more. Without doubt, he had fallen into a mighty crevice in the rocks, though why the air was so sweet to breathe was an enigma. Why was it not fetid and vile if the walls were narrow, and filled slightly with the sweepings of the wind? He felt about him. The rock was as smooth as a marble road that was kept in good repair. There was no vestige of sand, neither were there dead leaves. Evidently nearby there must be an entrance to this cavern with the skylight window. He had the feeling that people were in the vicinity. He was not alone. His courage returned to him, gone were the stupid fears that had momentarily gripped him. He stretched out and yawned. He longed for a cigarette, and even though he had a pack with him, he made no attempt to light one. Better to wait till daylight before doing so. It was never wise to attract attention. Even though he felt that he was not in hostile territory, his natural caution exerted itself. A cigarette attracts enemy fire. Why make a target of oneself? The sweetest morsel of life is that which a man tastes when he is in danger.

Somehow, he had no regrets. This was adventure. Perhaps he had run across, or rather fallen into a natural air raid shelter that nature had kindly equipped for just such an emergency as China was facing. Why it even had clear, fresh, running water.

He smiled ruefully. What a pity if it should prove to have no exit. Still the thought brought him no dismay. He could see the stars above. If there was

no other means of egress, he'd journey to the stars.

The solitude was friendly. Perhaps the belief that all was well was only an illusion, but illusion has a sweet-tongued voice. It lulled him to sleep without his knowing. And in his sleep, he dreamed that a voice kept whispering to him over and over again, "This is the hour of mist-feeding."

HE AWAKENED much refreshed. Curiously he gazed about him. Perhaps this, too, was a dream, for he was lying in a comfortable bed in a luxuriously silken-draped yellow room in which a single lantern burned with a cheerful, subdued glow. It was a room in which one might give himself over to the enjoyment of solitude. On the air floated a faint suggestion of sandalwood and musk. He gazed down at the coverlet, rich yellow silk embroidered with the dragon emblem. In the days when China was an Empire such a covering was reserved only for the Emperor. He smiled ruefully. Perhaps it was fitting, for in this shadowy hour of mist-feeding, somehow he had become a Lord of Dust, an Emperor of Dreams. Some echo of doubt, brought him up shortly. He was undoubtedly in delirium, feasting on beauty as his life ebbed away. But this was ridiculous, too, for he had not been injured in any way. He grasped at logic, but it failed him. This was the stuff that dreams are made of, there was no place for reality in this enchanting room. Nevertheless, he refused to be disturbed. If this was the fringe of death it was indeed a beautiful adventure. But that was all rot, for he was hungry. Does the spirit detached from the body yearn for food? If such a state exists, would it not be beyond hunger, beyond thirst, beyond desire? Those were mighty comforting questions to have about in this strange hour, for of one thing he was sure, his hunger was real though all else be but wraiths and visions.

With a start, he became aware that in a shadowy corner, an old man sat as though waiting—for what he dared not guess. And as he peered intently at the ancient figure every detail of his face became clear to him—like old parchment, as lined and wrinkled as a dried fig. But his eyes were as sharp as sword's points. The most surprising thing of all was that the ancient one did not look Chinese. Perhaps he was a native of those forgotten lands where men and women live and die magnificently and mysterious strangers knock at moonlit doors.

And then, accidentally, the eyes of Richard Trent met those of the stranger, and remained as though bound by a spell —an instant only—then the ancient one turned his eyes away and the spell was broken.

Trent's interest had been fired to fever pitch. In that glance there had been no hostility, only the reflection of a strong personality. Bah! It was only a hypnotic trick. Trent's eyes were already large with wonder, ready to be swayed by anything. Another time he must be on guard, exert his own influence. He must live up to the reputation of the Flying Tigers.

When the stranger spoke his voice was soft and gentle. He spoke English with little trace of accent.

"My name is Mu Lin, I bid you welcome to my humble home."

"I am Richard Trent, an American volunteer, flying for China. I don't know how I came here, nor why I am here, but I am gratified anyway. However, if this is a humble home my eyes would not be able to stand the brilliance of a palace."

"A house is humble when its occupants understand and appreciate the value of humility. He is rich who is well satisfied. I think of Su Wu, the Shepherd. In the market, Su Wu sold bean curd. He sold it

for nineteen years and saved three dollars. He married a young wife and passed the New Year happily. He was a very rich man. . . . But come, arise, you must be hungry. You will need much food to make you strong for the dangers that lie ahead."

"Dangers, I know of no dangers."

"That is regrettable, for death stares you in the face."

"Fine, that proves at least that I'm not dead, or dying or tossing about in delirium."

"No, I can assure you you are in perfect health. I found you lying by the Black Dragon River, so I brought you to my house."

"So there is an exit from this cave."

"Several and death is one of them. I will show you the way. However, for your guidance, be it known that my house is within the cavern. How you came unto my people I have no way of knowing."

"The explanation is simple. I came down by parachute when my plane was destroyed, and, since your house is near the Black Dragon River, it wouldn't be exaggerating to say I fell through your skylight."

"Your words are not without a substance of humor but the incident is regrettable nonetheless."

"I prefer to call it fortunate and I am grateful."

"Is a condemned man grateful for the rope that hangs him?"

"What's that to do with me?"

"Perhaps much."

"What fantastic stuff is this? Are you threatening me? I don't scare easily. My squadron of flyers were and still are known as Flying Tigers."

"And you have done great work for China. For that we shall honor you."

"Thanks."

"Unfortunately, soon thereafter you must die."

"I assure you I intend to keep on living. I've wiggled out of worse spots than this. But what have I done? What law have I broken?"

"You've invaded our solitude. For ages we have been people of legend. Come, let us go into my library for a moment and I will read a short passage from one of the endless stream of books on China written by your people. Odd how you Americans can write so much about us when you know so little. I spend many a droll half hour reading over these merrie tales. So many of your people are patronizing about the Chinese. We only taught you the Golden Rule, gave you the first printed book, the first paper, the first ink, the first silk, the first tea—"

"But alas," broke in Trent ruefully, "what good are all these great gifts if I cannot live to enjoy them."

"I am amazed that you are so opposed to dying, when you can die for a great principle—in order that our solitude will not be violated."

"Sounds a bit selfish if you ask me."

"Not at all. There was once an Indian philosopher who spoke for all men when he said, 'Ah, brother, you will never know the blessing of doing nothing and thinking nothing; and yet, next to sleep, that is most delicious. Thus we were before our birth, thus we shall be after death!' "

AS HE spoke, Mu Lin drew aside a curtain and they entered a library, large in extent but very homelike. Beside comfortable chairs scattered about the room were convenient tables piled with books while yellow lanterns burned above in the best position to give proper light. Mu Lin went to a bookshelf and took down the volume he wanted.

"This book," he said, "was published about a hundred years ago but it will serve its purpose. It gives only a few lines

about us, but enough. Let me read to you, 'In the mountainous districts of China there are magic streams and wonderful caves, which are the scenes of mythical and legendary tales without number; many of these have great interest for the student of folklore. In one of these curious caves there are many chambers and exquisite formations of colored rock produced by the action of water in past ages. The people tell of a strange race having white faces and red hair, who came down the rapids in ancient times and took possession of these caves and pillaged all the neighborhood land. From whence they came and to what race they belonged was never known, but when they were satisfied with their booty they vanished into the land of mystery.' "

Mu Lin finished reading, closed the book, placed it back on the shelf. "That will give you some idea what I mean. Others have told the story in somewhat different fashion but all agree we are only a myth. Are we at fault if we desire to remain apart from the world in a Utopian Elysium of our own chosing. Among my people hatred, greed, and modern civilization cluttered up with motor cars, yachts and such worries are unknown. But we love nature in all her exquisite forms and caprices. Our women are beautiful. Life is calm. There is no envy. Such an ideal state has been menaced by your accidental plunging down into our midst. You must die gently and without pain. We'll grant you a perfumed death if you prefer."

"The death I prefer is from old age."

"That isn't quick enough."

"I'm in no hurry."

"We are not so patient. You must cease to exist within a fortnight. Why are you so stubborn? Why a man should protest about dying when it is the supreme adventure in life, is an enigma. But enough of this playing around with words. Let us not waste time while the lentils burn. A small repast is ready for us. You will join me at rice."

"At anything as long as it is food. Don't forget I'm a guest. No poison."

"Did I not say you would be honored ere you were destroyed?"

"Yes, you did say something about that, but save your medals. I might escape."

"I doubt it. The Black Dragon River flows only under the earth. It never emerges."

"No matter. I can't swim."

"That is well."

They walked through a series of rooms, each more gorgeous than the last, filled with fragile porcelains, carved jades, fine brocades, lanterns shaped like unto the loveliest flowers, splendid bronzes, lacquers and lapis lazuli. Trent longed to linger, but Mu Lin urged him forward.

There were no doors to any of the rooms, only embroidered silk and tapestry curtains. And always there was a fragrance in the air, ever changing—wistaria and musk, jasmine and nutmeg.

In one room a table had been set for them.

"Be seated," said Mu Lin, "and may you enjoy abundant health."

"I hope you do nothing to disturb my digestion."

"In this hour of rice, you are in no danger."

Trent seated himself at the table. Before joining him, Mu Lin put on a gorgeous coat, embroidered medallions of yellow and red on a field of darkest blue. Along the skirt of the coat was a conventional wave design. There was no border or collar. The brilliant yellow sleeves were colorfully embroidered — flowers, birds, deer, and the heavenly Dog of Foh. The blue cap had a pearl button.

"I never drink tea," explained Mu Lin, "unless attired in ritual robes." He seated himself at the table. "Tea is liquid jade, the medicine that has saved Chinese civili-

zation. Where are the Greeks, the Romans, the early Egyptians? They were not tea-drinkers. And they have perished. All those who would prepare tea should heed the Ch'a-ching (Tea Classic): 'The bubbles should reach the size of lobster's eyes but on no account should they be permitted to grow to resemble those of large fish. To do so would be to boil the water until it lost its original freshness of life.' "

A servant entered and placed a tea service before each of them. The fragile cups were transparent green in order that the light, shining through them, might reveal the delicate coloring of the tea.

Trent said nothing as Mu Lin poured the liquid into the cups.

"Let us drink," he said and his voice seemed far away.

Trent sipped the golden beverage. It coursed through his veins like rarest wine but with a far better taste. It was a soul-satisfying moment. Somehow he felt that he could trust Mu Lin anywhere despite the doleful sentence he had pronounced. Tea makes all men brothers. As Mu Lin filled the cups once more, the world narrowed down. They two alone remained. Could this be "The hour of mist-feeding" of which the voice in his sleep had spoken?

NOT till long afterward did he realize that neither of them ate anything. Nevertheless, hunger left him. He longed for excitement, a new thrill, the bright face of danger, as though drunk with the wine of living.

As they returned to the library Mu Lin said, "The fact that you are a Flying Tiger complicates things."

"Set me free and I'll bother you no more."

Mu Lin ignored the interruption as he continued, "For amber is made of the souls of tigers. When a brave tiger dies, his spirit enters the earth and becomes transmuted into that which is known as hu-p'o or tiger's soul."

"Mere folklore," said Trent. "It is common knowledge that when amber was being formed, none of the present races of mankind existed. Forests of the Tertiary Period were submerged and the resin became petrified. I mean the resin produced by certain kinds of coniferous trees, now extinct, which were embedded in blue clay. In the Ice Age, changes in the earth's surface released much amber from its former bed. Today it is found in various quarters of the earth, but practically none in China proper despite the fact that since long before the Han Dynasty it has been prized because it is symbolic of courage."

"Courage, yes," agreed Mu Lin, "because it has tiger qualities. As to the rest of your remarks, I fail to agree with them. Alas, you have been reading books again. And reading without knowledge is a dangerous thing. Books have a quality of being wrong. It is believed by your countrymen that Gutenberg printed the first book from movable type. A nice fallacy but given almost universal credence. It is almost as ridiculous as the belief that the Americans invented air-conditioning, when these caves were air-conditioned before I was born, while Ming Huang, the Illustrious Emperor who died in 762 A. D., had one of his summer palaces air-conditioned. Again you claim that Columbus discovered America. As a matter of fact he rediscovered it, for certain Chinese Buddhist Priests landed on your West Coast in the vicinity of Lower California and called it Fusang, 'The Country of Women,' probably because the Indians wore their hair long and the Chinese did not at that particular time. My people have never worn long hair, that is, we Red Haired People. Nevertheless, it is well that you have devoted some small time to the study of amber, for it is with amber that you are to be fittingly honored

for your exploits as a Flying Tiger. Thereafter, you must be put to death but in no spirit of anger."

"I'll be just as dead as though you hated me," said Trent curtly. "I spurn your gifts. First you give me a bit of amber, a trinket of little importance, then you kill me and take it back again."

"No," said Mu Lin slowly; he seemed somewhat offended. "I shall give you no tangible gift. What I will bestow upon you is something of far greater value, something that you will remember always, in this world and in all the worlds that are to come."

"I'm still unimpressed and unappreciative."

"All things change, so will your opinion." Mu Lin walked across the room, Trent could not help thinking, "With what grace he walks, despite his years. But then it is an attribute of the Chinese. The smile of a Chinese girl is infinitely charming. Speaking to the eye, the Chinese language is the richest in the world."

How far his thoughts might have flown, is problematical, had Mu Lin not spoken again. "If there be no use in our words of what use are they?" He took a small object from a wall cabinet. Then he returned and stood by the chair in which Trent was sitting and held up the small yellow object for his gaze. "Here is a fragment of amber," he mused and now his voice sounded far away as though his thoughts had retreated to the inner recesses of his heart. "Amber may easily be tested as to its genuineness by a simple device. Only that which is rubbed and thereafter attracts mustard seeds is true. The belief that amber goes back to what your countrymen call the Age of Bronze is fantastic in the opinion of Chinese scholars who have meditated over this problem for centuries and they have long since set down that the 'resin of fir trees sinks into the earth and becomes amber after a thousand years.' I have proven this to be correct in an astounding manner. But behold, this amber is transparent and if you hold it close to the light you will see that it encloses the body of a fly."

TRENT examined the trinket with keen interest. "I have heard of oddities like this many times," he said, "and when I was in college, how long ago that seems, I studied the poems of Robert Herrick, one in particular I have never forgotten:

'I saw a fly within a bead
Of amber cleanly buried.
The urn was little, but the room
More rich than Cleopatra's tomb.' "

"A poem that fits the occasion," observed Mu Lin. "But see, this little fly is perfectly preserved. Its legs and wings are undamaged. Why did it not struggle to get away when first it became entangled in the liquid resin long ages ago? Perhaps it knew that it was to be immortal and was satisfied. Scientists by years of study have discovered one hundred and sixty-three different types of insects incased in amber, many unknown to us. But in no case are there signs of struggle or panic. All are perfect specimens. Perhaps they submitted serenely because they knew that this was not death but suspended animation. If one had the fanstatic impulse one could release specimens of all these different insects upon mankind. Perhaps some are poisonous. A single sting might bring death. Of these things no man may tell, for no living man knows. It would be interesting to trifle with such an experiment but I am concerned with a higher ambition. After all one plague more or less in this Axis infested world would scarcely matter. I'd do it at once if I thought that the insects would only feed on Japanese. However, I doubt if they'd touch such poisonous meat. But of idle speculation enough. What lies before us

is on a loftier plane. It would be fitting if it could take place along the Milky Way or upon the Blue Highroads of the Sky. Alas, that we must be content for this great adventure to take place near Black Dragon River."

"Are you then planning for me a perfumed death, or am I to have my throat cut with a golden sword?" asked Trent dryly. "I'd be far more enthusiastic about this thing if I knew what lay in the inner recesses of your mind."

"I assure you that at this moment you are in no immediate danger," said Mu Lin gently. "Right now you are being feted for the marvelous deeds you have performed for China. Let me assure you that the exploits of the Flying Tigers are scrupulously set forth in our gazette, a newspaper that is not published daily or weekly but whenever there is news worth recording that is of uncommon interest. You Tigers have been responsible for many editions. For even though we have red hair and our faces are white, we deem it a privilege to walk side by side with the brave Chinese whose brothers we are."

"From your eulogies I gather that I will not be stabbed in the back."

"Your mind may be at rest on that score. I would be a party to nothing so ungenerous."

"Good. Having faced death a hundred times, I'd hate to turn my back on it at the end."

"You make my position very difficult."

"Then let me live and we will both be cheered."

"If I did I'd be a traitor to my people. Our sanctuary must be preserved."

"By murder?"

"The need for it is upon us."

"Thereafter it will no longer be a sanctuary, for whenever you hear the roar of the tiger that drives the wind, this evil deed will be driven into your mind."

Mu Lin sighed. "The hour of grandeur is upon us. Let us put aside such distressing thoughts. The vision that you will witness will purify the eyes of your heart."

AS MU LIN spoke, he drew aside a curtain and Trent followed him into a room of subdued lights. The carpet was as soft as grass in the green spring. Though there was sufficient illumination it was difficult to see with any degree of clarity. Nevertheless it was not gloomy. A great beauty was in the air, hard to define. If it were perfume it was elusive and unlike any he had ever encountered. He walked gently as though the rug on which he trod was a carpet of dreams that might vanish at any moment.

Far down the room a yellow disc was glowing like the round moon of autumn. Was it a disc of jade? Yellow jade is one of the rarest of gems. Not till he was quite close did he realize that it was amber, amber as clear as polished crystal.

Mu Lin clutched his arm so tightly his fingers felt like steel claws. Nevertheless Trent made no objection to the pain. It was odd that a man so old should have such strength in his fingers.

"See, I keep her in a Golden Room," Mu Lin whispered. "A red embroidered cloth is spread before the shrine of her beauty. Above, the curtains are of silk as green as jade. Her fragrant mouth is small. Tell me did your eyes ever behold a girl more beautiful?"

"What girl is this of which you speak?" said Trent, "I see no girl."

"Within the amber, gaze and you will see. My dear one, for a thousand years has waited to be released."

Trent took a few steps forward. He gazed at the amber, glowing with a soft golden light, and as he gazed he saw that the amber was transparent. Within was the body of a slender girl. She seemed to be sleeping. Her beauty was breath-taking, peach bloom cheeks, eyebrows like

willow leaves. A knot of hair lay low upon her neck. She wore a gown of green silk, though it may have been blue with yellow amber tints upon it. In her hair was a flower, a small red rose bursting into bloom. It was hard to believe that roses had bloomed a thousand years ago. He was now willing to believe that all amber did not go back to the Stone Age for this slender girl must have lived in comparatively recent times as years are reckoned in the great age of the universe.

"Do you wonder that night after night I kept for her the half of my quilt?"

Was it only his imagination, Trent wondered or did her eyelids move as though she were sighing in sleep. Never in his life did he realize the importance of the flickering of an eyelid until that moment. He held his breath, afraid to breathe, lest he disturb the magic of this immortal moment.

This was the woman that the magic hours of all the world had given unto him. And she belonged to Mu Lin, Mu Lin the ancient one whose face was as wrinkled as a dried fig. Why it was sacrilege to even think of such a union. In that moment he forgot that his life was in danger, forgot that he was a Flying Tiger, forgot his intense yearning to get away from those caverns; for a new desire, terrible in its intensity had blotted everything from his thoughts but his craving for this glorious woman. What matter that she was the oldest woman in the world? Her face glowed with youth eternal. Music was mingled with her form.

"She is as lovely as a nutmeg bursting into bloom," murmured Lin. "Below her amber palace I have built a mound of dried fir and pine chips. A touch of flame would start a fire that would burn away the amber, restore heat to her numb body until her heart began beating once more. I await that day when she will come to me like a goddess of the morn with stardust in her eyes. I will kneel as she comes to me, and in the warmth of her young arms I will become young once more."

"Are you setting nets to catch the moon?" asked Trent bitterly.

"That is why I hesitate," sighed Mu Lin. "I speak of spring and yet the autumn gale blows wildly through the grass. Her body has the eloquence of jade. I gaze upon her face with the eyes of my heart, and I pray to the God of Longevity that he will help me in this supreme hour. She stands there waiting and I hesitate. The flower of yesteryear will bloom again, but not the flower of man's youth. So sang the poet, but need I believe him? Is a verse true because it is set down in grass characters? For thirty years I have waited for my face to grow young, my remaining hope is in the fire that warms my dear one, perhaps it will bring its blessing unto me. Still I hesitate. The words of Wang Wei chant in my ears even though no man sings:

" 'Out of the dusk comes the autumn
The fragrance of spring sighs and expires.' "

"Yes," said Trent slowly, "you are old but I envy you. To own the golden room that encloses a girl so beautiful makes you the richest of men. Are you not afraid I will snatch your great treasure from you?"

"No, for you will be dead ere that opportunity comes."

"But you said I would be honored!"

"You have been honored."

"What use a feast of beauty without the time to digest it?"

"You must die within the week. When the week fades you must die."

"But during that week I may remain in your house?"

"Yes, as an honored guest."

"I am humbled before your words. Seven days will be enough. If then death steps in, I'll meet it smiling. If it should

pass me by, for even you have no power over death itself, I shall be gratified."

"Death will halt, I promise you that. In the meantime, I shall muse over an old precept, 'Never lightly esteem a friend or an enemy.' "

HOURS later Trent was alone in the sleeping room that had been assigned to him. He paid no attention to the embroidered rugs and draperies. The flowers were so lifelike they seemed to give forth perfume. In one corner of the room there was a silken bamboo thicket that seemed to sway in the breeze like slender girls dancing. Above them was a verse embroidered in equisite characters: "The bamboos are admirable when fresh with rain. In the hills we love the time of sunset." Trent had always enjoyed this mixing of art with written characters that is so typically Chinese. He had several landscapes in his apartment in New York, dating back to middle Ching upon which there were numerous verses, one written by the original painter, others by poets who had enjoyed viewing the picture and had set down their thoughts as one might scribble marginal notes on the pages of a beloved book. There were also a couple of seals that attested to its authenticity. One had the simplest of lines, "Oh, these Mountains, Oh, these Great Mountains—" as though the artist, overcome by their grandeur had been unable to go on. But now Trent gazed at the inscriptions of the tapestries with unseeing eyes. In the bamboo grove he imagined he could see the amber girl dancing to the rhythm of the swaying bamboos. His eyes were glazed with the wonder of her, nor did he see her with his eyes alone. He saw her with his heart and his flesh. His whole body longed for her, his mouth was dry with a dryness of a thirst nothing could quench. He cast off his clothes and put on the Chinese lounging garments that were spread on a chair beside the bed. They were cooler than his own clothes but still that amber fire burned within him, the fire of love without reason and without regard. He must have the girl, hold her for one immortal moment in his arms though he die for it the next moment. Death would mean nothing to him then, for he would be like unto a man who had drunk the stars and walked through the highroads of the sky. There was madness in his thoughts, divine madness.

He threw himself upon the bed and tried to rest. Sleep dug at his eyes but it would not enter. The silken coverlets were warm to his touch as though a fire had been kindled underneath the kong as is customary in China during four-coat weather. But it was mid-summer, though he was not sure of the season. Time in China is very elastic and one never cares about the days of the week or the weeks of the months. The earth turns without man's effort. Why toil? The heat intensified, the fever of longing which he could not endure. He did not even know the name of the girl enclosed in the amber, yet her image had come to live in his heart. His body was in torment, and then out of the whispering night a daring plan took root in his thoughts. He was a man of action. The war had made him so. He rose from the bed, put on his felt-soled slippers, and slipped through the curtains of his room. He was thankful that there was no door to creak an alarm.

It was not difficult for him to find the way. The lanterns in the various rooms were still lighted, since within the caverns daylight never penetrated. His padded slippers made no sound, nor did he meet anyone. Within the mountain all were sleeping or enjoying inactivity. It took but a moment for him to reach the amber shrine of his beloved. A gentle smile seemed to hover about the corners of her

lips, as though she sensed his purpose and somehow knew that her hour of deliverance was at hand. The beating of his heart was like sledge-hammer blows. He was surprised that it made no echo. His forehead was moist, his hands shook as he struck a match. He would like to have delayed for an instant, to catch his breath, but this was no time for waiting. Unless he acted quickly the opportunity might be gone forever.

He did not know that Mu Lin was standing but a few yards in back of him, a picture of profound inertia. He made no outcry; his face was expressionless, as tranquil as that of Lao Tzu Riding on an Ox in the painting by the Sung artist, Ch'ao Pu-chih. Nevertheless his eyes were as keen as sharp swords.

WITH shaking hand Trent applied the lighted match to the chips of fir and pine. They flared up joyously. Had they not been aged and dried for many years by Mu Lin for the moment that would be for him the culmination of his dreams, perhaps bringing him youth once more? But always Mu Lin had hesitated. Suppose his experiment failed, suppose his golden girl was devoured by the flames that consumed the amber. Suppose youth should always remain beyond his fingertips even though success crowned his efforts. And so his hands had remained leaden. He lacked the strength of will to apply the spark. The amber burned quickly with a bright yellow flame. It gave off an agreeable perfume, like unto the scent of pine as it was consumed. The amber melted away into ashes. Now and then they both could catch a glimpse of the golden girl. Her cheeks seemed flushed, her eyes about to open. She remained smiling as if her ordeal was without pain. So quickly did the amber burn away her flesh was not even scorched. A slight flush had come into her cheeks as though the blood was once more flowing after a thousand years of suspended animation. Trent took a step closer and now for the first time he noticed in her hair a golden hairpin delicately inlaid with kingfisher feathers. Her gentle breast seemed to rise and fall slightly as though the breath of life had indeed been restored to her. Or was it only the fruits of his own imagination? He brushed aside his momentary doubt. Is it not a fact that it is only the imagined that is ever real? Or is it true that nothing exists except the moment one is living, and in this moment this one woman encompassed all. Perhaps he too was only made of the stuff that dreams are made of. Was he not in the caverns inhabited by the legendary Red-Haired People? Was he not the guest of Mu Lin who certainly existed on the borderland of reality?

For long he stood gazing enraptured at the golden girl, while the ashes at her feet grew lifeless as the last spark flickered out. Then abruptly he reached up and drew her down to him, her body all warm and yielding. Reverently he held her close and kissed her lips. Was it only imagination or was there a response?

With a harsh cry Mu Lin, aroused from his lethargy, flung himself at his tormentor, his hands like talons yearning to tear his prey to shreds. Spellbound he had watched the experiment, the experiment which he lacked the courage to complete because it might bring destruction to his dear one. But now the woman of a thousand years had been released. Trent, the madman, had dared to take her into his arms. He had violated every code of hospitality. To invade a man's home and steal his beloved was the most heinous of crimes. That he had released the girl from the amber prison in which for so many ages she had been enclosed, Mu Lin saw fit to overlook. Trent had attempted to captivate her. Therefore, he must die, not only because he had inadvertently invaded

the sanctuary of the Red-Haired People but also for his preposterous impudence. Truly no man was ever more deserving of death. And so Mu Lin clawed at Trent's throat, his face convulsed with hatred, but Trent was a trained athlete and easily eluded him. To have delivered a crushing blow to Mu Lin's chin would have been an easy matter. But Trent had no wish to injure his aged host even though Mu Lin was intent on killing him. As a Flying Tiger, Trent had seen death in a hundred cruel forms and so close had he lived to it, he was without fear. Besides there was no slightest tinge of enmity in his heart for Mu Lin. All that he cared about was this new wonder that had come to him with a woman's kiss. And now for the first time, he noticed that her eyes were open, black brilliant eyes that contained all the mystery of the ages. Mu Lin, too, had beheld and in that moment all anger was drained from him. One could not be angry in the presence of this fair woman. Strangely enough she seemed startled, frightened, like a forest creature before the avalanche of man's wrath. Then, without warning, she turned and fled with both Trent and Mu Lin in pursuit. Trent, by far the younger, was fleeter of foot. Even so, Mu Lin exhibited enormous stamina as he followed. But the girl easily outdistanced both of them. Through the rooms she sped, nor did any servant block her way, and on to the level paths of the cavern. Once away from the house, her pace quickened. She sped along with Trent close in pursuit, until she reached the edge of Black Dragon River. On the brink, she hesitated for a moment only looking back at her pursuers, but now she was smiling and her teeth were as white as camomile flowers. Then she plunged into the water; nor did Trent hesitate to dive in after her. The river was deep but he came to the surface quickly. Was it only imagination or could he hear the ripple of laughter? He could see the flash of her white body just ahead of him. With bold strokes he drove forward, urged along by the fast-flowing river. And now the lights were growing dimmer, the lights of lanterns that were lighted along the road near the house, but he could see that he was gaining on her, as though she had lessened her speed for him to come abreast. As he did so, she snuggled against him, and from that moment they swam together in perfect unison. It was like swimming through the waters of the Milky Way, that milky river that flows through the cold night sky. They were on a journey to the sun, to meet the sun at dawn with all its crimson purple splendor.

In his ecstasy he did not notice that the rock roof was closing in above them In a few moments it was so close to the water, they were forced to swim submerged. Not once did he worry over the fact that they were swimming in an underground river, a black cold river that might wind like the coils of a serpent into the depths of the earth. Only when he was in need of air, did the horror of his predicament enter into his consciousness. Even then he shrugged it aside. If this was to be a journey into death, it would be rapture to die with his dear one in his arms. And so he ceased to swim. His arms fell limply, consciousness left him. In this last glad moment, he was beyond life, beyond despair and pain.

WHEN Trent awakened the night had ended. Morning swept in golden splendor from the mountains of the sky. A lark graceful of wing dropped down from heaven, sprinkling its song in the air. He gazed dully about him. So it had all been a dream, beautiful hallucinations while he lay unconscious after striking his head when he landed by parachute.

He sighed, how sad that such loveliness should have less texture than dust of moonrise. He sat up and gazed about him.

A few feet from him a river flowed tranquilly but nowhere in sight was there the slightest vestige of a parachute. Someone must have made off with it. But the Chinese are by nature honest.

"Those damn Japs," he muttered.

However, he was dripping wet and even his enemies could not be blamed for that. Perhaps he had fallen into the river. He could not remember crawling to safety. He must have been in a half-stupor before he passed out. That would account for the missing parachute. It had merely drifted down river.

So the dream was ended.

He rose to his feet. An old man driving an ox-cart was approaching along the river road.

Trent called to him. The old man seemed pleased to stop and talk as is the custom of people who dwell in lonely places.

"I am a Flying Tiger," explained Trent in Chinese.

"May heaven protect you, Noble Tiger," said the old man.

"Came down by parachute. Haven't the slightest idea where I am," Trent explained.

"We are not far from a town, seven li. Yonder is the Black Dragon River. It rises in the Daourian Mountains and has a course of two thousand miles to the sea. Come, get into my humble cart and save your felt soles from wear."

"The Black Dragon River!" Trent repeated in an awed tone.

"Yes, is there ought that is strange about that?"

But Trent did not hear the question. He had stooped reverently and picked up a glistening object from the sand. It was a golden hairpin delicately inlaid with kingfisher feathers.

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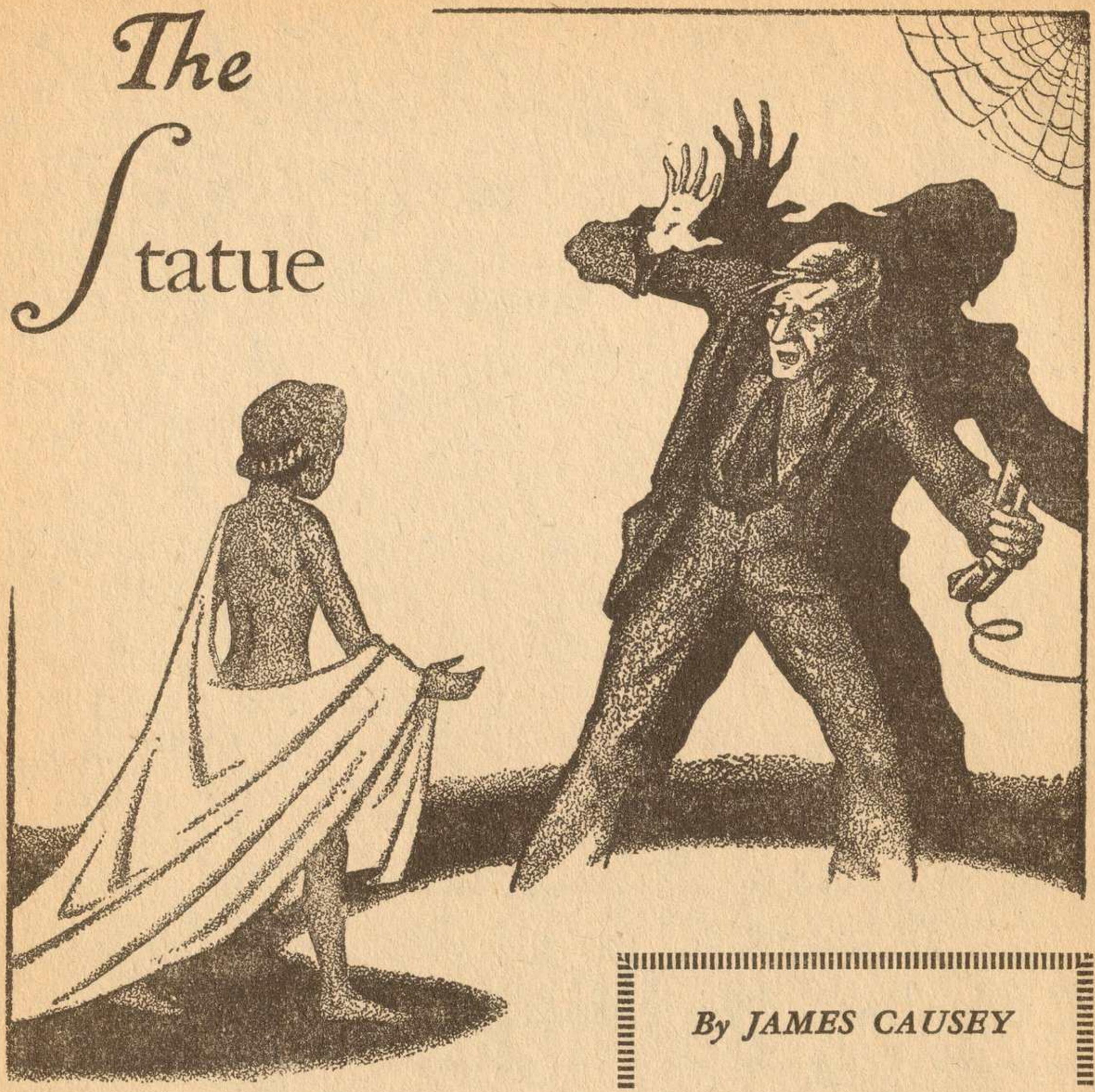


By JAMES CAUSEY

JEROME WINTERS pursed his lips.

"Young man," he said coldly, "a bargain is a bargain."

"But can't you give me just a little more time!" The young man's eyes were dark and pleading against the pallor of his face. "Another two months. Another month! I could surely find some way—"

His voice trailed off. Winters was shaking his head from side to side, staring at him with his frosty blue eyes.

"Three months you were given," he said curtly. "Seventy-five dollars. You've had time enough, my good man. Plenty of time. Seventy-five dollars, with interest. And—you don't have it, do you?" His voice was faintly mocking.

The young sculptor buried his face in his hands. "No," he said hoarsely. "I haven't. But I could surely scrape up the money some way—if only—"

Winters looked queerly at him. He

Each night the chipping and shaping went on . . . and the only man who could have done it was dead.

stood up. He was a short, slight man, small and withered as an old persimmon, his blue eyes wearing a perpetually frosty gaze.

In the little town of Hammondville, Winters was by far the wealthiest—as well as the most hated. His loans bordered upon usury—and those who could not pay were given no mercy. He had caused more than one suicide, and a very appreciable amount of misery and suffering. A wizened, dried-up little spider he was, who spun his web carefully, showing not the slightest pity to those unfortunate enough to fall into it.

Just now, contrary to his usual satisfaction when foreclosing a mortgage, he felt curiously frustrated. Perhaps—he had not made enough profit this time.

"Young man," his voice was thin and sharp, "three months ago you came to me with a desperate plea for money—on my terms. As security, I was given a small bit of sculpture, unfinished at that." His voice hardened. "It is not my usual policy to be so generous—"

"Generous!" The young sculptor's face twisted. His voice was bitter. "You speak of generosity! The Dawn Child—my statue. Seventy-five dollars! Finished, I could very easily sell that statue for—"

"For some considerable sum, I suppose?" Winters' words dripped cold. "Remember. The statue is incomplete. I may have a hard time disposing of it, for that very reason."

He frowned petulantly.

The young man stared at Winters as if seeing him for the first time. Slowly Winters flushed, and his eyes fell under that penetrating gaze.

"So," De Roults said softly. "I might have known."

He straightened, drew a deep breath, and looked at Winters again. "It is absolutely useless to ask for more time, I see."

"Absolutely," Winters said, some of his poise returning to him.

"Then—" Two spots of color appeared in the young man's cheeks. "Then, sir, may I see the statue? May I? Just once, since it is for the last time."

There was no harm in letting him see it. Winters shrugged. "Why not?"

HE MADE his way toward the back of the study, where he opened the door to a closet. De Roults followed him slowly. In one corner of the closet stood a shapeless something on a pedestal, draped in a sheet.

"Your statue, young man." Winters turned sideways, and lifted the sheet. In spite of himself, a small glint of appreciation came to his eyes as he looked at the statue.

It was the nude figure of a child. Exquisitely carved, it was, in pink marble, life size. The statue stood on tiptoe, a smile on its rosy face—a childish, contented smile, both arms stretching skyward, as to greet the sun.

But the hands—they were unfinished. The fingers were crudely blocked out—rough, like marble mittens. Evidently, some work was needed before the whole was completed.

But even as it was, the statue was beautiful. Winters, in spite of himself, had to admit that. Unconsciously, his fingers caressed the marble in a possessive gesture. He turned to look at the young man.

De Roults was standing there, leaning against the door jamb, gazing at the statue intently. There was an odd expression on his face—a strained, rapt expression.

"But it is unfinished," he breathed. "It is unfinished."

"Eh?" said Winters sharply.

De Roults started. He turned slowly, and looked at Winters. He looked then, at the statue, caressing it with his eyes.

"I put my soul into that statue," he murmured softly. "I labored to produce a masterpiece, a work of art that would endure—" He broke off.

"Winters," he said, his face strangely white, his voice suddenly hoarse. "Could I —finish the Dawn Child. Her hands—they are incomplete. She—would not like that. It is hard to reach for the sun, when ones hands are—ugly. Would it be possible? Even though the statue is yours now. I could do the work in this room here. With chisel and hammer—" His eyes held the quality of a prayer, his voice trembled.

"Could I—finish it, sir?"

Winters looked at him. A faint streak of perversity—which, incidentally, was to cost him his life, rose in his brain.

"I see no reason why I should," he snapped. "You have looked at the statue. It was enough that I should let you do so. Quite enough. I expect to have the statue disposed of by the end of this week, unfinished as it is. Of course, the profit will be negligible, but—" He spread his hands, indicative of his disinterest in the matter.

"Good-day, sir."

De Roults turned slowly ashen.

"Then—then you will not allow me to finish—" he said, almost childlike.

"Precisely."

The young sculptor walked slowly toward the door, his head bowed. At the threshold, he turned, and looked first at Winters, then at the Dawn Child. There was an enigmatic expression on his face.

"Nevertheless," he whispered, "the Dawn Child shall be finished. Soon. I asked you for but a week more, Winters. *I give you a week, now.*"

He turned and walked stiffly out.

Winters raised his eyebrows.

IT WAS, perhaps, thirty seconds later that he heard the crash. He hurried out of the house, his pale blue eyes curious behind the glasses. There was a rather large crowd clustered in the middle of the street, muttering excitedly. The truck stood by, its fender rather badly dented, with a splotch of red. The truck driver was standing by, addressing empty air for the most part, and telling how, "He just walked right out in the street, front of my truck. Wasn't *my* fault. Can't help it if a man walks out'n the street in front of a truck, and doesn't even look where he's going. He walked out—"

Winters pursed his thin lips, then he turned back into his study, where he made certain entries in a large black ledger. On impulse, he checked up upon De Roults. The young sculptor had lived alone in a garret in the poorer section of town, and from what Winters could ascertain—seemed passionately devoted to his work. He was poor—very. Indeed, Winters wondered how he had ever managed to keep body and soul together.

It certainly was not *his* fault, if De Roults paid no attention to where he was walking, while crossing the street. The remainder of the day Winters spent in his usual pleasant fashion—that of figuring how to dispossess certain hapless clients.

It was late that night, around eleven-thirty, when Winters awoke suddenly, with the conviction that someone, or something was making strange sounds downstairs. He lay awake for some minutes, staring into the blackness, and suddenly he sat bolt upright in bed. The sound was repeated. It was an odd scraping, and scratching noise.

Muttering to himself, Winters got out of bed, put on his robe and slippers, and shuffled out into the hall. As near as he could determine, the sounds were coming from downstairs—in the general direction of his study. He shuffled downstairs, and into his study, where he turned on the light.

The glare of the light exploded whitely, throwing everything in the room into harsh

relief. Black ugly shadows. Dark corners illumined.

There was nothing in the room.

Winters grunted, and reached again for the light switch. He froze. The sound had recommenced; it was distinctly audible, and it seemed to come from the closet.

Winters went over and opened the closet door. Probably rats, he thought, peering through the darkness of the closet.

No rats.

Winters frowned and looked more carefully. There was no corner where a rat might hide. Winters looked at the statue, standing there in the corner, and his breath hissed softly between his teeth. He distinctly remembered having draped a sheet over it, before going to bed.

But now the sheet lay on the floor.

Well, then.

Rats could drag down sheets.

Large rats.

Frowning, Winters picked up the sheet and stood staring at the statue, before covering it. The general appearance of the statue had changed; it was not quite right somehow.

Winters shook his head angrily, and went back to his room. Rats, no doubt. He was not the sort of man to be bothered by such occurrences. Perhaps half an hour after going to bed, he was roused again.

The same sounds. Grating, rasping, scratching noises. Oddly muffled they were. Coming from downstairs. Winters swore softly and tried to sleep.

The next day Winters examined the statue critically. There was, he observed, a peculiar quality to the Dawn Child's smile—an oddly unpleasant quality—and the arms of the statue did not look quite right.

And the hands, Winters could see—were changed. As if someone had been working on them. With a sculptor's chisel!

He did not bother to puzzle the matter out. Methodical and precise as ever, he cleaned up the shards of marble, and went about his business for the day.

Possibly some prankster—or his imagination. Or it might be the rats. Gnawing. No matter. He would make sure.

A substantial remainder of the morning, he spent in setting rat traps in likely spots throughout the house. Later, he would see about selling the statue.

That afternoon, Winters called several dealers in antiques, and *objects d'art*. There was, it seemed, little or no demand, of unfinished statues. No, he could find no buyer anywhere. After the dozenth call, Winters hung up, disgusted, and sat meditatively staring into space for several seconds. His thoughts were not pleasant. It was probably the first time in his life he had failed to come out winner in a business transaction.

The remainder of the afternoon, he brooded over it. Mentally he kicked himself a dozen times for having failed to take advantage of the young sculptor's offer. He should have let De Roults finish—

Winters' brows furrowed. Had not De Roults said something about—*about finishing the statue!*

But—De Roults was dead.

Mentally Winters kicked himself again.

THAT night, before going to bed, Winters investigated the entire study thoroughly. Everything was in perfect order. The statue was covered, the closet was locked, the windows and the doors were all barred.

Winters grunted in satisfaction and then went to bed.

Three hours later he was roused suddenly. He could hear nothing now, save the faint echo of a somehow familiar sound, seeming to echo in his ears. Possibly one of the rat traps going off, he de-

cided in some satisfaction, and so deciding, turned over again on his side.

Abruptly he raised himself on one elbow and glared through the darkness toward the hall. The sound had been repeated. He could hear it now—the same *chipping* sound. Winters cursed silently, and got up, taking care not to creak the bedsprings.

Very stealthily, he tiptoed downstairs. He opened the study door silently, and quite suddenly snapped on the light and stood on the threshold blinking.

There was no one in the room.

Winters looked around. The closet door was still locked. Muttering querulously to himself, he opened it, and looked inside. For an instant he wondered if his eyes were beginning to play tricks on him.

Then he took a step backwards.

The statue's hands were beginning to take definite form. Moreover, the arms had moved. Moved a good three inches.

Winters rubbed his chin doubtfully, and wondered how he could have ever thought the face of the statue beautiful. The lips were not smiling at all, and the whole face seemed to have a definitely unpleasant cast.

"Humph," said Winters.

He retrieved the sheet and placed it upon the statue. He looked around the study carefully, and into each corner of the closet, more than once narrowly escaping the sticking of his foot into a rat trap.

Before going back to bed, he eyed the tiny pile of marble chips around the pedestal of the statue, and though his lips moved queerly, he said nothing.

Jerome Winters got very little sleep that night. He heard the chipping, scraping sounds from downstairs quite audibly, no matter how hard he tried to bury his head underneath the covers.

NEXT day, business did not go well at all. Every little thing seemed to go wrong, his papers were not where they should be, and he forgot several important matters relating to interest payments and debts.

But he would not admit, even to himself, that he was worried. Toward noon, Winters received an unexpected telegram. He scowled at it, and pursed his lips.

This was decidedly unfortunate. He had planned to get rid of that statue today. To take it to some antique dealer, and—and give it away if he had to.

What was he thinking of! Give something away that had cost him seventy-five dollars. And for that matter—two sleepless nights. But after all—De Roults had said that the statue would be finished within a week. And the look on the face of the statue last night—possibly there was something to the young sculptor's threat, after all.

Winters dismissed the thought.

At any rate, he would be out of town for the next four days on business. A piece of property he had acquired from some poor debtor must be appraised. Well, he could get rid of the statue in the city. At some small profit, of course. It would be comparatively simple, since the statue was almost finished.

So it was that while away from Hammondville, Winters saw and interviewed the manager of a certain prominent antique shop, one Sir Arthur Manwell, in regard to coming out to Hammondville to see a very valuable statue he possessed.

Yes, the statue was easily worth five hundred dollars. Exquisitely carved, it was. By a young sculptor named De Roults. What? Oh no. The young man had met with a very tragic accident. Yes. Too bad.

And he would come out to Hammondville today, to appraise the statue? What? Not until tomorrow. But the week would be up then. What? Oh nothing. Nothing at all. Tomorrow then.

Winters arrived home that afternoon

with a curious feeling of mingled relief and apprehension. The very first thing he did was to open the closet door. There was absolutely no doubt about it this time. The arms of the statue had moved downward to an almost horizontal position. The hands—they were nearly completed! But they had changed. The fingers were bent as if to grasp something—they looked like small pink claws.

The marble dust, Winters saw, was thick about the base of the statue. One foot was poised, with knee lifted high *as though the statue were about to step off the pedestal!*

Winters slowly raised his eyes and looked at the face. It was twisted in a rather frightful leer. Winters shut the closet door and leaned weakly against it. He locked it carefully and walked out of the study, mopping his damp face with a handkerchief. His mouth was strangely dry, and his face was pale.

Tomorrow would be the seventh day.

LATE that night, he heard the now familiar chipping of stone. The noise this time, was fast and furious, almost—eager. Winters did not get out of bed. He knew it would be no use. After a little while, the sounds ceased. The statue, then, was finished.

Winters did not venture downstairs next morning until almost noon. When he did, he stayed as far away as possible from his study. In an agony of dread and apprehension he waited for the arrival of Sir Arthur, from the city.

Sir Arthur did not come.

By mid-afternoon, Winters was almost frantic.

Finally, he tiptoed into his study. There was a telephone on his desk.

Swiftly he dialed the operator, and staring fixedly at the closet door, waited for his call to be put through.

Sir Arthur Manwell, dealer in antiques and *objects d'art* answered. Yes, he was sorry, he was desolated, but he had not been able to keep the appointment. No, he would not be able to come down to make the appraisal until tomorrow. Sometime in the morning— What? What was the matter?

But it was impossible. An important matter had come up—he had to remain at the shop—and—

"I don't care!" Winters shrieked into the mouthpiece, suddenly panic-stricken.

"You've got to come down! Today, you hear? I've got the damned thing locked up in the closet, but the week's up, I tell you. The week's up!"

Sir Arthur informed him politely—and frigidly, that he would arrive tomorrow morning.

"But the statue!" shrilled Winters. *"The statue!"*

There was the audible click of the man hanging up.

"Operator, operator!" Winters dialed frantically.

Abruptly he froze.

Behind him. The sound of a splintering wood. A door smashing open . . .

The *closet door . . .?*

Involuntarily, Winters dropped the receiver on its hook, and trembling, stared straight ahead.

A soft thud of something striking the carpet. Then the quick pattering of footsteps across the floor.

Winters worked his mouth convulsively, but before he could scream, he was seized by the throat.

Like Winters, Sir Arthur Manwell was a very punctillious man. So it was that he arrived in Hammondville early the next day to see Winters on the matter of the statue. It so happened that when he arrived, there was a rather large crowd of people clustered about Winters' house. Managing to get in, he saw the police and the coroner probing about Winters' study.

Winters had been found in his overturned chair, and the studio in his immediate vicinity was somewhat messy. His head had been almost torn from his body. Indeed, the coroner was quite puzzled.

"Strangled," he murmured gravely. "Um—handprints like those of a small ape. Or possibly those—of a child."

Manwell was extremely shocked.

"Yes," he explained. "I came out here to see the poor chap about a statue he intended to sell. Any idea how it happened?"

The coroner had no idea.

As he turned to leave, Manwell caught sight of the closet door at the back of the room. The lock was ripped away, and the door hung loose on its hinges. Manwell frowned, puzzled.

"Winters mentioned the closet," he murmured under his breath. On sudden impulse, Manwell looked around to see if he were being observed. Everyone's interest was focused upon what lay in the center of the room. Manwell went slowly to the closet door. He opened it. He drew a slow deep breath of awe.

"Superb," he breathed.

The Dawn Child stood on tiptoe, both arms stretching high, its face smiling in contentment. Manwell looked at it for a long minute. Quite suddenly he stiffened. He glanced back toward where Winters lay.

He looked again at the statue.

Then, his face very white, and his hands shaking, he shut the closet door softly. His lips were a jagged thin line, as he strode slowly outside. He recalled again, the words of the coroner.

"Very tiny handprints. . . ."

He remembered Winters' frantic shrieking over the phone.

And on the soft pink of the statue's hands, he had seen a deeper, more ominous stain of red.

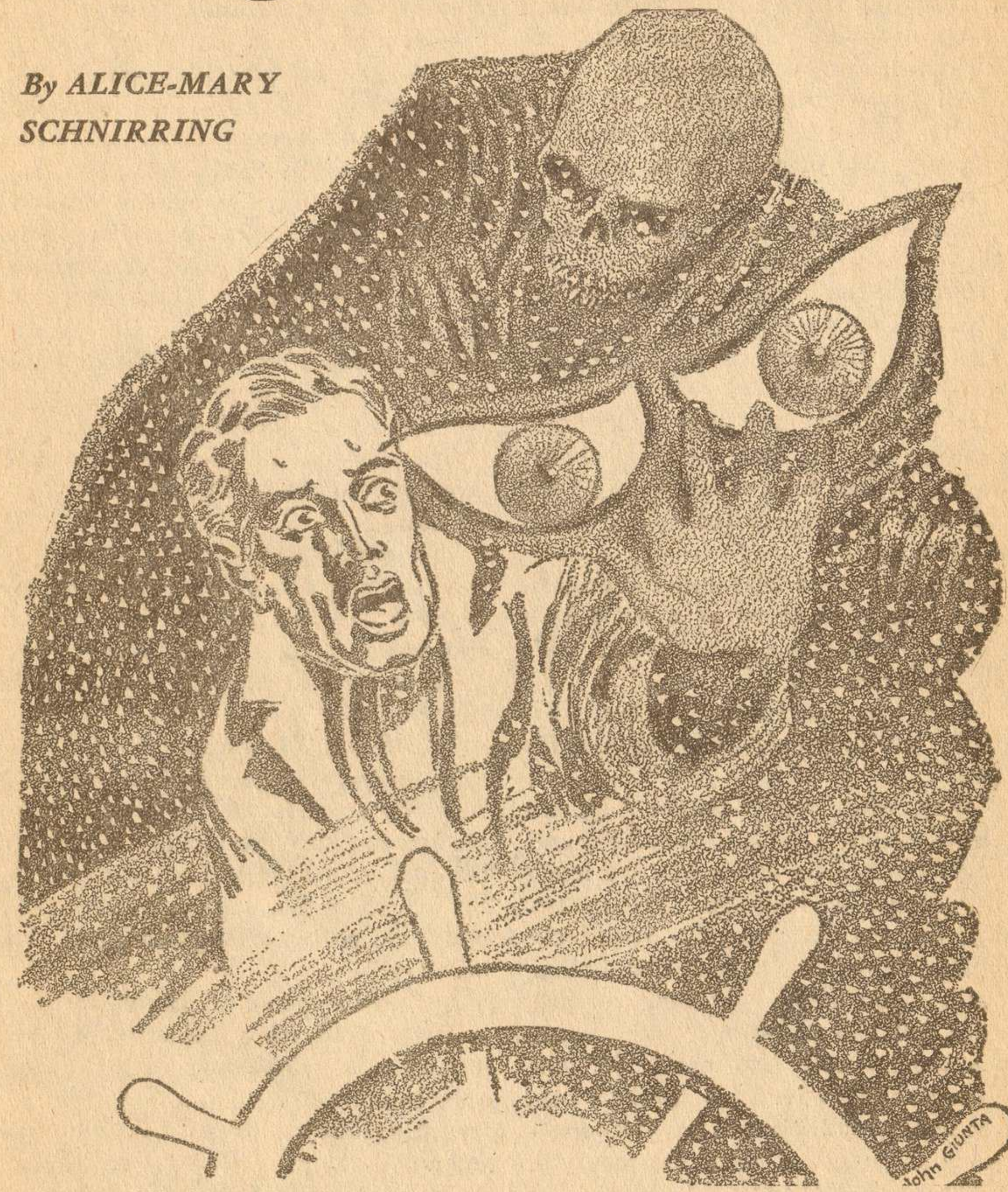
After an Air Raid

By DOROTHY QUICK

THEY met on the top of a flower-strewn hill
Where the soft clear air was cool, was still.
They looked at each other with glad surprise
And a new sweet light was in their eyes.
They stretched out their hands and their fingers met;
They renounced the world without regret
For they knew, in that instant, they were one,
And a new existence had just begun.
So it did not matter, the two ghosts said,
That the world they'd left would call them dead.

One-Man Boat

By ALICE-MARY SCHNIRRING



The boat called Gemini *sold cheap . . . perhaps because she had murdered every previous owner.*

THE yacht-broker stopped, his feet slipping in the cold mud of the boat-yard, and pointed to a sleek hull that lifted above them, balanced gracefully on its slender fin keel, and supported by wooden shearings.

"Now, there's just the boat for you, Mr. Chambers," he said, a little wearily. "Of

all the ones we've looked at, she ought to be ideal for you. She's fast, but not tender; you could take her anywhere—even for ocean work. And what's more, one man can handle her alone, easily."

Dell Chambers walked around under the stern of the boat, and read aloud the name stencilled in gold leaf on her counter: *Gemini.*

"She looks like a beauty," he said. "What are they asking for her?"

Hartman, the broker, consulted a sheet of paper that he took from his pocket. "That's the best part of it — she's dirt cheap. Only $1,500."

Dell raised his eyebrows. "Dry rot?" he suggested. He took out his penknife, and dug it into four or five spots of the hull, then looked puzzled. "She seems sound enough."

"Dry rot!" said Hartman indignantly. "This boat is as sound as if she'd been built yesterday. As a matter of fact, she's only five years old."

"Then why," said Dell Chambers skeptically, "are they only asking $1,500 for her?"

"Why, when you know the story, it's understandable," said Hartman. "The only thing I can't figure out is why she hasn't been snapped up long ago. You remember Carter, the millionaire who went broke and shot himself?" At Dell's nod, he continued. "Just before everything smashed, Carter had had the *Gemini* built, to his own design—cost him about $25,000. When his estate was settled, this boat went up at auction, and was sold for—let's see—I think she went for about five thousand, $5,200 maybe. The man who bought her was crazy about her—*he* used to sail her alone, by the way. Good sailor, too; Hendrickson. Remember him? Won one of the Bermuda races."

"Sure, I know who he is. Why is he selling her so cheap, though?"

"Oh, he doesn't own her any longer. He only kept her about one season, and then he sold her to a fellow from Larchmont. That was a very sad thing."

"What was a very sad thing?"

"Why, the Larchmont boy—he was only about twenty-five—took her down from Block Island, where Hendrickson had been keeping her (he has a summer cottage there, you know), and he was drowned. He was all alone on board, and apparently caught his foot on a sheet or something and went overboard. The *Gemini* was picked up by the Coast Guard the next day—the day after he left Block Island —with her mainsail and working jib set, but nobody on board. The tiller was lashed, and she was holding her course, pointing into the wind. But nobody was on board."

The dusk was beginning to close in, and the damp air, blowing in from Long Island Sound, was chilly. Dell shivered, and drew his coat around him.

"Poor kid," he said. "Who owns the boat now?"

"His family," Hartman replied. "Naturally, they want to get rid of it. The boy's body was never found, by the way. You can imagine that the sooner they see the last of her, the better pleased they'll be. But in spite of that, she's a sweetheart of a boat. Do you want to go on board, look her over?"

At Dell's response of "Sure!" Hartman looked around for a ladder; found one leaning on a neighboring yawl, and bore it in triumph over to the *Gemini,* propping it against her side. "I'll go up first and unlock the padlock on the companionway," he called to Dell from halfway up the ladder. "Better take it one at a time —this ladder is sort of rickety." His feet landed with a thump, as he jumped into the cockpit. "Damn!" he swore. "I've lost the key. Come aboard, anyway, and I'll yell for the night watchman. He comes on duty about now, and maybe he has

one." As Dell clambered up, the broker shattered the silence of the twilit boat-yard with a rousing yell. "Svend! O-oh, Svend!"

At the second repetition of the call, a faint answering hail came from a far corner of the yard; and, at length, they could see the uncertain gleam of a flashlight reflected on white topsides about a hundred yards away.

"Vat you vant?" came a Swedish-accented voice.

"Hello, Svend; it's George Hartman. Have you a key to the *Gemini* in the office? I seem to have lost mine, and I want to show Mr. Chambers, here, what she's like inside. He's thinking of buying her."

The flashlight's track came nearer, and was suddenly thrown on the deck of the sloop, picking up Hartman and Dell in its rays; feebly, since it was not yet actually dark. Even by straining his eyes, Dell could not distinguish the features of the night watchman.

"Naw. We bane no key. Is better you look at her in daylight, anyvay."

Hartman spoke impatiently. "Listen, Svend; I'm sure I saw a key for this padlock in the office last Saturday, when I was up. Be a good egg, and go look for it. It's getting late, and Mr. Chambers and I want to take a look at the boat and get back to town."

"Office is locked. Is better you look tomorrow." Without even bothering to listen to Hartman's reply, which was profanely disgusted, the watchman turned and walked away, the strengthening light from his flashlight bobbing on the ground and the looming hulls.

Dell shivered again, uncontrollably. "Look, Hartman; I appreciate all of the trouble you're going to, but it *is* getting late, and damned cold, too. I want to see the inside, but what about coming up with me tomorrow afternoon, about four-thirty? Then we can take our time about it."

"Okay," the broker agreed. "I'll pick you up at your office at four, and we can make it up here before it gets dark. Come on, then; I'll drive you back to town."

"SHE'S really a beauty," breathed Dell, as, tired and stiff from his exhaustive inspection of the *Gemini,* he sank down on the upholstered bunk in the main cabin. "If she sails the way she ought to, Hartman, you've sold a boat."

"I tell you, Chambers, she sails like a streak," Hartman assured him earnestly. "She hasn't been raced since Carter built her—owned her, that is—and most people have forgotten it, but Carter piled up a swell record with her in the Handicap Division in his first season with her. His only season, poor guy. If he had raced in the whole series, you'd have heard more about *Gemini.*"

"Well, what the devil!" said Dell, with sudden decision. "I don't see how I can possibly go wrong. Subject to survey, Hartman, she's mine; and I'll give you my cheque for her right now, to make sure nobody else gets her."

"It's a deal," said Hartman, producing a fountain pen as if by legerdemain. "And I think you've made a very smart buy, Chambers. I tell you, if I had $1,500 to spare, I'd have bought her myself as a speculation. I bet I can sell her for you tomorrow for double the price."

"I don't want to sell," laughed Dell, signing his name to the cheque. "When I buy a boat, I stay with it. You know, I had my last boat for five years. She was smaller than *Gemini,* though; only twenty-eight feet. *Gemini* is thirty-five feet overall, isn't she?"

"Thirty-five overall, twenty-one water line," corroborated the broker, folding and pocketing the cheque. "Well, what do you say—shall we have a drink to your new boat?"

"Absolutely," said Dell, rising. Outside,

it was growing rapidly darker. Suddenly Dell peered through the dusk, wrinkling his forehead as he tried to see through the companionway opening. "Is that somebody in the cockpit?" he asked. Hartman looked, too. "I can't see anyone—might be Svend, of course," he responded. "He comes on about this time, and he may want to see who's on the boat. He loves all these boats as if he owned them; the tubs and the smart sailers, regardless," he laughed.

But when they climbed into the cockpit, it was empty. "A trick of the light," said Dell carelessly. "Lock her up, and let's go."

"You lock her up," said Hartman, presenting him with the key and smiling.

"It's your boat, you know."

Dell, his head close to the padlock, protested half-earnestly, "I don't like the way you laughed when you said that. Come clean, Hartman—did you sell me a dog?"

THE broker appeared honestly surprised. "I didn't laugh. I swear, this boat is the buy of the year. I really meant it when I told you I could sell her for you again at double the price you paid. Look—here comes Svend; ask him. I think he crewed for Hendrickson the year he had this boat: anyway, I know he's sailed on her."

They clambered down the ladder, one by one, and greeted Svend. Hartman prodded the Scandinavian for his opinion of the *Gemini*. "She's a smart sailer, isn't she, Svend? Fast, easy to handle?"

"Yah."

"Sound hull, good sails? By the way," turning aside to Dell, "she has two complete sets of racing sails in the locker; good ones, made by Ratsey."

"Yah."

"Good God, Svend; can't you say anything but 'Yah'?" Hartman protested, a little annoyed. "What do you think of her? Mr. Chambers has just bought her, you know."

SVEND made a sudden movement, instantly suppressed. "So? You have man on board, keep deck washed, brass polished?"

"Sorry," Dell laughed, "I know she deserves it, but I can't afford to keep a man on board. I'll have to keep her up myself."

"Is better you keep man with you," the Scandinavian said obstinately. "Not good to sail her alone."

Dell looked at Hartman. "I thought Carter sailed her alone, and Hendrickson?"

"Certainly they did," he replied, indignantly. "She's a one-man boat; designed to be."

Svend, surprisingly, gave a short laugh, sounding as if it hadn't been used very often. "Yah," he said, turning on his heel, "she a vun-man boat, all right. But I don't vant to sail her alone."

The two of them looked after his retreating figure. "Now just what do you make out of that?" demanded Dell.

Hartman shook his head. "I think he's bats," he said simply. "I've seen him take a seventy-foot schooner out single-handed in a forty-mile blow, just for the hell of it."

But Dell looked thoughtful. "I think I'll call up Hendrickson, and ask him. After all, he sold her after only one season."

"But he got a good price for her, Mr. Chambers! The only reason she's going for the ridiculous price you paid for her is because that boy's family can't bear to see her around, and they have plenty of money; they can afford to throw an eight thousand dollar investment out the window."

Nevertheless, Dell did speak to Hendrickson. He didn't call him up, because, as the spring wore on, and he worked on the *Gemini*—painting, scraping, varnishing—he fell more in love with her every day; but one day, as he was putting the

final lick of varnish on the mast, he was hailed from the ground. He looked down, to see a big man standing there, his head thrown back to look up at Dell.

"Hello! You bought the *Gemini?*"

"Yes," Dell smiled. "Won't you come aboard?"

"No thanks—I know her well. Owned her myself once."

"Say!" Dell put the varnish brush carefully in an empty can on the deck. "You must be Hendrickson, then!"

"Yep."

"Gosh, I've wanted to talk to you. Mind if I come down and ask you a few questions? That is, if you're sure you won't come aboard?"

"Come on down," said Hendrickson, pleasantly. "No, I won't come aboard, thanks."

Dell clambered down, scrubbed at his hands with a once-good handkerchief that now resembled a second-rate paint rag, and stuck out his hand to the six-foot racing man.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you," he said, a little diffidently.

"Heard a lot about you, of course. Tell me; you owned the *Gemini* for a year, didn't you?"

"I sailed her one season, yes," Hendrickson assented.

"Why did you sell her—is there something wrong with her? Doesn't she handle well, or—or what? I understood that her original owner and builder designed her to be sailed single-handed, but Svend Andersen—the watchman here, who seems to know boats—says *he* wouldn't sail her single-handed; yet I hear he's a very good man on a boat. I meant to call you up and ask you, but—well, working on her, and one thing and another, you sort of get to know a boat, and I feel that she must live up to her lines. What's the story?"

Hendrickson was silent for a moment. Obviously a little embarrassed, and equally obviously with something on his mind, he scraped with his foot in the dust for a second or two before answering.

"Well—you're right about her sailing qualities. Carter built her to be sailed alone—he wanted to sail by himself, get away from all his hangers-on. You know how it is with a man with a lot of money. Gets tired of all the dead-beats and moochers, and wants to get off away from everything, and there's nothing like a boat for that. She sails like a charm. Point, reach, beat—anything you want, she'll do. But I sold her—"

"Why?"

"Why—oh, hell, Mr.—what's your name? Chambers? Mr. Chambers, if I told you why, you'd say I was a screwball. But it's the reason I came over here today, to see you."

"To see me?" Dell parroted, stupidly.

"Yes. Svend—he used to crew for me, you know—told me you'd bought her, and —well, knowing what he knows, and I know, about her, he thought I ought to talk to you, anyway; even if it doesn't do any good."

Dell was dumbfounded. "Know about her? What? Dry rot?"

HENDRICKSON moved impatiently. "No, her hull is as sound as a dollar. It's—oh damn it; I tried to tell the kid who bought her from me, but he wouldn't listen. But I've got to try, anyway. What about coming over to the Paradise Bar for a drink with me, and letting me talk to you for about fifteen minutes?"

"Why—that would be swell," said Dell, slowly.

But after the fifteen minutes, and fifteen more like them, had elapsed, Dell was not only still puzzled, he was a little alarmed; not for himself, but for Hendrickson, and Hendrickson's sanity. The famous sailor knew it, too; and twisted his mouth in an

unhumorous smile, as he called for another Scotch.

"Well," he said, shrugging, "that's the story. Each time I sailed her alone, I had some sort of an accident. Look: once the topping lift broke, and the boom only missed killing me because some sixth sense —which you get, when you do much sailing—told me to jump. And I jumped. The second time, I was sailing through The Race, and I tell you the tiller was wrenched right out of my hand. She was heeling well over, and I was sitting on the coaming of the cockpit; and the sudden shift threw me completely off balance. If I hadn't caught at the backstay and held on to it, I'd have been over the side—alone, at night, and in the makings of a nasty storm. The third—now listen to this, Chambers—I'm not drunk, and I wasn't drunk then, and, what's more, I've been sailing boats since before you were born; the third time, *something pushed me* when I was putting up my port running-light. I'd left it pretty late, and it was almost pitch-dark. I'd lashed the tiller, of course; went below and filled the lights, and was just tying the marlin around the stay when something pushed me—hard—right between the shoulder-blades. And that time I went over, but I was towing the dinghy, and I managed to grab hold of it and get in it.

The boat kept on sailing, of course, with the tiller lashed, and I had the devil's own time to get back on board her, but I made it. And the first thing I did was to head for the nearest harbor—Greenport, it was—and drop the hook there. In the morning I went on shore and hired Svend, who was working as a rigger in the shipyard, and I took damn good care that there never would be a fourth time. Because the fourth time he might have done it."

"Who? Done what?" said Dell, cautiously.

Hendrickson made a strangled noise that managed to express fury, contempt, and resignation.

"Carter, you fool!" he almost howled. "Carter, Carter, Carter! The man who built the boat for himself—who wanted to sail her alone! Listen, Chambers," he said, with a desperate calm, "a man can get damn close to a boat, any boat—and when it's a boat that he's put a lot of himself into, as Carter did into the *Gemini*—Good Lord!" he interrupted himself, impatiently. "The name alone ought to be a clue! — well, then *anything* can be true. How old are you? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? I'm fifty-one, and I've been sailing boats all my life; and there's a lot more to sailing than knowing when to shorten sail, and how to tie a running bowline, and whether Dreisenstock is a better system of navigation than Marc St. Hilaire. You think I'm bats—sure, the topping-lift just let go. *I had put all new running rigging on the Gemini when I bought her.* And I suppose it was a rip-tide that tore the tiller out of my hands in The Race. And the rip-tide brought her about on the other tack, too, I suppose. All right, all right: but what pushed me over the side? Imagination?"

Dell hesitated, and Hendrickson gave vent to another wordless ejaculation.

"All right, Chambers. I'm sorry. Naturally, you don't believe me. But please, for God's sake—for the sake of my peace of mind—promise me not to sail her alone, especially at night? You must have lots of friends. Surely it wouldn't be a hardship for you to take another fellow along?" In a voice that was almost a groan, he said, "That kid—he wouldn't listen, either. I did all I could, but I still feel responsible."

By now, Dell was really embarrassed. "Why, sure, Mr. Hendrickson—I'll promise you not to sail alone at night, if it will make you feel better. It's not often that I do, anyway—too many people are always inviting themselves along. But honestly,

don't you think that you're exaggerating—"

Hendrickson sighed, and tossed off the rest of his Scotch. "Listen, boy," he said, rising from the table, "never mind what you think about me. Just stick to your promise, and get someone to sail with you" With a nod, he was gone.

DELL was disappointed for a moment when he read the telegram from Mark, saying, *"Unable meet you Saturday City Island. Join boat Port Jeff Sunday";* but he was chiefly disappointed because he had wasted the whole morning waiting around for Mark. The prospect of a leisurely and solitary sail to Port Jefferson was pleasant, rather than otherwise; and if he had kept his promise to Hendrickson all summer, it was due to circumstance and too many friends, rather than conscientiousness—and certainly not to belief. In fact, the ship was satirically known to most of his friends—to whom, over a couple of drinks, he had unburdened himself of the racing man's solemn warning, as they termed it—as the Flying Dutchman; and the only sentiment that stirred Dell's mind when he infrequently thought of it was one of embarrassment.

His provisions were on board; the *Gemini* was all set to go, and there was a fair wind. He rowed himself out in the dinghy, made fast the painter, and hoisted the mainsail and jib; then—cursing at Mark for not being there to help—laboriously hauled up the anchor, which seemed to have turned into a two-thousand-pound mushroom, instead of a sixty-pound kedge. Finally he broke it out, and, leaving it hanging on the bow, raced back to the cockpit, made fast his main sheet and jib sheet, and put the *Gemini* on her course.

It was a broad reach; the best sailing for almost any boat, and sheer perfection for the racing sloop. The breeze was rather light, but she slipped along at a comfortable five knots; and, as it began to get dark, the wind freshened. Soon Dell decided to put on his pea-jacket; and, while he was below, make himself a sandwich and fix the running lights. He lashed the tiller, looked to see that no tugs or other boats were on his course—as a matter of fact, the only other craft to be seen was a schooner some three miles to port, tacking away from him—and went below.

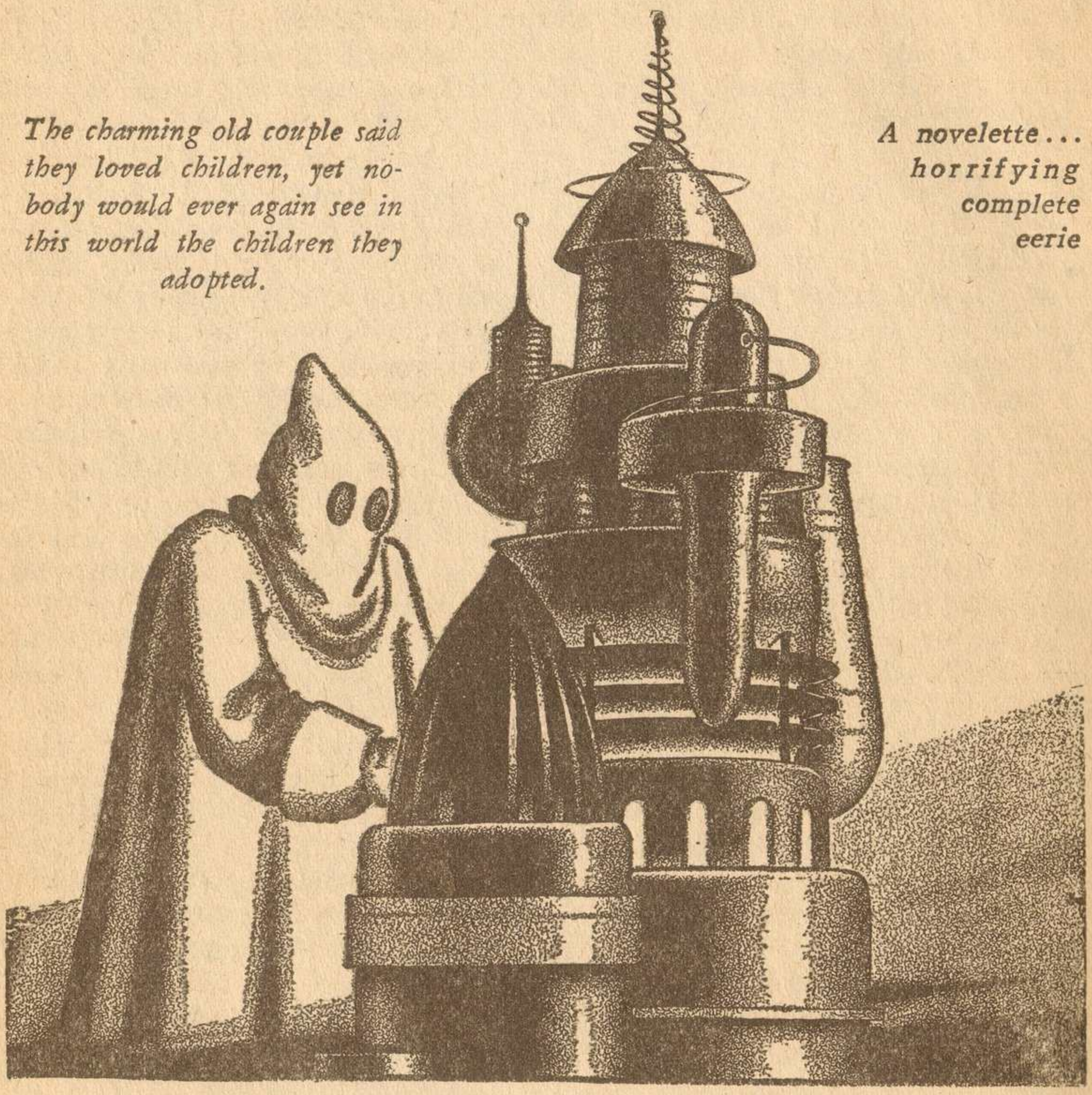
By the time he came back on deck, it was almost completely dark. The wind was a steady southwester of about fifteen knots, and had brought with it, as a "smoky sou'wester" often does, a little mist. The wisps of fog trailed over the water, curling around the shrouds and in the cockpit; and Dell hastened to put up his running lights. Those secured, he turned to go back to the cockpit and unlash the tiller—and stopped short, a scream frozen in his throat and a chill not brought by the fog shivering through all his body, at the sight of two lambent, pale-green eyes on a level with his own, about two feet away. Instinctively, Dell stepped back. His sea-boots slipped on the wet deck, and, as he lost his balance, he clutched for the shrouds, and missed them.

It is possible to swim in sea-boots and a heavy pea-jacket—but not for very long.

The Two Moons of

The charming old couple said they loved children, yet nobody would ever again see in this world the children they adopted.

A novelette... horrifying complete eerie

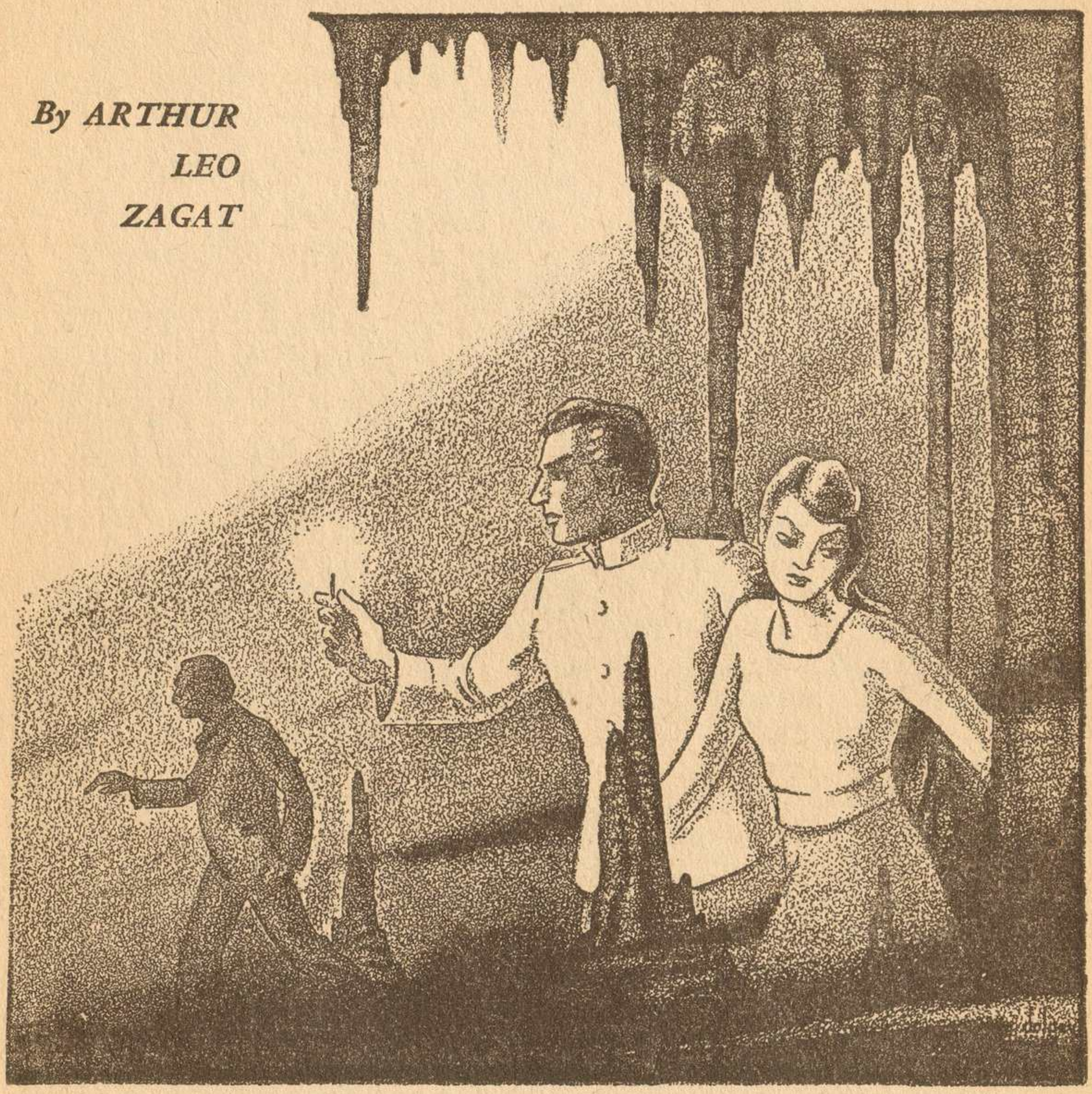


GEORGE CARSON — Lieutenant George Carson, U.S.N., now— came in through the door on which is lettered the meaningless title, "Editorial Consultant," they gave me when they put me on the shelf. "What the devil are you doing here?" I growled as he closed it and strode toward me. "I thought you were somewhere in the Atlantic, chasing U-boats."

"I was, Pop." He slung a long, blue-clothed leg over a corner of my desk, grinned down at me. "I'll be shoving off again by midnight." He looked ten years younger than when I'd last seen him. Wind and the sun had bronzed him, hooded his gaze with an eagle's drooped lids and the one or two threads of gray in his black hair served only to give him a certain solidity. "A bit of luck gave me

Tranquillia

By ***ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT***



the chance to wangle the first shore leavé I've had in five months."

It might be luck, but with the word pain had come into his gray eyes and a slow smoulder of anger.

"Picked up a drifting ship's boat," he explained, "with some poor sons aboard more dead than alive."

"Jerry's got another one, has he?" I grabbed for my 'phone. "What—City Desk, Jen— What was it? Where—? Oh, okay." His face had gone blank. "Okay, George, I forgot. Quote. No information shall be published unless and until released by the Commandant, Third Naval District. Unquote. So the radio can spill it first," I added bitterly, "and make our headlines look like the March of Time a year behind the band. Now in 'eighteen— You wouldn't remember, you were in the

Navy then too, but back in 'eighteen we—"

"Had to fight your way into the building through the crowds waiting for extras. Or was that the fracas in 'ninety-eight?"

"If you're hinting, you young whipper-snapper, that I'm old enough to— What in blazes are you wasting time here for, anyway? Why aren't you on your way up to Westchester to see your son?"

"No train till one-seven, which gives me about forty-five minutes— Listen, Pop. Something's come up that you—I wonder if you could help me out. Fishing in a pocket of his uniform he looked and sounded exactly like the shy but earnest cub who when I was in the slot, in the twenties, used to come to me with a thousand eager questions. "I picked up a copy of the GLOBE this morning, the first I've seen since Christmas, and— You know I always read the Agony Column first, don't you?"

"I ought to, seeing it was I tipped you that the personal ads are a good spot to find hints for off-trail items."

"This hit me in the eye." George put a torn-out clipping in front of me and added, an odd note of significance in his tone. "In today's sheet."

IT WAS four lines of six point type, the first line light-face caps and small caps:

COUPLE WILL CARE FOR THE DURATION without charge child of widower who wishes to volunteer for military service. Country Home. 'Phone Carseville - 465.

I looked up. "This would have struck you just right five months ago, but—"

"It did. I answered that same ad five months ago, and parked Pete with the old couple who'd inserted it." I'd been on vacation, I recalled. He'd been gone when I returned. "That's how I was able to get back into uniform without worrying about the brat."

"So someone else got the idea, so what? It's good, isn't it?"

"I said the same *ad*, Pop." He spoke quietly, but obviously he was disturbed. "Exactly the same, even to the 'phone number. I checked in my address book. It's the same people."

"Okay. Your Peter worked out well and they've decided to take in another kid."

"There isn't room for another. The Barrets live in a small bungalow and the one guestroom is tiny—"

"Two boys might share it, if they got one of these two-story beds you see advertised."

"Ye-e-es." He tautened again. "They don't specify a boy, Pop. Look here. See. They say child. Pete's twelve and— All right. Maybe I'm nuts but I've got a nagging sort of hunch. What I came down here for was to find out if that ad's appeared any other time since the lad's been up there."

"What would that prove?"

"Well . . ." I picked up the 'phone, told Jen to get me the Morgue, told Ed Brolles what I wanted. "Now suppose we get sensible, George," I suggested. "Have you any sane reason to suspect anything's wrong with the boy?"

"No. I haven't seen him since late January but he's written me fairly regularly." His breast pocket produced a packet of pencil-smudged half-sheets. "His letters are all pretty much alike." He pulled one from under the elastic that held them together, unfolded it. "Like this; 'Dear Dad. How are you? I'm fine. I hit a three bagger Saturday. We won, sixteen to twelve, and—'" George checked, brown fingers tightening on the paper. "I'll be damned," he said softly.

"What's hit you?"

He didn't answer. He put the letter down on the desk, selected another from the opposite side of the packet, glanced through it, grunted. "I thought I remembered . . . Listen, Pop. That letter's six weeks old. This one came yesterday, but listen— 'I hit a three bagger Saturday. We

won, sixteen to twelve.' What do you make of that?"

"Coincidence."

"Think so?" George had both papers on the desk, side by side, was looking back and forth between the two, lips compressed. Grim. "Take a look at this and see if you still think it's coincidence."

I bent over, studied the sheets. "I see what you mean. The rest of the wording is different, but those two statements, just alike, are in exactly the same relative positions on the two pages."

"As if," he half-whispered. "As if one was traced from the other."

"Mmm." I couldn't be positive without superimposing them, with a strong light behind, but it certainly looked as if every character of the endearing, childish scrawl on the one sheet were identical with its corresponding character on the other. "Yesterday's letter might be a patchwork of tracings from several earlier— Wait!" I exclaimed, abruptly relieved. "We've forgotten that you had the earlier letters. You certainly didn't give them to anyone to trace."

"No. No, I didn't. But the whole batch of these might have been prepared all at once, then mailed at inter—." The 'phone bell cut him off.

My hand beat his by a fraction of a second. "The GLOBE ought to make a special rate for those people." Ed has one of those telephone voices you can hear across the room. "That same ad's appeared a dozen times the last—"

"Thanks, fellow. That's all I wanted to know."

II

GEORGE'S eyes were gray steel, black-dotted by pinpoint pupils. "If they've done anything to Pete . . ." He slid off the desk and started stiff-kneed toward the door.

"Wait," I barked. "You've still got twenty minutes to make that train. I want to try something."

He swung around. "What?" but I was rattling the bar for Jen. She came in on the line and I told her, "Get me Carseville 465."

"I didn't let them know I was coming," George cautioned. "I—" His mouth twitched. "I wanted to surprise Pete."

In my ear a low, musical voice said, "Hello. Who is it, please?"

"My name's Harold Gatlin." George tugged at the receiver and I moved it so he could get his ear to it too. "I'm calling with regard to your personal in this morning's NEW YORK GLOBE."

"You are interested in placing a child?"

"A little girl. Have you any preference?"

The woman hesitated. Or perhaps I imagined it. At any rate, her reply was definite when it came. "Not at all." I saw a brown hand tighten on the desk edge, its knuckles go white. "How old is your daughter, Mr. Gatlin?"

"About ten," I replied. "But she is not my daughter. I am her grandfather."

"Her grandfather!" I was sure, this time, that the voice at the other end of the wire had changed. "I am afraid you do not quite understand," it said coldly. "What we have in mind is to release someone for military service—"

"You'll be doing exactly that in this case." The rather nebulous impulse that had prompted me to say "grandfather" was crystallizing into a definite plan. "My daughter is a trained nurse. Her hospital unit has been ordered overseas and she will have to resign unless Kay can find a home where she can be happy."

"Surely she could be happy with you."

"Surely. But, unfortunately, I too am leaving the country. I happen to be on the staff of a—a certain magazine," I'd almost said newspaper, realized just in time this would be too clear a tie-up with George,

"and have been given an assignment that will keep me abroad indefinitely."

"I see." Her tone was still tentative. "Are there no relatives, or close friends perhaps, who can take care of the little girl?"

It was evident now what she was after. "None. Helen was divorced shortly after Kay was born and— Well," I ventured an embarrassed little laugh, "it would be about the worst possible thing for the child if she were to come under the influence of her father or his family. I'm sure you understand, Mrs—"

"Barret," she filled in. "Mary Barret. Yes. I think I do." She paused, began again. "Would you care to bring your granddaughter up here, Mr. Gatlin?"

There it was, on a silver platter. "Precisely what I had in mind."

"And her mother too, please. Mr. Barret will be here and we can all get to know each other before we make any final decisions. Shall we say for lunch tomorrow?"

George had only till midnight— "I'm afraid not. I shall have several important conferences and Helen will be on duty at the hospital. Would it be inconvenient if we were to skip the lunch and make it this afternoon?"

Not at all. They would be happy to have us. I jotted down the directions she gave me and after a final exchange of inanities, hung up.

George's jaw was ridged with knotted small muscles, his nostrils pinched. "It's being a girl didn't feaze her."

"No," I agreed softly. "But did you get the rest of it? Your Mary Barret was plenty careful to make sure that no one would be dropping in unexpectedly—"

"Someone's going to drop on them, like a ton of coal, just as soon as that train—"

"Hold it, son. Hold everything, we're not going up there by train."

He stared. "We!"

"What the blue exes do you think you'd accomplish, rushing in there like a red-eyed bull, except to make things tough for Peter if there's really something wrong about that set-up? I'm keeping the appointment I just made, and if I don't know the whole layout before I've been in that house half an hour, I've been in the wrong business for forty-three years."

Shadows were blue in the hollows of his gaunt cheeks. "It won't work. They'll smell a rat when you show up there without this family you invented."

"The only thing I invented," I chuckled as once more I picked up the 'phone, "was that stuff about Helen's being a nurse— Oh, Jen. Will you ask Mrs. Clark to step in here, please?" I cradled the instrument. "She's been Martha Propper's assistant on the Woman's Page since about two weeks after you left us."

"You never told me you had a daughter."

"I never had one, till Kay Clark adopted me as her grandfather and her mother seconded the motion. Quite something, that youngster. She— But here's Helen."

AS SHE pulled the door shut behind her, she saw George. Her irises, a luminous brown flecked with gold, dilated slightly and for the briefest instant breath was caught between the warm, red bows of her lips. Then she turned to me.

"You asked to have me come in?"

Helen is long-flanked, slender, but her voice is a deep contralto underlaid by a vague huskiness that pulls at my old heart-strings. "I did." Her dark gray suit was professional enough looking, in spite of the sweater that moulded her curves, but something would have to be done about that unruly tousle of chestnut hair. "This is George Carson, Helen. I think you've heard me speak of him."

"Once or twice." The smile with which she acknowledged the introduction was frank. Friendly. "Did you know, Lieu-

tenant, that not a single stick of literate copy has appeared in the GLOBE since you beat your typewriter into a torpedo tube?"

"I shouldn't wonder," he said, abstractedly looking at his wrist-watch. I watched the girl's upper lip start to curl, said, "Helen! You're going up to Westchester with us this afternoon. Right now."

"I couldn't possibly. I've got four more ways of disguising watercress as food to think up before deadline, and a column of lovelorn blah—"

" 'Phone Kay's school to have her ready for us to pick up." I pushed creakingly to my feet. "I'm going downstairs to Circulation, to wangle the loan of a car out of Ramsey. Meet me out front in ten minutes."

Amusement crinkled the corners of Helen's eyes and mouth. "Perfect!" she exclaimed, applauding with silent palms. " 'Call yourselves reporters?' snarled Scrooge, the demon editor. 'Come with me and I'll show you how to get the story.' "

"Right. A story the radio won't beat us to, for once."

"It is— Oh, no." Her face fell. "No, you're kidding me. If it was, really, you wouldn't want Kay along."

"Kay's the key to the whole thing," I said from the door. I was to recall saying that, in a moment of horror. "George will explain, while you're getting your duds."

I stopped a moment to fix things up with Helen's boss. Martha's never liked me, but there's one advantage in being around a shop as long as I have. You know where all the skeletons are buried.

III

I DON'T know any landscape in the world more nostalgically lovely than New York's Westchester County. The rolling hills, brilliant with soft green flame, the blue-gray haze in the hollows, the limpid chatter of tumbling small streams—

You can have your Cote d'Azur before the war, your Isle of Capri. I'll take the Sawmill River Road in April.

I was driving, Kay was a vibrant little bundle of restlessness beside me. We'd told her only that when we got where we were going, we would pretend that I was her real grandfather, her mother an army nurse, and that we were looking for a place for her to live. "It's something for the paper," Helen had explained, "and so it's not really a lie but just making believe."

Which bit of sophistry had at least eased the mother's conscience, however it had been accepted by the child.

She was a brat, but a nice one. A sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of a tiny, tip-tilted nose, close-cropped hair the color of honey—one sometimes surprised a wistfulness in Kay's pert countenance that vanished the instant she knew herself observed. Left almost from infancy to her own devices, and the scant supervision of such maids-by-the-day as a very slim purse could afford, she was altogether self-sufficient yet on occasion she could display a surprising capacity for deep affection.

Just why she'd chosen to extend this to the crusty, cynical old curmudgeon I am, I never pretended to comprehend.

"Don't forget, Pop." George broke in on my thoughts. "You turn off into a side-road, left, just beyond that curve ahead."

"I'm driving this car," I growled, "and I don't need any help." I glanced up into the rear-view mirror, discreetly tilted to reflect the rear compartment. He sat bolt upright at one end of the seat, expressionless except for the throb, throb of his temple. Helen was in the other corner, as far as she could get from him.

I'd maneuvered to get them back there together, with the disingenuous statement that the car had been loaned to me on my express promise that I alone would drive it, and the help of Kay's insistence on riding

up front. I had my trouble for my pains. Helen's half-hearted attempts at conversation had elicited only monosyllabic grunts from her companion, and she'd finally sunk into a brown study of her own.

I couldn't blame George. Peter was more to him than his son. He was the living memory of the wife whose death, six years ago, had come near to breaking the man.

Slowing on the long curve and watching for a chance to break through the opposing flow of traffic to the side road whose narrow entrance was banked with azaleas, I decided that there must be at least ten years between those two. Helen had been eighteen when she'd contracted the unfortunate marriage that had lasted only long enough to produce Kay. The girl had had a tough time, but she'd won—

The azaleas brushed the car's sides and their fragrance filled it. "Oh, shucks, gran'pa Harry," Kay pouted. "Now I can't watch it any more."

"See what, grandchild Kay?"

"A tomahawk, I think it was. I'd have been sure in another second."

"That you'd seen a tomahawk?" I teased. "I didn't know there were any more Indians in these parts."

She giggled, delighted at my mistake. "A Curtiss Tomahawk, gran'pa. A pursuit plane. It was flying around and around, way high up, and all of a sudden it started to fly straight, like the pilot saw something. Do you think it was Jap bombers he saw, maybe? Do you think maybe they're coming to bomb New York and kill a lot of people and—?"

"Stop it, Kay!" Helen's voice was sharper than I'd ever heard it to her daughter. "Stop it this instant!" And then she was apologizing. "All this is so peaceful, I'd forgotten all about the war. Please find something else to talk about, sweetheart."

"Why should she?" George demanded harshly. "What else is there to talk about? Or think about?"

SHE twisted to him. "But not the children, Lieutenant Carson. Please. Not the children."

He looked at her, not really seeing her. "Do you think you can hide from them the filthy world we've made for them to live in?"

"We ought to try—"

"Ought we? Listen, Mrs. Clark. In the lifeboat we picked up last night there was a refugee boy, six or seven years old by his size. His size was the only way you could tell anything about him. He'd been burned— They told me at the Naval Hospital that he will live, that they're hopeful he will not be badly scarred. His body, they meant. What about the scars on his soul, do you think?"

Reaching brush whispered along the sides of the car but within the car there was only the hiss of Helen's pulled-in breath.

"Listen," George said again. "I used to read to my son from the great books of all time, I used to take him to the art galleries, the concert halls, teaching him what beauty man can create. Other times we would go where some skyscraper, some bridge, was being erected, some tunnel dug, learning what strength and usefulness man can build. And if I happened to write a line that sang, a paragraph that shone, I carried it home to Peter in my hands, and he was very proud of his father."

He laughed, shortly, bitterly. "What have I now to show my son, to bring home to him? 'Congratulate your old man, Pete. Today I dropped a depthbomb and blasted a submarine—"

"Gee!" Kay broke in, wide-eyed. "Gee, did you? That's swell. Was it a German one?"

"Kay! You—"

"No, Mrs. Clark. It's no use." George

came around to her daughter, his lips—only his lips—smiling. "Yes, it was a German, Kay. We know, because some things came up to the top of the water, splintered wood, shattered— Well, things that float.

"One was a kit box that must have belonged to one of the sailors. It was watertight and among the other things in it there was a picture of a blonde little girl, about your age only she had a little button of a nose and pigtails. On the picture was written, *'Komm bald deinem Elsa zuruck, Vater,'* which in English means, 'Come back soon to your Elsa, father,' but Elsa's father won't ever come back to her because I killed him. Isn't that a pity?"

Kay nodded, speechless for once. "Oh," George exclaimed. "I forgot! We're certain it was that very submarine which torpedoed the ship that had almost brought the little boy I was talking about safe to America. It might even have been Elsa's father who aimed the torpedo."

"That's different. I'm glad you killed him. I'm awful glad."

There was an incoherent sound in Helen's throat, then— "You— You're despicable, George Carson!"

He swung back to her. "Of course I am. So are we all. We're all trapped in a despicable, brutal world and there's no escape, no longer the slightest possibility of escape for me or you or Kay or Pete— Pete," he repeated, the name a groan, and he sank back into his corner, hands closing into tight fists on his thighs.

AFTER that there was no more talk, except for Kay's chatter. The road climbed steadily through a rustling, second-growth thicket and for all the sign of human habitation we might have been five thousand miles from New York instead of fifty. We crested a hill, glimpsed the distant Tappan Zee, in the sky above its silver shimmer a V of black planes flying South. The woods closed around us once more as the road dipped into leafy shadow.

My mind clung to those planes. There had been a waspish sort of haste about their flight, an odd sense of urgency. They were ours, of course. They must be ours. If they were not, the guns I knew to be hidden all through this placid countryside would be blasting— Light struck through slim, young boles ahead and I started braking.

I checked the figures on my speedometer. "Thirteen miles from the Sawmill River. This must be it."

George had his car door open before the car had stopped. I caught up with him and we made as little noise as we could, working through underbrush. We reached the edge of the thicket and peered through a green screen of brambles.

A lush meadow sloped gently away from before us, affording pasturage to a half-dozen brown and white cows. In the hollow below was a grove of tall old maples and beneath their leafy spread nestled a low-roofed small house, its shingled walls mottled gray and brown and velvet green by moss and weather.

"Yes," George breathed. "That's it."

The sun struck through the trees, brightening the rear of the house and the shadows it cast were deep purple—George's fingers dug into my arm, bruising. "Look there, Pop. In that bush." His grip transmitted to me the tremor that ran through him. "See it?"

I located what he meant, one of those model planes boys build and fly. It was caught, nose down, in a welter of thorny withes not five yards from us, rain-spattered, stained by mold but seemingly intact. "That's Pete's," George whispered. "That design painted on the fuselage, it's one he worked out for himself and he put it on all his planes."

"So what? We know he was here. What we're out to find out is if he's here now."

"We've found out. Pete would never have let that plane rot like that if he could help it. Even when one of his models smashed up, he always salvaged what parts he could for the next one. He isn't here and he hasn't been here for weeks."

It was abruptly chilly, there at the edge of the woods. "Okay," I said. "You wait here while we go down and find out where he is, and why."

It took almost physical persuasion to get him to agree.

IV

THE room, extending all across the front of the house, was low-ceiled, its woodwork dark with the mellow patina of the years but dancing flames in a fieldstone fireplace, a massing of flowers in the deep-silled, many-paned windows, made it very cheerful. The furniture, much used but not shabby, had a timeless grace of line that made altogether appropriate the juxtaposition of, say, the plum-colored Georgian sofa where Kay sat demurely beside her mother with the Hepplewhite chair Mary Barret occupied.

"Yes, Mrs. Clark." Her low voice was as musical as I'd heard it in the telephone. "John and I always have loved children, though we've never had any of our own."

"I suppose that was what prompted this plan of yours."

"Yes," John Barret replied. "We wanted to help, and it seemed the best way." He stood behind his wife, blue-veined hand on her shoulder in an unschooled gesture of affection. As so often happens when two people have lived long together, there was a definite physical resemblance between the white-haired couple. Both had the same broad, thoughtful brows, the same clear transparency of skin that age had not so much wrinkled as brushed with a tracery of fine lines that crinkled with kindly humor at the corners of bright little eyes and emphasized the sensitiveness of thin, pale lips. "The only way we could."

"It's a wonderful way," Helen smiled. "I was at my wit's ends what to do."

About both the old people, she in her modest black silk dress with its relieving, creamy lace at the throat, he in a well-worn velvet smoking jacket open to reveal a high-cut, lapelled vest and Ascot cravat, there was a fragile, almost spiritual quality utterly disarming to anyone but a newspaperman who cynically recalled a certain woman convicted for swindling her fellow church members, the sanctified countenance of a certain mass poisoner.

The wall opposite that through which we had entered was, save for a single, closed door, completely covered with books and I was putting this circumstance to good use. No book-lover could find anything alarming in a visitor's browsing along his shelves but such a random occupation can cover a very thorough visual scrutiny of a room.

This one was warmly lived in, but nowhere was there any hint of the kind of disorder with which even the best behaved boy of twelve inevitably betrays his presence in a home.

"At my wits' ends," Helen repeated. "Nurses are needed so desperately with our Expeditionary Forces, but I have a duty to my daughter too. She did not ask me to bring her into the world."

"No," Barret agreed with the cliche. "She did not. A mother's first duty is to her child, but I'm positive Kay will be very happy with us."

"I'm sure of that, now that I've met you both. There's only one thing that still troubles me— Won't my little girl be lonely here, without any other children for company?"

"No," the woman responded, with assurance. "I can guarantee that she will not be lonely."

"Then you do have another child here!" Clever girl! "I suppose he's at school?" Neat. Very neat. "Will he be home soon enough for us to meet him?" She'd rocked them right back on their heels.

IF SHE had, Mary Barret made a quick recovery. "Unfortunately, our little house is too small for more than one youngster—but I want you to see the rest of it." She rose, held out a hand to Kay. "Come, my dear, and see the lovely room that will be yours if your mother decides to let you stay with us for a while. You'd like her to, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes!" Kay jumped up and came eagerly to her. "You're awful nice." No child could simulate her glowing enthusiasm. "And he is too. You're almost as nice as Moms and gran'pa Harry."

Don't ever tell me again, I thought, that a child's instinct is unerring.

Helen got to her feet to join them and John Barret came toward me. "Ah, Mr. Gatlin," he smiled. "I see you've found the most prized of my possessions."

"The—" I glanced down at the book in my hand. It was open to a page of abstruse mathematical formulae. "I'm afraid this is quite meaningless to me."

"I shouldn't wonder," he chuckled. "There are supposed to be only a dozen men in the world who can really understand it. But have you seen the flyleaf?"

"Why no." I turned to it, found an inscription in an angular, very foreign hand. "Mmm. Most interesting. 'To John Barret, who has progressed much farther along the path we both tread than I can ever hope to.'"

The signature was that of the foremost physicist of our day.

"He was altogether too kind when he wrote that," the old man murmured. "All I've done is to find a practical application of his discovery of the essential identity of Space and Time, Matter and Energy. I—"

"John, dear," his wife's gentle tones intervened. "Don't you think Mr. Gatlin would like to look around with us? I'm as proud of my kitchen," she favored me with that vague, sweet smile of hers, "as John is of his books."

"You have every right to be," Helen's voice came from somewhere beyond the now open door in the book-lined wall. "Just look at this, Father!"

I crossed a dim hallway, went in through another doorway. The white-tiled room was walled on one side by enameled cupboards, chromium trimmed. A solid-fronted counter ran the full length of the other side, its grayish monel metal glowing in the sunlight that poured through a gayly curtained window open to the rustle of the maples and smells of spring. "Where's the stove?" I demanded. "The refrigerator? The sink? I'm a brass monkey if this looks like a kitchen."

Barret laughed softly, going past me to the counter. He touched something. A panel lifted up out of the top to reveal the spiraled wires of an electric range. Another flick of his hand exposed a rectangular basin, two feet deep, containing a large, circular wire basket.

Kay was beside him, excited. "What's that for?"

"You stack your dirty dishes in there, honey, and—" He must have toed a pedal in the base for abruptly steaming water sprayed into the cavity, from beneath its upper rim. The lashing jets met, swirled. Suddenly the wire basket was filled with a foaming mass of soap suds, as suddenly the sprays were clear water again, magically rinsing away the soap.

BARRET chuckled. "Now isn't that an easy way to wash dishes, Kay?"

"It's swell. But you still got to wipe them."

"No you don't." The basket was revolving. It was whirling so fast that it seemed

to have disappeared. "You just whisk the wet away." The panels closed down, as if of their own motion. "It's all done by pressing these buttons—see here—along the edge of the counter."

"What else is there?" Kay demanded.

"Well—I tell you what. Suppose you push all the buttons you can find and see what happens." Barret turned to me, for all his silver hair very much like a youngster showing off. "Some of the devices in here I bought. Most I constructed myself, and even those manufactured by others I've found ways to improve."

"Very clever," I grunted.

"You certainly have a way with children." Helen was admiring. "You couldn't have thrilled Kay more than you've done by letting her play with those gadgets, but I should think a boy would be in Seventh Heaven." That was almost too obvious. "A little older boy. About twelve, say."

"Quite right. Now I recall when—"

"Shall we go look at the other rooms?" Once more Mary Barret interrupted her husband, and this time I was positive she deliberately was forestalling some indiscretion.

"It's getting on, and you ought to start back early enough to be on the Parkway before dark, that road through the woods can be treacherous at night." Yet, as she took Helen's arm and urged her out into the hall, she was just a smiling little old lady as demure and naive seeming as the one Whistler once painted. "You have no idea how dark it gets."

"Why, Mary," Barret protested. "It's only three-thirty." He waited at the door for me to pass out. "They've plenty of time."

I took my time about it, so that when I reached the passage the women were well down toward its end. As the old man started to follow I blocked him off and demanded, low-toned but imperatively, "Where's Peter Carson?"

V

HE WAS startled, no doubt of that. Shocked. "Come across," I growled. "What have you done with the lad?"

His gray lips quivered— The house was shaken by a dull thud!

A rolling growl was like distant thunder, but through the kitchen window the leaf-fretted sky was blue and cloudless. Once more the thud, and again, and the far-off rumble once more. "John!" There was alarm in Mary Barret's cry. "Those planes before— Are those bombs, John? Are they bombing New York?" and that reminded me of Kay asking the same question on the Sawmill River Road and I realized I did not see her back there in the kitchen.

"Kay," I called, going back in. "Where are you?" A giggle pulled my eyes to a hitherto unnoticed door in the sidewall beyond the end of the row of cupboards. "Kay!" A dress hem flicked in the narrowing space between door-edge and jamb, and the door slammed shut. I reached it, grasped the knob. "Come out of there, you little imp."

The door refused to open.

Barret reached me and I heard Helen, beyond him. Against the gray enamel of the door-frame the chromium disk of a Yale lock glittered. "Kay!" I called again, rapping the wood with my knuckles.

"Oh, John," Mary Barret sighed, reproachfully. "You forgot again to make sure you'd pulled it tight." A bunch of keys clinked in her husband's hand. "Open it. Quickly. Before—" She checked, fingers going to her mouth, pupils dilating.

Abruptly the floor had commenced to vibrate. It was as if someone held an electric massage machine against my soles, and the sensation was oddly frightening.

Barret's key chattered against the lock, fell away. He looked at his wife, gray lips shaping a word that would not come. The vibration stopped, as abruptly as it had be-

gun and I snatched the bunch of keys from him, jabbed the one he'd selected into the serrated slit in the shining disk. Someone caught at me but I had the door open, was going through it into a small windowless room.

A closet rather, it was barely six feet square. Its walls and floor were of dull lead, the ceiling also. The sunlight following me in was fractured into a myriad gleaming spears by the intricate, polished metal of a machine that head-high, unfamiliar, took up the cubicle's central half.

"Kay!" Helen called as she entered. "Kay! Where are you hiding?"

"She must be in back of this." I went around the machine—stopped short. There was enough light back here to show me every inch of the space. There was no other door. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could conceal so much as a rabbit but there was no Kay.

"Where is she?" Helen's eyes were large and dark and appalled in a face suddenly chalk-white. "What has happened to my child?" and it was then I recalled saying in my office, 'Kay's the key to the whole thing,' and answered her, hoarsely. "The same as happened to Peter Carson."

"Please." John Barret laid a trembling hand on her arm. "Please, Mrs. Clark, don't be alarmed. Your daughter is quite safe. A little frightened perhaps, but that is all. We can fetch her back in a twinkling if you and Mr. Gatlin will be good enough to step out into the kitchen and close the door—"

"So you can make your getaway through the same trapdoor she blundered into?" Over my first bewilderment, I'd guessed the answer. "What kind of fools do you think we are?"

"But I assure you there is no—"

"It's no use, John," Mrs. Barret broke in. "We'll have to explain. Perhaps when they understand—"

"Explain be damned! Bring Kay back and then start explaining about Peter—"

"Hop to it," George Carson bellowed, abruptly thudding in. "Pronto!" Barret spun to him, recoiled from the sudden, threatening apparition — slipped, fell heavily—

And lay motionless.

"John!" the old woman gasped, went to her knees beside the sprawled, frail form. "John!"

"If you think I could stay up there in the woods, wondering what was happening here," George answered my unspoken question, "You're crazy. I was crouched under that kitchen window when things broke loose in here, and my clasp knife was enough to get me in through the back doo—"

"It's his heart spell!" Mrs. Barret was up again. "I've got to get his drops." She evaded George's clutch at her, darted out. We both sprang after her jammed in the doorway.

HELEN'S, "Let her go," pulled us back in again. "We don't need her. Kay saw something the moment she came in here, a—"

"Pushbutton!" I exclaimed, a step ahead of her words. "Like the ones he told her she could monkey with. Of course." I pointed to a vertical slab of bluish soapstone riveted to the machine, facing the door. "Here it is." I jabbed the button inset in the stone, glanced around the gray walls for a panel to start sliding open, at the floor for a trapdoor to appear.

Nothing happened.

"Maybe there's another—"

"Hold it, Pop!" George cut in. "Hold everything. See this copper plate on the jamb here and this strap spring on the edge of the door? They match up. I'll bet he's fixed them to break the power circuit so that the thing doesn't work unless this is closed." The lock clicked as he shut it. Blue-white glare struck down at us from

a fluorescent double-tube in the ceiling. "Try it now."

I obeyed. Nothing in the room moved. But the floor was vibrating again. Not only the floor. The lead walls. The air they enclosed. The vibration intensified swiftly, took hold of me every nerve, cell—

Blackness smashed into the cubicle!

Something jarred. That's the wrong word. It was as if a stratum of rock on which the house stood had grated bodily along another stratum beneath it.

The dreadful tremor ended, that same instant, but the blackness remained, thumbing my eyeballs. "If I was aboard ship," George said somewhere within it, "I'd swear a depth-bomb just went off under our keel," and then his breath caught and I knew he'd recalled, as I had, the distant thuds, the far-off rumble of what had not sounded quite like thunder. "Let's get some light on the subject," he suggested evenly. "I think I've a pack of matches—Yes."

As he scratched one, I was thinking of how in England frustrated bombers would jettison their loads of death over some unalarmed countryside and how people were sometimes buried alive for days beneath the ruins of just such isolated small houses as this.

The tiny flame blossomed. Its feeble flicker brought George's set, gaunt countenance out of the darkness, wavered over Helen, straight and still, hand denting her sweatered breast. There should be a wall behind her. The match should be burning straight up, steady, in the windowless room where no one moved, not wavering in the soft and inexplicable breeze I felt stroking my cheek.

This should be a lead covered floor on which John Barret lay sprawling and somehow pathetic, not rough-surfaced stone.

I stared into the depths of dark space not thinking yet, not daring to think—Small feet scampered, somewhere out there! "Mumsy," a childish treble piped. "Grand'pa Harry." Kay ran into the dim, dancing circle of luminance, flung thin arms about her mother's waist and sobbed, "Oh, mumsy. I've been looking and looking for you, all over."

All over where? In the name of sanity, where were we?

VI

"IT'S a huge cave."

George Carson had struck another match and high above us some bits of mica sparkled. "A cave," I repeated, as if by the reiteration I could make it seem reasonable. "A bomb blasted a hole and we've dropped into it."

"Without even shaking us up, or smashing that machine?" I didn't need him to point that out. "And besides, Kay was here before us, wherever here is— Ouch!" The match arced away, went out. "Burned myself." I heard George blow on his fingers and somehow the familiar act eased the hollow, empty feeling at the pit of my stomach. "Wait a second. I'll light another."

"Hadn't you better go easy on them?" Helen's voice was amazingly steady, coming out of the tarry sightlessness. "You've only the one book, haven't you?"

"Right. But we've got to find a way out of here and we can't do it in the dark."

"It wasn't dark here at first." That was Kay. "Not black dark like this." She sounded her normal self again instead of the terrified little tyke who'd scampered to us out of the unknown, and I realized why Helen held herself so sternly under control. "There was a little light coming in, from way off there."

"Was there, dear? Tell mother— You came in the door from the kitchen and then what?"

"Gran'pa Harry called me but I closed it to tease him and I saw this button and

pushed it— He said I could, Mom. You heard him say I could push all the buttons and see what happened."

"I certainly did, sweetheart. You couldn't know he didn't mean this one. So you pushed the button, and then?"

"And then everything started shivering and all of a sudden the light went out. I—I went back to the door to get out, but there wasn't any door. I kept going farther and farther and I couldn't feel the door or the wall or *anything*. And I called you and you didn't answer and it was *big* in here and I couldn't see anything and there was *nobody*."

It was the breathless way she told it, rather than what she told, that made it so graphic. The blind groping in sudden, vast darkness. The calls echoing and reechoing and bringing no response. The realization of aloneness. . . .

"I stopped calling and stood still, and it wasn't so awful dark any more. Like when you go in a movie theatre, Mom. You can't see anything right at first but pretty soon you can. You know?"

"Yes, Kay. I know. What did you see?"

"Well, far away there was this hole, like, where the light was coming in and I was in this great big place, just stone all around, all empty. I was awful scared.

"I wanted to run to the light but I remembered how when I was a little kid you used to tell me if I got lost I should stay right where I was and you'd come and find me, so I didn't. But you didn't come and it got too dark to see, and I didn't know *what* to do. And then all of a sudden I heard people talking and this match lit up and it was you and gran'pa Harry and— Oh, Moms! I don't *like* it here."

"I don't like it here either dear. I'm sure none of us do."

"Then why don't we go back?"

Helen laughed a little helplessly. I wondered how she was going to answer that, how avoid the issue. "We want to, Kay," she said, matter-of-fact. "But we don't know how."

She hadn't avoided it. I realized that treating the little girl frankly, as an adult, she was wiser than I should have been. Very much wiser. "Why that's easy, Mom," Kay was saying. "You just push another button. Like the elevator in our house."

"'Out of the mouth of a babe,'" I quoted softly. "Is my face red. How about some light, George?"

His fingers pawed at my sleeve, traveled down it and thrust the packet into my hand. "Here."

"Afraid you'll burn yourself again?" I tore off a match, struck it. The unsteady light was multiplied by the maze of curiously twisted rods and wire coils— George bent to Barret, at the machine's base, lifted the fragile body and put it across his shoulder. "What's the big idea?"

THE eyes he turned to me were sultry. "Pete's somewhere here, Pop. I'm not going back till I find him or—" The corners of his mouth twitched. He wheeled, strode away into the dark.

I started to call to him, changed my mind. "All right, Helen."

"But—"

"Push that button," I snapped, backing away, "before this match burns out. You've got Kay to think about."

"You're not coming with—"

"I'm the demon editor, remember? On a story. Your angle's Mary Barret. Get—"

"There's just the one button, Mother." Kay, at the slab, had not heard this interchange. "I can't find any other."

"It must work both ways." I was now well outside the distance the cubicle walls had been from the machine. "Push it!" Her little thumb went to the stone. Flame stung and I flipped the match away. "It doesn't work," Kay wailed. "It's busted."

VII

THE fourth match showed me Helen hugging her small daughter to her. "George," I called. "George Carson! We need you." He emerged from the shadows, carrying Barret as though the old man had no weight at all. "The Navy's press agents pull a good line about all sailors being ace mechanics. How about your fixing that elevator?"

He put down his burden, went to the contraption. I struck five more matches before he reported, "I can't find anything obviously loose or out of place. If I juggle with it, regardless, I may do some irreparable damage." The light went out, we were in the dark again. "You'll just have to wait here till the old devil comes to."

Suppose he doesn't, I asked myself. He looked rotten. Suppose he dies on us?

"*We* will have to wait here," Helen was exclaiming. "We! What about you?"

'I'm going to look for my son." His footfalls started away. "Come back here, you young nincompoop," I barked. "Helen's in this jam because she wanted to help you. Where do you think you get off, walking out on her?"

The footsteps hesitated, returned. "Okay, Pop. You win. What do you want me to do?"

"The least you can do is stay with us. What good do you think I would be if—Well, if anything happened?"

Silence gathered about us. Except for a faint whisper of breathing the blackness held no sound at all. No drip, drip of seepage, no scutter of anything living. It was as though the unseen walls moved in on us, entombing us.

"We can't!" A thin edge of hysteria had at last come into Helen's voice. "We can't just stand around here in this awful dark. We'll go— Let's do something. Let's try and find some way out of this—this cave."

"Which direction," I wanted to know, "would you start looking?"

George had the answer. "This breeze must be coming from the cave's mouth. All we have to do is walk into it. It's worth trying, isn't it?"

"It might be, if we could be sure of finding our way back here. If we had a ball of cord—"

"We have," Helen offered. "Not a ball but something just as good. My sweater. I can start the wool at the hem and it will unravel as we go along—"

"That's the ticket," George approved. "That's what we'll do," so eagerly that I didn't bring up any more objections although I could think of plenty. We used one more of our now scanty supply of matches while Helen tied the end of a thread plucked from the bottom edge of her sweater to the machine, tested it to make sure it would pull out easily.

"We've got to keep touching one another," I reminded them, "so we don't get separated. I'll lead."

George lifted Barret to his shoulder again. We started out. We went very slowly, because I tested each step to make sure the darkness did not conceal a pitfall. Concentrating on each inch of progress, I was still aware of the deep, brooding silence the small noises we made did not so much disturb as accentuate. No one spoke, not even Kay except once when she complained that Helen was squeezing her hand so tightly it hurt.

The cave floor sloped gradually upward. The breeze freshened and it began to carry faint odors, the brown smell of earth, the green smell of vegetation. These brought me both an easing of tension and a pulse-throb of apprehension. What was waiting for us out there, where a paling of the dark promised the end of this interminable groping?

There was a rustle of foliage. Almost abruptly, I was in the open.

I stopped just in time. A foot ahead of me was the sharp edge of a ledge. "Hold it," I whispered. I don't quite know why I did whisper. It wasn't because I was afraid of being overheard. I think it was awe, inspired by a sense of immense height, of isolation under the vast, gold-dusted dome of velvet sky that confronted me.

A little below my level moving air soughed through a boundless black mass, the swaying roof, it dawned on me, of a forest.

Helen's shoulder pressed against mine. I heard George gasp. "Oooh," Kay breathed. "Ooooh," and then, "It's night. Gee, how did it get to be night so fast?"

So fast was right. It could not be more than an hour, if it was that, since in his sun-flooded kitchen John Barret had said, "It's only three-thirty. Three-thirty War Time, what's more, not sun time."

No one had answered Kay, but that didn't bother her. "Look at the stars, Mom," she prattled on. "They're so bright and near you can pick them right out of the sky." Her small hand reached out, as if to pluck one.

"They're all wrong," George was puzzled—something more than puzzled. "I can't spot a single constellation I know. If I had to navigate by these stars, I'd be lost."

"We are lost, George." Helen clutched Kay to her. "We're lost in Time and Space." She buried her face in the little girl's hair and I saw her shoulders tremble.

VII

AS unbelievable as what she'd said was that Helen Clark should have gone to pieces. I gaped in dismay and George Carson took an involuntary step toward her.

She straightened up before he could reach her. "Isn't it thrilling, Kay?" she cried, with just the right note of enthusiasm. "Just think what you can write the next time your English teacher asks for a composition about an interesting true experience!"

The child looked up. For an instant, from her expression, I was sure she'd not been deceived but abruptly she laughed, exclaimed, "Oh, Mother. You ought to see how funny you look with just the top of your sweater left around your neck."

"Goodness!" Helen snatched at the hems of her suit coat, pulled it together over a sheen of silk colorless in the starlight. "Am I glad I felt reckless this morning and put on my best slip."

All this eased the tension. At my suggestion we moved back just within the cave. George put Barret down, pillowed the white-maned head on his own rolled-up smoking jacket. Kay broke off the sweater thread, carried it to one side to tie it to a little knob of rock she spied. We found ourselves discussing our next step as matter of factly as if we'd missed a train or had run out of gas on the road.

He wanted us to remain here while he went exploring. I overruled him. "You've got to stay here with Helen and Kay. I'm the one to do any poking around that's necessary."

"Nonsense," he snorted and Helen added her protest. "You can't either of you accomplish anything in the night. The sensible thing is for us all to stay together till sunrise. Maybe Mr. Barret will wake up before that and then our troubles will all be over."

"How is he?" I asked.

George bent to him. "Pulse seems pretty feeble," he reported, "but it's even enough and his breathing is steady. No sign, though, that he's coming out of it."

"Well . . ."

"I'm thirsty," Kay complained. "And I'm getting hungry too."

"You're thirsty and hungry are you?"

I rumpled her hair. "Okay, grandchild Kay. Let's you and I run around the corner to the drug store and I'll buy you a tongue sandwich and a chocolate malted milk. Or do you like vanilla better?"

She giggled, subsided. "Now, George. Getting back to—"

"Hush," Helen interrupted. "Listen!"

She'd turned to the opening, was staring out, tousled head a little to one side, lips parted. I could make out only the susurrus of the treetops, nothing else. Not even the nocturnal shrill of cicadas or the peep of a bird disturbed in sleep. "I thought I— There! There it is again!"

"I still don't hear anything."

"I do," Kay piped. "People singing," and some shift of the breeze brought it to me too. Faintly. The merest shadow of melody that brushed some vaguely familiar chord.

A LONG stride took George to the ledge. The music faded—welled up again. Briefly the words were distinct;

". . . no more, my lady. Oh, weep no
more today . . ."

and died again beneath the vast, dark rustle of foliage.

There was no longer anything to dread in the luminous night. Where "My Old Kentucky Home" was being sung under the stars, no matter how strange the stars might be, there could be nothing to fear.

I started to say something to that effect, was checked by the touch of Helen's fingers on my sleeve. She motioned to George. Within the cave-mouth's jagged black frame he was silhouetted, stalwart and unmoving against those alien stars, in the grip of some strong emotion.

As we watched him, some vagrant trick of the wind once more brought us the singing, this time even more clearly than before, so clearly that we thought it was children's voices we heard in the rollicking, roguishly gay song to which they'd shifted:

". . . think the world is made for fun
and frolic,
And so do I.
And so do I.
Some think it well to be all melancholic
To pine and sigh.
But I, I spend my time in singing—"

George groaned. Even in the pallid starlight I could discern the torment in his face. "Pete and I used to—Did you hear that?" he broke off. "Pop! Did you hear—? 'Some happy song.'" He was visibly trembling. "They did just sing that, didn't they? I didn't imagine it? '*Happy* song.'"

"Why yes," I replied, wondering. "Seems to me that's wrong, but—"

"Of course it's wrong! It should be joyous, but Pete's always sung it happy, and—"

"You think it may be your Peter who taught it that way to the others." Helen's hand was on his arm, impulsively. "It must be Peter. Oh, George! He's down there and since he's singing he's well and happy."

"Maybe. I hope you're right, but I don't dare let myself—I'm climbing down there. Right now!"

"Can I go with him, mom?" Kay tugged at her mother's skirt. "Can I?"

"We're all going, honey. Come on."

"Hey." George had already started off. "I can't carry the old man."

"Leave him," he flung over his shoulder.

"Suppose he wakes up and escapes? We'll have no way of finding out how to get back to civilization."

"What do you think this is? We don't

have to rely on him any longer— Okay. Stay here if you want to."

There was nothing for me to do but follow. The ledge was only about three feet wide, but it was so smooth and sloped downward so gradually that there was no sense of peril.

Above us rose the escarpment to whose face it clung, topless, vertical rock starkly naked of vegetation and unsubstantial seeming in the stellar glimmer. What was it? The Palisades? That high cliff along the Hudson would be dwarfed into insignificance by this Himalayan height.

Even in the Himalayas, most gigantic of Earth's ranges, this precipice would be colossal.

VIII

"YOU'VE decided to stop at last, have you? So even the iron man gets tired."

George gave no sign he'd heard me. He just stood there, shoulders hunched, blunt jaw outthrust, peering through the leaf-flecked shadows. I shrugged, leaned my back against a tree trunk, too tired for either resentment or curiosity.

Helen must be as weary as I, but she was a woman. "What is it, George? What do you see?"

The slow downward slant of the ledge had taken us some three miles or more from the point below the cave where the singing had seemed to come. We'd had all that distance to retrace, guiding ourselves by occasional glimpses of the towering precipice.

In contrast with that gigantic height, the trees had appeared tiny, actually the smallest I'd noticed before weariness had caused me to lose interest was six feet through, and they soared breathlessly upward for a hundred feet before their boughs sprang outward to form the shimmering canopy of the woods.

They grew far apart and the spaces between them were extraordinarily free of brush for so obviously ancient a forest. We'd seemed to plod endlessly through the aisles of some De Quinceyan dream-cathedral, vast and awesome and unreal.

"I see it, Mumsy. I see what he's looking at." Kay pulled her hand from her mother's, pointed to where a reddish glow wavered briefly on the bark of some arboreal giant. "It's a fire. A camp fire, I betcha."

George stirred, said, low-toned. "You people wait here while I look that over."

"Be careful, Geo—" He strode away, leaving Helen in mid-sentence, looking after him with an odd, almost tender expression on her face. After a minute she turned to me. "He loves his son very much, doesn't he?" The huskiness in her voice was more noticeable than I'd ever heard it except when once or twice she'd talked to me of her dreams for Kay. "Too much to have room for any—anything else in his mind."

"Any *one* else," I suggested, dryly, "is what you meant to say. It seems so. Well," I yawned, "I'm going to try and get some rest. I'd advise you and Kay to do the same." I let myself awkwardly down to the ground, stretched out, "What time is it, anyway?"

She held her wrist-watch up, turned her hand to catch one of the pallid beams filtering through the whispering foliage overhead. "It's— Oh, dear! It's stopped. I'm sure I wound—" She shook the watch, put it to her ear, looked at it again. Her breath caught. "Kay. I wish you would lie down, sweetheart." Her voice was strangely flat. "See that pile of dried leaves over there. It looks so comfy and soft. Go lie down there."

"You come with me."

"I shall in a little while. I just want to talk to grandpa Harry about something. Go on now."

The little girl obeyed, though with evident reluctance. Helen settled down beside me. "You have a watch," she murmured, "even if you are too tired to get it out. Please look at it."

"What—? Oh, all right." I dug out my Waltham from the fob pocket my paunch made too tight for comfort. "What do you know about that? It's stopped too."

"What time does it say it is?"

"A quarter to four."

"Mine says thirteen of. It hasn't stopped. Neither has yours."

I shoved up to a sitting posture. "That's impossible! It was three-thirty when—Hell!" I burst into a laugh. "You had me dizzy for a second. It's a quarter to four in the morning, of course."

"You know better than that." The moon must have risen because in the flecks of light dancing across the pale oval of her face I could clearly see how drawn it was. "You know as well as I do twelve hours haven't passed since we were in the Barret's kitchen."

"Oh, now—"

"It was twilight when Kay first found herself in that cave, when we arrived there not more than ten minutes later it was full night. The sun doesn't set in April till well after seven." The delicate wings of her nose quivered. "We might as well face it. We're living at a different rate of time than our watches are adjusted to measure."

I STARED blankly. "A different rate of time—Sorry, Helen. I was never good at puzzles. Just what do you mean?"

"I'm not sure myself." She spread her hands. "All I know is we've done things that should have taken us three hours or more while our watches were marking off only about fifteen minutes, and that sounds like something I once read in a book by a man named Dunn. 'An Experiment with Time' it was called. I didn't understand it very well, but I do remember that he showed how time must run differently in different regions of Space."

"Poppycock," I snorted. "Balderdash."

"I thought it was too, till I talked about it with Wes—with a young man I know who teaches graduate courses in Science, at N.Y.U. He told me that while Dunn's book is popularized, it's basically sound. Wes tried to explain to me how according to the latest theories Time and Space are all mixed up—'interrelated functions of one another' is the phrase he used. 'Unless modern mathematical physics is all wrong,' he told me, 'if you were suddenly to be translated to some other part of Space, your watch would keep on measuring time as it is here but you would be living at an entirely different rate.'

"I must have looked awfully dumb, because he quit, told me not to worry my head about it, it was just something mathematicians liked to play around with and had no practical application. I—"

"Hold it, Helen!" My skin was prickling. "Let me think." I was back in the living room of that charming small house in Westchester County. I was looking at a book I'd picked at random from a shelf and an old man's gentle murmur was in my ears. "All I've done is to find a practical application of his discovery of the essential identity of Space and Time. . . ."

"No, damn it," I said aloud. "I don't believe it," and abruptly chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"I just thought of the old story, Helen, about the hillbilly making his first visit to the Zoo. You must have heard it a thousand times. How he stood in front of the giraffe's cage and drawled, "Shucks. I don't believe it. Thar ain't no sich animule.' Maybe I'm like that hillbilly, but—"

I didn't finish. George Carson was coming into sight, past a gigantic bole. He was grinning from ear to ear and beside

him trotted a sturdy little boy in shorts and sneakers.

Peter. Peter Carson.

IX

HE WAS a small-sized replica of George, the same chunky build, the same smiling gray eyes. Those eyes adored his father as by the unsteady illumination of the campfire and two flickering candles he and a curly-haired small girl he'd introduced as Margy brought to the rough wooden table the food for which we'd discovered a ravenous appetite.

Queer food for me to be enjoying. I like onions and French frieds with my steaks, the rest of your vegetables are spinach as far as I'm concerned. This stuff, however, tasted blamed good, even cold. Some sort of cooked grain in a bowl, a slab of something more solid that I could not identify, some peculiarly shaped fruit. "Now if I only had some coffee to wash all this down," I remarked. "I'd feel like Lucullus."

"Try this, sir." Peter put in front of me a mug rather skilfully carved out of wood. I sniffed the limpid liquid it contained, sipped it. It had a tangy, pleasant taste, altogether new to me. "What is this?"

"Panjusade, we call it. It comes from a tree out there." The lad gestured vaguely across the clearing.

It was an open space about two acres in extent, near one end of which the bark-covered stakes that formed the long table's legs had been driven into the ground. Along the side of the field to my right a narrow brook purled and beside this two large, rectangular tents cast black shadows in the moonlight. A baseball diamond was marked out on the grassy expanse we faced and beyond this I could just make out the uprights of a basketball standard.

Beside me, on the end of the backless bench where we sat in a row, sprawled a limp-limbed and much mauled doll.

"I hope you have some milk for Kay, Peter," Helen was asking anxiously.

He looked troubled. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Clark, I— We— That is—"

"Oh, it really doesn't matter if she misses it for once. She can make up for it in the morning."

"There won't be any in the morning either," the boy said. "We don't have any cows. Aunt Mary wanted to bring some but Uncle John said no. He thinks that's one of the good things about Tranquillia, that there are no animals here."

"No animals at all?"

"Nor birds either," he nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world. "There's just the trees and plants in the valley where the woods end and—and that's all."

The plants and the trees give us all our food," Margy put in. She was a tiny tyke, snip-nosed, most apparently full of life and the devil but she'd waited on us with the grave courtesy of an adult. "And we're finding out how to make clothes out of them, and everything else we need."

"I see." I knew by Helen's expression that she did not see at all, asked the question that was troubling her—and me. "What did this Uncle John of yours mean when he said it's a good thing there are no animals here?"

Peter hesitated an instant before answering. "He explained if there were animals we'd start killing them for food and maybe to protect ourselves from wild ones, and that would kind of teach us killing living things is sometimes all right, and after a while someone would get the idea, maybe, that it's sometimes right to kill people too, like in wars and such."

George grunted. He stared at his son, his expression at once startled, puzzled and speculative. "This 'Uncle John' is John Barret, Pete?"

"Of course. He and Aunt Mary are the only grownups ever came here till you did."

"And Tranquillia, as you call this place, is a children's camp?"

THE lad shifted from foot to foot, looked uncomfortable. "I guess you might say it is, Lieutenant Carson," Margy answered for him. "There's only us kids live here."

"I'm asking Pete." George kept his level, almost stern gaze on the boy. "All right, son. You've stalled long enough. We're fed and rested, now I want the whole story."

A muscle knotted in Peter's freckled cheek. His mouth opened, closed again. His eyes were unhappy. "Excuse me," Margy came to his rescue. "Kay looks awful tired. Maybe you'd like me to take her in the girls' tent, Mrs. Clark, and show her where she's to sleep."

"Please do, dear. And thank you for—"

"I don't want to go to sleep," Kay pouted. "I want to stay here and listen to Peter's story."

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning, sweetheart. Up! Upsydaisy! Kiss me good night and off with you."

"Oh, come on, Kay." Margy held out a stubby-fingered, capable little hand. "Wait till you see the cute washroom we've got fixed up in the back of the tent. I tell you what. I'll lend you my best pajamas and my very own bed."

"You mustn't do that, Margy," Helen protested. "Where will you sleep?"

"Oh, I'm not supposed to sleep tonight. You see I'm all dressed." She indicated her halter and shorts. "It's Peter's and my turn to be on watch." I understood now how George had located his son without rousing the camp. "Come along Kay. Don't be such a baby."

That got the brat. As the two ran off, I heard the small hostess warn, "Don't make any noise and wake up the other girls." They vanished inside the farther tent and I turned to hear George saying, "Night watch, eh? So there is something in these woods to be afraid of."

"No, sir. There isn't really but we can't ever make the new kids believe it, so Uncle John thought we ought to have a boy and a girl stay up every night to keep the fire burning and just be around."

"Peter." Helen leaned forward, a curious light in her eyes. "Is it always the same two that stay up together?"

"Why, yes, Ma'am. You see, when you've been on watch you're let off chores and school the next day and everybody's got a special job to do, like cooking or washing up or going in the woods or the fields to get things, so we'd get all mixed up if we did it any other way."

"Mmm. School, you said. Who teaches you?"

"Why, Uncle John of course. And Aunt Mary. One of them's here everyday and they teach us all kinds of things, but they make us kids run things ourselves. We've got to learn how, they say, because we won't always have them to depend on.

This had a startling implication. George put it into words. "You mean this—er—arrangement is permanent?"

The lad's brow knitted. "Permanent, dad? I—I don't kn—I can't answer that."

"You can't—Peter! That's the first time you've ever said anything like that to me."

"Yes, sir." The lad's eyes lifted, met the gray ones so like them. "Yes," he repeated, miserably. "It's the first time. I—I'm sorry dad. I— We've all promised not ever to say anything about Tranquillia. That's why we don't write letters or—or anything, so we won't slip up and give it away. We promised—"

"Peter!" Bronzed hands, clasping the table's edge, flattened fingertips against the wood. "You—"

"George." Helen touched the back of one of those corded hands. "He's a child,

George, and I'm sure you've taught him always to keep a promise."

The man swallowed, relaxed a little. "Listen, Son," he said more quietly. "You know I would never ask you to do anything dishonorable, don't you?"

"No, Dad. I know you wouldn't."

"Well then, you'll believe me when I tell you it's right for you to forget that promise and answer my questions frankly. First. Where, if you know, and what is this place you call Tranquillia?"

"Tranquillia," a new voice said, behind me, "is a different world from that to which you belong." John Barret's low and gentle voice. "It is a world where there is no hate, no strife and God willing shall never be, a clean, new world where a new race shall live in friendship and peace forever."

I turned and saw him standing there, the moonlight in his silken, silvery hair.

X

GEORGE CARSON was on his feet, head and shoulders taller than John Barret but instead of the wrath I expected in his eyes there was a question, and wild surmise. "A new world," he repeated, slowly, tasting the words. "Friendship. Peace forever. Do you mean all that, old man? Literally?"

"I mean exactly that, Lieutenant Carson."

Helen was up too. She was trembling. With excitement, not fear. "Of course he does, George. I've known it ever since Peter said what he did about there being no animals here."

"I was afraid to let myself hope—God!" It wasn't an expletive, it was almost a prayer. "I'm still afraid to let myself believe—"

"Look," I growled. "I don't like to break up this love fest, but I'd like you birds to tell me how you expect to keep this Shangri-La a secret?" I was beginning to understand, or so I thought. "Sooner or later some plane's going to wing over that cliff. The country its pilot belongs to will claim it, and some other nation will dispute that claim and—phtt—there goes your peace." Barret's machine somehow had transported us, in no time flat, to—well, perhaps an unexplored region of Antarctica kept incongruously temperate by some whim of sun and air currents. "The Earth's shrunk to a pretty small ball, you know, since the Wright brothers taught us to fly."

"Indeed it has," Barret agreed. "Indeed it has, Mr. Gatlin, a ball far too small for the good of those who inhabit it. But this is not the Earth."

"Come again."

"At least not the Earth you're thinking of," he placidly continued. "Tranquillia, my friend, is a planet in another Space, another Time, than Terra."

"Look you!" I jabbed a forefinger at him. "Helen was trying to tell me something like that a while back and I'll say to you what I said to her. 'There ain't no sich animule.'"

"Oh, you're wonderful!" Her laugh had the very note and texture of the brook's liquid tinkle. "But you're too good a newspaperman to really mean it. Seeing is believing."

"So they say, but what do I see here to make me believe your fairy tale?" I waved an embracing arm. "Grass. Trees no more different from those we rode through this afternoon than those are from the ones that grew in Westchester when Columbus sailed the ocean blue. The same moon. The— Uh!" My jaw dropped. "Say! What was in that Panjusade anyway? I can swear I see two moons."

I pulled the edge of my hand across my eyes, looked again. They were still there a reddish crescent just rising above the forest, another hanging golden and almost full above the black line of the colossal precipice.

Barret chuckled. "Tranquillia has two moons, Mr. Gatlin. Hardly a matter for astonishment since Uranus, in our own Solar System, boasts four and Saturn ten."

Microscopic needles were again pricking my skin. I moistened my lips. "Okay. I'm licked. This isn't the Earth. But how in the name of reason—? Listen. Unless you've a straitjacket handy, you'd better tell me how you got us here. And quick."

HE SMILED that slow, sweet smile of his. "That is not easy, to one as unacquainted with the latest physico-mathematical concepts as you've confessed yourself to be. May I suggest that we move to my classroom, that grassy knoll, and make ourselves comfortable while I attempt it— Oh, Peter!"

The lad had been standing silently by through all this. "I think perhaps you can be excused from watch for the rest of the night."

"But Uncle John—!"

"I know—you haven't seen your father so long. To please me, Peter?"

"I'll see you in the morning, Dad." He ran off. I saw George wince at that as I let myself down in the spot Barret had indicated and leaned my back against a tree that overhung the knoll, but Helen whispered something in his ear and he smiled, stretched out on the grass. The girl settled beside him, I noticed again how like a bird alighting she did so.

Barret lowered himself, sat facing the three of us.

"Space, Mr. Gatlin," he began, "is neither finite nor infinite—I beg your pardon." He smiled apologetically. "Let me put it this way. Space is neither limited nor limitless." Already he was beyond my depth but George was nodding wisely and Helen looked as if she understood, so I thought I'd better keep quiet. "It curves in upon itself much as does the shell of an egg, except that the eggshell has an inside and an outside and Space has not. Is that clear?"

"All but that last remark," I bluffed. "How can anything not have an inside and an outside?"

"Well, since it is not important for our present purpose, suppose we forget it. Let us just think of the Universe, everything that is and the reaches between, as our empty eggshell with, say, a hole at one end but otherwise unpunctured. An eggshell whose greatest circumference is approximately a billion light years.

"Let us further assume that at the other end of our eggshell from the hole, there are two specks of dirt, one on the inner surface, one on the outer, separated only by the thickness of the shell. Imagine that a—a bacterium wishes to go from one speck to the other. It would have to go all along the shell's surface to the hole at the farther end, through the hole and all the way back to the second speck, would it not?"

"If it couldn't go through the shell."

"Precisely. If it could find a way to penetrate the shell, it would shorten that journey of a billion light years to the infinitesimal part of a second." Barret was triumphant. "And that is all there is to it. Earth is one speck, Tranquillia the other and I am the bacterium who has invented a method of warping Space to shortcut that billion years' trip. There. It wasn't so hard to understand after all, was it?"

"No." I was still almost completely befuddled, but I didn't intend to admit it. "It's as simple as figuring out why a gal who not so many hours ago told a man he was despicable should now be twining a strand of his hair around her forefinger."

"Oh!" Helen snatched her hand away. "I hate you!"

"Don't blame me, honey. It must be the effect of double moonlight."

"If that's it," George grunted, rolling over, "blessed be the two moons of Tranquillia." Propping himself on his elbows

he looked fatuously down into her face. "Say, Pop. Did you ever notice she's slightly cross-eyed?"

"I am not! It's just that I'm focussing a smudge at the tip of your nose." Helen sat up. "Mr. Barret. You— How did you know, before you came through the first time, that you'd find yourself on another world this side of Space?"

"Suppose," she caught her breath. "Suppose you'd come out in—in just empty nothingness?"

"I should never have returned," he replied, tranquillity. "There were also the possibilities of my—shall I say materializing, for lack of a better word—on a blazing Sun or on an uninhabitable as well as uninhabited world, or within a planet's rocky or lava-like interior."

"But you tried it anyway?"

"Wouldn't you have?" he asked, as though she could answer in only one way. Talk about your Columbus! Cristoforo at least knew that if he failed he'd drown or starve, or die in some other comparatively comfortable and approved manner. "However, in order that no one should follow me if I met with disaster, I took care to destroy all my notes on the construction of my machine, as you've called it, and instructed my wife to completely destroy it if I did not reappear within a certain short space of time."

"How could she?" George pulled himself up. "The machine wouldn't have been there for her to destroy."

BARRET'S eyes twinkled. "Strangely enough, Lieutenant, it would have been. It is there now."

"You sent it back!"

"No. It is still in the cavern where I wakened to find myself alone, and guessed where you'd gone, but it is also in my home in Westchester."

"Bunk," I snorted. "You had me on the ropes for a while, but you've got another guess coming if you think you can get me to believe anything can be two places at once."

"I'm not trying to." I had a suspicion he was covertly laughing at me. "My machine is in only one place, but that place happens to be common to both worlds, just as the point where the circumferences of two tangent circles meet is common to both."

"I give up." It wasn't he that had me defeated, it was those two moons riding gloriously in a sky of stars that were not the stars one sees from Earth. "You bet your life against the quadrillion to one parlay that Earth and some other planet would touch each other in that room off your kitchen."

"The odds were not quite as much against me as that. Tangent circles, may I remind you, or spheroids, may lie within one another. I have not as yet collated enough data to demonstrate it mathematically, but I'm inclined to believe that Tranquillia and Terra are in some part co-extensive—"

"Lay off," I begged. "Please lay off me before I start looking for paper dolls to cut out." I pressed my throbbing head. "All I want to know is how soon I get back to New York."

John Barret plucked a grass-blade, regarded it contemplatively. "That, Mr. Gatlin, "is a problem. I have been wondering whether I can permit you to return at all."

XI

"EASY, Pop." George grabbed my arm. "Hold your fire."

"Hold nothing," I grated. "If he thinks he—"

"Please." Helen was clinging to me. "Please calm down and let him explain."

"I don't seem to have a chance to do anything else, the way you're hanging on to me, but don't get the idea he's going to hypnotize me the way he has you two. I'm

going back, or I'll know the reason why."

"Precisely what I should like to tell you," John Barret murmured in that mild way he had. "If you will permit me."

"Go on. But you'd better make it good."

He did.

On his second visit here, he told us, he had explored this new world, had found that while its gravity, atmosphere, temperature range and other climatic conditions were fairly identical with those of Earth, no life existed anywhere on it that he could discover.

There were only the trees and the plants, the fragrant breeze and a deep, unbroken tranquillity.

He had returned to a world torn by war, a world of organized killing, of shattered cities and enslaved nations, even his own beloved Science prostituted to the uses of brutality.

"I proposed to Mary," he continued, "that we pass through and smash the machine so that we could not be followed, and live out what little time was left to us, quietly in this quiet forest. She made me see how wrong this was. She made me understand that God could not mean the gift a new and unspoiled world for us alone. Yes." He looked up at some sound in my throat. "Yes, I believe in Him. The more I have learned of the infinite, yet ordered complexity of His Universe, the more firmly convinced I have been that only He could have built it."

The plan they settled on was very simple, almost naive. They would take to Tranquillia a group of children old enough to adapt quickly to new conditions, not yet old enough to unlearn the ways of the sorry world they were leaving. "If we could have brought here all the children of Earth," he sighed, "it would have satisfied us better, but that of course was impossible. We decided that a dozen boys and girls were enough to be the progenitors of a new race whose religion, implanted from its very birth will be the holiness of neighborliness, the sanctity of human life."

Helen's hand had crept into George's. In the soft glow of Tranquillia's moons their faces were calm and peaceful. I recalled how dark and bitter those faces had been on the Sawmill River Road. I remembered George's despairing cry, "We're trapped. We're trapped without hope of escape."

But Barret was still talking. "I think it was I who thought of how to accomplish our plan with the least danger of interference. I recalled a story a member of our Local Draft Board had told at the village store, how they'd had to turn down, because he had two children, a widower who had been most anxious to get into the army. We placed the first advertisement in the GLOBE the next day. You know how it read."

"Yes," I observed, dryly. "I know how it read. It was a smart scheme. You could insist on the children you took having no one interested in them except their fathers, and since they were going into combat, you could be pretty certain of not being caught up with till the war's over. But what's going to happen then? What about those fathers when they come back?"

His face went bleak and for a moment there was a spark of fanatic fire in his eyes. "Some will not return. Those who do—will find an empty cottage and a heap of twisted, unanalysable metal in a lead-sheathed room."

"Good Lord, man!" I was appalled. "You can't do that to them!"

"Why not?" This was George. "When you think of the millions of fathers and mothers who have given their children to war, why is it so terrible that a dozen should give theirs to peace?"

"Because— Look here! You were throwing conniption fits in my office this noon because you merely suspected something phoney had happened to Peter. Suppose you'd found that house in Westchester

empty when we'd got there? No sign of him, no sign of the people you'd left him with. No trace of any of them, ever. How would you have felt?"

"What difference would that make? Pete would be here, wouldn't he? He won't have to live in the world as it's going to be like when this thing's over. He won't have to face the misery that's ahead. He won't ever have to see everything he's dreamed of and hoped for and worked to help build smashed because of some megalomaniac's lust for power. Isn't that worth whatever I would have had to go through?"

"You can say that because you know you won't have to go through it. Helen. You're with me, aren't you?"

HER hands twisted in her lap and a pulse throbbed in the shadowed hollow beneath her throat. "I—I'm sorry for those fathers, dreadfully sorry, but I think George is right. You— If you had a child, you'd understand. If you'd lain awake night after night, listening to her breathe while you stared burning-eyed into the black future, trying so hard, so desperately hard, to see one single, tiny ray of hope for her happiness."

"Well, maybe I'm wrong." I might be, as far as what I'd been saying went, but there was still something askew about this set-up. Something—I couldn't put salt on its tail, couldn't get it out to the forepart of my brain. "So what?" I settled down again. "What does it all add up to? I seem to remember your setting out, Mr. Barret, to explain to me why you're wondering whether you ought to let us go back where we came from."

"Isn't that obvious, Mr. Gatlin?" It was, naturally, but I wanted to hear him say it. "If you return, Tranquillia is no longer safe from incursion. The one man who has any inkling of the theory of my machine will never reveal it, but there are other physicists less scrupulous who can reconstruct it, once they know it has been done."

"And use it, knowing it's safe to do so. Yes."

"On the other hand, as you've demonstrated a few minutes ago, the habit of violence is so deeply ingrained in you that if you remain here you must become a focus of infection that will imperil all I hope to accomplish."

"You're damned if you do, eh, and you're damned if you don't."

"No. There is one way between the horns of the dilemma. You earnestly desire to go back to Earth, do you not?"

"What do you think?"

"I think that you are a man of honor, Mr. Gatlin. Therefore, you shall return provided you give me your solemn promise that you will keep the existence of Tranquillia, and all you have learned about it, secret forever."

Now wasn't that a proposition to put to a man who cut his eyeteeth on a Hoe press? The biggest story since the Chinese invented printing, and I should promise to bury it. "Suppose the answer is no, Mr. John Barret? How are you going to keep us from walking back to that cave and pushing the button on that infernal machine of yours?" I shoved erect. "If you want your Tranquillia to see a first rate exhibition of violence, you'll try it."

He looked up at me, soberly, but apparently unperturbed. "I don't have to. You may press that button from now till the end of time and you will still be in the cavern."

THAT was what I wanted to know. The reason it hadn't worked before wasn't because of power failure from the other side, or because he'd jarred something out of kilter when he fell. "So there's a switch you've got to throw to reverse it, is there? Where is it?"

Would my stratagem work? His wife wasn't here to keep him from an absent-minded slip. "There is no switch," he

smiled. "The machine will not operate unless it is shielded with lead, and the only material it will not bring through the Space-warp is lead. That is why Mary and I have never visited Tranquillia together, one of us has to remain in that lead-lined room, protected by a lead-lined costume, to bring the other back."

That was that— Maybe not. "What does she do? Stay in there and keep her thumb on the button till you show up?"

"Hardly. As long as one of us is absent, the other visits the room every hour, exactly on the hour, and waits five minutes for signal that can be given by moving a certain rod in a certain way." Oh, oh. That "certain" was the tip-off he was on to me. "We've agreed that if that signal does not come within twelve Earth-hours, which is a far longer period on Tranquillia, the other will come through."

"And then neither of you goes back."

"No one goes back," he agreed.

"Unless someone on Earth happens to come along and pushes that button."

HE shook his head. "No. The first thing we shall do is destroy the machine." He rose, made a weary, almost sorrowful gesture with his hands. "But all that is aside from the issue. The point is that you cannot return to Earth unless and until I give Mary our signal while you are within three feet of the machine. I think you know that you cannot make me give her that signal against my will."

"Yes." About him, standing there, there was the awful strength of the gentle, the same strength I'd recognized in Pastor Niemoller as I'd watched him in his pulpit while the iron-jawed Storm Troopers thudded down the aisle of his Church. "Yes, I know," I admitted defeat, "that I'll stay here forever unless I give you the promise you ask, and I don't want to stay here. On my word of honor, John Barret, I will never tell anyone how I got here, or what I've seen here, or even that there is such a place as here."

"Thank you." He was very still for a long moment and I could see the tautness he'd not betrayed till now drain out of him. Then he turned to George and Helen, who'd also risen but still held hands as they stood waiting for his, "And you? Will you two promise to keep the secret of Tranquillia?"

They hadn't spoken, either of them, since Helen had made that speech about lying awake at night. I should have heard them if they had. They didn't speak to one another now. "No," George answered the old man, very firmly. "No. We do not."

To my surprise, Barret's lined, gray countenance lit up. "You wish to remain here?"

"We wish to remain here," George replied. "In Tranquillia. With our son and daughter—and with each other."

"And with each other," Helen echoed him, her eyes shining.

XII

I INSISTED on leaving at once and John Barret, anxious to reassure his wife that he'd recovered from his heart attack, was as eager. We started immediately but by the time we reached the cave mouth the sun—a sun of another Galaxy so far from ours that the human mind cannot begin to grasp the immensity of the distance—was rising.

I turned and took a last look at the green sea of foliage that from this height was all that could be described of Tranquillia.

Even the gentle breeze that had greeted us here had died down, so that the thin thread of smoke from the children's campfire rose straight upward to the pellucid sky. Somehow it symbolized the spirit of peaceful aspiration they had brought here.

"Well," I said soberly. "I hope it all works out the way you think it will."

"It must," Helen cried. "It has to." The two of them had come along, to say good-by to me on the borderline between their new world and the one to which I am returning. "God can't be giving us a second chance just to have us fail again."

Barret had gone on into the cavern and this gave George the chance he evidently had been waiting for. "Still time to change your mind, Pop." He put a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure we can talk the old man into letting you stay."

"Nothing doing. You can have your Tranquillia." I pulled away, started into that great hole hollowed out of the unimaginable cliff. "Me. I'm going back where I belong." I didn't want them to see my face just then. "Where I belong," I repeated. "Back to my own kind of people, the kind that can take it without running away."

The light followed us in, dimming but still strong enough to show me the thread from Helen's sweater as it trailed across the rocky floor. It unaccountably had frayed during the few hours since she'd unravelled it. Or was it my eyes that made it appear so fuzzy? My eyes. Barret's frail, white-haired frame, ahead, was just as fuzzy.

Helen's heel-clicks, catching up to me, were caught up and multiplied by some reflecting surface. George was on the other side of me, his foot-falls thudding. "Funny," I mused aloud, "the kind of things come popping into the head of an old fool like me, things that have nothing to do with what's happening at the time. Like just now I happened to think of something happened on the old *World*.

"This was a long time ago. I guess you kids are just about old enough to remember its last days, but this was long before that.

"John— Well, call him John Burns— was hell and gone the most promising cub we'd ever had, but one day he gets the pink slip in the pay envelope. Orders from the Big Boss who'd just happened to drop in for a day or two, like he used to about once a year.

"John don't get it. He don't get it at all so he barges right into Pulitzer's sanctum, demanding to know why he's fired. 'Haven't I been turning in the best copy on your sheet?' he asked. 'Didn't I do a whale of a yarn just yesterday on that waterfront riot?'

"'You did,' Pulitzer acknowledges, looking at him, the way he had, like he could see him with his blind eyes. 'A humdinger of a story.'

"'And didn't we beat every other rag in town by an edition because I was right on top of it when it started?'

"'That's it,' the Boss says. 'That's why you're being fired.' John stares at him, not believing his ears. 'Weren't you supposed to be in the Hall of Records,' Pulitzer goes on, 'copying off the real estate assessment list?'

"'Sure. Sure I was, but that's just a lousy grind anybody knows his a-b-c's can do. I got this hunch maybe something was brewing over on West Street and tipped a clerk a couple of bucks to take it off my hands. What's the matter? He get it bolluxed up?'

"'No. No, he did a good job. The only thing is, it was your job he did, the job your editor sent you out to do. Good-by, my boy. I wish you luck.'"

GEORGE'S footfalls thudded along on one side of me, Helen's heels clicked on the other. Not far, now, John Barret's machine glittered in a beam of sunshine that slanted down across the gloom from some chink in the cave's front wall.

"And then," I rambled on, "There was something Roosevelt said in a speech once. I don't remember it word for word, but it was something about how we're fighting not just for America nor just for the United Nations, but to make a better world

for all the little people of all the world. I don't remember if he used just those words, 'the little people' and I know that if he did he certainly wasn't thinking just about the children, but I am. I'm thinking about all the millions of kids who're going to have to keep on living in that world because their fathers weren't lucky enough to answer John Barret's ad— But here he is, looking at his watch impatiently. How about it, Barret? How much time have I left to say good-by to my friends?"

"Less than a minute— Watch that line on the floor, Helen!" he cautioned. "George. If you're caught inside of it, you'll go with us."

I stepped over the faint scratch in the rock that marked out the boundaries of the lead-sheathed room in another world. "Well, my boy, I guess this is it. I— What's the matter, Son? What do you see on your arm?"

Putting out his hand to grasp the one I'd extended, he'd brought his sleeve into the sunbeam. The gold stripes above its cuff flashed in the light and he was staring down at them as if he'd never seen them before. "George! I'm saying good-by."

His fingers crushed mine, and then I was looking at Helen. "Good-by, Helen."

"Good-by," she whispered. It was the tears between her lashes that the sun made brilliant. "I— Oh, good-by!"

I wanted to wish them luck but I was all choked up and before I could get it out Barret snapped, "Move toward me, Mr. Gatlin." He was doing something to the machine. There was a thud beside me. Something butted my shoulder— That infernal vibration! The blackness smashed down.

I was dazzled by light, the bluish-white light of a fluorescent double-tube. I was blinking at a grotesque apparition, hooded, shapeless in a cloak of some heavy-seeming material, thick-gloved hand dropping from the pushbutton—

And behind me, as I turned to look for the lead-lined door from this room, was George Carson!

"You win, Pop!" He was trying to grin, but he was making a poor job of it. "I can't do it. I can't run out on those millions of kids who've got to keep on living on this lousy Earth of ours. I'm going to finish up the assignment I'm on and if I live through it, I'm going on to do my share in making it a better world—"

"And I'm going to do my best to help you, darling." Helen stepped around from behind the machine. "It's going to take all of us, it's going to take every drop of will and energy and brains we've got, but we'll do it, you and I and Pop, and millions of others like us. We will, George. We will in the end build a bright, new world here on Earth for our children—" She broke off, her eyes widening, the exaltation draining from them. "Our children," she whispered. "Oh, George! Kay. Peter . . ."

A MUSCLE knotted in his gaunt cheek —"Kay and Peter will be in our care," a low, musical voice came from behind me, "and in the care of Him who sets different paths for each of us to follow." Mary Barret had let the lead impregnated heavy folds fall to her feet, had removed the goggled mask, "Paths that may be wearily long but that all come together at last." Her frail hand clasped her husband's and standing there like that they seemed more ethereal than ever, more—non-Earthly.

"If you will step out for a moment," John Barret asked, smiling that vague, endearing smile of his. "Mr. Gatlin. Mrs. Clark. Lieutenant Carson. I should like a word with my wife."

There was a light in the kitchen, and the gay curtains were blowing in at the open window. "It's still night here," Helen exclaimed, then remembered. "Of course— What time is it, George?"

He looked at his watch. "Nine. Nine-seven. I've still time to get back to my ship by midnight. But you—"

"I'll be waiting," Helen told him. "I'll be waiting for you— You know that, don't you?"

"I think—I'm sure I can get leave for another twenty-four hours in a week or so. Pop!" He came around to me. "I'm going to depend on you to make arrangements for—"

The floor was vibrating, the sensation like that of a massage machine against the soles of my shoes.

It ended.

Barret's keys were still in the lock, turned in my hand. The light from the kitchen struck into the lead-lined cubicle. It laid my shadow over the ungainly folds of a cloak on the floor, over a goggled hood. Except for this and John Barret's machine, the little room was empty.

I felt George and Helen press against my back, felt their breaths on my cheek. A metallic clang half-deafened me. A fragment of shining metal thudded to the floor, another. The clangor filled the little house in Westchester and bit by bit we watched the thing John Barret built disintegrate under the blows of a sledge hammer wielded in a world a billion miles away.

And the clangor ended, and there was nothing in that room but a heap of smashed, unreconstructible metal. "Good luck," I called into that empty room. "The best of luck for your dreams, John Barret, under the two moons of Tranquillia."

Me, I can dream better under the one moon I've been used to all my life.

"IS GOD DEAD?"

(as this war grows worse Americans are asking that question)

Well, I can say to them that God is most certainly NOT dead for I TALKED WITH GOD, and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a postcard to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 111, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1942, Frank B. Robinson.

Say a Prayer for Harvey

By JOHN J. WALLACE

MR. STEPHEN BRADLEY, society psychiatrist and author of several tomes dealing with behaviorism, eyed his table guest dourly. Balloon glasses of brandy were at their elbows, but something of the conventional host-guest camaraderie was lacking.

"You're bitter, Steve—and illogical," Dr. Rennald said critically. "The real task of the moment is Hitler and Europe. We've simply got to hold on as best we can in the Pacific while we smash the master menace. Why do you go directly against the thought of the great world strategists?"

Surprisingly, Dr. Bradley's eyes had mellowed as he looked back at his companion.

"At heart I'm a romanticist, I imagine," he confessed, "and then, too, there's Harvey and the undiscovered South Seas Island, the one everyone has dreamed about

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The little man assured the doctor that there was nothing supernatural about the way he projected himself to far-off places.

at some time or another. It's all there, a glittering coral reef with the waters of the lagoon lapping against the sands, palm trees, pretty women, music, dancing—and until eight months ago no stranger ever had set foot on its shining beauty."

The younger man chuckled tolerantly. "Hard-boiled old Bradley," he said softly. "The next thing we know you'll be finding there really is something in the rumor about the baby and the stork. And who's Harvey, if you please?"

Bradley shook his head. "You wouldn't believe it," he grumbled, "and I don't know that I would if *you* told it to me. But here it is and Harvey's the hero. I'll tell it to you chronologically, and just the way it happened—without trimmings."

HARVEY was a little chap, who seemed more puzzled than nervous. He refused all details to my receptionist, but he insisted that it was an emergency and that he must see me at once. Finally she passed him in ahead of three neurotic women. His first words were:

"Doctor, I've gotten into the habit of going places. I just can't help it. And Matilda, my wife, is simply furious about it. It irritates her and I can't blame her. Can you stop it?"

That was a let-down, just another wanderlust. You can't cure them, even with a ball and chain, for it's all the same motivation. But he was there, and I had to start routine questioning.

"You mean that the open road calls you?" I asked flatly.

"There's no road to it," he snapped. "It's lots worse than that. I just get to thinking hard about some place—Moscow, Rome, maybe Africa—and the first thing I know, there I am."

That changed things up considerably. Here was something different.

"You mean you think hard about those places, and then you're able to see what is going on there; that you can project your seeing mind to them?"

"I wish it was just that," he wailed, "but it's my body, too. I think about a place, and I just turn up there, disappearing from where I was when I started thinking. Matilda says she'll divorce me if it happens again. She says it's bad enough for me to go traipsing all over the world without disappearing when we have company.

"That happened last night when Mr. and Mrs. Gibson finally accepted her invitation to come over for bridge. They're the real social leaders out where we live, and it meant a lot to Matilda.

"Right in the middle of it, Gibson said that he didn't believe London had been bombed as dreadfully as the papers said.

"I asked him why he thought that, and he answered: 'Propaganda. They're trying to steam us up so we'll get into the war, too.'

"I was worried. I'd been to London two nights before and I knew he was wrong, but there wasn't any way to prove it. It was then that the terrible thing happened. Matilda said she was mortified to death. I was thinking hard about London—and all of a sudden, there I stood on the East India docks!

"Was I in a swivet, realizing how I'd treated the Gibsons! So I just concentrated on the kitchen at home and there I was. I came back into the living room with some beer, but Mrs. Gibson acted awfully funny. She said she hadn't seen me leave. I hope there's some way you can help to stop all of this foolishness, Doctor."

I LOOKED him over carefully, the funny little rabbit-man, and *I knew that he really believed he'd been in London.* Well, you know about the rationalizing treatment for hallucinations, so I started to lay the basis. But first I had to know things.

"You're fully materialized, flesh and

blood, when you arrive at these far places?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, just like I am now. There's nothing supernatural about it, you know. I'm just there, that's all there is to it."

"I've got to have proof of that before I can help," I told him gravely. "How about ducking over to London right now, so I can see how you leave here—complete with body and clothing?"

He didn't want to, but finally he closed his eyes. And then he was gone, evaporated. He just ceased to be there. And there wasn't even a swish.

I started to make some notes, but before I could complete them he was back in his chair where he'd been sitting a quarter of an hour before.

"I'm back, Doctor," he said breathlessly, "and I brought you this."

He handed over a copy of the London Times, and it was that day's first edition!

"Now I'm in a pickle again," he wailed. "I've got to tell Matilda I was over there, and she'll raise hell. She's got an idea that I turn up in places where I shouldn't be, —ladies' bedrooms, backstage, places like that. Honest, I don't do that, Doctor, anyway, not often. There was one time—but why go into that?"

"Here's another question?" I said. "How about some place you hardly know exists? You think hard about it, and you're there —even if you don't know just where it is."

"Oh, yes!" he said eagerly. "Just the other night I was reading about the heroism of the men on Atlantic patrol, and it struck me that I'd like to shake the Commander's hand. Then, the next thing I knew, I was on a little boat out on the ocean. It was night and awfully cold, and believe me I was frightened.

"There were two men on deck, buttoned up in big overcoats. A wave came over and splashed me and I hollered I wanted to see the Captain. I was shivering, for I'd been sitting before the fire when the thought struck me, so I didn't have a coat, even a hat.

"One of the men yelled and they ran at me. Bells started ringing and a big bunch of men came piling out on deck. So instead of congratulating the Captain, I just thought hard about home—and then I was there."

"Wait a minute now," I said crossly. "You're sure about that one? A patrol boat's a very small thing in a mighty big ocean, you know."

"Yes, he admitted, "and I caught a terrible cold in those few minutes. Matilda was awfully provoked. I was drenched, and she made me soak my feet in mustard water and drink hot lemonade—and I hate it. I guess I *am* an awful trial to her."

That was interesting. When he projected himself, it was an all-out job, even to catching cold in inclement weather. Yes, it was unbelievable. You cannot do such things with physical matter, but, darn it, there was the London Times he'd brought back, and I came to the conclusion that he either was truthful, or I was a candidate for some elaborate mental repairs.

BUT I decided on one more test before letting the alienists have a crack at me. As you know, I have the place down at Miami Beach, in Florida. So, as proof positive, I told him of my upstairs bedroom and a copy of Maugham's "Of Human Bondage" I'd left on the night table.

"Duck down there and get it for me," I suggested. "If you can do that, I'll go to any lengths to cure you."

Two seconds later he wasn't there. But he was back in five minutes, bringing the book!

"It wasn't where you said," Doctor, he apologized, "I had to hunt for it. It was in the bookcase."

And then I remembered putting it there.

I told him to come back next afternoon, and until midnight I sat there putting him

on paper. I was deep in some old Scottish folk tales the next afternoon, trying to match his case up with something they had to say, when I heard someone breathing hard at my elbow. It was Harvey.

"The boss wouldn't let me off,' he grumbled, "so I went to the little boy's room and thought my way over here. I'm in another mess with Matilda. You see, I took her to the movies last night to make amends for going to Florida for you. One feature was an African travel scene that didn't look right to me. I thought somehow it should be different. I guess I thought too hard for suddenly I was there.

"I was only gone for a few minutes, but when I got back the woman in the seat behind me started having the screamies. She said she'd seen me melt away and then melt back again."

There he sat, little and frightened—not at the strange power that possessed him—but because of that big brute of a Matilda. I told him I was sure I could blank his mind to travel urges through hypnosis, but I nearly spoiled everything by wondering aloud if he could project himself right into Hitler's presence.

"I—I've dud-done that—already," he chattered, "and as soon as his bodyguard saw me, they started kicking me to bits. If I hadn't held to consciousness long enough to think myself home, they'd have killed me."

I told him to come back the following afternoon, when we'd start his treatments. When he arrived, he had a big knot on the side of his head where Matilda had underscored her disapproval with a skillet. He told me pretty frankly that it was now or never; that if I couldn't help him he'd go elsewhere.

There still were a lot of points to be cleared up before I could call you and a couple of other men in to witness the impossible—transsubstantiation. But he was impatient and Matilda was waiting.

"All right," I said, "but let's get this straight. You think of a place, and you're there. But suppose for sake of argument that in the South Pacific there is an undiscovered island where no white man ever has been. Where the natives are happy, where the sun shines, food is free, women are beautiful, sensuous, natural, loving girls without any silly inhibitions."

He looked at me dizzily for a moment.

"Gosh!" he said. "And no skillets—no bursts of temper."

"Could you dream of such a place and, if it existed, find your way there?"

"I'm quite—sure—I could," he answered dreamily.

And then the most beatific smile I ever have seen, either in life or in art, spread over his harried face. His shoulders straightened. His chin jutted out. His eyes gleamed.

That was the last I saw of him. Even as he smiled he faded away. That was eight months ago. Matilda? Oh, she be blowed. She's still raising Cain. What I'm worried about is the be-damned Japs and Harvey. He deserves better.

VOCATION

A girl, a man . . . and a voice from the dead!

A tale of high honor and an oath that obtained beyond the grave.

by SEABURY QUINN

COMING IN THE MARCH WEIRD TALES

SUPERSTITIONS

OF ALL THE **EVIL SPIRITS** WHICH INHABIT ROCK AND TREE AND ANIMAL, THE BATAKS OF SUMATRA BELIEVE THE MOST TERRIBLE *LIVE IN THE TIGER!* THE WORD "TIGER" IS NEVER USED. INSTEAD HE IS CALLED "THE OLD ONE" OR "HE WITH THE STRIPED COAT." WHEN MARAUDING EXCURSIONS OF THIS MOST DREADED JUNGLE BEAST BECOME UNBEARABLE TO THE VILLAGERS, A MEETING OF THE ELDERS IS HELD AND AFTER MUCH HESITATION *THE DEATH SENTENCE IS PASSED!*

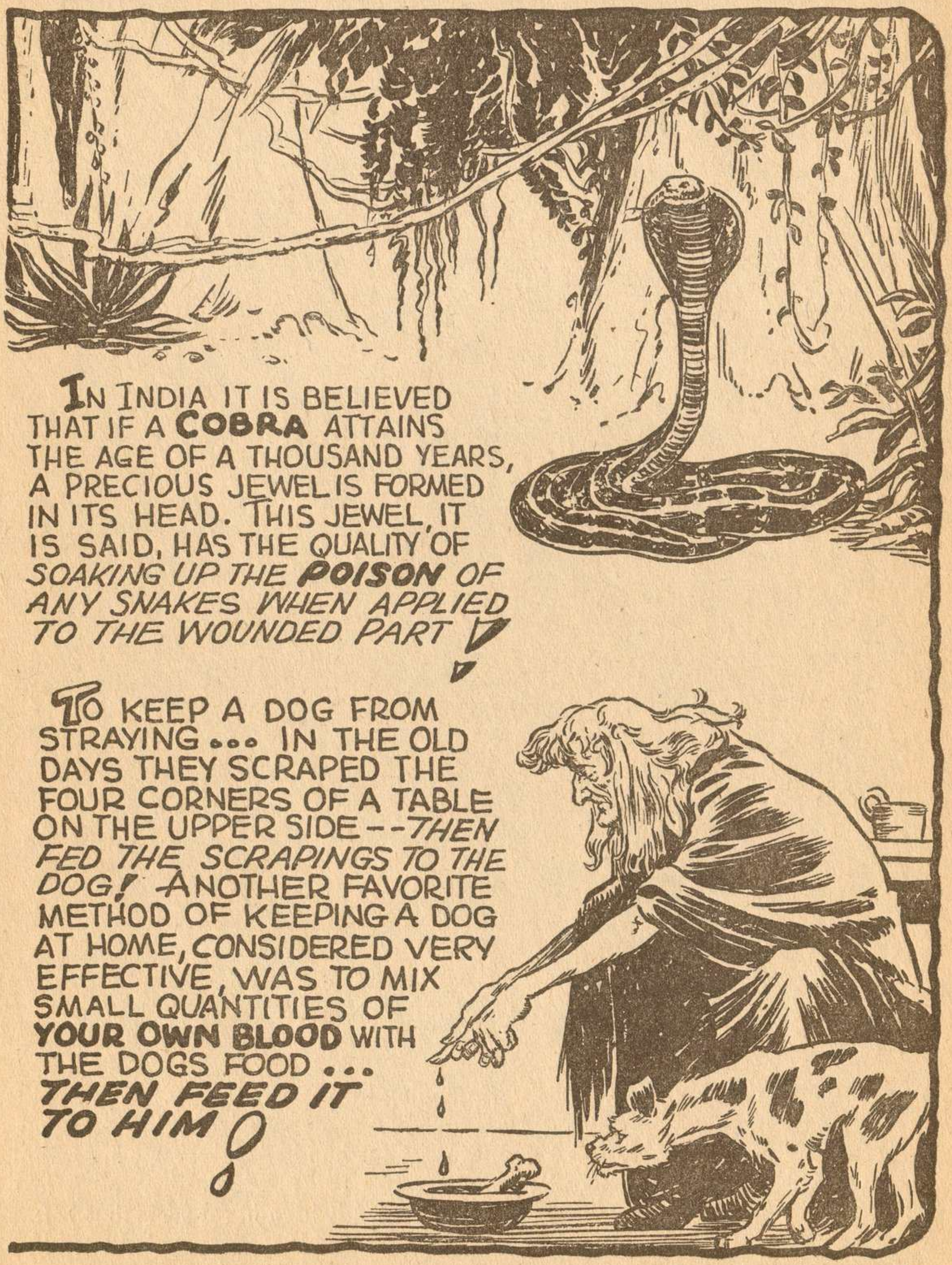
AFTER CAPTURE AND DEATH OF THE TIGER, ELABORATE CEREMONIES ARE NECESSARY TO AVERT THE WRATH OF ALL TIGERS, FOR IT IS BELIEVED THAT THE MALEVOLENT SPIRIT OF THE TIGER **MIGHT STAY IN THE VILLAGE TO SOW SICKNESS AND DEATH!** OR HE MIGHT FLY TO THE TIGER CITY WHICH IS SUPPOSED TO EXIST IN THE DEPTHS OF THE JUNGLE.

THERE THE TIGERS LIVE IN HOUSES THATCHED WITH WOMEN'S HAIR AND GOVERN THEMSELVES LIKE MEN!

THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD TIGER WOULD ENTER THE COUNCIL CHAMBER OF THE BEASTS OF THE TIGER CITY. IT WOULD TELL WHAT HAD BEEN DONE, *AND ALL WOULD DESCEND UPON THE VILLAGE* **TO AVENGE THEIR DEAD COMRADE!**

AND TABOOS

by Hill

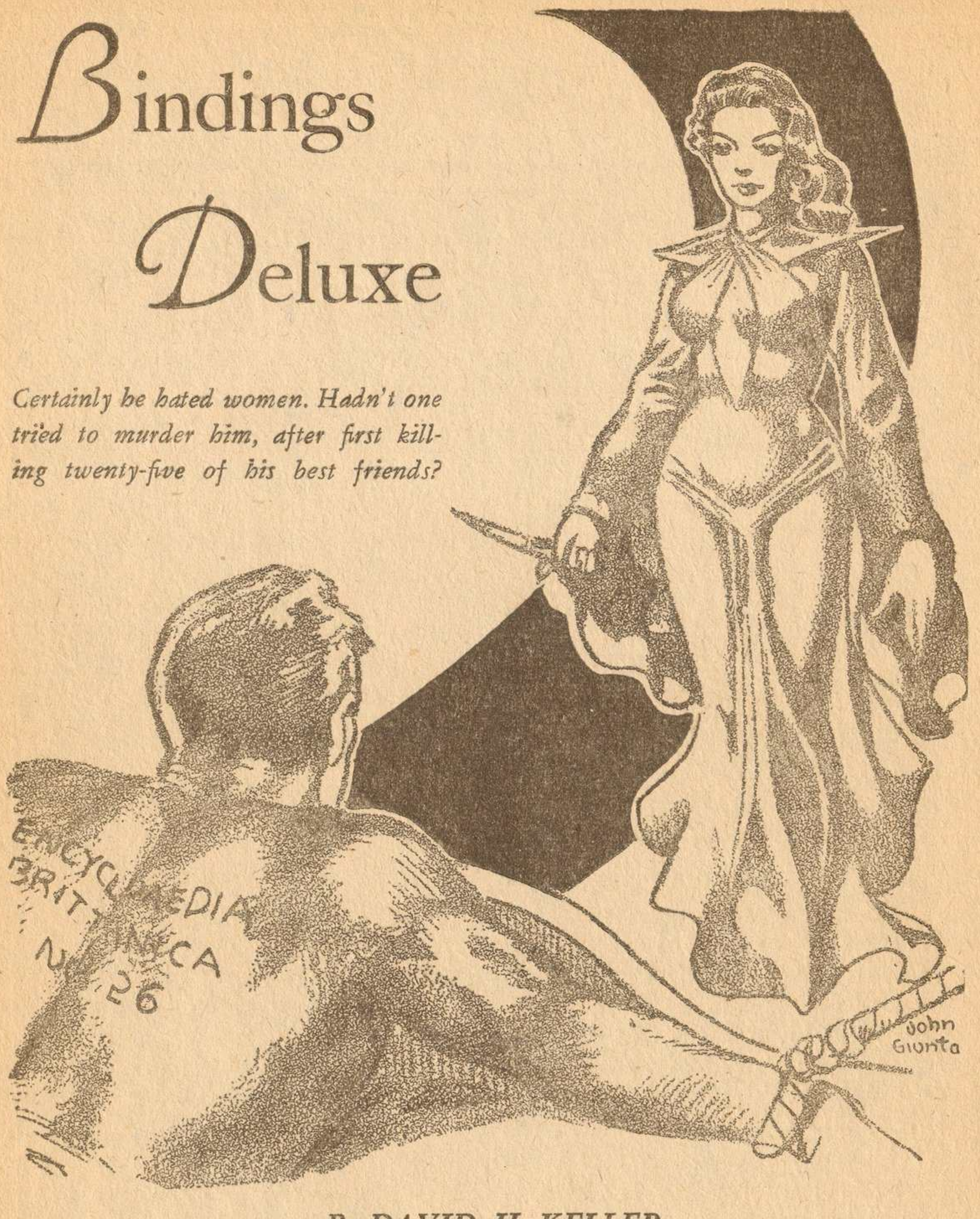


IN INDIA IT IS BELIEVED THAT IF A **COBRA** ATTAINS THE AGE OF A THOUSAND YEARS, A PRECIOUS JEWEL IS FORMED IN ITS HEAD. THIS JEWEL, IT IS SAID, HAS THE QUALITY OF *SOAKING UP THE* ***POISON*** *OF ANY SNAKES WHEN APPLIED TO THE WOUNDED PART!*

TO KEEP A DOG FROM STRAYING... IN THE OLD DAYS THEY SCRAPED THE FOUR CORNERS OF A TABLE ON THE UPPER SIDE--*THEN FED THE SCRAPINGS TO THE DOG!* ANOTHER FAVORITE METHOD OF KEEPING A DOG AT HOME, CONSIDERED VERY EFFECTIVE, WAS TO MIX SMALL QUANTITIES OF **YOUR OWN BLOOD** WITH THE DOGS FOOD... ***THEN FEED IT TO HIM!***

Bindings Deluxe

Certainly be hated women. Hadn't one tried to murder him, after first killing twenty-five of his best friends?



By DAVID H. KELLER

"I DON'T like women!"

"I feel the same way," was my reply. "Now when it comes to men or books, why that is something different."

We were in the Turkish bath and just beginning the sweat. Only two of us in the room, on steamer chairs, with the temperature at one-hundred and seventy but feeling more like two hundred. The other man had evidently been in for some time before I entered for his appearance indicated that

he was beginning to suffer. At least he had surely reached the point of irritation. I thought this cutaneous irritability might be the reason for his outburst against the fair sex. At least there was no other obvious reason. To make his antipathy toward women in general all the stronger he repeated the idea with variations.

"I just don't like them. They do things differently; they think differently. I can't even say that I believe they think; perhaps they just react to their emotions. Why, I have seen women calmly do things that a man wouldn't think of. Fond of books?" he asked abruptly changing the subject.

"You bet!" I replied enthusiastically. "Ought to be. I collect and bind them as an avocation. I make some money by binding and spend it collecting. Make a specialty of early Pennsylvania imprints."

"I have some really nice books." He sighed as he said it. "A few of them are distinctly rare. Odd! I'm a binder myself. Must get out of here now. I can stand just so much and then the heat worries me."

He walked out, a rather portly, middle-aged man. Ten minutes later I followed him. An hour later I caught up with him in the sun-ray room. He was exposing his back to the lamps. I looked at that back; sat down quietly on the cot next to his, continuing to look, incredulous. At last I was satisfied that what I saw on his skin was really there and not an illusion, then I made myself comfortable on my cot and began to ponder this thing. I had never seen anything like that back. Not once, on all the thousands and hundreds of thousands of men I had examined in the army had I ever seen a back approaching the like of that one.

Of course it was something that could not be discussed, certainly nothing one man could ask about directly; but if he offered to talk of it freely, of his own accord, it would certainly be interesting.

After the alcohol rub I invited him to have a snack of refreshment. Wrapped in sheets we became better acquainted over a Swiss sandwich and a cup of coffee. We found that, being bookbinders, we had much in common. He was an older man than I by perhaps twenty years and when I told him of having bound an Erotica in the skin of a diamond back rattler, for a customer, he acknowledged it to be both a new and unique idea.

"And rather appropriate," he added, "because it would not have been erotica without having a woman in it for villian, and if a woman is not a rattlesnake, I'd have you tell me just what she is."

I agreed with him. At least I let him think I did. His almost violent dislike of women intrigued me and I wanted his explanation of why he felt as he did. But more than that, I wanted the story I was sure was connected with his back. So I sat there, expounding largely on all the strange behavior of women which I had observed in my medical practice; called them traitors; cited history to prove them scheming, devious and cruel.

All the while I was talking thus I was glad I was in the bathhouse instead of my own home, where my wife might hear me. Of course she would have known I was just egging him on but she never did like it if I gave my opinion of her sisters.

It all ended by his inviting me to visit him the next time I was in Boston. The address he gave was in the Back Bay section. I told him I expected to visit his city soon and he replied that the sooner the better pleased he would be; and added with a sly wink:

"Do you suppose you could bring some rattlesnake skins?"

THREE weeks later I sat in his library. It was an aristocrat's room done in natural burled walnut panels between wide and well-filled glass-enclosed bookcases

which were built into the wall. The ceiling was of the same wood, carved in squares and supported by rough-hewn beams. Two large windows looked out across Boylston Street to the beautiful public gardens, which were colorful with fall foliage. At one end of the room was a great fireplace of Redstone granite facing flanked on either side by deep, restful leather upholstered chairs. Before this fireplace was a table set for supper.

"I thought you might enjoy a quiet evening here," my host remarked. "Besides, Ling, my Chinese boy, is a fine cook. I like the Chinese for many reasons, but chief of all possible reasons is the fact that they, as a nation as well as individuals, despise women."

The supper served by the quiet Chinese boy was excellent indeed; the wine of exquisite bouquet and the tobacco smooth and mild. By the time supper was over we were rather mellow and confidential. I ventured to recall his great obsession by remarking, quite casually:

"Neither do I like women!"

"Are you married?" he asked.

"Yes," I admitted with a wry twist to my lips to prevent the smile I could hardly resist.

"Too bad! You ought to really know about them. They certainly outdo themselves to make a fool of a man. I was in love once, just once though, but the woman nearly killed me— After that lesson—no more women." He was becoming vocally reminiscent. "Is your wife sadistic? Has she ever tried to kill you?"

"Not yet. Of course she has told me several times what she thinks of me and men in general. But one can never be too sure of the female of the species, you know."

"Better be careful. She may poison you some day," he warned.

"Gracious! I hope not."

"So do I. But be on your guard. I'm naturally suspicious of all these she-devils and that's why I'm alive today—and the other poor trusting fellows dead."

"Some of them died?"

"Yes. Twenty-five of them. Some of them my best friends. Of course there were a few I was not acquainted with, really well, but all were nice boys."

"Was it during the war? Spies?" I queried. I wanted to get him started on that story of his back, and was sure he would tell it if it were properly led up to.

"It was a war; a sure enough war, but terribly one-sided. Men have no show when a woman, especially an unscrupulous one, gets after them."

"Women are clever," I admitted.

"This one was, and beautiful. Just about as wonderful a female as the Devil ever made."

"Genesis states that she was made by another Deity."

"Wrong!" he cried. "Man, perhaps, was made in the Garden, but the woman was made below and crawled over the fence in the dark of the moon. Poor Adam! If he had only had enough sense to hit her on the head with a big stone, and continued the race with some form of parthenogenesis, what a beautiful world it would have been."

"Let's toast these brave men who have, for all these centuries, fought so valiantly against so wily a foe," I suggested.

We drained our glasses.

"Now tell me the story," I urged.

"It was some forty years ago when it started," he began. "You were probably in high school at the time. Some of us in the trade thought of organizing an international association of bookbinders. There were twenty-six of us, all wealthy, young, and enthusiastic over fine books and their covers. The world was our market and playground where we spent countless happy hours digging in musty book piles and museums as children dig in the beach

sand. We were all single, except for the wedding with our art. We held meetings once a year, each in a different country, where we read papers, exhibited specimens and discussed all phases of the work and our discoveries. One week in every fifty-two, spent in goodfellowship, clean, wholesome, profitable pleasure. For four years we carried on the meetings—then a woman applied for membership.

"It was at the London meeting. She came well introduced—it seemed impossible to justify a denial of the privilege for her to attend the meetings of the Society. As a founder of the organization I was able to prevent her being elected to membership, even though some of the younger fellows thought I was wrong. They argued that so long as she was a bookbinder she should be permitted to join; there was nothing in the laws to prevent a woman from becoming a member. I tried to amend the bylaws, but I was outvoted. So—there she was—a member.

"She turned up at Paris the next year with a lengthy paper all ready to read. I guess she knew how to bind a book. In fact I was much later to know that she knew how, but some of the statements made in that paper were all but, if not wholly impossible, and proved her to be a rank amateur. She was not the person to belong to our group of specialists.

"In the open discussion following the reading of her paper we told her so. Man after man rose and explained to her exactly how much in error she was on this point and that. She waited till we were through with our criticisms and then she said emphatically that she knew she was right because she owned an Encyclopædia Brittanica, twenty-six volumes of it, and every statement she had made was in those twenty-six books; that we could discover for ourselves, if we would only trouble to do so. We laughed at the idea that a person could learn to bind a book, especially a fine, rare one, by reading the Brittanica. Finally we became silly about it and passed from simple laughter to masculine hee-hawing and lastly we were sarcastic.

"She sat stiffly, first flushed and then dead white. At last, rising, she said she would see us later on and walked unsteadily from the room. Some of the men realized then they had behaved harshly and most unmannerly to a beautiful and earnest woman and tried to make amends.

"The next meeting was at Chicago. She failed to attend. Ten of our younger members likewise were absent. Just sixteen of us were present. We were disturbed, in a way, for always the response had been unanimous—and now so many absent without any explanation. At San Francisco, the following year, there were only six of us and we were frankly astonished and discussed disbanding. But I pleaded for unity and a continuance—for another year, at least.

"Not one of the old crowd appeared at the meeting in my home in Boston. Not one! I decided they were all either married, dead or fed up on the idea of an international association—or perhaps they were too busy—but why not some word from some of them, especially those whom I had called friend?"

MY HOST paused long enough to replenish the glasses and I found I had been sitting rigidly, intent, as the story flowed from his lips.

"I was worried," he resumed, "and decided to spend a few months and a bit of money seeking some of them out and try to discover the reason of the breaking up of our group. Investigation showed they had all followed the same pattern of behavior; all had done the same thing. One by one they had gone to Spain and there all trace of them vanished. It all seemed very queer.

"I was all the more mystified when

I returned to Boston and found a letter, in a feminine hand, from Spain.

"It was an invitation from the Lady Leonora Sonada to visit her. The reasons she gave were not too clear; merely that she was lonely and was desirous of my advice regarding some difficulty in her work. Would I please come if expenses and other financial matters were attended to?

"Perhaps I was tired and distressed, anyway my mind was not working very fast. However, at last I identified her. She was the bookbinder who had read such a foolish paper at the Paris meeting. But Spain? Spain? Why all the rest of the boys had gone to Spain! And now I was being invited there! Why? And where were the other twenty-five? Spain!

"However, I went. With my fingers crossed and knowing I was doing something foolish, I went to Spain. Not until I met her in her castle did I realize why I had gone. Once I saw her I knew. I was in love with her; realized I had been in love with her from the first time I had seen her.

"Oh! Of course I was a fool, but I was younger then, and she was exquisitely beautiful and dainty as an elf.

"She entertained me delightfully. She sang like a lark and knew how to bedevil a man. We were very much alone; there seemed to be no servants—they must have been extraordinarily well trained—for surely there must have been some serving folk—but I never remember seeing any from the first day after I drove my car into the courtyard of her castle to the day I drove out, we were alone; and as I remarked, she was very lovely and enticing.

"I cannot tell you what we talked about—but it must have been all of romance, because you see, I was in love and I remember distinctly, of telling her so. We swam in the cool, blue lagoon under the palms, both in the warm sunlight and the soft sense-murdering light of the moon. And, lying on the white sands, her fragrant, tempting self close to me, I forgot my hatred of women: I thought no more of the mystery of the twenty-five bookbinders. All I could think of was that she was delectable and desirable; that I was young and in love.

"One night she was especially beautiful in a soft, misty gown which clung to her, revealingly, so that I was half mad with desire to crush her to me, never to let her go from my arms. She was particularly nice to me—even yet I can't remain calm as I remember—for she was sly and full of evil plotting even as she accepted my caresses—and we drank deeply of that rare old Spanish wine.

"AT JUST what point I fell asleep I don't, of course, know, but when I woke I realized I had been drugged. My head was nearly splitting with pain and I found myself, face downward, spread-eagled, tied hand and foot to the four corners of one of her huge Spanish beds.

"And she sat there beside the bed, waiting for me to waken, still in that transparent gown intensifying her ravishing beauty—waiting for me to waken so that she might further torment me and talk to me. I didn't say anything, but I did a lot of thinking, especially about those other twenty-five bookbinders.

"It did not take her long to tell the story. It seems that after the Paris meeting she had become dissatisfied with her Britannica—not with the pages, but the bindings, which she decided to change. So one at a time, she had invited the members of the association to visit her, those men who had laughed at her. One at a time she had driven them insane with her beauty and wiles. I well knew her ability. And one at a time she had drugged them and tied them, as she had me. Then on their backs she had tattoed, in purple ink, the words:

ENCYCLOPÆDIA
BRITTANICA
VOL. I

or two or three or ten as the case might be. Careful lest she damage the skin she removed the derma as a pelt from an animal, tanned it and bound her volumes, one man's skin for each binding. And I was to serve as leather for the last one, Volume Twenty-six.

SHIVERING, I laughed hollowly, at my host. I had suspected all the time and now I knew that he was either insane or the greatest liar of all time.

"But the thing is impossible!" I cried. "You cannot take enough skin off a man's back to bind a Brittanica without killing him!"

"Who said she didn't kill them?" he retorted savagely. "Of course she killed them, and buried them. I saw the graveyard—with a name on the marker at the head of each grave. Perhaps you do not believe me? It is all true. She told me about it and then started to work on me. You saw my back in the bathhouse. She finished the title part—of the last job. Do you want to see it in good light?"

"No. No, thanks," I hastened to disavow any desire for further investigation and ashamed of my suspicions. "I saw your back. The words ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITTANICA VOL. 26, are there in purple ink and properly spaced so if you were skinned it would serve for a binding. But you know it really did not happen—not the way you tell it. Such things don't occur these days!"

"I'll show you the books!" he exclaimed, and flung open a bookcase. "There they are."

I rose to examine them—all the titles in purple ink. I took one in my hand, felt of its smooth leather.

"I agree I never saw leather like that before," I murmured.

"Probably not, since it is made from human skin. Well, there in that case is all that is left of twenty-five friends."

"It's a nice story," I said. "A nice, gentle, bedtime story, but incomplete. You say twenty-five of your friends died. You were prepared for the last volume; your back shows that. Yet there is volume twenty-six, all bound like the rest. How about that?"

"Look at it again," he urged.

I picked it out and carefully examined it.

"It is different," I cried incredulously. "It looks like the others but the leather is finer, softer, of a different grain."

"Certainly. It should be," he admitted, "for that last book is bound with female skin. That is all that is left of the seductive Lady Leonora Sonada."

"No! You don't mean—"

"Just that. She thought she was clever, but I outwitted her. She was very sure of herself. In an unguarded moment she lay the scalpel too close to my fingers—I used it to turn the tables on her. I bound that last volume with her skin. Now I have all the society together."

Gingerly I replaced Volume Twenty-six.

There was a definite discomfort at the pit of my stomach.

"And that is why you hate women with the vengeance you do?" I asked.

"That's why," he laughed coldly—so coldly that I shook as with an ague. "Whenever I feel there is a woman becoming interested in me I come in here and look at my ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITTANICA in Deluxe bindings."

Seventh Sister

By ***MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN***

THE night Seven Sisters was born, a squinch-owl hollered outside the cabin from sundown until the moment of her birth. Then it stopped its quavering cry. Everything stopped—the whippoorwills in the loblollies; the katydids in the fig tree beside the well; even the tree-frogs, burring their promise of rain as

They came to her by night, hissed at her window and proffered silver in return for her magic.

"The dogs sounded nearer."

'sheet lightning" flickered across the black sky.

The row of slave cabins behind the Old Place looked ramshackled and deserted; had been deserted, for a fact, ever since Grant took Richmond. Daylight or a moon would have shown their shingle roofs fallen in and their sagging porches overgrown with jimson weed and honeysuckle. Only one cabin was livable now and inhabited. Dody, grandson of a Saunders slave, had wandered back to the Old Place, with a wife and a flock of emaciated little pickaninnies.

They had not thrived on odd-job fare in the city. So Dody had come home, the first year of the Depression, serenely certain of his welcome. He knew Cap'm Jim and Miss Addie would give them a cabin with a truck garden, in return for whatever sporadic labor was needed on the old run-down plantation smack on the Alabama-Georgia line.

That was in '29, six years ago. Miss Addie was dead now and buried in the family cemetery on the south hill. Most of the land had been sold to meet taxes. Miss Addie's grandson, Cap'm Jim, alone was left. Cap'm Jim was a baby doctor in Chattanooga. He kept the Old Place closed up except for week-end trips down with his wife and two young sons.

The red clay fields lay fallow and uncultivated. The rail fences had fallen, and even the white-columned Place itself was leaky and in need of paint. Whenever Dody or Mattie Sue thought of it, they had one of the young-uns sweep the leaves and chicken-sign from the bare sanded clay of the front yard. But aside from that weekly chore, they had the deserted plantation all to themselves, and lived accordingly. The children grew fat and sassy on yams and chitterlings. Dody drank more homebrew and slept all day in the barrel-slat hammock. And Mattie Sue cooked, quarreled, and bore another pickaninny every year. . . .

That is, until Seven Sisters was born.

That night a squinch-owl hollered. And somewhere beyond the state highway, a dog howled three times. More than that, one of the martins, nesting in the gourd-pole in front of the cabin, got into the house and beat its brains out against the walls before anyone could set it free.

Three Signs! Small wonder that at sundown Mattie Sue was writhing in agony of premature childbirth. Not even the two greased axes, which Ressie and Clarabelle —her oldest unmarried daughters, aged fifteen and seventeen—had placed under her bed to cut the pain, did any good.

"Oh, Lawsy—Mammy done took bad!" Ressie whimpered.

She hovered over the fat groaning black woman on the bed, eyewhites large and frightened in her pretty negro face. Ressie had seen many of her brothers and sisters come into the world. But always before, Mattie Sue had borne as easily and naturally as a cat.

"Do, my Savior!" Clarabelle whispered. "We got to git somebody to midwife her! Aunt Fan . . . Go 'long and fotch her, quick! Oh Lawsy . . ." she wailed, holding high the kerosene lamp and peering down at the woman in pain. "I . . . I'se sho skeered. . . . What you waitin' on, fool? Run! . . . Oh Lawsy, Mammy . . . Mammy?"

Ressie plunged out into the night. The *slap-slap* of her bare feet trailed into silence.

The cabin's front room was very still. Save for the regular moaning of Dody's wife—and an occasional snore from Dody himself, drunk and asleep on the kitchen floor—there was no sound within. The other children were clustered in one corner, silent as young foxes. Only the whites of their eyes were visible against the dark. Clarabelle tiptoed about in her mail-order print dress, her chemically-straightened hair rolled up on curlers for the church social tomorrow.

Light from the sooty lamp threw stunted shadows. The reek of its kerosene and the smell of negro bodies blended with the pungent odor of peaches hung in a string to dry beside the window. Hot summer scents drifted in: sun-baked earth, guano from the garden, the cloying perfume of a clematis vine running along the porch rafters.

It was all so familiar—the smells, the night-sounds. The broken and mended furniture, discarded by four generations of Saunderses. The pictures tacked on the plank walls—of a snowscene, of a Spanish dancer, of the President—torn from old magazines Cap'm Jim and Miss Ruth had cast aside. The last year's feed store calendar, dated January, 1934. The gilded wreath, saved from Miss Addie's funeral, now decorating the mantel with its purple and gilt ribbon rain-marred to read: *ABID WI H MF.*

Even the childbirth scene was familiar to all of Mattie's children except the youngest. And yet . . .

THERE was an eerie quality about the night, throwing the familiar out of focus. The young-uns felt it, huddled, supperless, in the corner while Clarabelle fluttered ineffectually about the bed and its burden. It was so hot and oppressive, with a curious air of waiting. Even a rumble of thunder along the horizon sounded hushed and furtive.

And the screech-owl's cry drifted nearer.

The woman on the bed writhed and moaned again. Clarabelle twisted her black hands together, bright with pink nail polish—relic of the winters spent in Chattanooga as nurse for Cap'm Jim's youngest. She went to the open door for a fourth time, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps.

Aunt Fan had a cabin down the road about half a mile, and had washed for the Andrews as far back as anyone remembered. She was a church woman; in fact, one of her three husbands had been a preacher before he knifed a man and got sent away to prison. If anyone could help Mattie Sue in her extremity, it would be Aunt Fan . . .

The squinch-owl wailed again. Clarabelle drew a quick circle on the cabin floor and spat in it. But the moaning of her mother went on and on, incoherent, rising and falling as though in imitation of the owl's ill-omened call.

Clarabelle stiffened, listening. The hurried crunch-crunch of shod feet came to her ears at last. With a grasp of relief she ran out to meet the pair—Ressie, returning, and a tiny weazened old negress with a wen in the center of her forehead, jutting out like a blunt horn.

"Aunt Fan, what I tell you? Listen yonder!" Ressie whimpered. "Dat ole squinch-owl been holl'in' fit to be tied ever since sundown!"

The old midwife poised on the porch step, head cocked. She grunted, and with a slow precise gesture took off her apron, to don it again wrong side out.

"Dah. Dat oughta fix 'im. Whah-at Mattie Sue? My land o' Goshen, dat young-un don't b'long to git borned for two month yet! She been workin' in de garden?"

"Well'm . . . " Clarabelle started to lie, then nodded, contrite. "Seem like she did do a little weedin' yestiddy . . . "

"Uh-huh! So dat's hit! I done tole her! Dat low-down triflin' Dody . . . " Aunt Fan, with a snort that included all men, switched into the cabin.

Outside, the screech-owl chuckled mockingly, as though it possessed a deeper knowledge of the mystery of birth and death.

Ressie and Clarabelle hunched together on the front stoop. Through the door they could hear Aunt Fan's sharp voice ordering the pickaninnies out of her way

into the kitchen. Mattie Sue's regular moaning had risen in timbre to a shrill cry. Clarabelle, squatting on the log step of the porch, whispered under her breath.

"Huh!" Ressie muttered. "Ain't no use prayin' wid dat ole squinch-owl holl'in' his fool head off! Oh, Lawsy, Clary, you reckon Aunt Fan can . . . ?"

The older girl shivered but did not reply. Her eyes, wide and shining from the window's glow, swept across the flat terrain. Fireflies twinkled in the scrub pines beyond the cornfield. A muffled roar from above caught her ear once. She raised her head. Wing lights on a transport plane, racing the storm from Birmingham to Atlanta, winked down at her, then vanished in the clouds.

" 'Leb'm-thirty," she murmured. "Less hit's late tonight . . . Daggone! If'n dat ole fool don't shet up his screechin' . . . " She checked herself, sheepishly fearful of her own blasphemy.

Of course there was nothing to all that stuff her mammy and Aunt Fan had passed down to them, huddling before the fire on rainy nights. Signs! Omens! *Juju* . . . Cap'm Jim had laughed and told them, often enough, that . . .

The girl started violently. From the cabin a scream shattered the night. High-pitched. Final.

Then everything was still. The tree-frogs. The quarreling katydids. The whippoorwills. The muttering thunder. A trick of wind even carried away the sound of the transport plane.

And the screech-owl stopped hollering, like an evil spirit swallowed up by the darkness.

A FEW minutes later Aunt Fan came to the door, a tiny bundle in her arms swaddled in an old dress of Mattie's. The girls leaped to their feet, wordless, eager.

But the old negress in the doorway did not speak. She was murmuring something under her breath that sounded like a prayer —or an incantation. There was a sinister poise to her tiny form framed in the lighted doorway, silent, staring out into the night.

Suddenly she spoke.

"Clary honey . . . Ressie. You mammy done daid. Won't nothin' I could do. But . . . my soul to Glory! Hit's somep'm funny about dis gal-baby! She white as cotton! I reckon yo' mammy musta had a sin on she soul, how come de Lawd taken her . . . "

Clarabelle gasped a warning. A broad hulk had blotted out the lamplight behind Aunt Fan—Dody, awake, still drunk, and mean. A tall sepia negro, wearing only his overalls, he swayed against the door for support, glowering down at the bundle in Aunt Fan's arms.

"Woods colt!" Dody growled. "I ain't gwine feed no woods colt . . . Git hit on out'n my cabin! I got eight young-uns o' my own to feed, workin' myself down to a frazzle . . . Git hit on out, I done tole you!" he snarled, aiming a side-swipe at Aunt Fan that would have knocked her sprawling if it had landed.

But the old negress ducked nimbly, hopped out onto the porch, and glared back at Dody. Her tiny black eyes glittered with anger and outrage, more for herself than for the squirming handful of life in her embrace.

"You Dody Saunders!" Aunt Fan shrilled. "You big low-down triflin' piece o' trash! I gwine tell Cap'm Jim on you! Jes' wait and see don't I tell 'im! Th'owin' Mattie's own baby out'n de house like she wont nothin' but a mess o' corn shucks! And Mattie layin' daid in yonder . . . "

Dody swayed, bleary eyes trying to separate the speaker from her alcoholic image.

"Daid? M-mattie Sue . . . my Mattie Sue done daid? Oh, Lawsy— why'n you tell me . . . ?"

His blunt brutal features crumpled all

at once, child-like in grief. He whirled back into the cabin toward the quilt-covered bed.

"Mattie?" the three on the porch heard his voice. "Mattie honey? Hit's your Dody—say somep'm, honey . . . Don't sull up like that and be mad at Dody! What I done now? . . . Mattie . . . ?"

Clarabelle and Ressie clung together, weeping.

Only Aunt Fan was dry-eyed, practical. In the dark she looked down at the mewling newborn baby. And slowly her eyes widened.

With a gesture almost of repugnance the old woman held the infant at arm's length, peering at it in the pale glow from the open cabin door.

My Lawd a-mercy!" she whispered. "No wonder Mattie Sue died a-birthin' dis-heah one! Makes no diff'rence if'n hit's a woods colt or not, dis-head chile . . ."

She stopped, staring now at Clarabelle and Ressie. They paused in their grieving, caught by Aunt Fan's queer tone. The old woman was mumbling under her breath, counting on her black fingers; nodding.

"Dat ole squinch-owl!" Ressie sobbed. "I knowed it! If'n hit hadn't a-hollered, Mammy wouldn't . . . "

"Squinch-owl don't mean nothin' tonight," Aunt Fan cut in with an odd intensity. "Eh, Law, hit's jes' stomp-down nachel dat a squinch-owl'd come around to holler at dis-heah birthin'. Nor neither hit wouldn't do no good to put no axes under Mattie's bed, nor do no prayin'. You know why? . Dis-heah young-un got six sisters, ain't she? Dat make she a seb'm sister! *She gwine have de Power!*"

Like a solemn period to her words, a clap of thunder boomed in the west, scattering ten-pin echoes all over the sky.

"Yessirree, a seb'm-sister," Aunt Fan repeated, rubbing the wen on her wrinkled forehead for good luck. "Y'all gwine have trouble wid dis chile! Hit's a pyore pity she didn' die alongside she mammy."

RESSIE and Clarabelle, saucer-eyed, peered at their motherless newborn sister, at her tiny puckered face that resembled nothing so much as a small monkey. But she was *white,* abnormally white! Paler than any "high yaller" pickaninny they had even seen; paler even than a white baby. Her little eyes were a translucent watery pink. Her faint fuzz of hair was like cotton.

"De Lawd he'p us to git right!" Clarabelle whispered in awe. "What us gwine do wid her? Pappy won't leave her stay here—not no woods colt, and *sho* not no seb'm-sister! Will you keep care of her, Aunt Fan? Anyways, till after de funeral?"

The old negress shook her head. With flat emphasis she thrust the wailing bundle into Ressie's arms, and stumped down the porch step.

"Naw suh, honey! Not me! Hit say in de Good Book not to have no truck wid no conjure 'oman. And dat little seb'm-sister of yourn gwine be a plain-out, hard-down conjure 'oman, sho as you born! . . . Jes' keep her out in de corn crib; Dody won't take no notice of her. Feed her on goat's milk . . . Mm-mmm!" Aunt Fan shook her head in wonder. "She sho is a funny color!"

It was a month after Mattie's funeral before Cap'm Jim came down to the Old Place again with the boys and Miss Ruth. When he heard, by neighborhood grapevine, that Dody's new baby was being hidden out in the corn crib like an infant Moses, he stormed down to the cabin with proper indignation.

He took one startled look at the baby, white as a slug that has spent its life in darkness under a rock. Pink eyes blinked up at him painfully. The little thing seemed to be thriving very well on goat's

milk, but the corn crib was draughty and full of rats. Cap'm Jim attacked Dody with the good-natured tyranny of all Deep-Southerners toward the darkies who trust and depend upon them.

"I'm ashamed of you, boy!"—Dody was over ten years older than Dr. Saunders. "Making your own baby sleep out in a corn crib, just for some damnfool notion that she's a hoodoo! And of course she is your own baby. She's just an albino; that's why she's so white."

Dody bobbed and scratched his woolly head. "Yassuh, Cap'm? Sho nuff?"

"Yes. It's a lack of pigment in the skin . . . er . . . " Dr. Saunders floundered, faced by the childlike bewilderment in the big negro's face. "I mean, she's black, but her skin is white. She . . . Oh, the devil! You take that child into your cabin and treat her right, or I'll turn you out so quick it'll make your head swim!"

"Passuh . . . " Dody grinned and bobbed again, turning his frayed straw hat around and around by the brim. "Yassuh, Cap'm . . . You ain't got a quarter you don't need, is you? Seem like we's plumb out o' salt and stuff. Ain't got no nails, neither, to mend de chicken house . . . "

Dr. Saunders grunted and handed him fifty cents. "Here. But if you spend it on bay rum and get drunk this weekend, I'll tan your hide!"

"Naw*suh?*" Dody beamed, and guffawed his admiration of the bossman's unerring shot. "I ain't gwine do dat, Cap'm! Does you want me for anything, jes' ring de bell. I'll send Clarabelle on up to look after de boys."

Dody shambled off, grinning. Cap'm Jim let out a baffled sigh. He strode back toward the Place, well aware that Dody would be drunk on dime-store bay rum by nightfall, and that the big rusty plantation bell in the yard would clang in vain if he wanted any chores performed. But he had laid the law down about the new baby, and that order at least would be obeyed.

"A pure albino!" he told his wife later, at supper. "Poor little mite; it's amazing how healthy she is on that treatment! They won't even give her a name. They just call her Seven Sisters . . . and cross their fool fingers every time she looks at 'em! I'll have to say, myself, she *is* weird-looking with that paper-white hair and skin. Oh, well—they'll get used to her . . . "

Cap'm Jim laughed, shrugged, and helped himself to some more watermelon pickle.

Dody, with his fifty cents, rode mule-back to the nearest town five miles away. In a fatherly moment, while buying his bay rum at the five-and-ten, he bought a nickle's worth of peppermints for the young-uns. He bought salt, soda, and some nails.

Plodding back home up the highway, he passed Aunt Fan's cabin and hailed her with due solemnity.

"Us sho got a seb'm-sister, all right," he called over the sagging wire gate, after a moment of chit-chat. "Cap'm Jim say she ain't no woods colt. He say she black, but she got pigmies in de skin, what make her look so bright-colored. Do, my Savior! I bet she got de blue-gum! I sho ain't gwine let her chaw on my finger like dem other young-uns when she teethin'! I ain't fixin' to get pizened!"

"Praise de Lawd!" Aunt Fan answered non-committally, rocking and fanning herself on the front stoop. "Reckon what-all she gwine be up to when she old enough to be noticin'? Whoo-ee! Make my blood run cold to study 'bout it!"

DODY shivered, clutching his store-purchases as though their prosaic touch could protect him from his own thoughts. If there was any way to get rid of the baby, without violence . . . But Cap'm Jim had said his say, and there was

nothing for him to do but raise her along with the others.

It was a fearful cross to bear. For, Seven Sisters began to show signs of "the Power" at an early age. She could touch warts and they would disappear; if not at once, at least within a few weeks. She would cry, and almost every time, a bullbat would fly out of the dusk, to go circling and screeching about the cabin's field-stone chimney.

Then there was the time when she was three, playing quietly in the cabin's shade, her dead-white skin and hair in freakish contrast with those of her black brothers and sisters. The other pickaninnies were nearby—but not too near; keeping the eye on her demanded by Clarabelle without actually playing with her.

Willie T., five, was playing train with a row of bricks tied on a string. Booger and Gaynelle, twins of eight, were fishing for jackworms—poking a blade of grass down each hole and jerking up the tiny dragon-like insects. Lula and Willene and Buzz, aged twelve, nine, and thirteen, were engaged in a game of squat tag under the fig trees. They were not paying much attention to their queer-colored youngest sister, though from time to time she glanced at them wistfully.

Willie T. it was who happened to look up and see the bird clumsily winging along overhead in the clear June sky. He pointed, not greatly interested.

"Look at dat ole shypoke!" Snatching up a stick, he aimed it at the flapping target, closed one eye, and shouted: *"Bang! Bang! Bah-loom!"* in imitation of Cap'm Jim's rifle. The bird flew on.

The other children glanced up idly. Only the little albino, lonesome and longing for attention, feigned interest in this byplay. Squinting eagerly up at the distant bird, she pointed the old chicken foot with which she was playing, and trebled in mimicry of her brother: *"Bang, bang! Boom!"*

And a weird, incredible thing happened.

The shypoke, flapping along, wavered suddenly, one wing drooping. With a lurching fluttering motion it veered—then fell like a plummet, striking the ground not three yards from where the little girl sat.

Willie T. stared. The bird was dead. There was blood on its feathers.

IN A stunned, silent, wide-eyed group Mattie's other children backed away from their ghostly sister. She blinked at them, her pinkish eyes squinting painfully in the sunlight.

"Bang-bang . . . " Seven Sisters repeated in a hopeful undertone.

There was a shuffle of running feet. Her lower lip quivered when she saw that she had been left alone.

She was always alone after that, partly because the other children shunned her, and partly because she could not see well enough to run after them. She had developed a peculiar squint, holding her towhead to one side, slit-eyed, upper lip drawn back to show her oddly pointed little teeth. For a "seven-sister," she tripped over things and hurt herself twice as often as her brothers and sisters who were not gifted with supernatural powers.

Cap'm Jim, on a flying visit to the plantation one Sunday, had noticed the way the child kept always to the shadowy places.

"Weak eyes," he pronounced. "Typical of albinos. Have to get her some special glasses . . . " He sighed, mentally adding up his vanishing bank account. "Oh, well—time enough when she starts to school. Though, Lord help the little thing at recess!"

That preference for shadow was given another connotation by dark-skinned observers.

"Dah! Ain't I done tole you?" Aunt Fan was triumphant. "See jes' like a cat in de dark, but can't see hardly nothin' in de daytime. Yes sirree—she a plain-out,

hard-down conjure 'oman, and I knowed hit de first time I sot eyes on her!"

By this time, the lone screech-owl which had attracted Seven Sisters' birth had become seven screech-owls, hovering in a ring around the cabin to demand Mattie's soul in return for the new baby's "Power."

This "Power" mystified Seven Sisters, though she did not doubt that she had it. Clarabelle and Dody had told her so, ever since she could understand words. Now, a thin too-quiet child of six, she accepted the fact as simply and sadly as one might accept having been born with an interesting club-foot. But, because it was the only way in which she could attract attention—half fear, half respect—the little albino drew on her imagination, and did not herself know where fact ended and fancy began.

The other children jeered at her but were frankly envious. The elders laughed and remarked that nobody but "ig'nant country niggers" believed in conjures any more.

Secretly they came to her by night, and hissed at her window, and proffered silver in return for her magic. Seven Sisters never saw any of the money, however, as the business was always transacted through Clarabelle or Dody.

Some of the things they wanted were incomprehensible to her at first. *Mojoes*—tiny bags of cloth that might contain anything at all, plus the one thing only she possessed: "the Power." In Atlanta, in Birmingham, and Memphis, especially in Harlem, a good one might sell for as much as ten dollars. These, according to whatever words the conjurer mumbled over them, were able to perform all sorts of miracles for the wearer—from restoring the affection of a bored mate to insuring luck in the numbers game.

Seven Sisters, with the precocity of all outcasts, caught the idea early. Like the little girls who started the witch-scare in Salem, she felt pains and saw apparitions for the bug-eyed approval of kin and neighbors. She made up words and mumbled them on every occasion, squinting weirdly and impressively. She hummed tuneless little chants, in the eerie rhythm of all darkies. She memorized the better-known household "conjures"; such as, burying three hairs from the end of a hound's tail under the front steps to keep him from straying. With ready wit she invented new ones, then forgot them and supplied others on call.

True, most of these tricks had, at one time or another, been subtly suggested by Aunt Fan or Clarabelle as the proper procedure for a "seven-sister." But the little albino, pleased and excited by any substitute for affection, threw herself into the part—a pale wistful Shirley Temple in the role of Cybele.

She wanted to be admired, however. She did not want to be feared.

But even Clarabelle, who loved her in the skittish way one might grow to love a pet snake, gave her a wide berth after the incident of the stomach ache.

IT HAPPENED one sultry August day when Dody came stumbling into the cabin, drunker than usual and in a nasty mood.

"Whah dat low-down triflin' Seb'm Sister?" he bellowed. "Whah she at? I'm gwine wear de hide off'n her back—takin' dat four-bit piece from Ole Man Wilson for a huntin' mojo! Hidin' it fum her po' ole pappy what feed her! Whah she at? . . . Young-un, you come out fum under dat table! I sees you!"

The other children, gnawing pork chop bones beside the fireplace—thanks to the sale of a "health mojo" purported to contain the infallible John the Conqueror root—stirred uneasily. In this mood Dody was apt to throw things at anyone within range. But it appeared that Seven Sisters, quak-

ing under the table, was the main object of his wrath tonight.

"Come on out, you heah me?" Dody snarled, grabbing up a stick of lightwood from the hearth and advancing toward the culprit. "I'm gwine whup you good! Stealin' my four-bit . . ."

"I . . . done lost it, Pappy. . . ." Seven Sisters' childish treble was drowned out by his bellow of rage. "Don't whup me! I drapped it in de field. I couldn' see where-at I drapped it—I'll go git it . . ."

"Now you's lyin' to me!" Dody roared, waving his club. "Come on out! I'll learn you . . ."

The other pickaninnies, fascinated, stopped gnawing their chop bones for an instant to watch, their greasy black faces gleaming in the firelight. Dody jerked the table aside. Seven Sisters cringed. Then:

"Don't you hit me wid no stick!" the frightened child shrilled. "I'll put a hoddoo on you! I'll . . ."

Dody lunged, and fell over the table. His stick whistled dangerously close to the child's tow-head.

The next moment Dody was groaning with pain, doubled over, hugging his stomach. Sweat stood out on his black face. He stared at his weirdly white daughter: backed away, thick lips trembling. Seven Sisters made a dive through the open door and out into the friendly night.

Cap'n Jim happened to be at the Place that day; it was a Sunday. He rushed Dody to the nearest city in his car. Appendicitis, Cap'm Jim called it, to the man at the hospital. He and Miss Ruth had a good laugh over Dody's version of the attack.

But after that, Clarabelle stopped giving her little albino sister a playful spank when she was naughty. No one would touch her, even in fun.

"I done tole you!" Aunt Fan intoned. "Do, Moses! Puttin' a hoodoo on she own pappy! Dat ole Sab'm Sister, she jes' born to trouble! She *bad!*"

For more than a week thereafter, Seven Sisters hid in the woods, creeping out only to sneak food from the kitchen. She was deeply frightened. So frightened that when Cap'm Jim came to bring Dody back from the hospital, she ran from him like a wild creature. If she had not tripped over a log and knocked the breath from her slight body, he would never have caught her.

DR. SAUNDERS helped her up and held her gently by the shoulders, marveling anew at her negroid features and cotton-white hair and skin. Her single garment, a faded dress which had not been changed for eight days, hung half off one shoulder, torn and filthy. She was trembling all over, squinting up at him with white-lashed pinkish eyes dilated by terror.

"Now, now, child," the tall bossman was saying, in a tone as gentle as the grip of his hands. "What have those fools been telling you? That it's your fault about Dody's appendix? Well, Heaven help us!" He threw back his head, laughing, but stopped when he saw how it frightened his small captive. "Why, don't be scared. Cap'n Jim won't hurt you. Look here—I've got a present for you! Don't let the other young-uns get hold of it, you hear? Just hide it and play with it all by yourself, because it's yours."

The little albino stopped trembling. Gingerly she took the proffered box and gaped at the treasure inside. A doll-baby a foot high! With real hair, red hair, and eyes that opened and shut. When she turned it over, it gave a thin cry: *"Ma-ma!"* Seven Sisters giggled.

The cap'm chuckled. "Oh, I don't reckon you want this old doll-baby," he made a pretense of taking it back, eyes twinkling. The child clutched at it. "You do? Well, then, what do you say?"

Seven Sisters ducked her head shyly. "I

don' care," she whispered—polite rural South for "Thank you!"

Dr. Saunders chuckled again. "That's a good girl." He stood up; gave her a careless pat. Then he strode off toward the Place, frowning over his own problems—not the least of which was mother-in-law trouble.

He and Ruth and their two boys had been so happy in their touch-and-go way. Then his wife's mother, a forthright lady from Oklahoma, had descended upon them and decided to run their lives with a new efficiency. With her customary dispatch she had found a buyer for the old Saunders plantation, and was now raging at her slipshod son's reluctance to sell.

Even Cap'm Jim had to admit that the price was half again as much as the property was worth. Besides, his practice in Chattanooga had been dwindling of late. A mother-in-law could point out such matters so vividly . . . !

Seven Sisters blinked after his retreating back. Keeping to the shade of the pine coppice, she followed the tall white man a little way, the doll squeezed tightly against her soiled blue-gingham dress. Cap'm Jim waved at someone, who met him in the orchard—a pretty red-headed woman. They went on to the house together, arms about each other's waists. Seven Sisters watched them until they were out of sight.

Thereafter she listened attentively whenever Dody or Clary spoke of the Cap'm. She grew to love anyone that he loved, and to hate anyone that he hated, with a dog-like loyalty. In her child's mind, Good became personified as Dr. Saunders, and Evil as either the sheriff or Old Miz Beecher.

It was common knowledge about the mother-in-law trouble. Clarabelle, who cooked all year round for the Saunderses now, had passed along every word of the quarrel.

"Us'll git turnt out like white-trash if'n de Cap'm sell de Place," Dody mourned. "Dat old Miz Beecher! Do, Law! Dat ole 'oman means as a cottonmouth! She don' care what happen to us niggers, nor nobody. Miss Ruth sho don't take after her none. I wisht she'd fall down de steps and bus' her brains out, so she wouldn't plague de Cap'm no more! If'n he don' sell come Thursday, Thanksgivin', she gwine jes' make his life mis'able!"

Seven Sisters listened, huddled apart from her black kin in a shadowy corner of the cabin. Her little heart began to beat rapidly as a mad idea crept into her towhead. Without a sound, she slipped out into the frosty night of mid-November.

There was a thing Aunt Fan had hinted to her one day—or rather, to Clarabelle within her hearing, since no one ever spoke directly to a seven-sister in idle conversation. Something about a . . . a *graven image*. There was even, Aunt Fan said, a passage about it in the Good Book, warning all Christians to steer clear of the matter.

But Seven Sisters was not a Christian. She had never been baptized in the creek like the rest of Dody's brood. Nothing hindered the plan. And . . . it sounded remarkably simple.

". . . whatever you does to de image, you does to de one you names it!" Aunt Fan's solemn words came back to her clearly. "Jes' wrop somep'm around it what dey wears next to dey skin—don't make no never-mind what hit is. And dat's de conjure! Eh, Law, I seed a conjure man do dat when I was married up wid my first husband. And de 'oman he conjure drap daid as a doornail dat same winter. . . . And dey do say as how hit were a big black cat got in de room whah dey was settin' up wid de corp. Hit jump up on de bed and go to yowlin' like ole Satan hisself! Yes sirree, dat's de Lawd's truth like I'm tellin' you!"

Seven Sisters, picking her way easily

through the dark, slipped into the pine coppice. After a moment, heart pounding, she dug up something from under a pile of leaves. A faint sound issued from it, causing her to start violently—*"Mama!"*

LIKE a small white ghost, the child then ran through the peach orchard. The Place, dark now since Cap'm Jim had gone back to Chattanooga, loomed just ahead. Seven Sisters found what she was looking for, under the steps of the isolated kitchen—an old piece of silk nightgown that she had seen Miss Ruth's mother herself give Clarabelle as a polishing rag for the flat silver. The older girl had used it and flung it under the kitchen steps. Seven Sisters retrieved it now furtively, and padded swiftly back through the orchard.

Deep in the pine coppice, lighted only by the filtered light of a quarter moon, she sat down cross-legged. For a long time she stared at the lovely thing Cap'm Jim had given her, the only thing that had ever been truly her own. The hair was so soft, the glass eyes so friendly. But now the doll had taken on a new personality, a hated one. Seven Sisters glared at it, shivering a little.

Then, deftly, she tied the silk rag about its china neck, and stood up.

"Ole Miz Beecher—you's ole Miz Beecher!" she hissed with careful emphasis; then clarified, against all mistake, to whatever dark pointed ears might be listening: "Miss Ruth's mama. Cap'm Jim's wife's mama. Dat's who you is, doll; you heah me? Ole Miz Beecher . . . !"

With a fierce motion she banged the poppet hard against a tree trunk. The china head broke off and rolled at her bare feet.

"Ma-ma!" wailed the headless body, accusingly.

Seven Sisters dropped it as though it were red-hot. She backed away, rubbing her hands on her dress like an infant Lady Macbeth, and shuddering in the Indian summer chill. Panting, shaken, she turned and ran back to the cabin.

But she paused in the half-open door.

Excited activity was going on inside. Aunt Fan was there, puffing with importance and fumbling for her box of snuff. Dody was shouting questions, wringing his big hands. Clarabelle, Ressie, and the others were milling about like a flock of chickens, clucking and squawking in chorus.

". . . and de phome call say for you to clean up de fambly lot on de south hill," Aunt Fan made herself heard shrilly. "She gwine be buried fum de Place like Miss Addie. . . ."

"Oh, Lawsy! Ain't it awful?" This from Ressie.

"Sho is, honey," Aunt Fan agreed complacently. "I don't reckon de Cap'm 'll ever be de same, hit was so awful. I don't reckon he care what become of de Place, nor nothin', he so cut up about hit."

"Lawd he'p us!" Dody shouted for a fifth time. "When it happen? How come?"

"I done tole you," Aunt Fan repeated, relishing the drama of her words. "Truck run slap into 'em. She was plumb flang out'n de car. Cap'm wont even scratched up. But it broke her pore neck. . . ."

The child in the doorway caught her breath sharply. The conjure had worked! So soon? A little knot of nausea gathered in her stomach, in memory of the china head rolling against her bare foot. Then an angry thought came.

"Aunt Fan— Cap'm ain't gwine bury dat ole 'oman in de fambly lot, is he?" Seven Sisters piped above the chatter. "Not dat ole Miz Beecher. . . . !"

The excited group barely glanced at her, impatient of the interruption.

"Miz Beecher?" Aunt Fan grunted.

"Law, chile, hit ain't ole Miz Beecher what got killt. Hit was Miss Ruth . . ." The aged negress went on with her narrative, dwelling on the details with relish. "And de man tole Marse Joe Andrews over de phome . . . Eh, Law; he say de Cap'm jes' set dah by she bed and hold she hand. Don't cry nor nothin'. Jes' set dah and stare, like he daid, too. . . ."

Seven Sisters heard no more. A sound like falling timber roared in her ears. Through it, dimly, she thought she heard a screech-owl's quavering cry — eerie, mocking, malicious.

SHE turned and ran. Ran, blindly sobbing. Cap'm Jim's Miss Ruth! She had forgotten Miss Ruth's hair was red, exactly like the doll's. And . . . that soiled bit of nightgown might not have been old Miz Beecher's at all, but Miss Ruth's. Cap'm Jim's Miss Ruth. . . .

Beyond the cornfield the black woods opened up to receive the small ghostly figure, running like an animal in pain; running nowhere, anywhere, into the chill autumn night.

Sawbriars tore dark scratches in her dead-white skin, but Seven Sisters did not feel them. She ran, careening into tree trunks and fighting through scuppernong vines, until the salt taste of blood came into her mouth. Twice she fell and lay in the damp leaves for a long time, her thin shoulders racked with sobs.

"Oh, Cap'm! Cap'm Jim . . . I . . . I didn't go to do it!" she whimpered aloud once. "I didn' mean to! I didn'—hones' I didn' . . ."

At that moment she heard the dogs baying.

Tense as a fox, she sat up and listened. Was it only Old Man Wilson, hunting with his pack along the north ridge? Or was it . . . the Law? A posse, with guns, following the deputy sheriff and his two flop-eared bloodhounds through the canebrake. Following a trail of small bare feet. *Her* feet . . .

The little albino sprang up, her flat darkey features contorted with panic. Harrowing yarns crowded her memory. Of the time Aunt Fan's preacher husband had hid in the canebrake for eight days, with the dogs baying closer and closer. And Aunt Fan's husband had only cut a man with his razor, while *she* . . .

Just then she heard the screech-owl, right over her head.

Seven Sisters was running again, goaded now by the spurs of terror. But now the very woods seemed hostile. Gnarled branches snatched at her cottony hair and tore a jagged flap in her gingham dress. Old spider webs clung to her face. The dogs sounded nearer. Once more she tripped and fell, panting, but sprang up again with a scream as something slithered out from beneath her arm.

The screech-owl tittered again, from somewhere above her. It seemed to be trailing the ghostly little fugitive, so white against the ground.

Seven Sisters ran on, blindly, staggering with exhaustion. Once she cried out in her terror—oddly, the very name of the one she was running from:

"Cap'm . . . ! Cap'm Jim . . ."

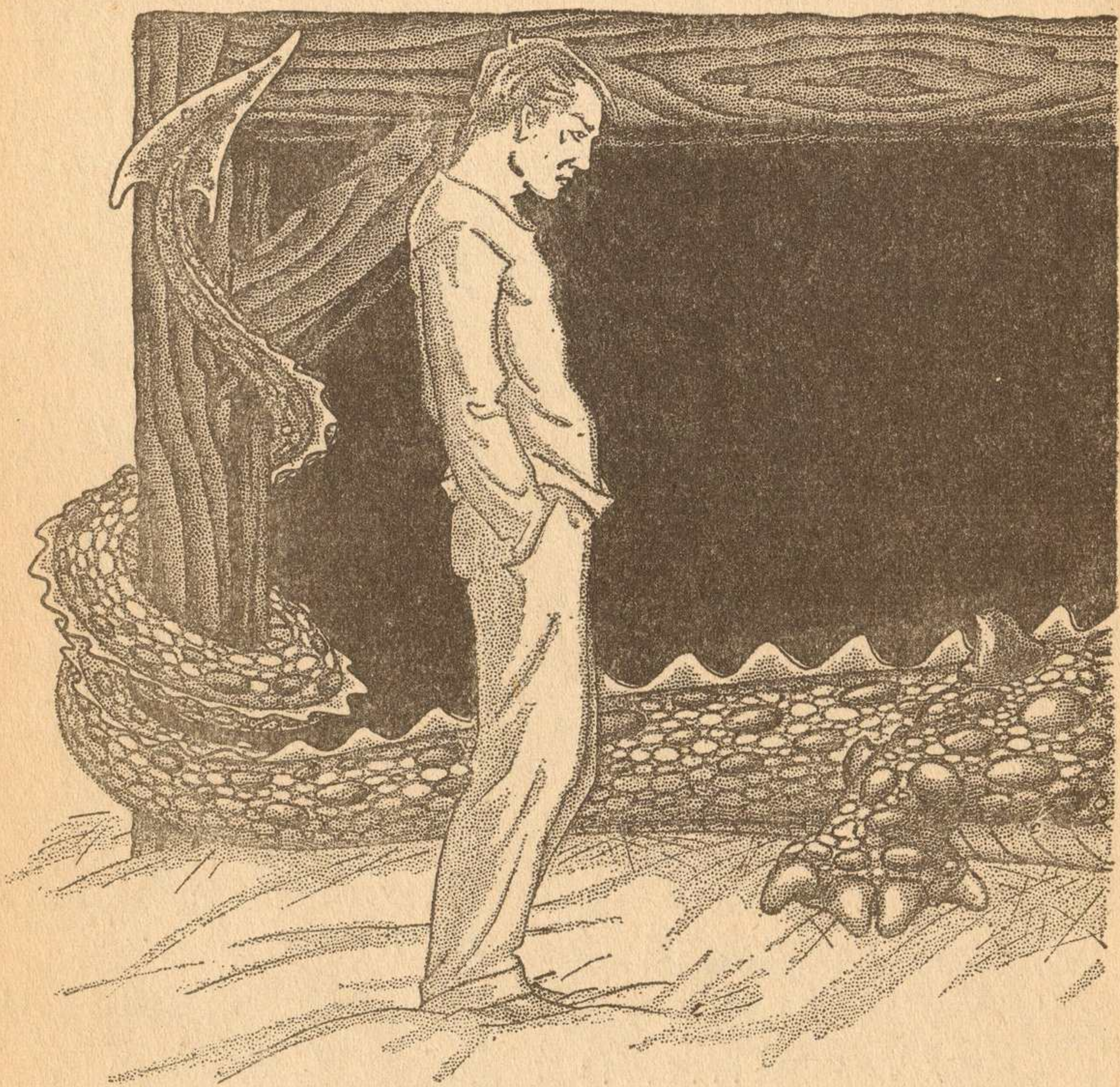
Of a sudden the ground dropped from beneath her feet. She pitched forward, and felt herself falling into space. Dark icy water rushed up out of nowhere to meet and engulf her . . .

Mist rose from the cornfield in front of Dody's cabin. Dry leaves rattled. The gourds on the martin pole swung in the wind.

Somewhere a screech-owl quavered again, far away, in the direction of the creek—whose muddy waters had washed away the sins of many a baptized little darkey.

The Eager Dragon

By ROBERT BLOCH



I AM sitting in Thin Tommy's tavern, and maybe I have a couple too many. This is quite possible, because I hear customers say that even one drink of Thin Tommy's whiskey is too many. But I have maybe five or six in a row, so I get about as high as the national debt.

Which is how I happen to get talking to these two strangers. They are sitting down at the other end of the bar, minding their own business—which seems to be liquor importing, if the way they spin the bottle is any indication. Each of them manages to import about a fifth of scotch down his throat while I watch. And they do not bother with any Emily Post stuff, either, such as pouring their drinks into glasses first.

Now I am not the type of personality who pries into other people's affairs. Particularly in a place like this, where it is not safe to shake hands with strangers unless you have heavy insurance on your fingers.

So after gulping my sixth anti-freeze, I slide off the stool to go home. I do not intend to speak to these jerks, but one of them turns around and gabbles at me.

"I beg your pardon," he says, very polite. "But you have your foot caught in a cuspidor."

If there is anything I'm a sucker for, it's politeness. Besides, when I look down I see that I have indeed stuck my left foot into one of Thin Tommy's finger-bowls.

"Thank you for the information," I tell the stranger. "I hardly notice such a thing because I expect to walk a little funny after drinking the stuff they serve here."

A rollicking tale of the dragon with blue eyes and some amazing ideas inside its scaly noggin.

"It is vile, isn't it?" says the first stranger. "Won't you have another one with me?"

Well, who can refuse such a courteous invitation? I sit down again and manage

to get my Thom McCan out of the cigar-pond, and the two strangers pour me a shot, and before you can say Jack Robinson I am too stinko to pronounce it.

That is how it happens I get so gabby, I guess.

Because the first stranger—a tall, skinny guy with glasses—says, "We are a couple of traveling salesmen. We are stranded here miles from the nearest farmer's daughter. Isn't it sad?"

And the second stranger—a fat, older guy with a bald head—says, "We are working our way through second childhood selling magazines to colleges. Our car breaks down tonight and here we sit out in the country where nothing happens since the last time Halley's Comet went through."

Evidently he refers to some traveling burlesque show, but I am just high enough to resent this crack about nothing ever happens.

YOU see, I like it here in the country, ever since I retire from the rackets and buy me a chicken farm. Besides, things are far from peaceful lately on my cackle ranch. In fact, what happens to me recently is so screwy I never mention it—but now I am too groggy to keep from leading with my jaw.

"Nothing ever happens here?" I say, to the bald-headed guy. "Listen, I can tell you stories that will make your hair stand on end, if you buy a wig."

"Such as?" pipes the first guy.

"I may look like a farmer but I am not handing you any corn," I say.

"Such as?" insists the first guy.

"You wouldn't believe me," I say.

"You tell me and I'll believe it," the first guy yells. "Tell me just one thing that ever happens to you around here."

"Well, about a week ago I am driving along about a mile down the road and I meet a knight," I begin.

"A what?"

"A knight—from King Arthur's court."

"Do you sniff the stuff or use a needle?" asks the bald-headed salesman. The tall guy whispers, "Say—your strait-jacket's showing."

"I tell you you won't believe me," I remind them.

"Go ahead. This is interesting."

"I meet this knight, from King Arthur's court. Sir Pallagyn, his name is."

"He tells you his name?"

"Why not?"

"Then maybe he also tells you what he's doing and how he got here."

"Of course. Merlin sent him."

"Merlin?"

"Merlin is the boss of the magician's union," I explain. "He can send his boys forward and backward in Time without paying cab fare. He sends Sir Pallagyn here on a big job—to put the snatch on a pedestal for a loving-cup he calls the Holy Grail."

"Aaaargh!" remarks the thin jerk. He is either commenting on my story or strangling on the drink he swallows. So I make with the tongue some more.

"I find out this pedestal is in a museum back in town, so the knight and I sneak in after dark. We goniff it easy, because Merlin sends some hoods from the Round Table mob to help us."

"Where is this Sir Pallagyn now?" asks the baldy jag, in a sweet voice. "I suppose he is hiding out somewhere so the government can't claim his armor for defense priorities."

"I am sorry," I mumble. "But when Pallagyn and his boys get the pedestal they are after, Merlin drags them back through Time again. And that is how it stands."

"It stands kind of wobbly to me," insists the dandruff-victim. "You are wasting your time if you are a chicken farmer. You should be a rodeo star, the way you can throw the bull."

"Listen, my fine featherless friend," I

remark, "if you think you can stand there with your bare head hanging out and call me a liar, you are not only mistaken but probably dead."

"No offense, buddy," he comes back. "Only you got to admit your story is a little hard to believe."

"I know that and I am willing to prove it to you," I say. "It so happens that Sir Pallagyn leaves his glue barrel in my barn back at the farm. It is a big white nag, all covered with a fancy tin blanket to keep out the flies or something. One look will tell you it isn't any fake and I am not palming off any Derby winner on you."

I AM really third degree burned by all these insinuations, to say nothing of the dirty cracks. I really mean it now when I suggest we all three climb into my truck and ride out to the stable for a look at the horse.

"Fine idea," says the thin fink with the glasses. So we all have another drink on that and then we go outside.

This time I do not even notice the cuspidor on my foot until we are way up the road—which gives some idea of how reeko I am.

We climb into the truck, I shag on the gas, and pretty soon we pull up at my poultry villa.

Then I help them out of the truck. Archie Biggers—that's the thin one's name—won't get out without another drink. Larry Cotton, the baldy guy, says if he has another drink he can't get out. So I compromise and drink it for him.

After that I lead Archie and Larry right to the barn in back of the house; which is no small job itself, the way they are walking.

"Now you'll see if I'm lying or not," I say, rattling the door.

The door opens without unlocking, which is funny. I step inside. I light a match. I let out a yell.

"Somebody stole my horse!"

"Huh!" snorts Archie. "I thought so."

"That's a horse on you," says Larry. "Don't bother to lock the barn door when you go out."

"But it's true," I insist. "The horse is right here when I leave tonight. Look—here is the hay I put out for it."

I hold up the second match and show them the hay-pile. Then I let out another yap and drop to my knees.

"What's this?" I holler, pointing to a big round white thing in the hay-pile.

"Why, a horse-egg, of course," sneers Archie.

"It's an egg all right," I agree. "But look at the size of it—why, it's over three feet long!"

And it is, too; a big, round white egg with long yellow splotches on it and a smell that his hardly Grade A.

"Wait a minute," Archie says. He stoops down and picks up a piece of grayish paper lying next to the egg. "Writing on it," he whispers. "In water colors or something. Can't make it out—bad spelling."

"Give it here," I request, grabbing it politely. "I am expert on spelling, particularly such spelling as those lousy kidnapers use that put the snatch on my horse."

"Put the snatch on?"

"Sure. This is doubtless a ransom note from the mob stealing my nag. There is nothing I hate and detest more than a horse-napper!"

But it turns out I am mistaken.

The writing is some kind of water-color job, and the spelling is terrific. But I can figure out what the note says.

Sir Butch:

Methinks in the excitement I forgot to send for the steed. I take it now, lest Pallagyn go unmounted as a churl.

Pallagyn thanks you for your seemly courtesy and bespeaks right highly your

prowess as a wizard. It behooves me therefore to tender you this little token of my esteem as a fitting reward for your assistance. It is a seemly gift from one wizard to another, and may serve as a reminder of the gratitude of

Merlin.

THIS is not only lousy spelling but lousy grammar—in fact, it reminds me of the way this Sir Pallagyn talks. Maybe this Merlin is not so much of a brain after all.

But what puzzles me is why he sends an egg for a present to a chicken farmer.

"Don't ask me," says Larry. "I don't even know what kind of an egg it is. It certainly isn't a Plymouth Rock. Looks more like a Plymouth Mountain."

"I wonder what's inside," I mumble.

"We can't find out till it hatches."

"Well, how we going to hatch it?"

"It's too big for a chicken to sit on."

"Something has to sit on it though," I tell them. "From the looks of it, it should hatch soon."

"From the smell of it, it better hatch soon," says Archie.

"I've got an idea!" yells Larry. "We aren't doing anything tonight. Let's all of us sit on it."

"You mean we should hatch this egg?"

"Why not? It's warm here. We have to sleep some place, you know. We might as well curl up in the hay, sleep on the egg, and wait until it breaks open. I want to see what's coming off here, anyway."

So after another drink it doesn't sound so screwy any more. Archie lays down on one side of me and Larry lays down on the other side. All three of us cuddle up to the big white egg with its thick shell.

I close my eyes, and maybe it's only my head throbbing but I think I hear something pounding away under the egg shell. And maybe it's only the snores of Archie and Larry, but I get the idea I hear noises inside the egg.

What could be hatched from an egg over three feet long? Why it must weigh a couple hundred pounds! More than that, who cares?

That is how I feel after the last drink, so I just go right off to sleep. But all the time I think I hear the egg making noises, and after while I begin to dream about the kind of things which probably lay such eggs. And I do not like to dream about radio comics.

It is pretty late in the morning when I wake up because somebody is shaking me.

At first I think it is Archie, but he is asleep. Then I look at Larry, and he is sleeping too.

But I am being shaken. My head is going up and down.

Then I realize. The egg is moving under my head!

I jump up, but quick, before I get my neck broken. The egg is cracking in long strips in about a dozen places, and the chunks in between are heaving and falling off. There is no doubt about it now—I do hear noises from under the shell. There is no doubt about my smelling something either.

The egg is hatching.

By this time, Archie and Larry are awake and on their feet. But I do not watch them. I watch the strips of shell peeling off the egg and watch the green stuff underneath moving up and down.

"What in blazes?" asks Archie, hopping up and down on one foot and pointing.

What he is pointing at is a long green thing waving out of the end of the egg. It looks like a snake without a head.

We do not answer him, Larry and I, because we are looking at the *other* end of the egg. There is another green thing sticking out of this end, and it *is* the head. You can't make any mistake about it, because this head is several feet long and several more feet wide, and it is the kind of a head nobody would ever forget, even

though they would want to forget it very much indeed.

Larry points at one end and Archie points at the other, and then both of them point at the middle. Because the egg-shell cracks, and we see the thing come out.

IT IS about eight feet long and four feet high, and how it manages to curl up in a three-foot egg I don't know. But then there are a lot of things I don't know about it, and I have a hunch I do not greatly care to find out. What it looks like and what it smells like is enough to hold me for a long, long time.

"Thin Tommy should tell me," I say. "Usually when I drink his whiskey I expect lizards or snakes. But he should tell me when he switches me to a stronger brand."

But I cannot help but give the thing a gander. We all stand there staring like we saw Dorothy Lamour stepping out of a sarong instead of that green scaly thing waltzing out of a busted egg shell.

Like I say, it is eight feet long and about four feet high. Part of the eight feet is a snaky-looking tail. Part is a fat, beer-barrel body all covered with warts and scales like a flophouse bum. But the biggest and worst part is the steam-shovel it uses for a head. This is round and green, with big bulging eyes, and practically all the rest is mouth and teeth.

It wobbles around on four stumpy legs.

I wobble around on two, myself. For some reason I get the impression that this thing is slightly repulsive. In fact, my face gets nearly as green as the one it exhibits.

But all at once Larry is pointing at it and jumping up and down like he has just got a double hot-foot.

"I know what it is!" he yells. "It's a *dragon!*"

"What's a dragon?" I say, glancing down at my trousers to see if the suspenders slip.

"That's a dragon. You know, like in the story books. Back in King Arthur's days the woods are full of them. This Merlin must think he is paying you a compliment as a wizard when he sends you a dragon's egg."

"Sure, that's what it is," says Archie. "Come on down out of there."

He is talking to me. Because when he mentions the word "dragon" I all of a sudden find myself climbing up the side of the barn to the hay-rack.

Now I get down real slow, because I am not a personality that likes to hurry—particularly when it comes to meeting such things as dragons or hungry tigers or ex wives.

"He won't hurt you," Archie argues "He's just a baby."

"What you want me to do, nurse him?" I inquire. "I am not of a mind to become a diaper artist for any walking boa-constrictors. Furthermore—*uuuuuuuh!*"

Maybe this *"Uuuuuuuh!"* doesn't make sense, but it sounds very apt when I say it, because right then the dragon walks over to me and begins to rub against my leg.

"It is just like a kitten," Archie tells me. "Quit rattling your knees, or you'll brain it to death."

SURE enough, the dragon begins to purr real soft, like the Twentieth Century Limited on a clear track. It looks up at me, and all at once it grins.

"Isn't that sweet?" says Larry. "See how affectionate it is?"

"I know a character back in town who smiles like this," I mention. "He recently fried for bumping off three old ladies with a butcher's cleaver."

"Go ahead, pat it on the head. It's perfectly safe," says Archie.

I feel about as safe as a peace treaty with Hitler, but I reach down and run my hand over the dragon's scaly noggin once or twice. Then I smile, more in relief at get-

ting my hand back than at anything else. And it smiles at me again.

FOR the first time I notice it has blue eyes. They are very pretty eyes—for a dragon. A sort of baby blue. They remind me of a dame I once knew, name of Daisy the Fish.

"Love at first sight," Archie sighs.

"All right, now we have our first sight and what do we do with this overgrown chameleon?"

"What do we do about it?" yells Larry. "What do we do about it?" he hollers, running around the hay pile. "Why listen, man—don't you realize what you have here?"

"A hangover."

"Hangover? You've got a million bucks, that's all! A cool million!"

"I don't even see a hot penny," I tell him.

"Listen." Larry stops running and begins to wave his arms. "You are the owner of the only live dragon in captivity—a real, flesh and blood dragon, the only one ever seen in the world for centuries! Don't you realize what this means?"

"Think of Science!" says Archie.

"I rather think of the million," I answer.

"That's just what I'm telling you," Larry breaks in. "You know that Gargantua the circus carries around?"

"You mean that big ape who looks like La Guardia?"

Sure. Why they pay thousands of dollars just to show such an attraction. Think of what they'd give you to have a real live dragon to exhibit."

"Well, I'll be—"

"Rich! Just leave it to me."

So that is how it works out.

"We're just the salesmen for a stunt like this," Larry tells me. "We'll head for town and handle the business end. Straight 25 percent cut. We'll contact circus people and set a deal. It may take about a week or so, but don't worry.

"Just take care of baby, here. See that it gets enough to eat. And above all, keep it out of sight, whatever you do. No word of this must leak out to anyone."

"I got to hide out here and play house with this lizard?" I squawk.

"Think of the money in it," Larry comes back. "You've got a fortune if you do what we tell you."

So he and Archie borrow my truck and head for town. And I am left with a dragon on my hands.

II

I DO not know if you ever have a dragon for a visitor, but it is not such a situation I am equipped to handle. I begin to wish right away that Merlin gives a little advice along with his present or at least sends me a book on THE CARE AND FEEDING OF DRAGONS.

Because I can tell at first glance that this dragon is hungry. Not five minutes after Larry and Archie clunk off, the dragon begins to look at me with those big baby blue eyes and I know something has got to be done.

After all, it is only a moppet, so to speak, and you have to take care of moppets. I never bring up a brat myself, but one thing I realize is that kids are always hungry. Particularly when they cry.

Which is just what this dragon starts to do when it looks at me. Its eyes blink and out comes two tears about the size of footballs.

I just stand there and listen to it bawl, soft and low like a dive-bomber. I am helpless, but absolutely. I cannot bounce this baby up and down on my lap. I cannot make faces at it, either, because its own face is more peculiar than anything I can dream up.

I cannot give it a rattle, either, except

with the old teeth, because I am still a little afraid of the thing.

What I need, I decide, is a drink. So I rush into the house and open the ice-box.

All I find is a case of beer, but this is an emergency. So I open a couple bottles and decide to sit down and think.

Then I hear a noise from the barn. Grabbing up the case of brew I rush back out.

But it is only the dragon, crying louder. It stands there and blubbers just like a baby sniveling for its bottle.

That gives me the old idea. Bottle? I haven't got any dragon milk, but I have got beer.

So I open another bottle and pour it down the dragon's throat.

This turns out to be just what the doctor ordered. One gulp and the beer disappears. And the dragon smiles!

I smile too.

Then I hear another gulp.

The foolish thing has swallowed the bottle.

But it keeps right on smiling.

"So that is the way things are," I say. "All right—help yourself."

And I push over the case of beer.

The dragon gets to work. In about five minutes it has swallowed eighteen bottles. I go back to the house for another case. Also I call up Thin Tommy's tavern and ask Thin Tommy to send over a couple dozen cases of his vile brew right away.

"Holding a party?" asks Thin Tommy, over the phone.

But I do not answer. I remember that Larry and Archie asked me to keep my mouth shut. This is always a good idea when speaking to Thin Tommy, anyway. If you open your mouth in front of him he is liable to steal your teeth.

So I just hang up, relieved. If I can nurse this dragon on beer it solves a lot of problems, and the way it drinks I do not even have to bother with piling up empty bottles.

Still and all, one other problem does bother me a little. I get to wondering if this thing is house-broken. I am just going to call uptown for a couple of pup tents in case I run out of diapers when I hear another noise from the barn outside.

It is a voice, laughing.

This time I make the trip back in nothing flat. And I am not a moment too soon, either.

Because there is a kid standing at the barn door, looking in. He is a little tow-headed shrimp about eight years old, hardly tall enough to reach up and goniff your watch. He is laughing and giggling, and when he sees me he turns around.

"Look, Mister!" he says. "The dragon has the hiccups!"

I LOOK and it is a fact. The dragon has the hiccups. It is standing in the barn and hiccuping like mad. What makes it peculiar is the fact that every time it burps a little spout of fire comes out of its nose.

"Gee, it looks funny!" laughs the kid.

I stare at him.

"Aren't you afraid, small-fry?" I ask.

The kid keeps right on laughing. "What should I be afraid about?" he asks me. "It's only a dragon, isn't it? I read about them in books all the time. Unless, of course, you're a wicked wizard or an ogre. But you don't look like an ogre to me."

"Thanks, small-fry," I say.

And my name isn't small-fry, it's Edgar," says the kid.

"Edgar what?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you, because if I did you'd send me home and I've run away from home," the kid gets out.

"Run away?" I say. "You mean you took it on the lam? What's the matter—does your old man put the boots to you?"

"You mean beat me? No, of course not," Edgar says. "Only I want to seek

adevnture. And I guess I've found it, haven't I?"

I don't do any guessing myself. Instead I give this little tow-headed Edgar another look. He is not a hick type, that I see. He is dressed to the ears in a swell Kuppenheimer Jr., which is a little dusty from traveling. I see his folks must be up in the tax list from his manner of gab, which is very high class. But what puzzles me is why he is not afraid of this dragon.

"You mean to tell me you aren't scared by this fire-breathing monster?" I ask. "Doesn't this thing with the hot halitosis give you the shivers?"

Edgar shakes his noggin. "Of course not. I'm used to animals. Why, back where I live I—" Then he stops and smiles. "But I'm not going to tell."

I give him another stare that is old but cold.

"Listen, Edgar," I say, kindly, "It will please me extremely if you go back to your old man before I am forced to do something rash, like kicking your teeth down your throat."

Edgar keeps on smiling.

"You can't fool me," he says. "You aren't an ogre."

"I am not the head of an orphan asylum, either," I tell him. "I am not running a Boy's Town. I am just a chicken farmer, understand? I have nothing at all to do with the rackets these days, and I am not getting mixed up with any runaway Dead End kids. It is bad enough I got to get a dragon today without singing *Sonny Boy* to a moppet."

Edgar gets the drift of my remarks all right, because he puckers up his little puss like a sponge and begins to spring a leak from the eyes.

"You don't like me—you're sending me away—" he bawls.

"That is the general idea, urchin. Go urch some place else."

"And just when I was going to have such adventures," Edgar sniffles. "Now when I tell people about your real live dragon they won't believe me."

"Oh, oh!" This is something I do not figure. If I send the kid away it will mean he spills the story about the dragon to somebody he meets. It is, as Mr. Heinz puts it, a very pretty pickle.

So I go over to Edgar and pat him on the shoulder.

"Do not drizzle so," I console him. "Maybe I change my mind. After all, I need somebody around to take care of the dragon for me while I keep the farm going. Besides, it seems to like you. So how about playing stable-boy to the baby, here?"

"You really mean I can stay and take care of the dragon and feed it and everything?" Edgar is so excited he hugs me around the knees, knocking them together severely.

"Ouch! Certainly!"

Then Edgar has to go over and hug the dragon. It is a pretty good blueprint for a nightmare to see the kid with his arms around that green head, and the fire shooting out of the dragon's mouth when he lets go with a hiccup.

BUT Edgar does not seem to mind—in fact you would think from the look on his puss that he has his arms around Betty Grable. And the dragon lets go with another smile, this time showing enough teeth to supply the entire Japanese army.

"He likes me," squeals Edgar. "See, we get along fine! By the way, Mister, what is his name?"

"Name?" I reply. "I do not give him a name as yet."

"How do you expect him to come when you call if he hasn't got a name?" asked the kid.

"What makes you think I ever want to call a dragon?" I answer.

But the moppet insists. "We can call him Herman," he decides.

"All right, make it Herman," I tell him. "You want I should christen him by breaking a bottle of beer over his head?"

The kid gives me a funny look while he pats Herman on the neck.

"I can't figure it out, Mister," he says. "You don't act or talk like a magician. But you must be one, or how would you own a dragon?"

"I am just a farmer," I say. "I wish you to forget all this double-talk about magicians and wizards and what-all."

Then I make a dive for the hay.

But I am too late. The urchin gets there first and picks up the note from Merlin, which he reads.

"Boy!" he remarks. "Oh, boy! You can't fool me, Mister—this note proves you're a sorcerer."

"Listen, Edgar," I mention, sweetly, holding out my arm. "This fist proves you got a black eye unless you forget what you just read. If you want to stay here with me and take care of Herman, you must keep your lip buttoned. For certain reasons, I do not wish anyone else to know I possess this dragon. You understand?"

Edgar smiles. "Maybe you're afraid of an enemy enchanter," he suggests.

"Maybe," I say.

Just then I hear a car honking in the yard. I go to the door and take a squint. It is Thin Tommy Malloon, bringing me the beer I order. So I turn around to Edgar and give him the old whisper.

"You are right," I tell him. "I am afraid of an enemy whatever-you-call-it. In fact, he arrives now. So it is up to you to keep yourself and Herman out of sight until he goes away. I do not desire a peep out of you or a burp out of Herman."

At which moment Herman lets go with another burst of anti-aircraft from the tonsils.

"Shove a bottle of beer down his throat," I advise.

But then Thin Tommy honks his horn again, so I go out to the yard. He is sitting in his truck, and when I come up he gives me the old once-over.

"I figure you are in the house all this time," he says. "What you doing out in back?"

"The new catalogue arrives today," I explain.

Thin Tommy just grunts. It is a normal sound, because he is built like a hog, with a strain of wild boar. He is called Thin Tommy because he weighs in at 300 pounds on the latest police blotter. Besides being a very unpleasant hunk of lard to look at, he is also an unpleasant personality to do business with. He runs his tavern, but also throws the scare into local yokels so they pay him protection money in these parts. In fact, Thin Tommy is what is vulgarly termed a hoodlum. My own term for him would be about twenty years.

IT IS for these reasons that I do not wish him to find out I have a live dragon on the premises, else he is liable to get his two triggers, Bertram and Roscoe, and put the old fingeroo on it.

So I make dumb and say, "Where is the beer?"

"Right here in the truck," Thin Tommy tells me. "You holding a party?"

"No," I say. "Not exactly."

"You gonna drink two dozen cases of beer yourself?"

"Well—" I begin.

Just then another burp comes from the barn. It sounds kind of mournful and impressive, like Louie Armstrong on the trumpet.

"What in purple blazes is that godawful blatting?" inquires Thin Tommy.

I think fast.

"I just buy a couple cows," I tell him.

"I never hear a cow make a sound like that," he scowls. "Holsteins?"

"No—Beersteins," I came back. "A

new breed. They give special milk if you see they get beer to drink."

What kind of milk does a cow give from drinking beer?"

"Malted milk, stupid!" I tell him. "That is why I order this beer. What is more, I wish you to deliver two dozen cases every day in the future."

"I would like to see such cows," Thin Tommy says, climbing out of the truck.

I back up to the barn door.

"They are too drunk to look at," I excuse.

Out comes another burp, making the door rattle a little.

"I still say that does not sound like a cow," Thin Tommy insists.

"Take my word for it," I tell him. "That's no bull."

THEN I pull out my wallet to distract him. The sight of money always distracts Thin Tommy, particularly if it is other people's money. It will even distract him through the door of a bank vault.

"Here is your dough," I remind him. "Kindly dump out the beer."

Which he does, and climbs back on the truck.

"So long," I call. "See you tomorrow. I got to go back now—one of the cows has a hangover."

Thin Tommy stares at me again.

"By the way," he purrs. "Speaking of hangovers, what do you feed those two finks you meet in my tavern last night?"

"Who?"

"Those two traveling salesmen with the broken-down car," he answers. "This morning they come in with awful heads and phone a garage. I hear them mumbling and muttering under their bad breaths about a dragon they hatch on your farm."

"What?"

I play dumb, but Thin Tommy keeps staring.

"Yes, they babble about going up to the old burg and contacting a circus owner or whatever."

"They are extremely stencho," I shrug. "Are you sure it is not pink elephants they mention?"

"No, it is a dragon. So I merely desire to ask you. Of course," Thin Tommy purrs, "you do not have such a dragon."

"Of course," I say.

"Only some drunken cows," he adds.

It is a bad time to hear another burp, but I do, and so does everyone else within a mile.

Thin Tommy starts his motor and smiles. "One of your cows must be calling you," he winks. "You better put an ice-pack on its forehead. That will make the malted milk colder."

Then he backs his truck out of the yard.

I stand there shaking and then lug the beer into the barn. Opening the door I almost trip over Edgar, who is stooping down.

"I know!" he yips. "That's the wicked wizard, isn't it so? Gee, he's a mean-looking ogre."

"I agree," I come back. "But why are you doing a Winchell at the door when you should be taking care of Herman?"

"Oh, Herman's all right," says the kid. "He's eating."

I look. Herman is eating—but definitely.

The dragon is swallowing down the milk pails I keep in the corner, also a shovel, a harness, and two pitchforks. While I watch, Herman also swallows an orange crate and the rest of the empty beer bottles.

"He's got a stomach like a furnace," squeals Edgar. "Look at the fire coming out of his mouth now."

I look. It is a three-alarm all right. Smoke and sparks fly out every time he breathes.

But Edgar laughs and pets him, and the

dragon stops eating long enough to rub up against his legs, nearly knocking the little shaver over. Then he starts to chew the planks in the barn floor.

I grab up the beer bottles in a hurry.

"Quick!" I yell. "Give him these to chew on. He's liable to eat me out of house and home!"

III

THIS turns out to be almost a fact in the next couple of days. Because the dragon keeps right on eating, morning, noon and night. It has a 24-hour-a-day stomach, strictly non-union shop. It eats everything—nails and blankets and boards and tin cans and barbed wire.

And the more it eats the more it grows. By the fourth day it is fifteen feet long and eight feet high. This is not a rib on my part, but the honest truth, because I measure it right there in the barn, and I have the yardstick to prove it. That is, I would have the yardstick, only Herman swallows it when I wave it near his head. Then he begins nibbling on the step-ladder, so I get down in a hurry.

Naturally, I have plenty of trouble. To begin with, I have to watch Herman's diet so that he will not actually chew down the barn itself. More and over, now that he is as big as an elephant, I am plenty worried he will actually outgrow the barn.

I do not have any figures handy on the hips and bust measurements of a full-grown dragon, but if he grows this much in four or five days, what will he look like in a year?

Pretty terrible, I decide.

But I am still waiting to hear from Larry and Archie on their circus proposition, so there is nothing to do but hold down the fort—even if I cannot hold down Herman's appetite.

Edgar and I pour beer into him every day and a lot more at night, so he will go to sleep. It makes him very affectionate, the beer does—which is lucky for us.

In fact it is very quaint the way Herman gives us the old glad eye when we feed him, and rubs up against us. This rubbing-up business has a few flaws in it, though—because now he is always knocking us down by mistake, and we keep our distance from his nose so the flames don't give us the old hotfoot.

But Herman likes us, and he lets Edgar pet him and lead him around. In fact, on the fourth day Edgar is out in the barn with him and actually climbs up on his back for a ride.

So the first thing I know, Edgar is riding the dragon around in the backyard.

I run out in a lather.

"Quit playing jockey!" I holler. "Don't you know they can see in from the road?"

"I have to take him out of the barn," Edgar tells me. "He just burns a hole in the roof."

I look, and it is the truth. Herman's breath shoots up in one spot of the barn, and gradually burns quite a hole.

"Take him back in," I order. "I will get some sheet iron and patch it up."

So Edgar rides the dragon into the barn, and not a bit too soon. Because Thin Tommy's truck chugs down the road just then to deliver the daily two dozen cases of brew.

IT IS very embarrassing, this business of Thin Tommy's visits. So far I manage to keep both the dragon and the kid out of his range of vision, but it cannot go on forever. More and over, Thin Tommy is still suspicious, in spades. He does not understand what I do with all the beer, or what becomes of the empty bottles. So I am hard put to keep his bashed-in schnozzle out of my business.

Today he rattles up and unloads without saying anything, which pleases me. I do

not wag my chin in his direction, either, but let him haul the beer cases down.

Then, right in the middle, he stops and drops a case. He is staring very hard at something on the ground.

I look.

What I see is most peculiar.

It is a big hole, about fifteen inches across, sunk in the dirt. It has a sort of web pattern to it.

All at once I realize what it is.

It is one of the footprints left by Herman the dragon when he is out in the yard.

"What gives?" asks Thin Tommy, with a fishy eye.

"That hole?" I spar.

"Yeah," says Thin Tommy. "Now—do not tell me you are raising giant frogs in your spare time like the ads say."

It is too bad he mentions this, because he kills my alibi.

"I am just doing a little digging," I tell him.

"Funny-looking hole," he remarks.

"I got a funny shovel," I come back.

"You must have," he grunts. Then he looks up and his eye gets fishier. "Unholy smokes!" he gargles. "What's that?"

Flames are coming out of the top of the barn.

"I am roasting marshmallows," I give out.

Thin Tommy waddles in the direction of the door. "I would like to see that," he says.

I try to bar his way, but who can argue with a human tank like Thin Tommy?

Just as he gets to the door, Edgar walks out.

Thin Tommy stops.

"Well I'll be blasted blue!" he predicts. "Who is the brat?"

"That is my nephew, Edgar. Edgar, this is Thin Tommy."

"The orgre," Edgar says.

"What?" Tommy bellows.

I jump in quick. "Edgar is a boy scout, and we are just roasting marshmallows in the barn."

Thin Tommy does not listen to this explanation. He does not glance at the flames any more, or at the footprint in the ground. He just stares at Edgar and grunts.

"Your nephew, huh? Never knew you had one." He grunts again. "Name's Edgar, huh? Well, well. Pleased ta meetcha." Another grunt. "Well, I got to be going. So long."

He backs to the truck, climbs in, and roars off.

I scratch my noggin.

"That is funny how he shuts up all of a sudden," I say. "Maybe he recognizes you, Edgar."

"How can he when this is the first time I see him?" answers the kid.

So I let it go at that.

I LET a lot of things go these days. To begin with, I do not put the old third-degree on Edgar to find out where he comes from, after that first day. I intend to just as soon as I get rid of the dragon. Meanwhile I let things ride. In fact, I get very mushy over the moppet, letting him sleep in my bedroom and even reading him to sleep out of MURDEROUS DETECTIVE STORIES. For his part, Edgar still insists I am a magician and that I am keeping this dragon under enchantment.

So I figure if I do not ask him too many questions he will not ask me any, and we are even.

Still, the way Thin Tommy looks at him in the yard gets me suspicious.

"You are sure you do not know this lug?" I ask again.

"Absolutely," he tells me. "Where is the beer? I think Herman wants his bottle again."

So we feed Herman by climbing on the stepladder and I scurry around to find some old sheet iron to patch the roof with.

While I do it, Edgar keeps up the babble.

"When are you going to fight the ogre?" he asks.

"Who, Thin Tommy?"

"Yes. You hate him, don't you?"

"Only his intestines," I remark, delicately. "But I do not wish to tangle with that one-man crime wave."

"You must be fooling," says the kid. "I know—you're just raising this fire-breathing dragon up and then you'll destroy him, won't you."

"If I raise this dragon much higher he will destroy me," I mutter. "The beer bills are terrific, he is eating down my barn, and I am worried sick."

"This is a funny adventure," the moppet remarks. "A dragon, and wizards, but no princess."

"Princess?"

"Of course. There should be a beautiful princess. You know."

"I am sorry, Edgar, but I do not possess the phone number of any beautiful princess. Besides, if I do, you are still too young to get mixed up with any ribs. The princess is out."

Edgar looks sad for a minute. "All right—but it's a heck of an adventure without any princess."

I get the new roofing nailed down and come back to earth. Herman the dragon swishes his tail, knocking down the ladder.

"Quiet, you overgrown iguana," I nag. "Or I will knock your warts off."

This is just a bluff, because now Herman's warts are big as cantaloupes and you cannot knock them off with anything but a blowtorch.

If I do not know Herman since he is a pup, so to speak, I would do a shiver shimmy every time I look at him, because he is now some sight. He is longer and greener and has more muscles than Charlie Atlas.

But right now he looks pretty tame. I do not figure why, but Edgar notices.

"Look—he's stopping the fire!"

IT IS a fact. Herman does not breathe fire right now. Perhaps it is the beer, but whatever the case, he is a little groggy.

"He's lying down," says Edgar.

Herman does lie down, with a thump like a ton of coal sliding into a manhole.

"Maybe he's sick." Edgar pets his forehead. "Look how pale he is."

Herman is slightly white around the gills—merely because he cannot get any greener.

"I'll go out and get him some more beer," Edgar says.

I go with him.

When we get to the yard I hear the phone ringing in the house, so I make a dash up the steps. I get on the wire and hear a familiar voice. Two voices, in fact —Larry and Archy.

"Hey, we've got wonderful news!" says Larry. "I'm calling from a drug store in Hoosack. Guess who's with me?"

"The Roxy chorus," I snap.

"No—none other than J. Carver Carson."

"So what?"

"So he's half-owner of the greatest show on earth, that's what! After four days we finally get him to an interview, and he's so anxious to talk business he's come down with us. I just want to warn you so you'll be sure and have the dragon ready when we arrive."

"He'll be ready," I say.

"Get your pen out—you're going to sign a million-dollar contract! It isn't easy to handle this J. Carver Carson—guess he's having some personal troubles of his own right now—but he's sold now. Just produce the dragon when we arrive tonight!"

Larry hangs up, leaving me very happy.

I am so happy I do not hear certain noises I should hear, because there is a

ringing in my ears—the ringing of a million bucks.

But when I get out in the yard again, I am not happy any more.

Because in the dirt are fresh tire-marks which I recognize as the marks of Thin Tommy's truck.

I make a dash into the barn.

"Edgar!" I yell.

There is no answer.

I go out in the yard again and shout. There is no answer here, either. Except the answer in the marks of Thin Tommy's truck.

It is easy to see what is up, all right, and I make a fancy dash back to the house to phone the State Troopers. Only one thing stops me—if I phone them they will come out and find the dragon. Which will be very bad for all concerned, because J. Carver Carson will not like publicity for his new attraction. And besides, the Troopers will ask me many questions about Edgar which I cannot answer on any Quiz program.

There is only one question about him I can answer. Thin Tommy knows who he is and puts the snatch on him, and I know where Thin Tommy must take him.

So I dash back from the house to the barn.

Herman is still dopey, but he perks up when I kick him in the side of the head.

"Come on," I yell. "Edgar's kidnaped!"

IV

MAYBE it comes from the kid's ideas about me being a magician and raising a dragon to tangle with Thin Tommy the ogre.

Maybe it comes from being plain crazy.

Maybe it comes from the mushy feeling I have for Edgar—which makes me want to exterminate Thin Tommy for snatching him.

Whatever it is, it's there.

And I am there, racing down the highway on Herman's back, riding a dragon to rescue a moppet.

What else can I do? It is the only way out, and if I can sick Herman onto Thin Tommy I should have the kid and be back in time to meet J. Carver Carson when the boys arrive with him.

That is the way I figure it, though it is pretty hard to figure anything when you are bumping along on a dragon's back. Particularly since there is no steering wheel on a dragon.

Herman is not sick any more. He is full of the old pep, and the flames come out of his mouth like he is chewing dynamite.

He seems to understand what we are doing, because he picks up speed as he goes along, and when I yell, "Come on, step on it!" in his ear, he nearly jolts me off.

I do not know if you ever ride a dragon in your life, but if you do, you know it is very hard without a saddle. So I am more than a little joyful when I see the lights of Thin Tommy's tavern up ahead in the twilight.

We round the bend and I grab Herman's ears.

"Whoa!" I yap. He skids into the yard and sits down like a pile-driver.

"Wait here until I call," I say, hoping he understands me.

Then I march up the steps of the tavern and go inside.

The place is empty. But after I go up to the bar, Bertram and Roscoe come out. These are the two gorillas Thin Tommy has for his waiters. Personally I would not hire them if I was running a slave market, but they are just the personalities Thin Tommy wants around.

They give me a frigid stare, but I ignore it, being more interested in the way my teeth are chattering.

"Where is Thin Tommy?" I inquire.

"He is out," says Bertram. "You want a short one?"

"Yes," I answer. "I want a short kid. Where is he?"

"We got no kid," says Roscoe. "So why not beat it?"

"Now be reasonable," I suggest. This is a very timely suggestion, because both Bertram and Roscoe suddenly pull on a pair of very black jacks and come around the bar.

I can see they do not wish to play, and so I back to the door.

Just then I hear a sound from upstairs. It is the kid's voice, and over it I hear the kind of grunt which is manufactured only by Thin Tommy.

So I change my mind about going out the door. Instead I do a quick forward run. Bertram comes at me from one side and Roscoe from the other, but I time it right. They miss me when I duck and run into each other.

Which gives me time enough to gallop up the stairs.

I yank open the first door.

Thin Tommy is sitting on the bed, and so is Edgar. When they see me, Thin Tommy gets up and Edgar tries to, but he cannot, because his arm is handcuffed to the bedpost.

"I knew you'd come!" says Edgar.

"So did I," says Thin Tommy. He waves a newspaper at me. "So this is why you act so mysterious these past days," he grunts. "Because you are holding the brat for ransom. I find it out this morning when I see his puss in the press."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look," he invites me. "J. Carver Carson's kid—son of the circus owner. Reward, huh? Well, you're out of luck. I just put through a call myself, and I find he is on his way up here. So it is lucky you blunder in. Because when he gets here I tell him you are the kidnaper and I rescue Edgar."

This sounds like a very reasonable scheme, even to me. What makes it more reasonable is that Thin Tommy suddenly slides the newspaper off his arm and I notice he is holding an equalizer. I notice also that it is pointing at me. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Instead it is Edgar who screams.

THIS turns out to be a very good thing indeed. Because all at once I hear a thundering noise from below and I know Herman the dragon recognizes the kid's voice and is coming in.

"Damn and blast!" yells Thin Tommy, using very bad language for kids to hear. "What the hell is that?" he further inquires, rushing to the door.

"It's the dragon!" squeaks Edgar.

It is the dragon all right. From the sounds I can tell he is smashing the bar, also Bertram and Roscoe. Thin Tommy runs down the stairs very fast.

"Hell's bells!" he growls. "It's a dinosaur!"

Evidently Herman does not like anyone to call him names, because he lets out a roar like an exploding boiler and there is a terrible crash. Then Thin Tommy begins to shoot.

I head out the door and make the stairs.

Thin Tommy is shooting at the dragon and the dragon is not paying the proper attention at all, merely coming right on for the stairway with his eyes gleaming very bright and a tongue of flame shooting out of his mouth. In fact he starts several fires on the way.

Thin Tommy reaches down on the stairway and picks up a keg which he hurls at Herman's head. It smashes on his nose and I see the keg is filled with whiskey.

The result is very unfortunate, because Herman's breath sets the alcohol on fire and a tongue of blue flame leaps up. Besides, Herman is not used to hard liquor, and he lets go with a burp that does Thin Tommy no more good than a bomb explosion.

In fact, this is just what happens.

With one loud blast, the room turns red. The rafters shake, the air is filled with smoke, and when it clears away I am staring down into a mass of flames.

Thin Tommy is gone.

I turn around and rush into the bedroom.

"We got to get out of here," I yell. "The joint is on fire."

Then I notice for the first time that Edgar is very unhappy about the whole thing. Because he is still handcuffed to the bed.

Right then and there I have to make up my mind about a lot of things. About Edgar, and about the dragon, and about a million bucks.

Which I do.

It is not easy. What comes next is not easy to do either, and it is a dirty trick on poor old Herman. But it just has to be. The explosion is terrific, but it puts the fire out.

And so, half an hour later, I finally get the handcuffs off and Edgar and I crawl down the stairs and out of the joint. It is still smoking a little, but the fire is out.

"That's that," I tell him.

And it is, because just then the sirens roar and I see Larry and Archie and J. Carver Carson arriving with the cops.

V

WHEN it is all over, we go back to the farm.

"I still don't understand it," J. Carver tells me. "Edgar here says you get rescued by a dragon. And there is no dragon."

"Lucky the cops don't see any," I say.

"But what happens to it?"

"It's simple," I answer. "There is only one way to get Edgar out of there with the place burning down. That is to put the fire out somehow. Which I do.

"I grab a fire extinguisher and toss it down Herman's throat. Naturally, poor Herman explodes. It wrecks the joint, but it stops the fire right away. The only trouble is, it also wrecks Herman. So now there is no longer any dragon left."

"That is a very heroic thing to do," says J. Carver Carson. "And I am grateful to you for it. Naturally, there is a reward."

I shake my head. All of a sudden I feel very sad when I think of poor old Herman. I walk into the barn and the others shuffle along.

"Just think of it," I mutter. "Only this afternoon I have a million-dollar dragon on my hands. Now I have blisters. I can almost see him here now, sitting in the hay and eating a keg of nails or a couple chicken-crate sandwiches. Poor Herman!"

Larry gives me a funny look.

"What do you call the dragon?" he asks.

"Why, Herman."

"I think you make a mistake," he tells me.

"So do I," I say. "The poor thing does not even feel good this afternoon. And then I take him out and extinguish him."

"I mean, you make a mistake when you call the dragon Herman," says Larry. "There is a reason the dragon does not feel good today, I bet you—also a reason why it should not be called Herman."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Take a look," says Larry, pointing at the hay. "Before the dragon left here it laid an egg!"

Sure enough, lying there in the haypile is a big round egg, about three feet long.

So that is the way it turns out, after all.

Larry and Archy and Edgar and J. Carver Carson are all lying down in the barn, trying to make the egg hatch.

If it does, I make a million bucks.

If it does not—well, I cook breakfast pretty soon and I will be eating the biggest omelet in the world.

Who knows?

McElwin's Glass

Perhaps it's better not to know what's ahead . . . but could you resist taking a peek into a telescope that shows the future?

By AUGUST DERLETH

ALDRIC McELWIN, who was part Irish and part Welsh, had been born with a caul. His mother had always made a great todo about this, and it was assumed that he would of course be something special in the world because of that fortuitous circumstance. A great man of some kind. The caul may have been subconsciously responsible for the choice of McElwin's way of life—he elected to follow in the path of the great Thurston, Houdini and others; he became a magician on a vaudeville circuit and made a moderate success of it.

For a man born with a caul, he certainly had to bear with a great deal; he was short,

fat, with reddish, thin hair, and somewhat distorted features. He was an impatient man, and no blessing of tact was his. But he managed to get along, comparatively adventureless, carving out a small niche for himself.

Until he came by the telescope.

One day in Chicago he passed a curious little hole-in-the-wall kind of shop: antiques and curios; and went in. He came out with the telescope, presumably the victim of an unclaimed pawn ticket.

But he had something, and he was not long in discovering it. The telescope was extraordinary, in that it had some kind of magic glass in it that enabled its possessor to look backward or forward in time. He discovered this by the simple expedient of looking through his glass; at the moment he had it turned upon a building in that area of the city where once, more than a century ago, Fort Dearborn had stood; and there he saw, instead of the building visible to his naked eye, a band of Indians besieging the fort. He went through all the emotions customarily associated with the occurrence of phenomena not within the scientific knowledge of the average man, but he was too practical to fail to see presently that his telescope had a great value to him in a commercial sense.

Away with legerdemain and the poppycock of appearing on a stage with fancy little tricks to mystify his audiences. He had something bigger up his sleeve. Forthwith he took a large slice of his savings and set himself up in the fortune-telling business. He had long envied palmists, crystal-gazers, numerologists and the like their skill in separating fools from their money; with a telescope like this, he could do a land-office business.

His first victim was the policeman on the beat.

He caught him in the focus of his glass one day and foresaw that he would be advanced in position and salary within four weeks because of an act of great bravery. He reported this gravely and without charge to the law, and two weeks later, Ryan was indeed promoted in reward for capturing a small-time thief who came bearing down on him waving a gun. "It was no great shakes," said Ryan, telling McElwin about it later. "But what beats me is how you could tell it that far in advance!"

The word went around. The grateful Ryan spread it far and wide. McElwin had known he would. And in a few days people began to come to have their fortunes told.

THEN it was that McElwin discovered that his glass had a most annoying idiosyncrasy—it did not work all the time, that is, with everyone. Indeed, it appeared to work most haphazardly, so that he had to resort to the cheapest kind of trickery to give any satisfaction as a fortune-teller. He could not understand it. Moreover, the glass failed to reveal everything; that is to say, he could visualize in it the future only by successive steps, not as an unfolding canvas. And there was, too, the occurrence of strange blanks; for instance, his glass one day revealed Ryan in hot pursuit of someone, by train it seemed, but the object of his search was not revealed, though once or twice it seemed, by all the laws of perspective, that he should have been within sight.

The glass responded most unsatisfactory also when Miss Yvonne Carsten came for a sitting. This young lady, who was destined to be the heir of a considerable amount of filthy lucre in cash and securities, was endowed with a great deal of physical charm; she was not a ravishing beauty, to be sure, but she had something more than the hint of the long green about her. Not unnaturally, McElwin was possessed of an overwhelming interest in her. Thus his disappointment was all the

greater when he foresaw in the glass that she would be married quite suddenly; he could see many of the details of the ceremony—nothing elaborate, apparently an elopement—but, like the man Ryan was pursuing, he could not make out the fellow she was marrying: indeed, it was as if she stood there in the glass before the preacher with only a space in the shape of a man beside her. Extraordinary! He bluffed his way out of her first sitting.

For, of course, she came back for more. McElwin was not an unattractive man, and he made no secret of the fact that Miss Carsten was definitely attractive to him. And by this time, too, he could put on quite an appearance of wealth himself. He actually began within a short while to think that the fellow in the glass—the invisible fellow Yvonne was marrying—would have to hurry on to the scene if he meant to be on time.

Ah, vanity, vanity! Soon McElwin knew no check on his self-esteem. He was bound to have a setback, however, though unfortunately for him, he did not recognize it when it came. It was in the person of a nondescript little man who appeared one day on the doorstep garbed in clothes which men of modest means might have worn circa 1750.

He was an extraordinary person, given to statements of the most astonishing nature. He introduced himself as a distant relative of McElwin's, with the same name. So distant, in fact, that he was several generations removed. "I had a son who fought at Fort Dearborn." He had come about McElwin's glass. "The fact is, the telescope was stolen from my house in the country south of Chicago, and I want to get it back. I've traced it here, and I'm perfectly willing to pay an adequate fee for its return."

"It's my livelihood," said McElwin sententiously. "I couldn't think of selling it."

"I fail to see how it could be your means of making a living," said the ancient, his little black eyes puzzled.

"I tell fortunes," answered McElwin.

The old man was even more puzzled; he wrinkled up his forehead and peered at McElwin with the utmost curiosity. "Can it be," he mused, "that you are not aware of the peculiar properties of the glass?"

McElwin grinned. "How do you think I could make my living with it if I weren't."

But the ancient still could not understand.

With patience and some manifest scorn, McElwin told him.

"But there's one thing more that dealer should have told you," said the old man then. "And that is this—the telescope is effective only when the scene or person whose past or future it portrays is associated with its possessor."

"Nonsense!" said McElwin. "What about that Indian scene?"

"My son was in that battle."

"Coincidence."

"Tell me what you have seen?"

McElwin obliged with a great air of personal pride, as if he had accomplished these miracles in divination by his own efforts alone. While he spoke, telling of Ryan and Yvonne and one or two others among his successes, the old man's frown grew darker and darker, and presently his manner grew curiously agitated, he manifested some nervousness, but by the time McElwin had finished, he could only shake his head and purse his lips.

"I must say, I don't approve," he said flatly. "Furthermore, I don't like the nature of those things you've been seeing. I can understand, however, why you wouldn't want to part with the glass. In view of the circumstances, and my desire to get it back, I wonder if you would mind much leaving it to me in your will?"

Since it was manifest to any observer

that the operation of the laws of nature would remove the ancient McElwin from the sphere of existence long before the younger was called—barring accident—McElwin made a ready assent, patiently took down all the data offered by his elderly relative—a relationship which the old man seemed to prove, however circuitously—and bade him good afternoon.

TWO days later he received a letter from the ancient containing complete directions for the care of the telescope, together with information about shipping it to him after McElwin's death. It was fully as extraordinary a document as the ancient had been an individual. There was a curious little footnote appended to the letter: "If you thought about what you have seen at all, surely it must have occurred to you that the course you are following is, to put it very bluntly, a very unhealthy one. I suggest more urgently that you leave matters in your life stand just where they are, send the glass back to me, and forget your present pursuits — particularly Miss Carsten and Inspector Ryan."

What pretensions the old duffer had! thought McElwin, destroying the letter.

He did not follow the old man's most obvious hint: to think about the revelations of the telescope. Beginning with the Fort Dearborn scene, there had been a singularly odd relationship among the scenes and persons about whom the telescope had been revelatory; it was unfortunate that McElwin was viewing them, so to speak, rear and foremost, and could not therefore be in the proper perspective. Even if he had opportunity to consider what he had seen, he was by this time far too much gone on Yvonne Carsten to give any unnecessary thought to the telescope.

For, extraordinary and incredible as it might seem, Miss Carsten had very definitely shown a distinct liking for McElwin, to such an extent that they were being seen together for luncheon, at the theatre, at flower shows and dog shows and the races. A great life! McElwin found less and less need to turn to his magic glass, he forgot all about his ancient relative, the telescope's previous possessor, and proceeded to enjoy himself. Yvonne was a woman of great charm and various devious ways. She was not so devious, however, that it was not manifest that she intended to have McElwin for her own: one of those masterful women—there were the signs in plenty, but unfortunately McElwin had not had enough experience to recognize them. Moreover, he was at that stage where a score of red flags and a dozen skull-and-crossbones labels would not have deterred him at the least.

In a position like that, there was only one possible outcome. One evening, when Yvonne was being especially coy and feminine, she archly proposed that they ought to elope, they were made for each other, and so forth. Since this was a consummation in McElwin's mind devoutly to be wished, it was no sooner said than done; off they went to a little country preacher over in Iowa, and there they were made man and wife.

Only one thing served to mar the joy of the occasion, and that was the persistent —if ridiculous—conviction that it had all happened somewhere before. Since McElwin was not a believer in reincarnation, he managed to shrug this feeling away with no great effort whenever he concentrated on the heavenly bliss of being forever now at Yvonne's side and within reach of her wealth.

They had hardly got settled before Inspector Ryan called on them to offer his congratulations. Incidentally, he explained, he came for another reading by means of McElwin's glass.

McElwin got it out, dusted it off, and performed. The telescope revealed that Inspector Ryan would soon be assigned to

the Homicide Squad, and that very shortly after his assignment, he would be put in charge of a very startling murder.

"Do I catch the murderer?" Ryan demanded.

"Well, I don't know," replied McElwin. "I don't see that. I see a chase—a train—a chase through a train. The murderer—and I can't make him out at all: just a shape, that's all—jumps off the train, and that's an end of him. Looks like water below."

"Well, I can recover the body," Ryan consoled himself.

"Good luck!" grinned McElwin.

IF RYAN had come a week later, he would have stepped into an entirely different household. It was the old story all over again. Now that she had McElwin, Yvonne began to look upon him as another property her riches had brought her, and she began slowly to treat him like property. McElwin had his pride, and he rebelled. They had several scenes.

First it was the telescope. It ought to be put away, she maintained. It was out of keeping with the decorations and the furniture, and anyway, he did not have to use it any more. Reluctantly, McElwin put away his glass. Some obscure impulse impelled him to pack it carefully, in accordance with the remembered instructions from his strangely ancient visitor, and put the label on it: the address which would take it to a house in the country south of Chicago.

Then it was the way McElwin dressed, the way he ate, the way he acted, the way he did almost everything. Yvonne revealed herself an ardent reformer at heart, and something of a termagent. The increasing tempo of these experiences was not pleasant for McElwin, and not at all good for his disposition.

A year passed—a year of constant torture for McElwin. It was apparent that he could do very little to please his wife, and it was also apparent that he was not going to get his hands on any of her long green. Not a cent of it. He was put on an allowance scarcely sufficient for his needs, and there he was, a caged lion—at heart, at least—being hand-fed and led around by a silver chain, so to speak. It was galling, it was humiliating, it was infuriating.

But whenever he thought of his wife's wealth, McElwin swallowed his pride. A painful process, but it could be done.

Unfortunately, however, it could not be done forever.

One day McElwin got out the telescope and focused it on his wife just walking out to her car. What he saw gave him cold chills. It was nothing less than Yvonne dead, lying somewhere with a hole in her head. He put away the glass with horror. However, after he had got over his chills, he was curiously surprised to find that the prospect of losing Yvonne was not too displeasing. He could have spent the rest of his life with the Yvonne he had known before their marriage—but now—heaven forbid!

So he settled himself to wait until someone reported that Yvonne had been killed in an accident, and was cruelly jolted when she walked in in the flesh and immediately began to berate him for not having attended to the forsythia bushes in the absence of the gardener.

FOR a week he could not think of his magic telescope without an acute feeling of displeasure. And he did not go near it, except to pack it all over again, and consign it mentally to that other, older McElwin.

By an odd coincidence, he had no sooner committed the glass in his mind to his curious relative, than a note came from the old man in the next mail. A note to thank him for the glass, which he would

expect shortly. "I am grieved that you did not heed my well-meant advice, but is that not always life? Indeed, it is; the older generations must always sit back and see how the benefit of their experience is carelessly discarded, and realize that when at last that benefit becomes apparent, there will be only this for youth to say: Too late! Indeed, and so it is with you, Aldric—already too late."

Aldric almost regretted having been so hasty as to pack the glass for the old man, but he was only too occupied with Yvonne's latest displeasure to do anything about it.

McElwin's patience was wearing very thin, indeed. He had borne just about all it was meant for man's patience to bear, and he had begun to snap back at Yvonne. This was a novelty for Yvonne, and she did not like it, not at all; in fact, she grew more demanding and domineering than ever and loaded onto his back enough straws to have broken the backs of several camels. Even the thought of all her wealth was no longer holding McElwin down.

The break came less than a year and a half after their wedding. It would have been the sensible thing of McElwin to have walked out on Yvonne before this; but he was not built to think that way. The obvious solution would never have occurred to him. It had been the same way about the magic glass, about his relative's straightforward warnings. Nothing doing. Leave it all to impulse.

It was unfortunate for Yvonne that she had chosen that morning to nag McElwin. She did not exist long enough to know how unfortunate it was. The fact was, McElwin had just finished cleaning a little target pistol when Yvonne walked in and began to berate him in that dictatorial way of hers for an incident so trivial that McElwin had long before forgotten it. He strove desperately to remember what it was about, and in the process of casting his mind back, he resurrected from memory all the disagreeable experiences to which Yvonne had subjected him. Memory overwhelmed him; something inside him snapped; he raised his pistol and shot her.

A neat round hole in her head, and that was the end of all her nagging. What good did her money do her now? Or her nagging either. For those brief moments after she fell to the floor, he was glad.

Then, of course, panic caught up with him.

Within an hour, he was on his way out of the city. He took a taxi to the Northwestern Station on his way to hide out in the north woods of Wisconsin, remembering in some mental confusion that Dillinger had once hidden out successfully there, and convinced he could do likewise. Unfortunately, the taxi was involved in an accident, and there was a delay that seemed interminable; he had to give evidence to the cop on the beat, and he all the time on tenterhooks.

But his taxi was allowed to go on at last, and he caught his train.

Out of the city at an agonizingly slow pace, he thought, but out they went, and no one could know him in that crowd. They crossed into Wisconsin in darkness —it had already been dusk when the train left Chicago—and at Madison he bought a paper. There was Yvonne's picture, not yet, thank the Lord, one of his, and notice that he was being sought for "questioning" by the police.

But it was the last line of the brief, stop-press account that caught his eye. *Inspector Ryan of the Homicide Squad is in charge. . .!*

DIMLY, incredibly, the meaning of what that ancient relative, the one-time owner of his glass, had told him began to seep into his paralyzed brain. "The telescope is effective only when the scene or person whose past or future it portrays

is associated with its possessor." Yvonne—he had married her. Ryan—on his trail.

In the darkness of the moving train he found in his mind's eye that strange, faceless shape he had seen in his magic glass, that shape at Yvonne's side, eluding Ryan's pursuit—but now it had a face, it had a recognizable body—the face and body of Aldric McElwin!

His thoughts jumped to that last scene with Ryan—on a train, in flight from the pursuing Ryan. But it could not be true! Ryan could not be on the train. McElwin was not without courage. He got up and went the length of the train and back to assure himself that Ryan was not on it. The inspector was nowhere present, and there was no sign of officialdom anywhere.

He went back to his coach and tried unreasonably to sleep. Of course, he could not. He could not get out of his mind's eye that picture he had last seen in the glass—that faceless shape with Ryan in hot pursuit through a train, the plunge to rushing waters below.

Hour after hour he crouched in his seat, apprehensive and alarmed for his life, not alone because of Ryan's pursuit, but because of the new upsurging of faith he now had in his glass, the telescope which had never really been his to own.

Dawn came. The train paused at a way-station in northern Wisconsin, presumably to take on water. McElwin peered from the window, but could see nothing. Unfortunately for him, he was on the wrong side. On the far side of the locomotive an aeroplane had discharged Detective-Inspector Ryan, fresh from a talk with the taxi-driver who had taken McElwin to the station and had come in in response to the call.

Ten minutes out of the way-station, McElwin saw him coming down the aisle of the farther coach. He got up and made his way leisurely to the platform of his own coach. There he looked up ahead. Pine forests loomed on all sides, and at the moment the train was approaching the top of a ridge where there was an especially thick growth of trees. He could yet thwart the glass and his prophecy.

At that moment he looked back into his coach, and Ryan caught sight of him. He burst on into the next coach; by the time he had run its length, the train would be passing through the dense woods at the top of the ridge; he could leap out and take his chance, however close upon him Ryan might be.

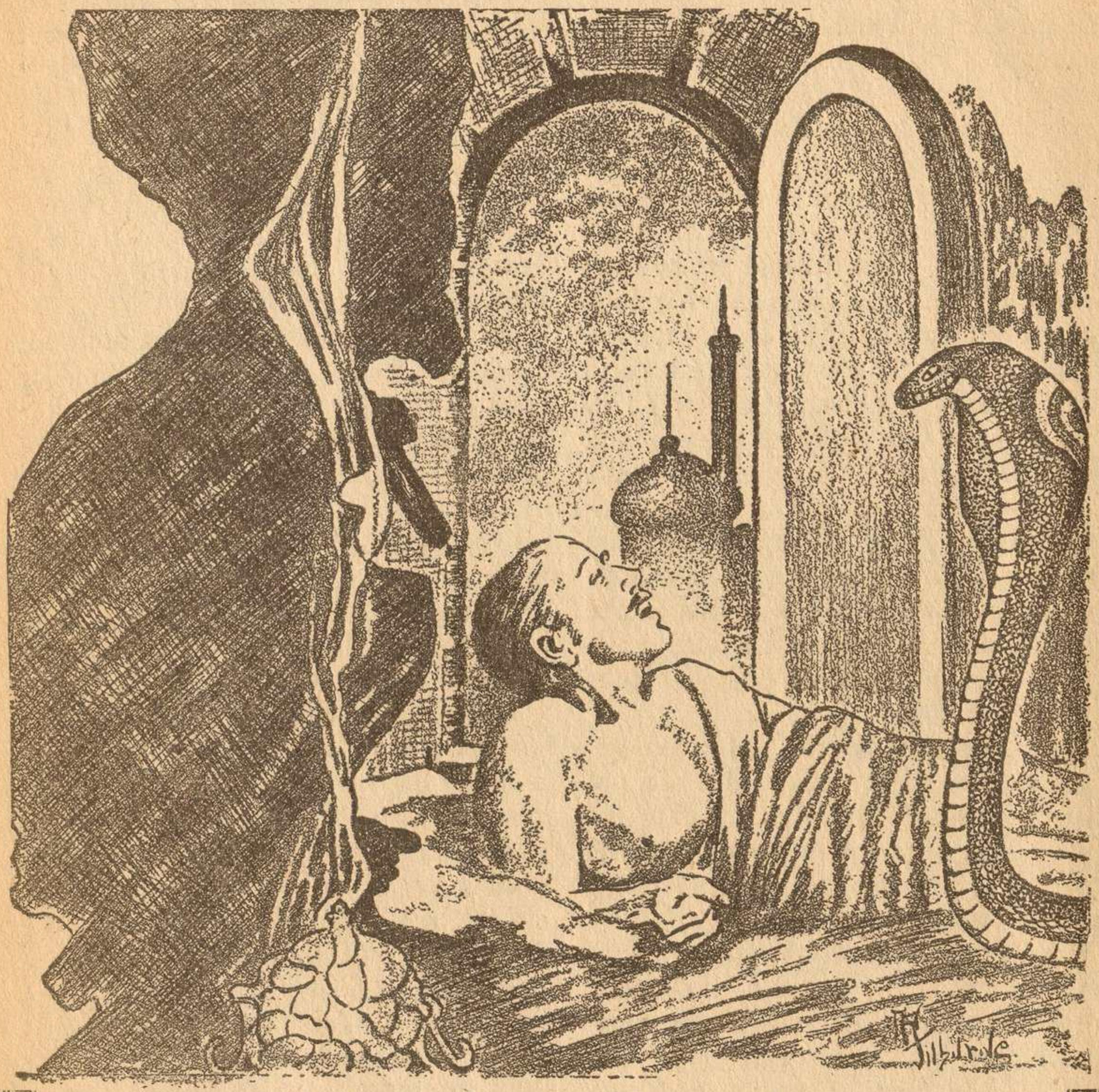
Through the coach, out to the further platform, a vaulting into the air—free of the train and Ryan.

Unfortunately for McElwin's vanity in his conviction that he could thwart the prophecy of his glass, the train at that moment passed over a deep gorge of scarcely fifty feet in width, with a deep, rushing stream below. Instead of landing in the woods, as he had hoped, McElwin went hurtling down.

He thought in his last despairing moments, that the face of the ancient owner of the telescope was looking up at him from the rocky, foaming water rising so swiftly to meet him, his lips opening and closing to say over and over, "Too late, my boy—too late!"

Repayment

By SEABURY QUINN



He thought the dance of the snakes might relieve him of immense boredom . . . and it did.

I HAD the story from my friend Gans Field whose acquaintanceship among the great, near-great and merely notorious of New York and its environs reads like a combination stone proof of the current issue of Who's Who and the five-star edition of the Daily Tattler. We were finishing dinner at the Café des Citoyens in East Fifty-seventh Street where the fromage de Brie is always at the precise, perfect point of ripeness, the steamed snails, lightly sautéed in olive oil, as

sweetly tender as the first kiss of young love and the slippery, thirst-annihilating Meursault grateful as a well-spring in the desert.

It was an evening in September, too warm for autumn and too cool for summer, the fitting ending to one of those radiant, vital, sun-swept days that New York knows in early fall, when twilight settles softly, like a lavender curtain dropped from a sky of pure dark amethyst, and blue haze trails across the distant Jersey Palisades like the blue cloak of some proud queen. Dinner had been served in the garden where orange, red and green Chinese lanterns were half hidden among the plane trees' leaves and thick soft grass made a carpet soft as any from the looms of Mosul underfoot. The subdued candlelight fell on the cloth and silver and glassware; across the pointed yellow flames I saw the pretty blond hair and gray eyes of Frances Field and her husband's lean, tanned face, his sleekly brushed black hair and the pencil-line of small black mustache. Muted like an echo from the street outside there came the ululating warning of a motor-siren, insistent but soft and musical as an ocarina played in middle register. Frances shivered slightly.

"Cold, dear?" Gans asked. "Perhaps we'd best be going in—"

"No," she denied, and smiled at him the way most men dream some woman will some day smile at them, "it was that motor-siren. It made me think of Dirk Vanderstein, and—"

"Oh, that!" her husband chuckled. "Don't let it get you down, darling. He only got what he asked for. Shoemakers ought to stick to their lasts, and young smart Alecs from Long Island have no business mixing in the rites and ceremonies of the Benni Senoussi."

"The who?" I asked.

Field smiled. He has a most engaging smile that has a tendency to neutralize the effects of the grim things he sometimes says. "The Benni Senoussi, the dark brotherhood of Berber sorcerers—hereditary magicians, snake charmers and necromancers—that has existed in North Africa since before the fall of Carthage, and flourishes today despite the interdiction of the Moslem *mollahs* and the French and Spanish administrations. The Berbers are not Arab stock, you know. They're a distinct racial group, something like the Basques, and probably pre-Aryan. Outwardly they're Moselmin, but that's a veneer laid on a core of folk-lore that has fire—and serpent-worship for its base. Not pleasant customers to tangle with."

"I should think not. And this friend of yours—Van whatever-his-name-was—how'd he get mixed up with 'em?"

"He wasn't any friend of mine," Field corrected. "I hardly knew the bloke to speak to. But I know all about him—"

"And what's a motor-horn that sounds like an ocarina got to do with it?" I interrupted impolitely. Field and I don't stand on much ceremony with each other.

"Oh, that?" He drew one of the table candles to him and thrust the tip of his cigar into its cone of yellow flame. "H'm-m," as a turban of white smoke came twisting from the cigar and swirled and spiraled round his head like ectoplasm in a spirit-photograph. "That'll take a lot o' telling. Could you stand hearing it again, Fran?"

"I think so," Frances answered hesitatingly, "if—"

"Yes, dear? If—"

"If you'll hold my hand, please. I'll feel safer that way—not imagine dreadful things are slithering across the grass at me."

"Right-o, *yah aini*—O soul of my soul's soul—" agreed her husband who speaks Arabic like a native—of Dixie Land, which he is. "Hang on for dear life. Here goes—"

DIRK VANIDERSTEIN, it seemed, had been left about everything his thrifty Dutch ancestors had accumulated since the founding of the Town of Breuckelen in 1646 except their good hard common sense. Born, as the saying goes, with a silver spoon in his mouth, he grew up into a spoiled brat believing there was nothing his money couldn't buy, and encountering no evidence to weaken that opinion between his fifth and thirtieth birthdays. His classmates at the swanky country day school they sent him to fawned on him for his favors, and at prep school he had top place in the stag line and first choice of the girls. He cut in when he wished, but no one ever cut in on him. His father's gift to the athletic fund got him a place on the first team. That was the year Adelphi defeated Shoreham fifty to nothing.

At college it was pretty much the same. If Dirk didn't make Phi Beta Kappa he did make Rho Tau Epsilon, which had a lot more social significance, and to whose chapter house his father gave a completely equipped indoor squash court. When several of the boys blind-dated chorus girls and Dirk found that the femme he'd drawn possessed less charm and beauty than the belle his roommate had he calmly exchanged partners, and his roommate, mindful of the loans he'd made and those he hoped to make in future, registered no complaint. Neither did the girl. She knew which side her bread was buttered on and had the not unusual feminine desire to spread some sugar on the butter.

And so, with his thirtieth birthday just across his shoulder, we find our little scion of Long Island aristocracy orphaned and not grieving much about it, with very much more money than he knew what to do with, and a lifetime of complete unemployment before him. He looked ten years younger than his age. His mouth had grown a little narrower, perhaps, but there were no lines in his forehead or about his eyes, no marks of victories or defeats. Immense boredom was pressing down on him like a cloud-loaded autumn sky. He was tired of gambling at the race tracks and casinos, wearied to the point of surfeit with the long succession of little gay ladies whose business in life it was to be amusing to rich young men, and so on what might have been called an impulse he went to Algiers for a week.

The week stretched to a fortnight, and the fortnight lengthened to a month, and still he lingered. How he came to take the villa he had no idea, but there he was with a three-month lease upon the place, a corps of native servants and a *chef de cuisine* who was at least three-quarters French, rejoiced exceedingly in the name of Manfroi and made *pâtisserie* which was in its way as much a work of art as are the panes of the Sainte-Chapelle.

At first he was enchanted with it all. He loved the flower-fresh airy silence of the mornings before the sun had come out hot and drowsy. He reveled in the long, sweet, quiet afternoons when over-ripe pomegranates lay like bleeding broken hearts upon the turf-ringed flagstones of the garden paths and sunlight poured a sort of pale liquescent brightness over everything and took on iridescence from the mass of green leafage and brilliant hibiscus flowering riotously everywhere.

But he was not a man to be content with merely contemplating beauty. Perhaps he had a good mind once, but a thing unused tends to deteriorate, and Dirk had never had to use his mind, so he was still a baby overtaken by manhood, and like an infant he knew life and the world only through their impacts on his five senses. So the boredom which he fled caught up with him that evening early in December as he sat on the flat roof of his house and watched the sun go down like a full ball of crimson in a sea of swimming rose while in the

turquoise east a single star showed sharp and bright as newly-minted silver.

"*Yah Sidi,*" came the soft, insinuating voice of Othman Nejim his dragoman, "one waits below who craves admission to thy presence. He brings that which he hopes will amuse you—"

"What is it?" Dirk was slightly annoyed at the interruption of his idleness. "A clown with a trained dancing ape, or one of those infernal sand diviners—"

"*Hou!*" laughed the dragoman who had a round and jolly face, a rounder, even jollier belly and a laugh rounder, fatter and jollier than either. "Is it with such trifles I would plague your lordship? I, Othman Nejim? Not so, protector of the fatherless. The one who waits upon thy gracious nod is a snake master, a very prince of snake charmers, a member of the clan and tribe of the accursed Benni Senoussi—on whom be Allah's interdiction!" He cast the imprecation perfunctorily, not as if he meant it, but because it was conventional. "Wilt deign to see him, O munificence?"

"Humphf. A snake charmer, eh? I've seen those johnnies in the *Kashbah*. Fakes, ain't they, workin' with fangless snakes?"

"Not this one, *Sidi.* He is of the cursed tribe whose forebears worshiped at the serpent's shrine before the Phophet—*salla 'lláhu 'aleyhi wasellum!*—converted them to Islam. 'Tis said the snakes know their blood brethren and will not bite them. However that may be, this fellow uses only deadly serpents from far Hind whose lightest kiss is sharp as the edged sword of the Dark Angel Azrael—"

"Oh, all right. Bring the blighter up. He may me amusin'."

THE "prince of snake charmers" Othman Nejim ushered to the roof was old. And wizened. Beneath the twisted green turban that marked him as a *haji* who had made pilgrimage to Mecca his face was drawn and almost colorless, with cheekbones standing out so startlingly they seemed almost to pierce the skin. A wisp of graying beard depended from his chin and on his upper lip a straggling line of gray mustache outlined the crooked smile that looked as if it might have been stitched on his mouth with red thread.

"*Es-salaam, yah Sidi*—the salute my lord," he touched breast and lips and forehead in a flickering, almost incredibly quick gesture. "It is thy gracious wish that I have my pets dance before the presence?"

"Can you do tricks with 'em?" Despite himself Dirk's interest was arrested by this strolling mountebank who wore his dignity and dirt with such an air of conscious pride.

"Tricks?" The old man set a pot-bellied basket on the roof tiles. "*Hayah!* Is it not a trick to force the serpents that bear death within their mouths to do my will, *yah Sidi?* What greater trick is there than to hold off the Sunderer of All Companionships and Ender of Delights by the power of the eye and flute, defender of the oppressed?"

"Huh! Want me to believe you haven't had their fangs yanked out?"

"*Rahmet 'Ullah*—the Lord's Compassion! Is they servant a pork-devouring, wine-imbibbing Hindu that he travels with emasculated serpents, *yah abu jood*—O father of munificence? Wait until my pets, my dears, my roses from the garden of the King have danced for thee, defender of the defenseless, then say if their fangs have been drawn or no!"

"Okay. Start goin', feller. I can't wait all night for you to get in the groove."

The scrawny little man flopped down cross-legged on the roof tiles with all the bonelessness of a rag doll. "Attend my voice, O gentle ones; come to my call, ye brides and bridesmaids, ye scented bowers of delight!" He jerked the cord with which the basket lid was fastened and rapped on the wattled lip of the hamper with a

knuckle. His voice dropped to a gentle, wheedling tone. "Come to thy lover, thy bridegroom, O ladies from the harem of the Great King—*hai!*"

Above the basket's open top something had risen like a nervous jack-in-the-box that jerked from sight almost as soon as it inhaled the outside air. Yet in the fleeting fraction of a second that it showed VanIderstein had seen the glimmer of a pair of little bead-bright eyes, the outlines of a cone-shaped head and the quick flicker of a forked tongue. A chill of sudden vague, indefinite fear went rippling up his spine, beginning at the small of his back and continuing until he felt the short hair on his neck commence to rise and bristle like the hackles of a startled dog. There was a chilled sensation in his forearms, and little pits of goose-flesh dimpled in his skin. The age-old fear of every mammal for the serpent had laid hold on him.

"Oh, hell! Never mind the show tonight, old man. Take your snakes an' run along. I'm not feelin' so good—like to rest—"

"Behold, *yah Sidi!*" The old snake charmer's eyes were on him with a cold and terrible insistence. "The serpents! They come to dance before thy presence, father of perfection!"

Not hurriedly, but with a dreadful, graceful, slow deliberation, flowing effortlessly as water across the smooth rim of the basket came three cobras with the shadows of the dying day reflected in their little, flat, unchanging eyes.

The serpent master thrust a scrawny hand into his dirt-encrusted burnoose and drew out a small instrument that looked like an onion with half a foot of stalk left on it. Along the upper side of the stem was a line of six holes like flute-stops. His eyes were fixed upon the snakes with a fierce, burning steadiness. Dirk shivered at their expression. This was not the look a trainer gives his beasts, the cold, compelling gaze of one who bids another do his will. It was the look of one who worships unclean gods as he beholds his deity, who feels himself inspired by the godhead of the being he adores till votary and deity are one in thought and being, one in aim and purpose—and thought and aim and purpose wholly evil.

The music of the pipe was sweet and flutelike, fluctuating from a slender spider-web of high-pitched melody to the soft and throaty murmur of doves busy with their courtship. It was all in minor key, the mourning, sad lament that stamps all Oriental music, yet underneath its sobbing, muted tones there was an intimation of shrill, spiteful laughter.

FOR a long moment the three snakes swayed to and fro as if they sought to find the source of the soft, liquid-flowing notes, then slowly, lazily, their mottled bodies weaving languid andantes across the umber tiles, they slid toward the old piper squatting with his back against the parapet.

Dirk saw the flicker of their lightning-forked, molasses-colored tongues as they slipped out of their coiled watchfulness and crept in slowly melting zigzags toward the musician, and beneath the liquid murmurs of the flute he heard the scratching of their belly-scales against the tiles, like the scuffing of dry leaves that fly before a burst of autumn wind.

They formed a semi-circle round the piper, swaying pointed heads from right to left, from left to right. Now one of them raised half a yard of lichen-colored body from the floor and as it reared itself the hood behind its head expanded slowly, and Dirk saw the spectacle-shaped mark of Brahma on it. A second snake was rising slowly, and the third. Unwillingly they seemed to rise, as though drawn from the floor by some force greater than their sluggish wills, but up and up they stretched until it seemed that almost their full

lengths were off the floor and that they balanced on a scant half-foot of coiled tail.

Faster came the music, rising in a shrill crescendo till its piercing sharpness whipped against the ears like a despairing scream, fluttering and wavering like a cry of eldritch terror, ornamented and embroidered with arpeggios until its melody was lost completely, then once more slipping back into its mournful, sobbing tune.

"Their fangs, *yah Sidi!*" The piper took his flute from his lips for an instant. "Behold their mouths and tell me that I lied to thee!"

As the shrill music paused the serpents' mouths fell open, almost as if they gasped for breath, and like grains of polished rice against the darkness of their gums Dirk saw the gleaming of their poison-fangs.

THE old man clapped his instrument against his mouth so quickly that it seemed the echo of his last note had not had a chance to fade, blew a final piercing-sweet lament. "*Hayah-hou!*" He cried in a cracked, quavering voice. "The dance is ended, daughters of delight!" Slowly, very slowly, like candles melting in intolerable heat, the serpents lost their rigor. They bent and swayed, lurched drunkenly, softened, wilted, became limp and flaccid, and lay upon the roof like half-deflated inner tubes, their little bead-bright eyes gone dull and lack-luster.

"My pets are tired," the old man said almost apologetically and stooped to gather up his faintly-quivering charges. "The dance sucks out their strength, protector of the bereaved."

Dirk grinned derisively at him. "Oh, yeah? Have to be the seventh son of a shiek's seventh son before they'll dance for you, huh? Gimme that pipe. I'll show you!"

He had been watching the snake charmer at his work, noting how he stopped the finger-holes as he blew in his pipe. Years before he'd learned to play the ocarina, and this instrument, he figured, couldn't be so very different. The old devil would come that death-defyin' bunk on him, would he? Pretend it took a special talent to make trained snakes dance to music?

He snatched the pipe from the old charmer's hand, put it to his lips, blew into it. A low, soft, liquid note came from the bulb at its base. He drew a quick, deep breath and blew into the instrument again, and his fingers fell upon the stops as if by instinct. Slowly, softly, came the purling notes of the old tune:

De silber moon's a-shinin'
In de hebbens up above,
Sleep, Kaintucky Babe . . .

"*Bism'—illah arrahman arrahim*—in the name of God the Kind and Compassionate—it is a fool's trick thou hast played, *yah Sidi!*" the old snake master chattered. "The snakes resent wrong charming—they will repay thee death for this insult!"

Already one of the spent serpents raised its head five inches from the roof, and as Dirk's music sounded softly through the gathering darkness the other two twitched irritably, like sleepers waked against their will.

"In Allah's glorious name I take refuge!" The old man seized the slowly bending bodies of his pets close to the heads and thrust them, writhing with faint rebelliousness, into his basket. "It is an evil thing that thou hast done this night my lord. The serpents have lost face by dancing to a stranger's piping. Their pride is very great, and surely they will make repayment for the jest that thou hast played on them—"

"Oh, get the hell out o' here, an' take your trick snakes with you!" Dirk reached into his trousers pocket, found a silver two franc piece and tossed it on the tiles. "Any

time you'd like to have me put 'em through their paces bring 'em round again."

Astonishingly the old man did not pounce upon the bouncing, clinking coin. "I cannot take it, *yah Sidi.* It would be blood money. *Allah ibaraq f'amur*—God have thee in His keeping." Swinging his reed-woven basket like a fisherman who lugs a heavy catch he shuffled to the stairwell, his heelless slippers slapping sorrowfully on the roof tiles.

DIRK woke to a quick sense of apprehension. The night had been unusually sultry and he had bidden Othman Nejim bring a mattress and silk sheet up from the house and spread them on the roof. Sleep had been a long time coming, but when it finally came it was heavy as a drugged coma. Now it seemed an eerie dream had wakened him, a dream that had to do with something heavy lying on his feet.

He moved his left foot cautiously, experimentally. It felt oddly numb and stiff, as if the circulation had been stopped by some weight imposed on his ankle, and as he shifted underneath the sheet he heard a lightly sibiliating hiss, like steam escaping from a simmering kettle. In an instant to the pre-dawn chill of dying night there came the added iciness of mortal terror.

He moved his foot another fraction of an inch and the weight upon his ankle seemed tc increase as it hardened like the sudden knotting of a tensed muscle. The whispered warning hiss was sharper, more insistent.

The moonlight blocked out half tones. Objects had the stark clarity of things drawn on a blackboard, and he could see the rope-like body coiled upon his legs, rocking gently to and fro as if it swayed in a light breeze. Its hood was up, its forked tongue flickered like a flash of sable light, its little, flat, hard eyes gleamed dully in the black head like a pair of tarnished cut-steel buttons.

Horror touched the very marrow of his soul. His stomach felt stiff and empty; stark panic clawed at him, terror seemed to drug his will. His blood seethed, churning in his ears, and every hurrying, frantic pulse-beat struck his brain like a trip-hammer blow. The strokes seemed to arrange themselves in rhythmic sequence, to form words chattered in a gleeful high-pitched voice:

The snakes resent wrong charming, yah Sidi,
They will repay thee death for thy insult to them!

Could it be the cobra had come back to take revenge for his silly prank—that as the old man warned no one not of the guild of snake charmers might make the serpents dance to his pipping and live to boast of it?

It had seemed fantastic—even childish—when the old snake master mouthed his admonition, but now . . .

He took the corners of the heavy silk sheet in his hands and raised them gently. Slowly—slowly. If he could make a shield of the tough fabric—let the snake drive into it . . .

With a mad, convulsive twist he drew his feet up, raised the silken rug for a screen and rolled sidewise as a streak of black lightning whipped at his throat.

The scream that stabbed the morning silence was stark terror made articulate. It rose and rose until it seemed no human throat could stand the strain of it. Then with a bubbling, choking sob it stopped abruptly.

There was no question of the cause of death. The little punctures in the neck just where the jugular comes near the surface were diagnostic of snake bite, and the report of Docteur Charles Auguste Renouard, the police surgeon who performed the

autopsy, left no room for quibbling. The toxin had spread with lightning-like rapidity, for it struck directly into the external jugular. It was undoubtedly that of the Indian cobra, *Naja tripudians,* as the advanced state of deterioration of the central nervous system and the hemolytic condition of the blood attested.

Nonmedical phases of the case are recorded in the voluminous *précis* of Etienne Hercule Jean-Baptiste Duval *brigadier de police,* who had charge of the investigation. With a corps of native gendarmes he had made a thoroughgoing search of house and garden. No place where any snake, even of the greatest smallness, could find lodgment had been overlooked.

There was no trace of any sort or kind of serpent in the house or grounds, nor even any hole where one the size of an earthworm could find a lair which they had not investigated with the most painstaking care. *Non, emphatiquement.* He, Etienne Hercule Jean-Baptiste Duval, *brigadier de police,* would personally certify to that. *Vraiment.*

How came the serpent on the housetop, and whither had it vanished when it had killed *Monsieur l'Américain* to death, then?

Ah bah, why put such abstruse questions to him?

After all, he was but a simple policeman, not *le bon Dieu!* But no.

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Mr. Zagat Explains

BY THIS time you've probably read *The Two Moons of Tranquillia,* unless you are one of those readers who spurns the conventional method of reading a magazine, and, instead, works from back-to-front. At any rate, Arthur Leo Zagat, whose last story for WEIRD TALES was published just one year ago, sent along to us the following appendage which, we think, fits in very well with his story:

Who in these dreadful days has not yearned for escape from them? What person capable of imaginative thinking at all has not imagined for himself a world free of the brutal savagery that has made of this one a horror? What parent does not lie awake in the night wondering what sort of world this small daughter or small son will face when they have grown to realization of reality?

What one of us does not cry out for some Tranquillia?

There is no Tranquillia, but if there were, if somewhere I or you could find a warp in space through which we could flee the terrible responsibilities of the terrible present, have we the right to seek that escape?

This was the question that gave *Two Moons of Tranquillia* birth. In *Two Moons* George Carson found the answer for me. When the story began writing itself I had no more foreknowledge of his decision than you who have read it, or will read it, with I hope some modicum of interest in the problem with which he was faced as well as with pleasure in the yarn itself. "Pop" Gatlin couldn't do anything else but what he did. Helen, being what she was, made an inevitable choice. I had to wait the end of the narrative to find out how George would solve his dilemma.

No, there is nothing mystic in the way *Two Moons* came to be written. It is the way all the hundreds of yarns that have come from my typewriter have created themselves. I find my characters among people I know, people like you, your neighbors and friends. Real people. I invent a situation for them, involve them in it, and then I sit back and watch what happens. To the persons of my stories I am demigod, creator, only in so far as I confront them with the necessity for decision and action, for all the rest I am no less aloof an observer than you, my readers.

I hope that you have enjoyed, or will enjoy, reading *Two Moons of Tranquillia* as much as I did setting it down for you. I sincerely hope you will agree with me that George Carson did the only right thing.

Arthur Leo Zagat

Witches in Ireland?

IN THE September *Eyrie* a reader and club member wrote in to ask if there were, or are, any witches in Ireland. The reader, who admitted to being from Ireland himself, com-

mented, rather wistfully, we thought, that he never heard of any witches there. But he wanted to get the lowdown. Luckily he addressed his query not to the editors of WEIRD TALES, who might have been hard put to settle the issue, but to Seabury Quinn who returned the following information in reply. We can heartily vouch for Mr. Quinn's qualifications to answer this—or almost any other —question.

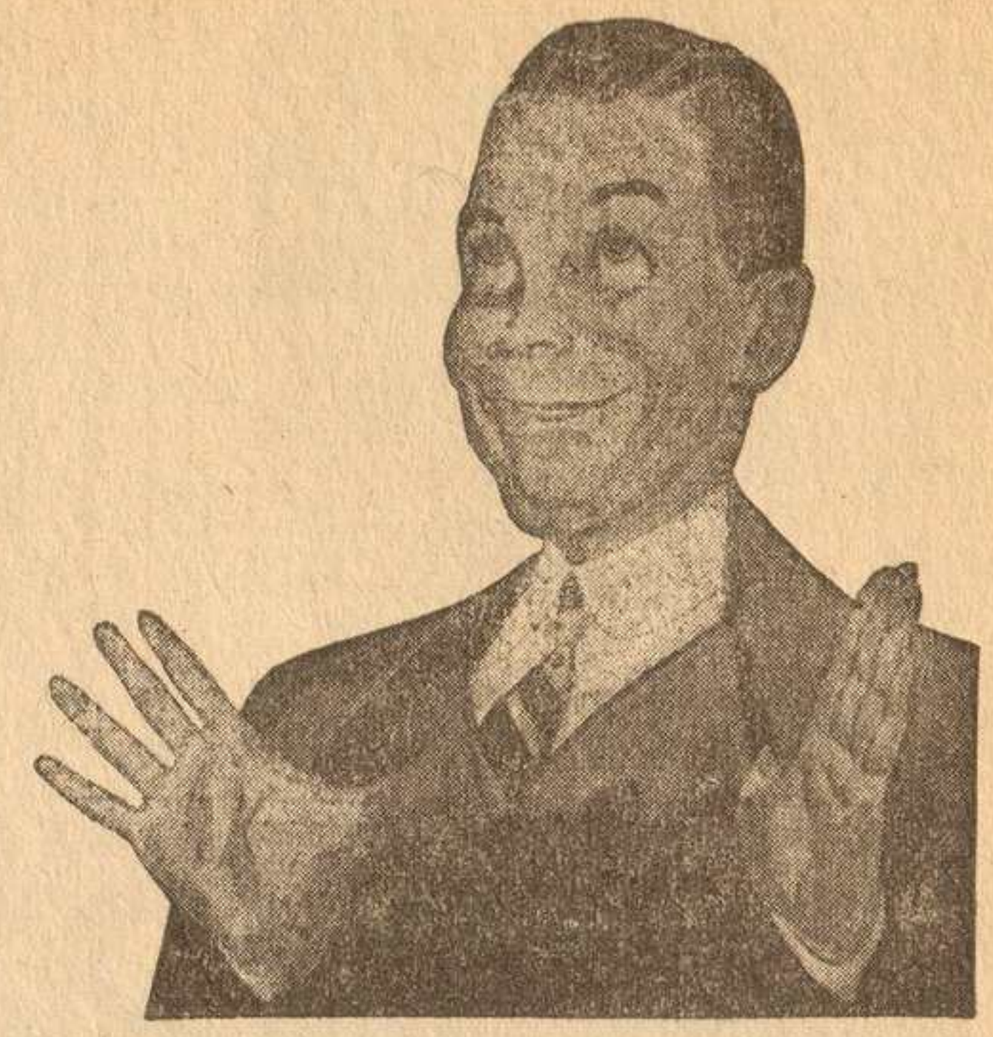
This is in answer to Mr. Mark Cathal's open letter to me in the *Eyrie* of the September issue:

The witch, in the technically accepted meaning of the term—one who has foresworn God and made a compact with the Devil whereby, in return for the trifling consideration of his or her immortal soul she (or he) is granted magical powers, enabled to work charms, brew potent potions, cause death or illness by magic, find buried treasure, summon or drive away love, and perform such-like handy little tricks—is practically unknown in Ireland.

Irish folklore swarms with fairies, "the little people," or, as the Irish prefer to call them euphemistically, "the little *good* people," who are almost continuously up to some sort of mischief, much of which has elements of witchcraft in it. But the fairies aren't people, they have no souls, they work their tricks for their own ends, not for hire or for the glorification of Satan. Indeed, it's almost a sure thing that the least spirited Irish fairy would reach for his blackthorn or the nearest half-brick if you called him a Satanist—bad cess to ye!

Father Montague Summers, who can smell a witch as far as anybody, and a lot farther than most, makes mention of only one Irish witch in his monumental work on witchcraft, Dame Alice Kyteler, tried in 1324.

My former fellow Brooklynite, Miss Theda Kenyon, relates the case of Bridget Cleary Boland of Clonmel, Tipperary, who was actually burned to death in 1895 by her husband and neighbors after being "tried" in circum-



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stances very similar to the witch-tests of medieval and early modern times, but this unfortunate woman was suspected not of being a witch, but a changeling—a fairy woman who had assumed the appearance of Patrick Boland's wife while the real Bridget was spirited away to dwell with the fairy folk in Kylenagranagh Hill.

This business of changing is a favorite trick of the little good people. The Irish peasant, or gentleman, for that matter, never knows for sure whether the wife of his bosom or child of his heart is in fact itself or some fairy masquerading in his or her likeness. It must be very disconcerting.

There are, of course, plenty of "wise folk" in Ireland, and in any other country they'd be called witches. Not in Ireland. They work white rather than black magic, and are for the most part highly respected members of the community.

My own belief is that the Irishman, like the Frenchman, is greatly misunderstood. Because he laughs when he's amused and cries when he's sad, his Saxon neighbors label him libelously "mercurial, irresponsible and impractical." Nothing is farther from the truth. Your Irishman is a hard-minded logical person who can see no virtue in pretending to be other than he is, and who sees no sense in hiding his feelings under a stoical mask. But he is at bottom eminently practical, and the delusions which made a shambles of Europe and the non-Irish British Isles and were in a fair way to do the same thing in our own New England in the late 17th century just didn't impress him at all.

Sprenger, that blood-stained bigot whose witch persecutions were responsible for sending thousands of innocent people to the stake and gallows, and whose bloody zeal makes even the worst acts of the modern Gestapo seem like gentleness, would have been riddin out of any Irish village on a rail if he'd attempted to preach his bestial crusade of witch-finding there. So would Titus Oates and Matthew Hopkins of detestable memory.

The Irishman knows that there are fairies, they're part of his native sod, they have the

smell of moss and peat-smoke on them. But as to this nonsense about witches preached by the foreign priests—not the pious homegrown variety, mark you, but the English, German and Eyetalian kind: "Arrah, would ye be havin' me belave har-rm o' ould Biddy Shane as niver har-rmed man nor baste in all 'er life? Be off wid ye, ye lyin' divil, or I'll be takin' me fist off th' end o' yer nose, so I will!"

And that, I am convinced, is why there is so little witchcraft in Irish folklore.

Seabury Quinn

Newcomer

NO LESS than other magazines, WEIRD TALES likes to turn up a promising new writer every now and then. We feel we have done just this in presenting James Causey, whose story, *The Statue*, appears in this number. This is Mr. Causey's first sale to any magazine, although he has been writing for some time and recently won a prize in a short story contest.

While attending Loyola University some time ago Causey was encouraged in his writing efforts by Myles Connolly, former editor and at present a motion picture scenarist.

Mr. Causey tells us he has been a public stenographer, a brush salesman and a political campaign speaker . . . and, of course, a writer.

READERS' VOTE

THE TWO MOONS OF TRANQUILLIA	SAY A PRAYER FOR HARVEY
THE EAGER DRAGON	BINDINGS DELUXE
QUEST OF A NOBLE TIGER	SEVENTH SISTER
THE STATUE	REPAYMENT
ONE-MAN BOAT	McELWIN'S GLASS

Here's a list of ten stories in this issue. Won't you let us know which three you consider the best. Just place the numbers: 1, 2, and 3 respectively against your three favorite tales — then clip it out and mail it into us.

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• 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.)

No Real Weird Happenings

I am very much interested in the letters that have been published by the Weird Tales Club from time to time by members who are trying to get data on ghosts, witchcraft and such subjects.

Although I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for quite a period of years, and I am certainly interested in stories about fantasy, I still feel skeptical about the truth of these various phenomena.

I think that these subjects make for very fine reading, but I doubt if they ever really happen. For myself, I have never found a real haunted house or seen a ghost or a witch or discovered anything that couldn't be explained on natural grounds.

My nature of work—I am a salesman—forces me to travel around a great deal in different parts of the country, and yet I still don't run into real weird happenings. I am willing to be convinced, however, and I would like to hear from other readers of the magazine on this. As at present my address changes almost from week to week, please write to me through the Weird Tales Club columns.

Truly yours,
Adam W. Grossette

Evil Mountains

I am writing this letter to the Weird Tales Club from my camp in the Superstition Mountains. I want to thank you for accepting me as a member and for the membership card which I think very nice. I'm proud to belong to such an interesting group of people. And now just a little about this range of mountains:

The Superstition Mountains lie some thirty miles east of Phoenix, Arizona, their jagged peaks and barren cliffs shadowing the obscure canyons. There is little water, the vegetation is scarce, thousands of rattlesnakes have made of this region a rendezvous. All in all, the Superstitions present a most forbidding aspect.

The Indians tell of evil spirits who haunt the canyons and bring dire calamity upon those who invade their domain. There is some reason for this belief:

A number of prospectors and others have gone into these mountains seeking the famous "Lost Dutchman's Mine"; some of them have returned, but more have not. What became of them no one knows. A few men from Eastern cities have come out and gone into the Superstitions looking for that lost mine. These men, unskilled in the ways of the desert, met their fate and for them to fail to return was not unique, but for others—men who had spent many years on the deserts, old "desert rats" and men well able to care for themselves—to meet their "Waterloo" here is strange. I had often wondered what it was that caused the loss of these men and, as my home is not so far distant, I decided to come down here and see if I could find out. So, here I am, camped a long way off the road at the foot of a high and barren mountain.

My home is a little log cabin close under the rim of the Tonto Basin. My post office is Payson, Arizona, Box 28, in case this letter is deemed interesting enough to make the grade into the Weird Tales Club department and some one would care to write to me. If so, I'll be glad to answer any questions about this part of the Southwest that I can.

Soon I'll be returning to my home, for I don't want to miss the next issue of my favorite magazine, WEIRD TALES.

Very truly yours,
Box 28, Payson, Arizona. *Bert A. Slater*

A Good Idea

I have enjoyed WEIRD TALES so very much that I started sending copies to boys in the service of Uncle Sam. The boys have written and told me that they have received many hours of pleasure from your fine magazine. So now whenever we send the boys cookies, or sweaters we have knitted for them, there is always a copy of your fine magazine enclosed in the package. Here's hoping that other sweethearts and mothers of our boys will do the same. Yours truly,

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War Note

Beginning with this issue, and for the duration, WEIRD TALES will no longer print the names or letters of Service men in the Weird Tales Club columns. We are glad to comply with a request made by the Office of Censorship in Washington, asking us to discourage men of the armed forces writing to people they do not know, as this, obviously, might be used to advantage by enemy agents.

Of course the editors will always be glad to hear from men in the Services, but we're sorry that we can no longer pass on their names and addresses. In the meantime, we expect you correspondents on the home front to get busy filling the letter-space previously taken care of by our soldier, sailor and marine friends.

NEW MEMBERS

A. Gordon Keys, R R No. 2 West Hill, Ont., Canada
Betty Hays, 37 Bank St., Winsted, Conn.
Monroe Mayer, 56 Bennett Ave., New York, N. Y.
Lorraine Kern, 808 5th St. N. E., Washington, D. C.
Bert A. Slater, Box 29, Payson, Ariz.
P. C. Thompson, 34 Myrtle St., Medford, Mass.
Donald Hunter, 723 Charles St., Aurora, Ill.
Barbara L. Conroy, 6 Benedict St., Somerville, Mass.
Gladese Troxler, R. R. 5, Muncie, Ind.
E. A. J. Davies, 607 28th St. West, Saskatchewan, Sask., Canada.
Peter Duncan, 3642 W. 11th Ave., Vancouver, B. C., Canada .
Mrs. Lois Jenkins, Box 373, Cotulla, Texas.
Dudley Ormrod, Odd Fellows Cemetery, Shenandoah, Pa.
Paul E. Anderson, 1027 E. McMillian St., Cincinnati, Ohio.
Ray Stock, 2213 Lafayette St., St. Joseph, Mo.
Leonard Allenbaugh, Route 1, Monte Clair and Linda District, Marysville, Calif.
Lawrence Boyles, 1021 N. Lincoln, Pocatello, Idaho.
Don Carter, 1045 North Arthur, Pocatello, Idaho.
Bob Robertson, 521 11th St., Wilmette, Ill.
Julian Williamson, 501 N. Court St., Talladega, Ala.
Robert Lee Kurth, 403 Mantooth Ave., Lufkin, Texas.
Dorothy A. Dillinger, 756 Jefferson Ave., Rochester, N. Y.
William J. J. Schumacher, 7731 W. Patterson Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Everett Gerrard, Box 167, Springside, Sask., Canada.
Perry G. Lueck, 900 Grove St., Austin, Minn.
Merlin Blois, 5020 Royal, New Orleans, La.
Budd King, II, R. F. D. No. 1, Orancock, Va.
Mortimer Newport, 1472 E. 116th St., Cleveland, O.
Hedy M. Campbell, P. O. Box 69, Danville, Ky.
Harley McGee, 136 Henry St., So. Devon, N. B., Can.
T. J. Boyle, 3 Southgate Pl., Worcester, Mass.
Cecil Brown, 1067 Hubbard Ave., Detroit, Mich.
Leonard A. Domine, 294 N. 8th St., Prospect Park, N. J.
Gurtha Louise Armbrust, The Cedars, Gretna, Neb.
Richard Kershaw, 119 Hubbards Lane, Louisville, Ky.
Howard Dalis, 1329 Dickerson Rd., W. Englewood, N. J.
Virginia Redden, 619 Second St., Portsmouth, Ohio.
Jack Sergeant, R. F. D. No. 3, Benton, Ill.
Bill Mitchell, 663 S. 3rd St. W., Salt Lake City, Utah.
Charles E. Wray, 1552A Jackson St., Charleston, W. Va.
Frank D. P. Olennor, 1633 Poplar St., Phila., Pa.
Willard C. Knight, 140 Jasper Place, San Francisco, Calif.
Charles Schnerr, 4 Davis Ave., Broomall, Pa.
Lee Loughlin, 9 Silzer Ave., Iselin, N. J.
Vincent Mitchell, Newcastle, New Brunswick, Can.
Buddy Mead, Stirrat, W. Va.

Harold Hallett, 811 Shaw St., Toronto, Ontario, Can.
Hassell Farley, Box 289, Pineville, W. Va.
Marie Kamerer, 1019 N. Murtland Ave., Homeood. Pittsburgh, Pa.
Mrs. Hazel Olsen, Miss Marjorie Olsen and Miss Rose Olsen, 50 Catherine St., Port Richmond, S. I., N. Y.
Ronald Green, 919 Elsemere Ave., Windsor, Ont., Can.
Carl Mason, Route 1, Franklin, N. C.
M. P. Maddock, 1725 Allendale Ave., E. Cleveland, O.
Reid Scott, 54 Berkley Rd., Galt, Ontario, Can.
Charlotte Sallee, 1139 E. 68th St., Los Angeles, Calif.
Hugh Hefner, 1922 N. New England Ave., Chicago, Ill.
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Ruth Bailey, 862 Main St., Worcester, Mass.
Angie Cutteruccia, 1311 Mesa St., San Pedro, Calif.
Stanley Bucenski, 989 Washington Ave., Bronx, N. Y.
Jeff Killebroew, 5430 Richmond, Dallas, Texas.
Douglas Fulton, 1524 E. 8th St., Tucson, Ariz.

We're sorry that lack of space prevents the inclusion of the names of all New Members. The rest will appear next time.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of WEIRD TALES, published bi-monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1942, State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared William J. Delaney, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the President-Treasurer of WEIRD TALES, Publishers of WEIRD TALES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publisher*, WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.; *Editor*, D. McIlwraith, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.; *Managing Editor*, None; *Business Manager*, W. J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock: William J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

(*Signed*) W. J. DELANEY, *President*.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of September, 1942.

[SEAL] (*Signed*) WILLIAM G. ELLIOTT, Notary Public, Bronx Co., No. 16, Reg. No. 3-E-44. Certified in N. Y. Co., No. 36, Reg. No. 4-E-18.

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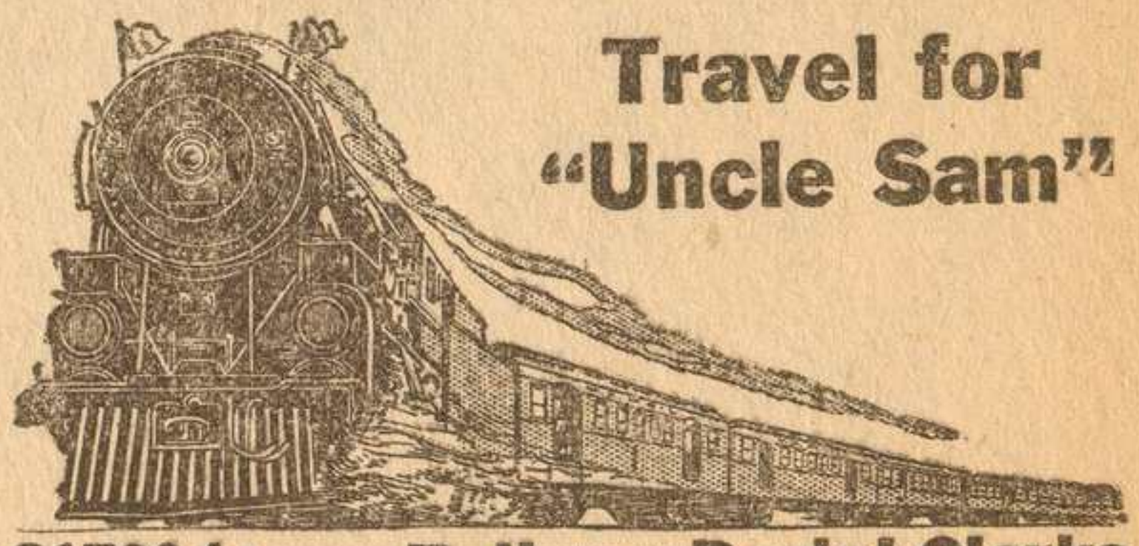

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"The 7 Keys to Power alleges to teach," the author says, "All the Mysteries of Life from the Cradle to the Grave—and Beyond. It tells you the particular day and hour to do anything you desire, whether it be in the light of the moon, sun, or in total darkness."

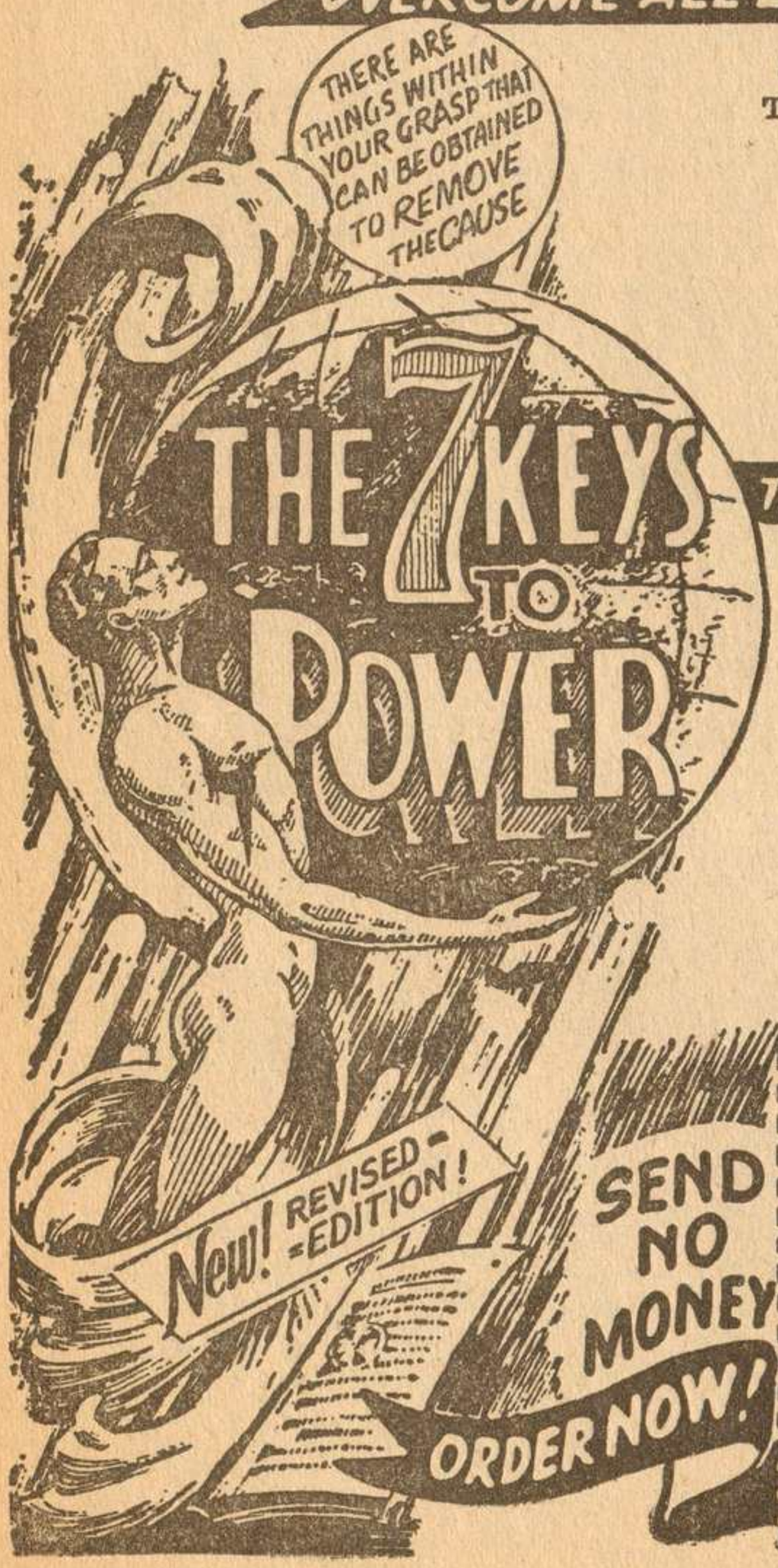
He claims, "The power to get what you want revealed at last, for the first time since the dawn of creation. The very same power which the ancient Chaldeans, Cuthic, Priests, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Sumerians used is at our disposal today."

He says, "Follow the simple directions, and you can do anything you desire. No one can tell how these Master Forces are used without knowing about this book, but with it you can mold anyone to your will."

From this book, He says, "You can learn the arts of an old Science as practiced by the Ancient Priestly Orders. Their marvels were almost beyond belief. You, too, can learn to do them all with the instructions written in this Book," Lewis de Claremont claims. "It would be a shame if these things could all be yours and you failed to grasp them."

He claims, "It is every man's birthright to have these things of life: MONEY! GOOD HEALTH! HAPPINESS! If you lack any of these, then this book has an important message for you. No matter what you need, there exists a spiritual power which is abundantly able to bring you whatever things you need."

OVERCOME ALL ENEMIES, OBSTACLES & HIDDEN FEARS



ARE YOU CROSSED IN ANY WAY?

The Seven Keys to Power, Lewis de Claremont says, shows you how to remove and cast it back.

The Book Purports to Tell You How to—

- Gain the love of the opposite sex.
- Unite people for marriages.
- Obtain property.
- Make people do your bidding.
- Make any person love you.
- Make people bring back stolen goods.
- Make anyone lucky in any games.
- Cure any kind of sickness without medicine.
- Get any job you want.
- Cast a spell on anyone, no matter where they are.
- Get people out of law suits, courts, or prison.
- Banish all misery.
- Gain the mastery of all things.
- Regain your youth and vigor.
- Choose words according to ancient, holy methods.

THE ONLY TRUE BOOK OF SUPREME MASTERSHIP!

This is the Power, He says, from which the old masters gained their knowledge and from which they sold limitless portions to certain favored Kings, Priests, and others at high prices, but never to be revealed under a vow, the violation of which entailed severe punishment.

THE VOW HAS NOW BEEN BROKEN

This book, he claims, shows you the secrets of old which when properly applied makes you able to control the will of all without their knowing it. If you have a problem and you wish to solve it, he says, don't hesitate. Advertisements cannot describe nor do this wonderful book justice. You must read it and digest its meaning, to really appreciate its worth.

GUARANTEED TO SATISFY OR YOUR MONEY REFUNDED

Only a limited number available for sale, so don't wait. It is worth many times its price. If you are wise, you will rush your order for this book NOW.

$1.

MR. LUCK'S CURIO CO., Dept. 702,
800 N. Clark Street., Dept. R,
Chicago, Illinois.

This coupon is worth $1.00 to you. Attach a Money Order for $1 to this coupon and we will send you your copy of The Seven Keys to Power—Regularly $2 for only $1.

Name .....

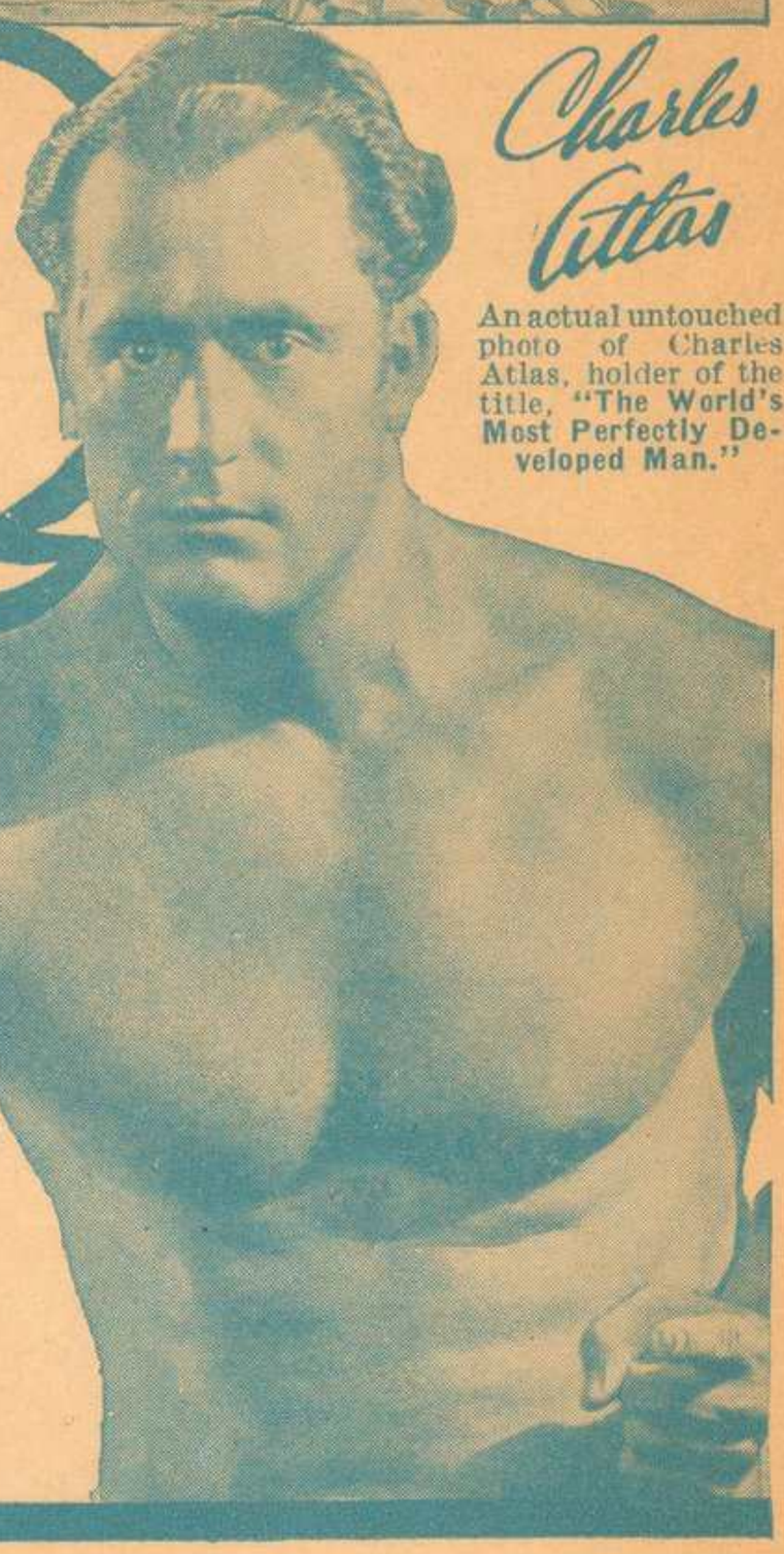
Address .....

City ..... State.....

SEND NO MONEY!

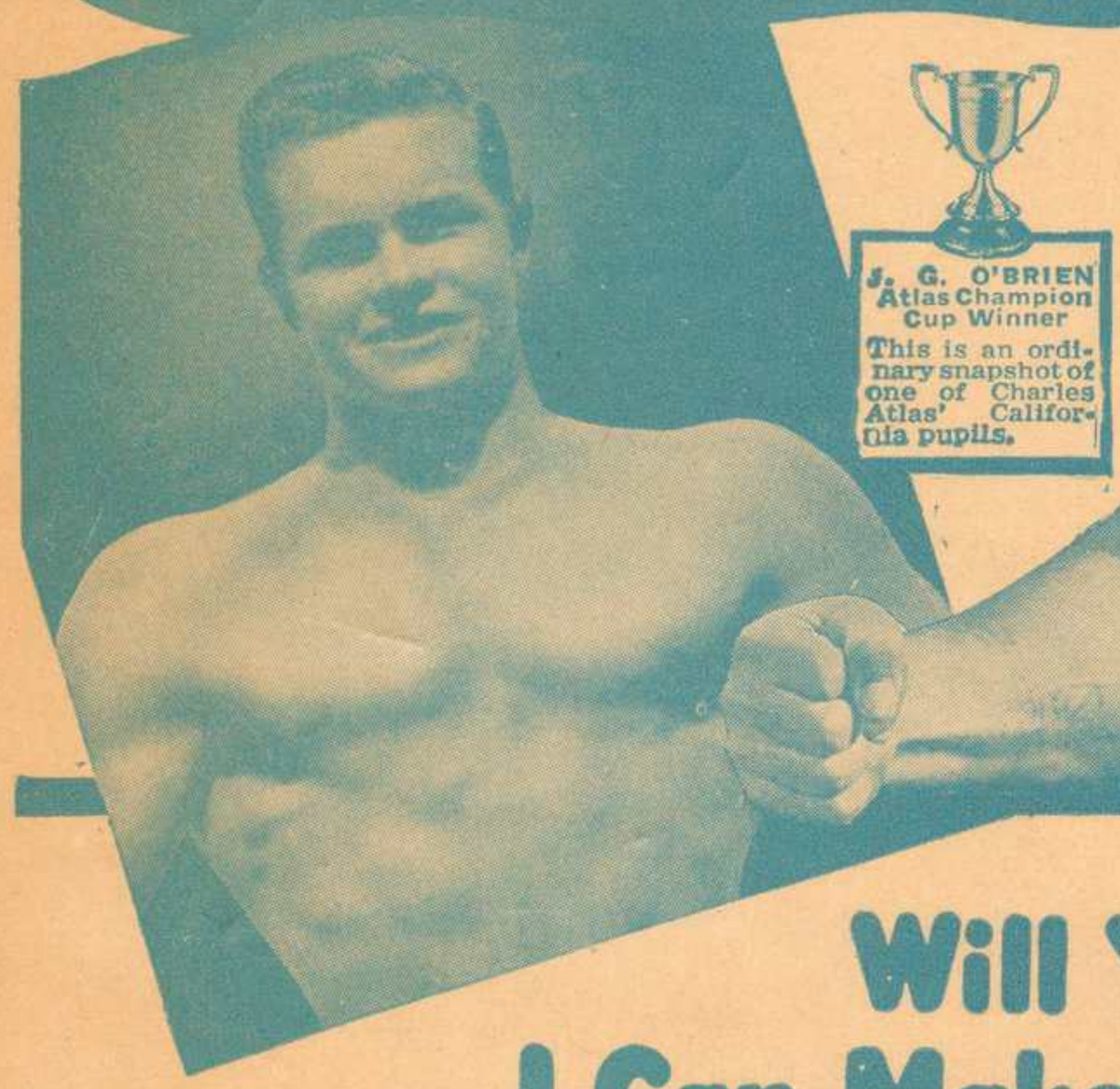
If you wish we Trust You. . . . Pay Postman $1 on delivery plus a few pennies Postage. Check here ( ).

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!



Charles Atlas

An actual untouched photo of Charles Atlas, holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."



J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion
Cup Winner

This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' California pupils.

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps — yes, on each arm — in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day — right in your own home — is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The *identical natural* method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens — *my way*. I give you *no gadgets or contraptions to fool with*. When you have learned to develop your strength through **"Dynamic Tension"** you can laugh at *artificial* muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body — watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

Only 15 Minutes a Day

My method — "Dynamic Tension" — will turn the trick for you. No *theory* — every exercise is *practical*. And, **man,** *so easy!* Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** almost unconsciously every minute of the day — walking, bending over, etc. — to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils — fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book *today*. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9ZB, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-ZB,
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me — give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly.)

Address .....

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WHY BE SATISFIED WITH *LESS*... WHEN $1.00 A MONTH INSURES YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY FOR *MORE*... IN Guarantee Reserve LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY?

HERE IS PROOF THAT GUARANTEE RESERVE'S FAMILY GROUP POLICY GIVES YOU *MORE* PROTECTION

$5,897.83 For the 5 members of a laundry operator's family in Indiana, $1.00 a month provides $5,897.83 protection against travel accidental death, $3,935.22 against auto accidental death and $1,962.61 against ordinary or natural death. Get this remarkable low-cost policy for free inspection—find out how much life insurance your family can buy for only $1.00 a month.

$6,344.70 A U. S. Government clerk of Washington D.C. has insured 4 members of his family in one policy—with $6,344.70 protection for travel accidental death, $4,229.80 for auto accidental death and $2,114.90 for natural or ordinary death. One dollar a month is all the policy costs him.

$5,018.70 A Michigan farmer, his wife and 4 children (6 people in all) are insured in a single $1.00 a month, Guarantee Reserve Family Policy for a total of $5,018.70 against travel accidental death, $3,345.80 against auto accidental death and $1,672.90 against natural or ordinary death. Take advantage of the Free Inspection offer and see this marvelous all-coverage policy.

SEND NO MONEY

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION — MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN—AGES 1 TO 65

By figuring separately the amount of life insurance on each individual of the family instead of bracketing them in age groups—the Guarantee Reserve Family Group Policy pays up to 50% more—in many cases double—the benefits provided by other similar life insurance policies. Yet the cost to you and your entire family is the same—Only $1.00 a month. The amount of life insurance provided for each family varies according to the ages and number of family members insured. Mail the coupon to find out how much life insurance your family group gets for only $1.00 a month. From 2 to 6 members of your family can be insured in this policy without medical examination. No Red Tape—No embarrassing questions—Take advantage of this free inspection offer without obligation.

INCLUDES PARENTS, CHILDREN, BROTHERS, SISTERS, GRANDPARENTS, AND IN-LAWS

As many as six who have an insurable interest can be included in this amazing low cost life insurance policy.

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The policy was prepared by nationally known insurance experts to provide safe, reliable life insurance for entire family groups at a price everyone can afford to pay—Only $1.00 a month.

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This policy is sold by mail only . . . to save agents salaries—medical expense—and collection costs. Get policy for 10 days. Read it—Decide for yourself—No Obligation.

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Without cost or obligation send details of your new Family Group Policy and 10 Day Free Inspection Offer.

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