"THE DARK BROTHERS" by HAROLD LAMB

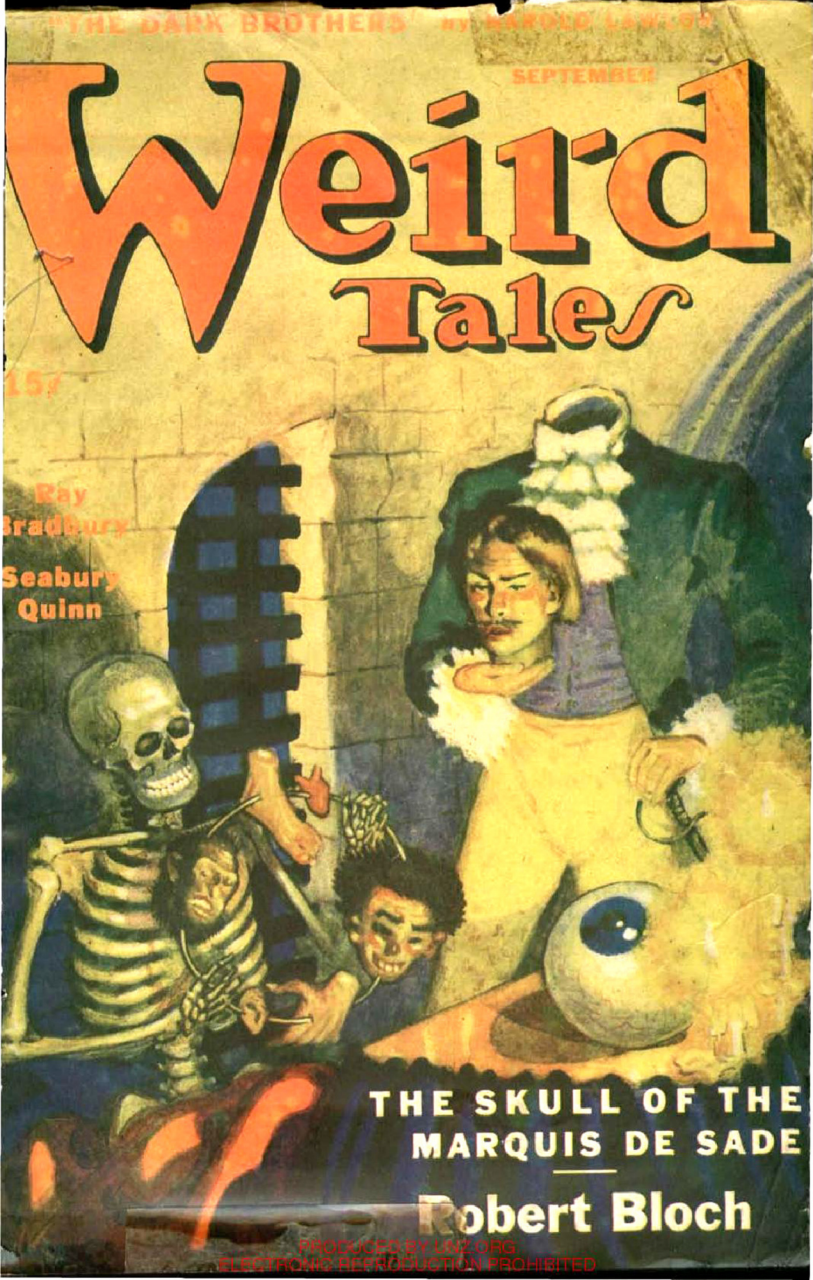
SEPTEMBER

Weird Tales

15¢

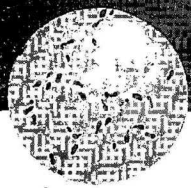
Ray Bradbury

Seabury Quinn



THE SKULL OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE

Robert Bloch



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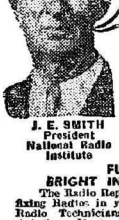

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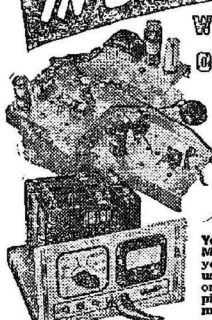

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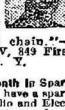

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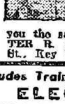

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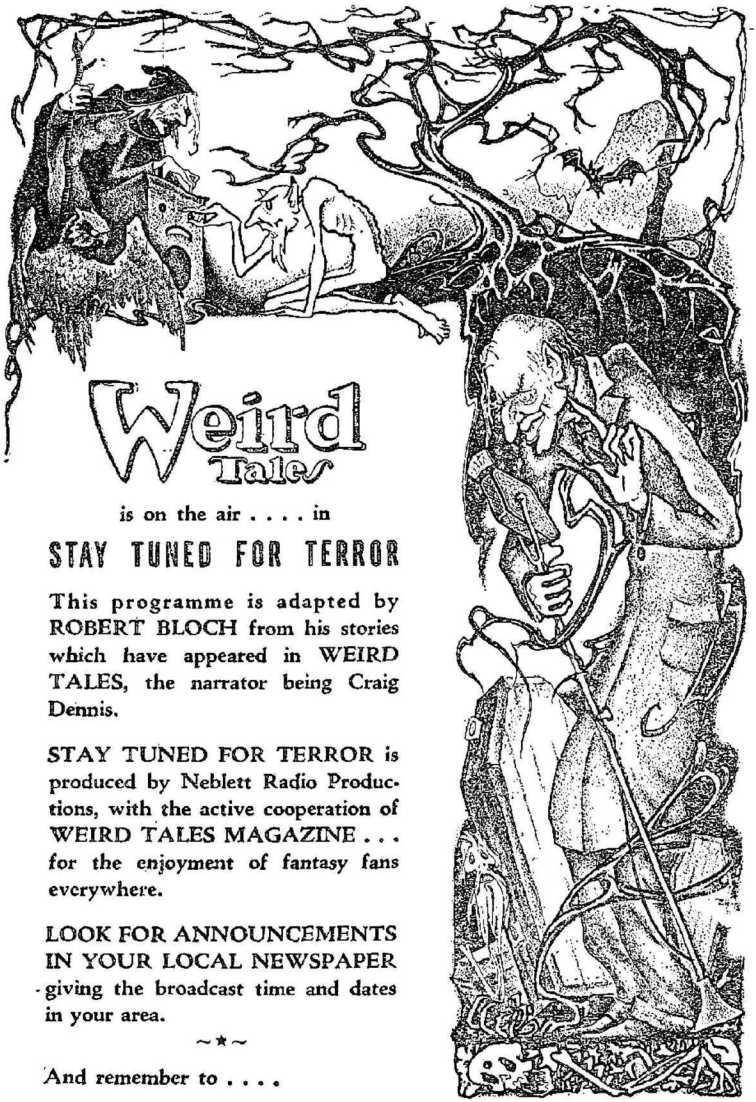

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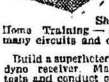

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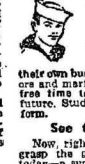

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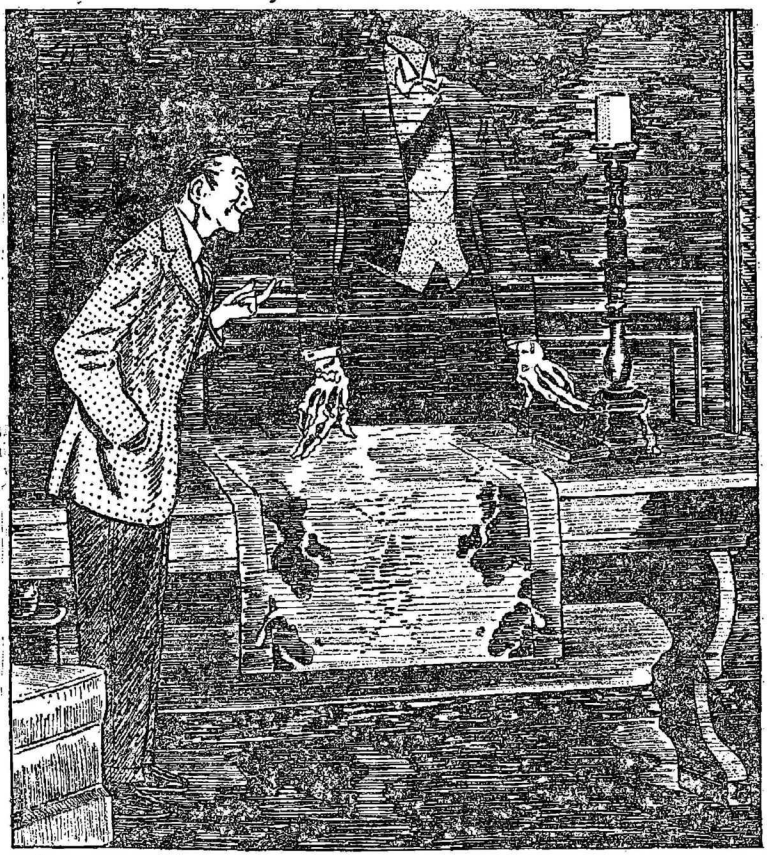
The Skull of the Marquis de Sade

By ROBERT BLOCH

CHRISTOPHER MAITLAND sat back in his chair before the fireplace and fondled the binding of an old book. His thin face, modelled by the flickering firelight, bore a characteristic expression of scholarly preoccupation.

Maitland's intellectual curiosity was focussed on the volume in his hands. Briefly,



For he was the Apostle of Pain and those who knew his caresses came to prefer even those of his rival, Death!

he was wondering if the human skin binding this book came from a man, a woman, or a child.

He had been assured by the bookseller that this tome was bound in a portion of the skin of a woman, but Maitland, much as he desired to believe this, was by nature skeptical. Booksellers who deal in such *curiosa* are not overly reputable, as a rule, and Christopher Maitland's years of dealing with such people had done much to destroy his faith in their veracity.

Still, he hoped the story was true. It was nice to have a book bound in a woman's skin. It was nice to have a *crux ansata* fashioned from a thigh-bone; a collection of Dyack heads; a shrivelled Hand of Glory stolen from a graveyard in Mainz. Maitland owned all of these items, and many more. For he was a collector of the unusual.

Maitland held the book up to the light and sought to distinguish pore-formation beneath the tanned surface of the binding. Women had finer pores than men, didn't they?

"Beg pardon, sir."

Maitland turned as Hume entered. "What is it?" he asked.

"That person is here again."

"Person?"

"Mr. Marco."

"Oh?" Maitland rose, ignoring the butler's almost grotesque expression of distaste. He suppressed a chuckle. Poor Hume didn't like Marco, or any of the raffish gentry who supplied Maitland with items for his collection. Hume didn't care for the collection itself, either—Maitland vividly remembered the old servant's squeamish trembling as he dusted off the case containing the mummy of the priest of Horus decapitated for sorcery.

"Marco, eh? Wonder what's up?" Maitland mused. "Well—better show him in."

Hume turned and left with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. As for Maitland, his eagerness mounted. He ran his hand along the reticulated back of a jadeite *tao-tieh*, and licked his lips with very much the same expression as adorned the face of the Chinese image of gluttony.

Old Marco was here. That meant something pretty special in the way of acquisitions. Perhaps Marco wasn't exactly the kind of chap one invited to the Club—but he had his uses. Where he laid hands on some of the things he offered for sale Maitland didn't know; but he didn't much care. That was Marco's affair. The rarity of his offer-

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

ings was what interested Christopher Maitland. If one wanted a book bound in human skin, old Marco was just the chap to get hold of it—if he had to do a bit of flaying and binding himself. Great character, old Marco!

"Mr. Marco, sir."

Hume withdrew, a sedate shadow, and Maitland waved his visitor forward.

Mr. Marco oozed into the room. The little man was fat, greasily so; his flesh lumped like the tallow coagulating about the guttering stump of a candle. His waxen pallor accentuated the simile. All that seemed needed was a wick to sprout from the bald ball of fat that served as Mr. Marco's head.

THE fat man stared up at Maitland's lean face with what was meant to be an ingratiating smile. The smile oozed, too, and contributed to the aura of uncleanliness which seemed to surround Marco.

But Maitland was not conscious of these matters. His attention was focussed on the curious bundle Marco carried under one arm—the large package, wrapped in prosaic butcher's paper which somehow contributed to its fascination for him.

Marco shifted the package gingerly as he removed his shoddy gray ulster. He did not ask permission to divest himself of the coat, nor did he wait for an invitation to be seated.

The fat little man merely made himself comfortable in one of the chairs before the fire, reached for Maitland's open cigar case, helped himself to a stogie, and lit it. Meanwhile the large round package bobbed up and down on his lap as his rotund stomach heaved convulsively.

Maitland stared at the package. Marco stared at Maitland. Maitland broke first.

"Well?" he asked.

The greasy smile expanded. Marco inhaled rapidly, then opened his mouth to emit a puff of smoke and a reply.

"I am sorry to come unannounced, Mr. Maitland. I hope I'm not intruding?"

"Never mind that," Maitland snapped. "What's in the package, Marco?"

Marco's smile expanded. "Something choice," he whispered. "Something tasty."

Maitland bent over the chair, his head outthrust to throw a vulpine shadow on the wall.

"What's in the package?" he repeated.

"You're my favorite client, Mr. Maitland. You know I never come to you unless I have something really rare. Well, I have that, sir. I have that. You'd be surprised what this butcher's paper hides, although it's rather appropriate. Yes, appropriate it is!"

"Stop that infernal gabbling, man! What is in the package?"

Marco lifted the bundle from his lap. He turned it over gingerly, yet deliberately.

"Doesn't seem to be much," he purred. "Round. Heavy enough. Might be a medicine ball, eh? Or a beehive. I say, it could even be a head of cabbage. Yes, one might mistake it for a head of common cabbage. But it isn't. Oh no, it isn't. Intriguing problem, eh?"

If it was the little man's intention to goad Maitland into a fit of apoplexy, he almost succeeded.

"Open it up, damn you!" he shouted.

Marco shrugged, smiled, and scrabbled at the taped edges of the paper. Christopher Maitland was no longer the perfect gentleman, the perfect host. He was a collector, stripped of all pretenses—quivering eagerness incarnate. He hovered over Marco's shoulder as the butcher's paper came away in the fat man's pudgy fingers.

"Now!" Maitland breathed.

The paper fell to the floor. Resting in Marco's lap was a large, glittering silver ball of—tinfoil.

Marco began to strip the tinfoil away, unravelling it in silvery strands. Maitland gasped as he saw what emerged from the wrappings.

It was a human skull.

Maitland saw the horrid hemisphere gleaming ivory-white in the firelight—then, as Marco shifted it, he saw the empty eye-sockets and the gaping nasal aperture that would never know human breath. Maitland noted the even structure of the teeth, adherent to a well-formed jaw. Despite his instinctive repulsion, he was surprisingly observant.

It appeared to him that the skull was unusually small and delicate; remarkably well preserved despite a yellow tinge hinting of age. But Christopher Maitland was most

impressed by one undeniable peculiarity. This skull was *different,* indeed.

This skull did not grin!

THROUGH some peculiar formation or malformation of cheekbone in juxtaposition of jaws, the deathshead did not simulate a smile. The classic mockery of mirth attributed to all skulls was absent here.

The skull had a sober, serious look about it.

Maitland blinked, and uttered a self-conscious cough. What was he doing, entertaining these idiotic fancies about a skull? It was ordinary enough. What was old Marco's game in bringing him such a silly object with so much solemn preamble?

Yes, what *was* Marco's game?

The little fat man held the skull up before the firelight, turning it from time to time with an impressive display of pride.

His smirk of self-satisfaction contrasted oddly with the sobriety set indelibly upon the skull's bony visage.

Mailand's puzzlement found expression at last. "What are you so smug about?" he demanded. "You bring me the skull of a woman, or an adolescent youth—"

Marco's chuckle cut across his remark. "Exactly what the phrenologists said!" he wheezed.

"Damn the phrenologists, man! Tell me about his skull, if there's anything to tell."

Marco ignored him. He turned the skull over in his fat hands, with a gloating expression which repelled Maitland.

"It may be small, but it's a beauty, isn't it?" the little man mused. "So delicately formed, and look—there's almost the illusion of a patina upon the surface."

"I'm not a paleontologist," Maitland snapped. "Nor a grave-robber, either. You'd think we were Burke and Hare! Be reasonable, Marco—why should I want an ordinary skull?"

"Please, Mr. Maitland! What do you take me for? Do you think I would presume to insult your intelligence by bringing you an ordinary skull? Do you imagine I would ask a thousand pounds for the skull of a nobody?"

Maitland stepped back.

"A thousand pounds?" he shouted. "A thousand pounds for *that?*"

"And cheap at the price," Marco assured him. "You'll pay it gladly when you know the story."

"I wouldn't pay such a price for the skull of Napoleon," Maitland assured him. "Or Shakespeare, for that matter."

"You'll find that the owner of this skull tickles your fancy a bit more," Marco assured him.

"Enough of this. Let's have it, man!"

Marco faced him, one pudgy forefinger tapping the osseous brow of the deathshead.

"You see before you," he murmured, "the skull of Donatien Alphonse François, the Marquis de Sade."

II

GILES DE RETZ was a monster. Torquemeda's inquisitors exercised the diabolic ingenuity of the fiends they professed to exorcise. But it remained for the Marquis de Sade to epitomize the living lust for pain. His name symbolizes cruelty incarnate—the savagery men call "sadism."

Maitland knew de Sade's weird history, and mentally reviewed it.

The Count, or Marquis de Sade was born in 1740, of distinguished Provencal lineage. He was a handsome youth when he joined his cavalry regiment in the Seven Years' War—a pale, delicate, blue-eyed man whose foppish diffidence cloaked an evil perversity.

At the age of 23 he was imprisoned for a year as the result of a barbaric crime. Indeed, 27 years of his subsequent life he spent in incarceration for his deeds—deeds which even today are only hinted at. His flagellations, his administration of outre drugs, and his tortures of women have served to make his name infamous.

But de Sade was no common libertine with a primitive urge towards the infliction of suffering. He was, rather, the "philosopher of pain"—a keen scholar, a man of exquisite taste and breeding. He was wonderfully well-read, a disciplined thinker, a remarkable psychologist—and a sadist.

How the mighty Marquis would have squirmed had he envisioned the petty perversions which today bear his name! The tormenting of animals by ignorant peasants . . . the beating of children by hysteric attendants in institutions . . . the infliction

of senseless cruelties by maniacs upon others or by others upon maniacs . . . all these matters are classified as "sadistic" today. And yet none of them are manifestations of de Sade's unnatural philosophy.

De Sade's concept of cruelty had in it nothing of concealment or deceit. He practised his beliefs openly, and wrote explicitly of such matters during his years in prison. For he was the Apostle of Pain, and his gospel was made known to all men in *Justine . . . Juliette . . . Aline et Valcour . . .* the curious *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir,* and the utterly abominable *Les 120 Journees.*

And de Sade practised what he preached. He was a lover of many women—a jealous lover, willing to share the embraces of his mistresses with but one rival. That rival was Death, and it is said that all women who knew de Sade's caresses came to prefer those of his rival, in the end.

Perhaps the tortures of the French Revolution were indirectly inspired by the philosophy of the Marquis—a philosophy that gained circulation throughout France following the publication of his notorious tomes.

When the guillotine arose in the public squares of the cities, de Sade emerged from his long series of imprisonments and walked abroad among men maddened at the sight of blood and suffering.

He was a gray, gentle little ghost; short, bald, mild-mannered and soft-spoken. He raised his voice only to save his aristocratic relatives from the knife. His public life was exemplary during these latter years.

But men still whispered of his private life. His interest in sorcery was rumored. It is said that to de Sade, the shedding of blood was a sacrifice. And sacrifices made to certain beings bring black boons. The screams of pain-maddened women are as prayer to the creatures of the Pit.

The Marquis was cunning. Years of confinement for his "offenses against society" had made him wary. He moved quite cautiously, and took full advantage of the troubled times to conduct quiet and unostentatious burial services whenever he terminated an amour.

Caution did not suffice, in the end. An ill chosen diatribe directed against Napoleon served as an excuse for the authorities. There were no civil charges, no farcical trial was perpetrated.

De Sade was simply shut up in Charenton as a common lunatic. The men who knew his crimes were too shocked to publicize them—and yet there was a satanic grandeur about the Marquis which somehow precluded destroying him outright. One does not think of assassinating Satan. But Satan chained—

Satan, chained, languished. A sick, half-blind old man who tore the petals from roses in a last gesture of demoniac destructiveness, the Marquis spent his declining days forgotten by all men. They preferred to forget, preferred to think him mad.

In 1814, he died. His books were banned, his memory desecrated, his deeds denied. But his name lived on; lives on, an eternal symbol of innate evil. . . .

SUCH was de Sade, as Christopher Maitland knew him. And as a collector of *curiosa,* the thought of possessing the veritable skull of the fabulous Marquis intrigued him.

He glanced up from revery; glanced at the unsmiling skull and the grinning Marco.

"A thousand pounds, you said?"

"Exactly," Marco nodded. A most reasonable price, under the circumstances."

"Under what circumstances?" Maitland objected. "You bring me a skull. But what proofs can you furnish me as to its authenticity? How did you come by this rather unusual *memento mori?*"

"Come, come Mr. Maitland—please! You know me better than to question my source of supply. That is what I choose to call a trade secret, eh?"

"Very well. But I can't just take your word, Marco. To the best of my recollection, de Sade was buried when he died at Charenton, in 1814."

Marco's oozing grin expanded.

"Well, I can set you right about *that* point," he conceded. "Do you happen to have a copy of Ellis's *Studies* about? In the section entitled *Love and Pain* there is an item which may interest you."

Maitland secured the volume and Marco riffled through the pages.

"Here!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Ac-

cording to Ellis, the skull of the Marquis de Sade was exhumed and examined by a phrenologist. Phrenology was a popular pseudo-science in those days, eh? Chap wanted to see if the cranial formation indicated the Marquis was truly insane.

"It says he found the skull to be small and well formed, like a woman's. Exactly your remark, as you may recall!

"But the real point is this. The skull wasn't re-interred.

"It fell into the hands of a Dr. Londe, but around 1850 it was stolen by another physician, who took it to England. That is all Ellis knows of the matter. The rest I could tell—but it's better not to speak. Here is the skull of the Marquis de Sade, Mr. Maitland.

"Will you meet my offer?"

"A thousand pounds," Maitland sighed. "It's too much for a shoddy skull and a flimsy story."

"Well—let us say eight hundred, perhaps. A quick deal and no hard feelings?"

Maitland stared at Marco. Marco stared at Maitland. The skull stared at them both.

"Five hundred, then," Marco ventured. "Right now."

"You must be faking," Maitland said. "Otherwise you wouldn't be so anxious for a sale."

Marco's smile oozed off again. "On the contrary, sir. If I were trying to do you, I certainly wouldn't budge on my price. But I want to dispose of this skull quickly."

"Why?"

FOR the first time during the interview, fat little Marco hesitated. He twisted the skull between his hands and set it down on the table. It seemed to Maitland as if he avoided looking at it as he answered.

"I don't exactly know. It's just that I don't fancy owning such an item, really. Works on my imagination. Rot, isn't it?"

"Works on your imagination?"

"I get ideas that I'm being followed. Of course it's all nonsense, but—"

"You get ideas that you're followed by the police, no doubt," Maitland accused. "Because you stole the skull. Didn't you, Marco?"

Marco averted his gaze. "No," he mumbled. "It isn't that. But I don't like skulls—not my idea of ornaments, I assure you. Squeamish I am, a bit:

"Besides, you live in this big house here. You're safe. I live in Wapping, now. Down on my luck at the moment and all that. I sell you the skull. You tuck it away here in your collection, look at it when you please—and the rest of the time it's out of sight, not bothering you. I'll be free of it knocking around in my humble diggings. Matter of fact, when I sell it, I'll vacate the premises and move to decent lodgings. That's why I want to be rid of it, really. For five hundred, cash in hand."

Maitland hesitated. "I must think it over," he declared. "Give me your address. Should I decide to purchase it, I'll be down tomorrow with the money. Fair enough?"

"Very well." Marco sighed. He produced a greasy stub of pencil and tore a bit of paper from the discarded wrappings on the floor.

"Here's the address," he said.

Maitland pocketed the slip as Marco commenced to enclose the skull in tinfoil once more. He worked quickly, as though eager to obscure the shining teeth and the yawning emptiness of the eye-sockets. He twisted the butcher's paper over the tinfoil, grasped his overcoat in one hand, and balanced the round bundle in the other.

"I'll be expecting you tomorrow," he said. "And by the way—be careful when you open the door. I've a police dog now; a savage brute. He'll tear you to pieces—or anyone else who tries to take the skull of the Marquis de Sade."

III

IT SEEMED to Maitland that they had bound him too tightly. He knew that the masked men were about to whip him, but he could not understand why they had fastened his wrists with chains of steel.

Only when they held the metal scourges over the fire did he comprehend the reason—only when they raised the white-hot rods high above their heads did he realize why he was held so securely.

For at the fiery kiss of the lash, Maitland did not flinch—he convulsed. His body, seared by the hideous blow, described an

arc. Bound by thongs, his hands would tear themselves free under the stimulus of the unbearable torment. But the steel chains held, and Maitland gritted his teeth as the two black-robed men flogged him with living fire.

The outlines of the dungeon blurred, and Maitland's pain blurred, too. He sank down into a darkness broken only by the consciousness of rhythm—the rhythm of the savage, sizzling steel flails that descended upon his naked back.

When awareness returned, Maitland knew that the flogging was over. The silent, black-robed men in masks were bending over him, unfastening the shackles. They lifted him tenderly, and led him gently across the dungeon floor to the great steel casket.

Casket? This was no casket. Caskets do not stand open and up-ended. Caskets do not bear upon their lids the raised, moulded features of a woman's face.

Caskets are not *spiked,* inside.

Recognition was simultaneous with horror.

This was the Iron Maiden!

The masked men were strong. They dragged him forward, thust him into the depths of the great metal matrix of torment. They fastened wrists and ankles with clamps. Maitland knew what was coming.

They would close the lid upon him. Then, by turning a crank, they would move the lid down . . . move it down as spikes drove in at his body. For the interior of the Iron Maiden was studded with cruel barbs, sharpened and lengthened with the cunning of the damned.

The longest spikes would pierce him first as the lid descended. These spikes were set so as to enter his wrists and ankles. He would hang there crucified as the lid continued its inexorable descent. Shorter spikes would next enter his thighs, shoulders, and arms. Then, as he struggled, impaled in agony, the lid would press closer until the smallest spikes came close enough to penetrate his eyes, his throat, and—mercifully—his heart and brain.

Maitland screamed, but the sound served only to shatter his ear-drums as they closed the lid. The rusty metal grated, and then came the harsher grating of the machinery. They were turning the crank, bringing the banks of spikes closer to his cringing body. . . .

Maitland waited, tensed in darkness, for the first sharp kiss of the Iron Maiden.

Then, and then only, he realized that he was not *alone* here in the blackness.

There were no spikes set in the lid! Instead a figure was pressed against the opposite iron surface. As the lid descended, it merely brought the figure closer to Maitland's body.

The figure did not move, or even breathe. It rested against the lid, and as the lid came forward, Maitland felt the pressure of cold and alien flesh against his own. The arms and legs met his in unresponsive embrace, but still the lid pressed down, squeezing the lifeless form closer and closer. It was dark, but now Maitland could see the face that loomed scarcely an inch from his eyes. The face was white phosphorescent. The face was—*not a face!*

And then, as the body gripped his body in blackness, as the head touched his head, as Maitland's lips pressed against the place where lips *should* be, he knew the ultimate horror.

The face that was *not* a face was the skull of the Marquis de Sade!

And the weight of charnel corruption stifled Maitland, and he went down into darkness again with the obscene memory pursuing him to oblivion.

Even oblivion has an end, and once more Maitland woke. The masked men had released and were reviving him. He lay on a pallet, and glanced toward the open doors of the Iron Maiden. He was oddly grateful to see that the interior was empty. No figure rested against the inside of the lid. Perhaps there had been no figure.

The torture played strange tricks on a man's mind. But it was needed, now. He could tell that the solicitude of the masked ones was not assumed. They had subjected him to this ordeal for strange reasons, and he had come through unscathed.

They anointed his back, lifted him to his feet, led him from the dungeon. In the great corridor beyond, Maitland saw a mirror. They guided him up to it.

Had the torture changed him? For a moment, Maitland feared to gaze into the glass.

But they held him before the mirror, and Maitland stared at his reflection stared at his quivering body, on which was set the grim, unsmiling death's head of the Marquis de Sade!

IV

MAITLAND told no one of his dream, but he lost no time in discussing Marco's visit and offer.

His *confidante* was an old friend and fellow-collector, Sir Fitzhugh Kissroy. Seated in Sir Fitzhugh's comfortable study the following afternoon, he quickly unburdened himself of all pertinent details.

Genial, red-bearded Kissroy heard him out in silence.

"Naturally, I want that skull," Maitland concluded. "But I can't understand why Marco is so anxious to dispose of it at once. And I'm considerably worried about its authenticity. So I was wondering—you're quite an expert, Fitzhugh. Would you be willing to visit Marco with me and examine the skull?"

Sir Fitzhugh chuckled and shook his head.

"There's no need to examine it," he declared. "I'm quite sure the skull, as you describe it, is that of the Marquis de Sade. It's genuine enough."

Maitland gaped at him.

"How can you be so positive?" he asked.

Sir Fitzhugh beamed. "Because, my dear fellow—that skull was stolen from me!"

"What?"

"Quite so. About ten days ago, a prowler got into the library through the French windows facing the garden. None of the servants were aroused, and he made off with the skull in the night."

Maitland rose. "Incredible," he murmured. "But of course you'll come with me, now. We'll identify your property, confront old Marco with the facts, and recover the skull at once."

"Nothing of the sort," Sir Fitzhugh replied. "I'm just as glad the skull was stolen. And I advise you to leave it alone.

"I didn't report the theft to the police, and I have no intention of doing so. Because that skull is—unlucky."

"Unlucky?" Maitland peered at his host. "You, with your collection of cursed Egyptian mummies, tell me that? You've never taken any stock in such superstitious rubbish?"

"Exactly. Therefore, when I tell you that I sincerely believe that skull is dangerous, you must have faith in my words."

Maitland pondered. He wondered if Sir Fitzhugh had experienced the same dreams that tormented his own sleep upon seeing the skull. Was there an associative aura about the relic? If so, it only added to the peculiar fascination exerted by the unsmiling skull of the Marquis de Sade.

"I don't understand you at all," he declared. "I should think you couldn't wait to lay hands on that skull."

"Perhaps I'm not the only one who can't wait," Sir Fitzhugh muttered.

"What are you getting at?"

"You know de Sade's history. You know the power of morbid fascination such evil geniuses exert upon the imagination of men. You feel that fascination yourself; that's why you want the skull.

"But you're a normal man, Maitland. You want to *buy* the skull and keep it in your collection of *curiosa*. An abnormal man might not think of buying. He might think of stealing it—or even killing the owner to possess it. Particularly if he wanted to do more than merely own it; if, for example, he wanted to *worship* it."

Sir Fitzhugh's voice sank to a whisper as he continued, "I'm not trying to frighten you, my friend. But I know the history of that skull. During the last hundred years it has passed through the hands of many men. Some of them were collectors, and sane. Others were perverted members of secret cults; worshipers of pain, devotees of Black Magic. Men have died to gain that grisly relic, and other men have been—*sacrificed* to it.

"It came to me quite by chance, six months ago. A man like your friend Marco offered it to me. Not for a thousand pounds, or five hundred. He gave it to me as a gift, because he was afraid of it.

"Of course I laughed at his notions, just as you are probably laughing at mine, now. But during the six months that the skull has remained in my hands, I've suffered.

"I've had queer dreams. Just staring at the unnatural, unsmiling grimace is enough to provoke nightmares. Didn't you sense an emanation from the thing? They said de Sade wasn't mad—and I believe them. He was far worse; he was *possessed*. There's something *unhuman* about that skull. Something that attracts others, living men whose skulls hide a bestial quality that is also unhuman or inhuman.

"And I've had more than my dreams to deal with. Phone calls came, and mysterious letters. Some of the servants have reported lurkers on the grounds at dusk."

"Probably ordinary thieves, like Marco, after a valuable object," Maitland commented.

"No," Sir Fitzhugh sighed. "Those unknown seekers did more than attempt to steal the skull. *They came into my house at night and adored it!*

"Oh, I'm quite positive about the matter, I assure you! I kept the skull in a glass case in the library. Often, when I came to see it in the mornings, I found that it had been moved during the night.

"Yes, moved. Sometimes the case was smashed and the skull placed on the table. Once it was on the floor.

"Of course I checked up on the servants. Their alibis were perfect. It was the work of outsiders; outsiders who probably feared to possess the skull completely, yet needed access to it from time to time in order to practise some abominable and perverted rite.

"They came into my house, I tell you, and worshiped that filthy skull! And when it was stolen, I was glad—very glad.

"All I can say to you is, keep away from the whole business! Don't see this man Marco and don't have anything to do with that accursed graveyard relic!"

Maitland nodded. "Very well," he said. "I am grateful to you for your warning."

He left Sir Fitzhugh shortly thereafter.

Half an hour later, he was climbing the stairs to Marco's dingy attic room.

V

HE CLIMBED the stairs to Marco's room; climbed the creaking steps in the shabby Soho tenement and listened to the curiously muffled thumping of his own heartbeat.

But not for long. A sudden howl resounded from the landing above, and Maitland scrambled up the last few stairs in frantic haste.

The door of Marco's room was locked, but the sounds that issued from within stirred Maitland to desperate measures.

Sir Fitzhugh's warnings had prompted him to carry his service revolver on this errand; now he drew it and shatttered the lock with a shot.

Maitland flung the door back against the wall as the howling reached the ultimate frenzied crescendo. He started into the room, then checked himself.

Something hurtled toward him from the floor beyond; something launched itself at his throat.

Maitland raised his revolver blindly and fired.

For a moment sound and vision blurred. When he recovered, he was half-kneeling on the floor before the threshold. A great shaggy form rested at his feet. Maitland recognized the carcass of a gigantic police dog.

Suddenly he remembered Marco' reference to the beast. So that explained it! The dog had howled and attacked. But—why?

Maitland rose and entered the sordid bedroom. Smoke still curled upward from the shots. He gazed again at the prone animal, noting the gleaming yellow fangs grimacing even in death. Then he stared around at the shoddy furniture, the disordered bureau, the rumpled bed—

The rumpled bed on which Mr. Marco lay, his throat torn in a red rosary of death.

Maitland stared at the body of the little fat man and shuddered.

Then he saw the skull. It rested on the pillow near Marco's head: a grisly bedfellow that seemed to peer curiously at the corpse in ghastly *camaradie*. Blood had spattered the hollow cheekbones, but even beneath this sanguinary stain, Maitland could see the peculiar solemnity of the death's head.

For the first time, he fully sensed the aura of evil which clung to the skull of de Sade. It was palpable in this ravaged room; palpable as the presence of death

itself. The skull seemed to glow with actual charnel phosphorescence.

Maitland knew now that his friend had spoken the truth. There *was* a dreadful magnetism inherent in this bony horror . . a veritable Elixir of Death that worked and preyed upon the minds of men—and beasts.

It must have been that way. The dog, maddened by the urge to kill, had finally attacked Marco as he slept, and destroyed him. Then it had sought to attack Maitland when he entered. And through it all, the skull had watched; watched and gloated just as de Sade would gloat had his pale blue eyes flickered in the shadowed sockets.

Somewhere within the cranium, perhaps, the shriveled remnants of his cruel brain were still attuned to terror. The magnetic force it focussed had a compelling enchantment even in the face of what Maitland knew.

That is why Maitland, driven by a compulsion he could not wholly explain or seek to justify, stooped down and lifted the skull. He held it for a long moment in the classic pose of Hamlet.

Then he left the room, forever carrying the death's head in his arms.

FEAR rode Maitland's shoulders as he hurried through the twilit streets. Fear whispered strangely in his ear, warning him to hurry lest the body of Marco be discovered and the police pursue him. Fear prompted him to enter his own house by a side door and go directly to his rooms so that none would see the skull he concealed beneath his coat.

Fear was Maitland's companion all that evening. He sat there, staring at the skull on the table, and shivered with repulsion.

Sir Fitzhugh was right, he knew it. There *was* a damnable influence issuing from the skull and the black brain within. It had caused Maitland to disregard the sensible warnings of his friend—it had caused Maitland to steal the skull itself from a dead man—it had caused him now to conceal himself in this lonely room.

He should call the authorities; he knew that. Better still, he should dispose of the skull. Give it away, throw it away, rid the earth of it forever. There was something puzzling about the cursed thing—something he didn't quite understand.

For, knowing these truths he still desired to possess the skull of the Marquis de Sade. There was an evil enchantment here; the dormant baseness in every man's soul was aroused and responded to the loathly lust which poured from the death's head in waves.

He stared at the skull, shivered—yet knew he would not give it up; could not. Nor had he the strength to destroy it. Perhaps possession would lead him to madness in the end. The skull would incite others to unspeakable excesses.

Maitland pondered and brooded; seeking a solution in the impassive object that confronted him with the stolidity of death.

It grew later. Maitland drank wine, and paced the floor. He was weary. Perhaps in the morning he could think matters through and reach a logical, a sane conclusion.

Yes, he was upset. Sir Fitzhugh's outlandish hints had disturbed him; the gruesome events of the late afternoon preyed on his nerves.

No sense in giving way to foolish fancies about the skull of the mad Marquis . . better to rest.

Maitland flung himself on the bed. He reached out for the switch and extinguished the light. The moon's rays slithered through the window and sought out the skull on the table, bathing it in eery luminance. Maitland stared once more at the jaws that should grin and did not.

Then he closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep. In the morning he'd call Sir Fitzhugh, make a clean breast of things, and give the skull over to the authorities.

Its evil career—real or imaginary—would come to an end. So be it.

Maitland sank into slumber. Before he dozed off he tried to focus his attention on something . . something puzzling . . an impression he'd received upon gazing at the body of the police dog in Marco's room. The way its fangs gleamed.

Yes. That was it. There had been no blood on the muzzle of the police dog. Strange. For the police dog had bitten Marco's throat. No blood—how could that be?

Well, that problem was best left for morning, too. . . .

It seemed to Maitland that as he slept, he dreamed. In his dream he opened his eyes and blinked in the bright moonlight. He stared at the table top and saw that the skull was no longer resting on its surface.

That was curious, too. No one had come into the room, or he would have been aroused.

IF HE had not been sure that he was dreaming, Maitland would have started up in terror when he saw the stream of moonlight on the floor—the stream of moonlight through which the skull was rolling.

It turned over and over again, its bony visage impassive as ever, and each revolution brought it closer to the bed.

Maitland's sleeping ears could almost hear the thump as the skull landed on the bare floor at the foot of the bed. Then began the grotesque progress so typical of night fantasies. The skull climbed the side of the bed!

Its teeth gripped the dangling corner of a bedsheet, and the death's head literally whirled the sheet out and up, swinging it in an arc which landed the skull on the bed at Maitland's feet.

The illusion was so vivid he could feel the thud of its impact against the mattress. Tactile sensation continued, and Maitland felt the skull rolling along up the covers. It came up to his waist, then approached his chest.

Maitland saw the bony features in the moonlight, scarcely six inches away from his neck. He felt a cold weight resting on his throat. The skull was moving now.

Then he realized the grip of utter nightmare, and struggled to awake before the dream continued.

A scream rose in his throat—but never issued from it. For Maitland's throat was seized by champing teeth: teeth that bit into his neck with all the power of a moving human jawbone.

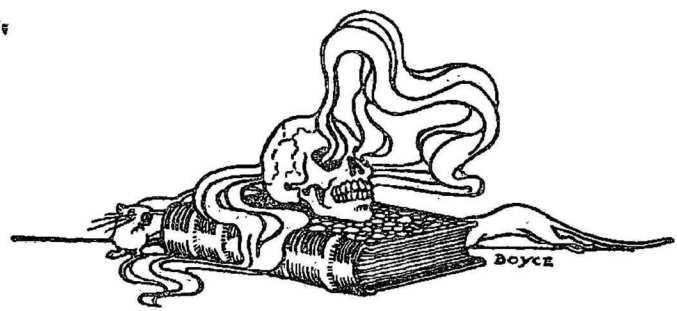
The skull tore at Maitland's jugular in cruel haste. There was a gasp, a gurgle, and then no sound at all.

After a time, the skull righted itself on Maitland's chest.

Maitland's chest no longer heaved with breathing, and the skull rested there with a curious simulation of satisfied repose.

The moonlight shone on the death's head to reveal one very curious circumstance. It was a trivial thing, yet somehow fitting under the circumstances.

Reposing on the chest of the man it had killed, the skull of the Marquis de Sade was no longer impassive. Instead, its bony features bore a definite, unmistakably *sadistic* grin.



The God-Box

By AUGUST DERLETH

What is sealed herein is not meant for human sight and dreadful woe shall take him who breaks the chant

AS HE got off the Underground in the vicinity of his home, Philip Caravel could scarcely conceal his self-satisfaction.

"Coo! And didn't 'e look like the mouse what swallowed the cheese!" said one of his late traveling companions to another as the Underground rolled on its way.

Caravel, however, was out of hearing, and would not have minded if he had

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

heard. It was a warm evening, just past dusk, with a misty rain falling and a yellow fog coming up over London. Autumn in the air, but Caravel walked along as if it were spring, jaunty of step and light of heart. He was very well pleased with himself, the way a man is when he has harbored apprehensions for a long time and finds them suddenly dispelled. He walked as if enclosed in a protective shell of familiarity—the London night with its odors and spicy perfumes here in the vicinity of the East India Docks, the mellow voices of river craft on the Thames, the rising chorus of fog horns, and a police-boat siren.

Even the sight of his dingy little house did not affect his spirits.

It was cozy enough inside, furnished in good taste, if a little cramped. He put down his briefcase almost tenderly, cast off the waterproof, and went directly to the telephone, where he gave a number and waited in smiling patience: a still young man, just beginning to gray a little at the temples, with a feral face and a feral mustache and long, thin fingers which tapped and drummed on the table.

The voice came. "Yes?"

"Professor Curtin?"

"Oh, it's you, Caravel."

"Can you come over?"

"Now?"

"It's urgent, rather. I've got something to show you."

"What have you been up to now?"

"I want to surprise you."

"Well, all right. But I was just in the middle of some interesting papers on the Ayar-Incas. You have no idea, my boy, to what an extent—"

A little impatiently Caravel said, "But the papers will wait—and this will not."

Caravel turned away from the telephone, conscious of hunger. He went over toward the briefcase, but thought better of it. He went into his small pantry and made himself a sandwich with which and the evening paper he settled himself in the one comfortable chair the room contained.

PRESENTLY Professor Curtin came. He had the look of an absent-minded character out of a Belcher or Cruikshank illustration. His tie was askew, he had forgotten to button his vest, and his bowler, which had needed dusting before he went out into the rain, now needed a thorough cleaning, beyond its owner's power to give. His eyes were myopic behind his rain-streaked spectacles, which he took off on the stoop and wiped as he walked into Caravel's brightly-lit study.

"I could tell you'd been up to something by the tone of your voice," he said to his host. "And I wondered how long you would get away with it. You know, there is a law of averages."

"And of retribution and punishment, too," said Caravel ironically. "I've been down to Salisbury."

"Stonehenge?" asked Curtin, as he sat down.

"Just the museum this time."

The older man looked at the younger; for a short space, neither of them said anything. Then Caravel drew the briefcase over, unstrapped it, and took something out. It was a small copper box, bound all around with bands of silver or silver-alloy. He put it down before his guest.

"The God-Box!" exclaimed Curtin.

"I thought you would recognize it."

"But how on earth did you manage it? You're sure you weren't seen?"

"Absolutely."

"You planned it!"

"By all means. I studied the thing for weeks, and then I made as exact a copy as I could, without actually seeing the underside. With the copy in my briefcase, I went down, presented my credentials — after all, you know, I have been described even in the Times as a 'rising young archeologist'—and was permitted to examine it. The moment I was alone in the room, I simply exchanged the copy for the original, and here you have it. Would you like to open it?"

Professor Curtin paled and shrank back. "No."

Caravel laughed. "Superstitious?"

"Call it what you like. But anyway, its value as an ancient piece of its kind is diminished, once it's opened."

"I daresay it could be restored cleverly enough. You aren't afraid of the curse, are you? These things are all cursed, you know."

Professor Curtin looked distressed. "The

thing I always ask myself is just what is inside? Dust, or what damnable invention of some past master of evil?"

"You sound like a penny-dreadful, if you don't mind my saying so."

"As you like it. The fact is, Caravel, these things are very old. And there are more facts we do not yet know about the Druids than there are that we know."

"There's no question about the druidic origin of this thing, then?"

"None whatever. It's a genuine 'god-box'—which is a generic name for any sort of contrivance, usually enclosed, into which has supposedly been locked any god, genie, imp, devil, force, and so on. There is therefore no telling what the old Druid priests put into them, actually, eschewing gods and devils and the like. Certainly something designed to be dangerous, I should think, to keep the curious out with a vengeance. Turn it over, will you?"

Caravel did so.

Curtin adjusted his spectacles. "Yes, the legend is druidic."

"Will you translate?"

"Well, roughly—*What is sealed herein is from outside, called Sho-Gath, not meant for human sight. Dreadful woe shall take him who breaks the Chant. It is delivered unto the guardian of the box.*"

"Demoniac then, rather than a god?"

"At least not a benevolent deity." He sighed. "Now that you have it, what are you going to do with it?"

"Sell it, I suppose—like the other pieces."

"Some day you'll be caught."

Caravel smiled. "By the time they miss this, what with the copy I left, it will be impossible to determine who might have taken it, even if it is remembered that I had access to it, along with others."

"Whatever you do, though—I'd advise leaving it untouched."

Caravel turned the box over and over in his hand. It had a good weight, yet was not heavy. "Nothing very big can be inside this—and nothing too deadly, either. What do you suggest? Powdered *amanita virosa?*"

"I'm not an expert on Druid customs insofar as they concern just what actually is put into one of these boxes."

"It's beautifully made, when you examine it. All manner of intricate carvings; I had the devil of a time trying to approximate them. Fortunately, though, most of them are somewhat crude—crude enough, at any rate to deceive the guards or any other casual onlooker. How much do you think I should get for it?"

"From whom?"

"Lord Wittner usually buys for his private collection."

"At least a thousand guineas."

"Very comfortable."

"Still, the whole thing is indecently reprehensible."

CARAVEL laughed good-naturedly. "Isn't it? Except, of course, when *you* happen to want some little item badly yourself." He put the box down in the silence that fell, and turned again to the older man. "What was that bit about the 'guardian of the box'?"

"That meant simply that one of the priests—presumably at Stonehenge, where the box was found—was the especial guardian of this box."

"He didn't function very well when it was moved to the museum, did he?"

"Oh, that is to prevent its being opened, or if opened, to rectify the damage done. Presumably he has power over whatever is in the box. These primitive religious beliefs follow quite consistent patterns. One thing though—Sho-Gath is not druidic; it's Atlantean, as far as I can make out. Which makes it most curious."

"Yes?"

"Quite as if the thing had been inadvertently called up out of the sea or from the vicinity of the sea."

"You speak of it as something of an entity, Professor. How in the devil could it be? Look at the size of that box—about three inches by five by three deep—and tell me what kind of an entity would fit into a cramped space like that?"

"Mere protoplasmic matter, my boy," said Curtin vaguely, and smiled a little helplessly.

"You're maundering," answered Caravel. "Will you have a drink?"

They sat over a whiskey-and-soda and talked for an hour longer. Then Professor Curtin reminded his host of the Inca papers, talking with mounting enthusiasm of the

findings chronicled therein, and took himself off. Caravel saw him to the door; it was raining steadily now, and the fog was even more thick.

He returned to his study and took up the box once more. A thousand guineas! He examined the bands under a strong light; there were minute seals scratched on the material, whatever it was; it had the tarnished look of old silver, and very probably it was old silver. He shook the box; there was nothing in it; for it had an empty sound.

He rapped on it, selecting the unadorned bottom for his experiment; it gave forth a hollow sound. If anything had been put into it those centuries ago, it had long ago been reduced to dust. Some of his older fellow archeologists, Caravel reflected, were more than just a little pexilated.

He went to bed and slept.

LATE that night Caravel was awakened by a low, but insistent knocking on his door. He snapped on the bed-lamp and saw that the hour was just past two o'clock. He got up, since there was apparently no help for it, and went along the narrow little hall to the door, which had one triangular pane of glass in it. In the night, this looked darkly yellow to his sight, because the fog outside pressed so close. He went up to the glass and looked out.

An old man stood there, his head uncovered, a great black shawl draped over his shoulders.

Mystified, Caravel opened the door.

"If you are looking for Dr. Blenner, his house is two doors down," he said.

He saw with some horror that the man on his stoop must be very old; his skin was leathery and pressed in wrinkled tautness to his bones, so that his head was smaller than it should have been, and his gray, wispy hair thin and incredibly matted.

"I am not the doctor," he said again.

The shawl caught his eye; it was not a shawl; it was a long wrapping, like cerements.

The old man put out a clawlike hand.

"For God's sake, come in," stammered Caravel, gazing in fascinated horror at the leathery hand extended toward him, palm up.

"The box," said the old man at last, in a voice which creaked and rasped.

"I don't know what you mean," said Caravel coldly.

"The box," repeated the old man. "Give it back to me."

The voice was horrible. Caravel shuddered. He backed away from the door, said again that he did not know what the old man was talking about, and then closed the door. From outside rose the voice again, repellent, implicable, with that same quality of difficult speech, as if articulation had not taken place for a long time.

"I will wait. I abjure you, by the Sign of Koth, do not open it."

So he had after all been observed, reflected Caravel. The thing to do now was to get the box out of the way before the old duffer went for the police. He thought of the reputation he had so carefully built up for a front. The box would not lend itself to easy concealment. He locked the door and went rapidly to the study, where he carefully drew down the curtains before he ventured to put on a small table-lamp in the center of the room.

HE GOT the box and pondered what to do with it. If only he had gone directly to Lord Wittner and not troubled to gloat about his prize to Professor Curtin! But it was too late to think of that now, what with the old man waiting out there on the stoop. If he were still there.

The thought sent him cautiously back to the front door once more. He peered out. The fog swirled in yellow dreariness there. He ventured to unlatch the door and look around the door jambs. Nothing. Nothing but fog everywhere. The cries of harbor and river boats, of fog-horns and the multitude of sounds rising from the East India docks assailed his ears, nothing more. He withdrew into his house again, latching the door once more. The absence of his visitor alarmed him still more. Suppose he had gone straightway to the police? He might even at this moment be talking to a bobby somewhere!

He hastened back to the study.

There was one thing he could do, perhaps more expeditiously than any other. The police would look for a box. They

would not think immediately of looking for parts of a box. He could take it apart, and effectively conceal the various parts of it. His only problem would arise in doing it no damage, with an eye toward that thousand guineas he could get for it after he had put it back together again.

He worked cool-headedly, getting out his tools without delay, and sitting down under the table lamp. The bands must come off first, and then the mortised sides—for it appeared to be mortised. Since the bands appeared to be fused together at their ends on the underside of the box, the simplest way to take them off would be to saw them at the point of fusion, trusting that the second fusion later would conceal his vandalism.

Without hesitation, Caravel sawed the bands in two and worked them off the box. With a fleeting curiosity, he lifted the cover. As he had thought, the box was empty; nothing presented itself to his gaze.

But wait—what was that dark spot, the size of a half-penny, in one corner? Rather, the size of a half-crown. No, larger—*it was growing!* It was a wisp, a puff, a thin swirl of smoke rising out of one corner of the box. Caravel dropped it as if it were hot to his fingers. It fell with the cover back and lay there. He lifted the lamp to cast some illumination over it. Black as pitch, smoke rolled out—a ball, a cloud, a fulminant pillar, convoluted and churning.

Caravel fell back, around the table; already the smoke filled a quarter of the room—a half—and then he saw rising out of its depths a pair of malignant, dreadful eyes, a ghastly travesty of a face, a grotesque, maddening horror of a thing transcending the boundaries of human experience! He screamed once, hoarsely; then his articulation was paralyzed. He leapt for the door, but the pillar of smoke, still swelling and glowing, assaulting the walls, the ceiling, the floor, fell upon him with the fearful animation of something long unfed.

The bursting asunder of Philip Caravel's house was a minor sensation even for the staid *Times*. It was manifest that only an explosion could have done it. And only an explosion could have torn Caravel himself apart. The more sensational papers hinted darkly that not enough pieces had been found to complete the remains of Caravel which were finally interred. But of mystery, there was little, thanks to the metropolitan police. They held the key to the riddle. They had long been looking for dynamiters and anarchists in the region of the East India docks, and it was too much to lay an explosion in that vicinity to pure chance. Simple deduction did it. Obviously Philip Caravel was leading a double life, and his archeological research was a masquerade for his real nihilist activities. It was fortunate that what must have been an experiment gone wrong resolved the matter with such dispatch.

The only jarring note in the proceedings was the hysterical statement of a streetwalker who had been pursuing her pitiful profession in the vicinity of the house when it had burst apart. She had seen no fire; the police said nothing of their own inability to discover evidence of fire, powder, or anything at all detonatable. But she had seen something else.

She had seen a very old man in a long "shawl or something like a sheet" go into the house and come out very shortly thereafter followed by something "big and black," which seemed to her in the fog to be "like a great big cloud of smoke, 'igher than the 'ouse." This had followed the old man docilely enough straight out to the sidewalk, and a little way up the street; then the old man had stopped and put something down on the pavement and shouted out some words she could not understand—"not English or French or Portugee"—which were the languages she had picked up in her small life, whereupon the "big black thing" had gone into it "just like a funnel" and disappeared. Thereupon the old man had picked up whatever it was he had laid down in the first place, put it under his arm, and shuffled off in the direction of southwest London.

This was the direction of Salisbury, a coincidence even greater than that offered by the metropolitan police. But they did not have the proper key to interpret it and hushed up the streetwalker. Professor Curtin, who did, lost himself for weeks in the Inca papers and wisely said nothing.

Night of Impossible Shadows

MY FIRST reaction to Paul's telegram was one of exasperated annoyance. He had sent me an airmail special a few weeks ago begging me to come to his country home, that it was a matter of great urgency and he must see me right away. I wrote back and refused as politely and tactfully as I could, explaining that even "a lawyer needs a vacation once a year," which was just what I intended taking, and—had he forgotten my bride of less than a year, Elaine?

My reply was final, or was meant to be, and then my golden-haired wife brought me the yellow envelope.

"One of your paroled clients, Mr. Anderson?" she kidded me.

I ripped it open and frowned at the "Valley Lake" sender's address.

"Come immediately. Must see you. Life or death. Bring Elaine." It was signed simply "Paul."

I would have dismissed the thing, for after all my three-week vacation was very precious to me. I wanted every minute of it, and with Elaine. But she, standing on tiptoe looking over my shoulder, intervened, or was it fate?

"Jim," she said, "what an intriguing note! Is he serious? And where is Valley Lake?"

Before I could marshal my forces, she had a map out and her carmine-tipped finger was pointing at a spot in the upper reaches of the state. Even on the map the area looked desolate.

"Let's go," she said. "It'll be fun. He's asked me."

I had a hundred objections and she a hundred answers. Paul Okerdon was hardly my choice of a host for a carefree twenty-one day vacation.

I had known him in college and afterward as a major and experimenter in electronic science. He was cynical, disillusioned, a chronic scoffer, but withal, witty, highly intelligent, and at times, excellent company. It may seem strange that one who is studying the law and another whose interests were along the lines of science should have found a common meeting ground. That common meeting ground was the occult. All manner of things beyond normal. He had read extensively on the subject; I, less extensively, and perhaps my tastes were less highbrow. He was amused that during my college years I never missed a horror film that came to our local theatre near the campus.

Recollections of our talks floated back to me. He had maintained that we were in the infancy of our knowledge of this thing "Life," of all that went on and all around us. That it was merely the ignorant and the cowardly who scoffed at any novel suggestion, however outre or outlandish.

Paul Okerdon had a small income of his own. He stoutly maintained that he would work at no repetitious, unspectacular little jobs in construction companies or engineering firms. He had ideas of his own and was going to indulge both himself and his ideas. We exchanged letters often after graduation, but as the years passed, we saw each other less and less frequently.

. . .A land where shadows ruled, shadows gone mad, doing things not meant to be done or utterly impossible!

By ALLISON V. HARDING

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

He grew strangely diffident it seemed, and I, well, I was immersed in my increasing law work. Then he wrote me he was taking a sixty-acre place in Valley Lake, several hundred miles upstate. He urged me to come and see him in his new home. I think I might have but I was so very busy, and then I met Elaine and soon afterward we were married. He had written me a formal little congratulatory note but I hadn't heard from him again. That is, until now.

Elaine seemed so terribly excited about the idea that I found even my own mental reservations disappearing. After all, why not go up and visit the old fellow? I hadn't seen him in a long while. He probably had highly controversial new theories on occultism he wanted to talk over with me. I dismissed the almost hysterical urgency of his telegram as being typical of Paul, who could command a wide range of sympathy-getting procedures to gain his own ends.

THAT evening I wired him that we were coming, and the next morning after an early breakfast we packed my coupé and started off. I hadn't been out of the city for three years except for very occasional week-ends and I must confess my thoughts were on the glories and attractions of a tree and some green grass rather than on Paul.

Elaine chattered at my side with road maps spread out on knees. We followed State Highway 1 faithfully all morning, and at lunch time when we pulled up at the side of the road for sandwiches and thermos coffee that we'd brought with us, we figured we were halfway there. Elaine sniffed delightedly at the country air with her exquisite little nose.

"It's a treat to be out here, Jim. You and your dusty old law tomes!"

I agreed with her. We took our time eating and then started off again. As the afternoon wore on, I noticed that the green, lush countryside, although in no way losing its beauty, grew more desolate, more primitive even. What houses there were seemed much fewer and farther between.

"How near are we, Honey?" I asked Elaine.

She crinkled up her blue eyes and squinted at the map. We rumbled over a rude wooden bridge, its planks shaking to the weight of our car. She indicated something on the map.

"That must be this, Jimmy, the bridge we just went over. It can't be so very many more miles."

The road was narrower now. The concrete had ended back beyond the creek we'd crossed. This highway was dirt. In my rear-vision mirror I could see how clearly the mark of our tire treads stood out, as though other autos had not been along for some time. The trees grew closer to the road here, and the late afternoon sun dropped behind them leaving the highway criss-crossed with long, sentrylike shadows. Elaine shivered a little and pulled on her coat.

"It's chilly up here, Jim."

"When the sun goes down," I said. "You're used to the hot pavements, gal!"

But I felt the chillier air myself and rolled the window up halfway on my side. The gold and light blue seemed to be squeezed out of the sky. Purple took its place and twilight came on us with the suddenness of an August thunderstorm. Almost involuntarily I speeded up, and the coupé jounced along the crude road.

I fumbled in my suit pocket for Paul's letter. His instructions were explicit: "Follow the dirt road until you come to a long hill. You go up to the top and then down about halfway. On the right you'll see two iron gateposts. There's a rusted sign but I'm sure you'll be able to make out 'Valley Lake Estate.'"

Elaine frowned at the letter. For the first time something seemed to strike her.

"He seems awfully upset about something, Jim, and that telegram! You don't think he's ill?"

"Why send for me, darling?" I replied. "I'm not a doctor."

"But you've told me yourself, you're probably his closest friend."

"Simply because Paul *hasn't* other friends, to my knowledge. I'm not the closest. Once perhaps. But you've come between us!"

Elaine giggled, "You mean those musty old law tomes."

My coupé nosed its way onto the hill road and began to climb. It took second gear to get up to the top, and the car moving at slow speed, rolled over the brow. In the twilight we had a wonderful view of the

countryside below. It stretched out in front of us in patterns of green and brown, seemingly lush, unbroken wilderness.

"Why, it's like a jungle!" Elaine gasped.

I was thinking myself it looked as though no living creature dwelt here, or could or would want to.

MY AUTO picked up speed as we rolled downhill. I braked gently around a corner, and then suddenly coming in sight on the right were the iron gateposts. Even in the increasingly dim light, we could make out the legend on one of the iron plates, "Valley Lake Lodge."

As we passed through the gates and down an even narrower dirt road, the trees seemed to close more tightly around us. It was dark enough for me to use my headlight. The birch and elm trees gave way to evergreens, I noticed, and then my car lights picked up something ahead. We turned to run parallel to water.

"Suppose that's Valley Lake," Elaine suggested in a hushed voice. "Sort of a spooky place, Jim, don't you think?"

I felt her soft shoulder pressing closer to me and I patted her arm reassuringly.

"We ought to see Paul's place pretty soon. He's really got a chunk of land here."

Needles from the evergreen's muted our car tires and we seemed to steal on silent rubber tiptoes deeper into a strange wilderness. And then the tunnel of trees through which we'd been riding opened out. The road curved sharply to the right and swept toward a large dark bulge of house that loomed up out of the early evening.

"There it is!" I said with an attempt at cheerfulness.

The place did look gloomy. There was one light high up in a wing. A small pinpoint of yellow. The rest was dark, forbidding. It was a trick of the light, I knew, mixed with fatigue from our long journey, but the structure looked like some huge loathsome monster, waiting to spring as we came out of the forest toward it.

"Golly! Jim, it's like one of those silly movies you drag me to! I don't think any man lives here. We'll probably find a dragon!"

I laughed appreciatively.

"If Paul's turned himself into a dragon, he's done more in this line than I ever thought he could! No, I'm afraid it's just his odd, egotistical way. He's probably even forgotten we're to arrive."

We pulled up in front of the steps that piled one upon another onto the porch. I got out and slammed the car door and came around to Elaine's side.

"I hope a big meal's waiting for us," I commented.

"It's so dark," she said. "Jim, he isn't, well, crazy or anything, is he?"

"As a lawyer, I can assure you Paul Okerdon was never insane in the legal sense of the word. That's all that can be said for a lot of us. Look at me and my musty old tomes!"

I feigned a jocularity I did not feel. Elaine was clinging to my arm and we mounted the stairs onto the dark porch. Our eyes, growing accustomed to the gloom, found the door and the black button set at one side. I thumbed it, and inside somewhere a bell sounded sharply. We heard steps and then a light flooded the porch. We grinned at each other.

"Some dragon!" I murmured. I could see Elaine was relieved.

"Hello Paul!" I called.

THE door was thrown back and my erstwhile college companion stood before us. I reached for his hand instinctively. And although he returned my clasp, somehow the coldness of his fingers tempered my enthusiasm. I introduced Elaine and he led us inside. I could see my wife had recovered from any doubts she'd had about the place, but an edge of uneasiness crept into my mind. As Paul stood before us in the great hall, his face was, well, Paul's. But it was as though a great conflict had raged in the man for some time. I am trained to notice such things in court, and quite obviously to one like myself who had known him for so long, Paul was highly elated about something—and at the same time also in deadly fear.

With conventional small-talk out of the way, Paul showed us our room, a large dark-paneled chamber made more depressing by its ancient mahogany furniture, its windows revealing nothing but the rustling blackness of trees at the corner of the house. I felt

the driveway should be down there somewhere but it was too dark to see even the outline of our coupé. Elaine was humming in the background as she unpacked the bags.

When we had readied ourselves to go downstairs, we found Paul bustling in the large old-fashioned kitchen like any suburban housewife.

"Can't get anybody nowadays, especially to work way out in the country like this, as I wrote Jim in one of my letters," he explained to Elaine.

"Now let me do things," Elaine said, her attention already attracted by a sizzling pot on the stove that needed water added.

"No, no, please," Paul smiled with a charming diffidence that I remembered from earlier days. "Just because I'm without a staff and entourage is no fair excuse to press my guests into service."

But Elaine made herself helpful and I leaned against the white enamel table chatting about this and that. With dinner ready Elaine led the way toward the dining room. Paul followed and I brought up the rear with a fistful of silver which made me feel useful but much to Elaine's amusement.

As we pushed out of the kitchen through the planked pantry door into a little serving hall, I noticed that the light from behind threw Paul's and my moving shadow against the wall and he stopped suddenly as though surprised or in fear. I know, because I almost rammed into his back with my handful of knives and forks. He didn't answer to the small joke I made but I thought no more about it—at the time.

The meal was pleasant. When a man cooks well, and Paul did, he is usually exceptional, and our long trip had made us hungry. We talked of old classmates out of the past, gone from one's life and the small tragedy of it. Then we adjourned to the living room, a room even larger than the dining chamber, with a high ceiling and a small balcony on two sides. The evening passed quickly and I found myself stifling yawns. The country air will do that to a man who's been in the city too long.

Paul had spoken superficially of his own interest in psychic and occult research. Elaine tied in a reference to me, pointing a finger accusingly.

"Jim's work has none of the elements of intrigue and adventure that keeps a man young. The law turns you old before your time, Paul," she mocked me pityingly. "Look, he's yawning already!"

But Paul's expression as he looked at me was one very hard to describe. I think envy is the nearest I can come to an evaluation.

"Say," I broke in, "I've got to stick my car somewhere, Paul. This castle must have some sort of a garage. Even a shed'll do."

"Of course," replied Paul, rising. "How stupid of me to forget. C'mon, Jim. Will you excuse us a moment, Elaine?"

We went through the great hall out onto the porch, and Paul produced a small flashlight.

"Golly," I said, "I didn't know it could get as black as this! I miss those electric signs!"

Paul played the thin beam of light across the drive to the car. I got in. He followed.

"Half a turn around the center," he directed, "then there's another gravel drive leading to the right. There's a big shed at the end of that."

I started the coupé's motor and we moved away in gear. The headlights picked up the turn, and then a few yards further a square shed at road's end.

"You've still got room for a couple of stagecoaches here," I joked with the coupé put away in the big barn. "Got your torch?"

PAUL nodded. I switched off the lights. As I did so, I felt his hand suddenly on my shoulder.

"Did you see that?" he hissed, and the thin beam of the pocket-flash played around the huge shed making grotesque and gigantic shadows.

"What!" I demanded.

His grip on my arm slackened and fell away. His silence was ominous. The beam caught the painted white inside of the shed door. As we were about to pass outside, I saw Paul's face. It was ashen in the light that reflected back. His skin bloodless, something had shaken him to the innermost of his very being. Outside of the rude structure, the starless darkness settled around us, the torch beam small in the gloom. A pinpoint of light showed ahead, far ahead. I hadn't realized the house was so distant. Paul's steps beside me quickened.

"What's wrong, Paul? What did you see?" I questioned again.

His only answer was to turn his head and look back. Although nothing could have been seen in the impenetrable gloom behind us, I followed suit and cold apprehension needled up and down my back. Paul's steps speeded up almost into a half run. His breath had the sound of a fleeing animal and I was caught up in the spirit of fright.

We reached the circular driveway and then finally the porch steps loomed ahead. I slackened speed abruptly.

"For God's sake, man, what was all that about!" I exploded, more than a little ashamed of myself.

Paul slowed too, and my eyes grown more accustomed to the darkness could make out the dejection of his figure.

"I . . . I'm terribly sorry, Jim.

He took my hand and squeezed it.

"Won't you put it down to a man who's lived too long alone out here? I guess my nerves are jumpy. Silly of me."

His laugh was forced and his fingers in my hand had the same coldness I had noticed before. Fear causes that. We climbed the porch steps and went inside. Soon after, Elaine and I went upstairs to our room. The open windows let in cool fragrant air as we settled ourselves for bed. The last thing in the world I wanted was to suggest any fear thoughts to Elaine. In fact, the happiest part of our vacation so far was the enjoyment my citified wife seemed to be getting out of this country visit.

With the light out I shut my eyes but sleep was elusive. Long after I heard my wife's breathing become regular in slumber I lay on my back, thinking, staring up at the ceiling. Paul's actions this night had been strange, to say the least. I wondered if living alone had affected his mind. The thought of sleeping in the same house with someone unbalanced was not conducive to restfulness.

The late moon threw thin gray light into the room, shadowing bedposts, chairs, and bureau. There was the occasional chirp of a cricket or humming noise of other small insects from outside, and then I heard a faint noise in the corridor outside our bedroom. There was no sound for a second and then the heavy iron handle turned and the door began to open, so slowly at first I thought it a trick of my staring eyes. I raised myself higher in bed. Then the opening was large enough for me to see Paul's figure touched by a shaft of moonlight, standing there solemnly. He raised his fingers to his lips and then motioned me to come. I silently slipped my bare feet into slippers and stole out of the room. Elaine still slept.

I followed Paul down the long gloomy corridor lit by one small bulb, down the stairs that led to his room. It was not until we were inside with the door closed that he spoke.

"I had to talk to you, Jim, and right away. I hoped to pass off the earlier events of tonight but my resolution . ." he made a hopeless little gesture ". . . well, it didn't work out, did it?"

I nodded. "I want you to tell me, Paul. I want to help you."

IF THE man were unbalanced, this would be the only way to handle him. One side of his bedchamber was lined with bookcases, and here and there I spotted a familiar title. Books of pseudo-science, of psychical research. There were many more I did not recognize. We sat down, Paul facing me. He began speaking.

"As you know, I have been interested in the unusual, the outré, Jim. I'm not going to bore you with a lot of scientific folderol because a lawyer is even less of a mathematician than I am. But as you may have guessed, knowing me of old, I took this place, frankly, because I wanted to be undisturbed in my experiments. Now that you've driven here yourself, I think you will believe it when I tell you that this is one of the most out-of-the-way spots in our section of the country."

I nodded, wondering what would come next.

"I had no set idea when I came here, but there were many that I wished to follow up. The creation of some Frankenstein monster is spectacular but thoroughly impractical. My interests were directed toward other fields, yet as I now have found out, nonetheless spectacular." He stopped.

"Well, go ahead," I urged. "Tell me more about it, Paul."

The man's enthusiasm grew as he talked on.

"I became interested in light, not as a scientist for my training is not profound in that direction, but in its relation to the psychic, to the occult. Light simply is a form of imagery which, by its action upon our organs of vision produces sight. Without taxing your legal mind, Jim, I think you can grasp that light is transmitted by undulations of the ether, a sort of radiant energy."

I bobbed my head. "Fine, but what—?"

Paul raised his hand.

"The next step in the study of light, the logical progression, was the study of shadow. Shadow we know as a sort of obscurity or shade within defined limits in a space from which rays are thrown off by an interposed body. I think you can visualize shadow easily as the image made by such an obscure space on some intercepting service, a wall or ceiling. You follow me, Jim?"

"To the limits of my legal mind," I grinned, but Paul Okerdon had no time for humor.

"I have discovered something that you with your conventional mind will not accept, for I with my willingness to believe almost anything, would not accept—at first! No, not until its truth was forced upon me."

I leaned forward in my chair. "What is it?"

"A shadow, Jim, is not a detached secondary visual experience. It is something of its own, a living entity in some peculiar way, whose purposes for reasons not yet apparent to me, have been served best by subordinating itself by mimicking and imitating man."

"You mean . . ." I started with a frown.

"I mean that your shadow, my shadow is not a meaningless harmless little patch of darkness and nothingness. It's something far more ordered, more sinister, more progressive than any of us have ever guessed."

I SETTLED back in my chair, studying Paul's face. My worst fears were realized. He was obviously unbalanced. I censured myself for bringing my wife hundreds of miles to live under the same roof with a lunatic.

"I can see the five-letter word 'doubt' written across your face, Jim," and Paul's smile was not a pleasant one. "There has always been doubt of those who discovered anything new and revolutionary."

"You've been out here too long, old man. You need to get away from this place. Come into the city and see people. Forget your dabblings in the occult arts for a while." I realized I'd said the wrong thing as his face clouded.

"Dabblings in the occult arts!" he repeated after me. "I pray to God another had discovered what I have uncovered instead of me!"

"Mankind has lived with its shadows for many centuries, Paul. What do you think is going to be different?"

"I don't know. I just don't know," he replied miserably. "But this place here, Jim. It's haunted by them."

"By what?"

"By shadows. Shadows without any rime or reason. Without the God-created form of human or animal structure that should give them being. Shadows that are independent of us and that have a malign, monstrous power of their own. I feel I'm a prisoner here now with this knowledge."

"That's absurd!" I burst out. "You're talking like a little boy afraid of a graveyard!"

My restraint was gone.

"I suppose you realize, Paul, that you're giving every indication of having worked much too hard and of having been alone much too long."

"You mean you think . . ." he tapped his own forehead significantly and smiled. "No, Jim, I'm afraid not. Perhaps it was selfish of me to have you come up here. Yes, it was, but I had to have someone I could trust, someone I had known out of the past. I boasted we were friends, you know. I like to think of you as the best one I have. You know about me and my past and the type of unusual research I've always been interested in. I had thought I could impart some of this discovery to you before whatever revenge was meant for me was meted out. This would make for some permanent record the means of my death, date, time, in a way to certificate it.

"But now, Jim, I'm very much afraid that through my eagerness, my selfishness if you will, I have gotten you and your lovely young wife into almost the same predicament I am in.

"These shadow forces are more powerful than I thought. I'm afraid, Jim, we're all

prisoners here now till some form of death relieves our vigil."

The man was obviously insane. I believed it now with my whole heart. His threats against me and Elaine were typical. I knew I must josh him into a more reasonable mood.

"Come on now, Paul," I slapped his knee. "Don't let this thing get you down. You're coming back to the city with us."

"Even after what I've told you?" He looked at me penetratingly. "You don't believe me?"

"Of course not," I said. "I don't think you really do either, Paul. You're far too sensible, too intelligent, to be afraid of, well, afraid of shadows."

There was silence then between us, a silence that seemed to come from every corner of the huge old house.

AND then shattering the silence with soul-shocking suddenness came a shriek of mortal terror. In an instant I was on my feet and out the door, dashing up the stairs toward the screams.

"Elaine!" I cried, "I'm coming!"

Paul was at my heels. I burst into our bedroom and rushed over to where my wife was sitting upright in bed. The table lamp beside her was on. I took her in my arms and cushioned her blonde head against my shoulders, soothing her sobs. Paul stood gravely by.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Oh, Jim," she gasped. "Something so horrible! It must have been some sort of awful nightmare!"

"What was it?" whispered Paul.

"Something in the room," Elaine replied against my chest. "Something huge and horrible. It was so real though, darling." She turned her frightened face upward toward me and I kissed her forehead tenderly.

"It seemed to envelop me, to smother me. It was like like a huge black distorted shadow!"

I turned my head and found Paul's eyes boring into my own. There was a smile on his face not nice to see and I again squeezed Elaine's head protectively to my shoulder. My mind worked at top speed as I stood there trying to control my own emotions. I looked again at Paul. His face was a mask now, as he leaned against the bureau watching us.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked me.

"Thanks, no. Elaine's had a fright. Anyone can have a mean nightmare like that."

Paul's acknowledgement was the suggestion of an enigmatic smile. Elaine had regained her composure now.

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

Paul withdrew then. My wrist-watch said one o'clock. I came to a quick decision. This was no place for Elaine, for us. I told my wife some of what had happened earlier, omitting the details of Okerdon's talk about the shadows.

"He's ill mentally," I summed up. "I'm afraid our coming here has been the very worst thing. It's disturbed him and upset him. I'm for slipping out."

My wife looked at me wide-eyed.

"You mean to leave now, in the middle of the night?"

My overwrought nerves gave way a bit then and I blurted out, "Your experience, Elaine. It may not have been entirely a dream!"

Her face paled again but I felt a sense of growing urgency. I was convinced that we were in the greatest peril, only of precisely what sort, I was not sure.

"You mean someone *was* in this room? But who, Jim?"

I shook my head. Far better to let Elaine think of this in a logical, normal manner than even consider the outré possibilities of the situation. What fiendish forces were at work in this accursed place, I did not know, but Paul was a man of tremendous intellect, of resources beyond normal. It was my job to get my wife out of here as soon as possible.

"We'd better dress," I said, and Elaine did so without further questioning.

It was then I turned to the bureau. My car keys were missing and Paul had been leaning there not long ago! Elaine had followed the direction of my eyes. I could see her quick mind had grasped the situation as my gaze came back to her face.

I walked to the door and was not entirely surprised to find it locked on the outside. Anger welled up in me and I rattled the heavy fixture in my hand and pounded on the thick panel.

"Okerdon!" I yelled. "Let us out of here!

What's the matter with you, man! Is this some stupid sort of joke?"

I knew better but this was the only way to talk to him. Paul's steps came along the hall and paused outside.

"Ah, Jim," he said. "I didn't want you to do anything rash like leaving hurriedly, so I took the precaution of shutting the door. Believe me, you're better off in there. Your quick mind has probably considered the window as an avenue of escape. I daresay, you and your pretty wife could make it that way, but there are things outside, Jim, things I fear you would not like, and I, as you have no doubt already noticed, also took the precaution of removing your car keys. It would be quite impossible to walk to the nearest house. There is no 'nearest' house."

HIS laugh punctuated the sentence, confirming my belief that we were in the house of a maniac. I thought back to the previous evening, to our experience in the shed.

Certainly Paul seemed compelled by some fear greater than anything of a subjective nature.

Elaine was at my side, her finger at her lips. She had her purse, and on her own key ring was a duplicate ignition key for the coupé. My wife often drove and we both kept a set. I smiled. It was the first card we had held all evening, but my exultation was short-lived.

The table light dimmed, dipped twice, and then flickered out. The sudden blackness was stifling. The thin rays from the moon outside shone feebly here and there.

But Paul's reaction outside the door was truly horrible. An animal sound in his throat grew to vile curses and entreaties. Heathen prayers and threats. I could make out little that was intelligible, but now and then I could understand a phrase:

"Don't! Don't! Destroy them, take them! Let me alone! Don't!"

I heard the sound of a striking match and a flicker of yellow light came under the door. Okerdon had been caught without his flashlight apparently.

I headed quickly to the window, guiding Elaine with me. There was a tree limb barely out of reach. The noise from the hall kept up. I stretched mightily for the limb and made it. I reached my hand back for Elaine, grasped hers.

"Come on," I ordered, and she forced herself away from the window-sill with her other arm.

Paul's screams were now accompanied by a tremendous knocking on the door. Almost as an afterthought I could hear metal scraping. He had inserted the key. I completed our trapeze act, lowering Elaine to the ground and dropping by her side myself. I turned and looked up then.

Paul came to the window, his face framed in the yellow flicker of a match. He screamed at us and I expected any minute he would vault from the window in pursuit. Pushing Elaine behind me I was fully prepared to fight, but Okerdon remained there in the window.

"Don't go out there!" he screamed. "For God's sake don't leave me. Jim, please!"

The match flickered and died and I heard the frenzied scraping as he lit another. The man's face above us was frightening beyond description. Madness is one thing, but lunacy induced by stark, raving fear is far more horrible.

I heard Elaine give a little cry. She had covered her face up with her hands. I turned away then and we started along the circular drive. Paul's shrieks and entreaties rose and fell. Some were to us, others to something else, begging them not to take him, not to destroy him. Indistinctly, every now and then he screamed one word over and over again. Elaine heard it and looked up at me.

"Shadows!" she shuddered.

The gravel crunched beneath our feet as we hurried. I knew the direction, but it was a considerable distance to the shed. My straining eyes could barely discern the turnout path from this we were on. Our quick steps took us out from beyond the shadow of the great house. The moon seemed to rise up behind its bulk and the way was somewhat brighter. The mansion we'd fled from was completely dark except for the flicker of light that was Paul in the window, calling, crying, cursing.

It was Elaine strangely who noticed it first. She grabbed my wrist tightly.

"Jim!"

Close behind where none should be was

a long thin shadow! A second appeared. This was a bulky, monstrous one. I turned my head even though I knew there would be nothing behind to have caused these shadows.

"Run!" My voice rose. "Run like hell, Elaine! Don't look back! Get your keys out and give them to me!"

WE SPED over the gravel. Then the shadows behind us, coming closer, taking all shapes and forms, reaching out tenuous, monstrous appendages toward us, and behind Paul Okerdon shrieked and yelled.

The dim outline of the shed was ahead. I fairly pushed Elaine before me. The door was only a few yards away.

"Jim!" Elaine sobbed and staggered a bit.

Oh God! I had felt it too, something soft as cotton yet with strength, touching, gripping for a moment on my flying legs, shaking me off balance for a second.

"Keep on!" I screamed, and we flung ourselves forward.

I gave Elaine a last push toward the door and threw myself after her against the increasing weight of a soft velvet pressure on my shoulder, another at my thigh, soft yet iron in strength, reaching out, groping and a third tight-vised at my left wrist. I hurled myself forward and the resistance slipped away.

We leaped into the car. I switched on the lights, cranked the motor, and accelerated madly out of the garage.

"Keep the windows up," I yelled, and as we headed toward the great circular drive; soft things plopped and swished at the glass.

We were running through patches of dark and light. There was a stripedness on each side of us and the car bumped and jerked a few times, but I kept the coupé in second gear, the gas to the floor. Only when we reached the drive did I notice the flames climbing out of the window where we had last seen Paul, shooting up the front of the old house.

Before we had gone a hundred yards more, the fire had spread and the old mansion was a flaming pyre. The flames lit up the desolate forest we passed through and even when we reached the iron gate and headed out on the country road, the flames were still visible behind us in the sky. There was no use turning back, even if we had dared. Paul was by now beyond any human help.

We sped through the lonely countryside for miles, and finally it was safe to slacken speed. I put my arm around Elaine and tried to quiet her shaking.

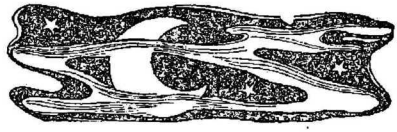
"Darling," I said, "it was a terrible experience but we're through it."

"But the shadows," she cried. "Jim, things like that can't be! But we *saw* them. I . . . I *felt* something!"

"We were wrought up," I argued. "Paul's collapse was shocking to both of us, poor devil. But as for anything else, that was imagination, darling. You've got to forget it."

My own mind had already started to reject the memories of our sprint across the grounds, our race against the shadows!

As I squeezed Elaine with my right arm, me left wrist gave a painful twinge. I looked at it in the dashlight. It was bruised severely. The welts were red and angry, raised around my wrist in perfect symmetry . unlike anything I had ever seen before!



Skeleton

By RAY BRADBURY

"God Almighty, all these years I've gone around with a Skeleton *inside of me!"*

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

IT WAS past time for him to see the doctor again. Mr. Harris turned palely in at the stair-well, and on his way up the flight he saw Dr. Burleigh's name gilded over a pointing arrow. Would Dr. Burleigh sigh when he walked in? After all, this would make the tenth trip so far this year. But Burleigh shouldn't complain; after all he got money for the examinations!

The nurse looked him over and smiled, a bit amusedly, as she tiptoed to the glazed glass door and opened it to put her head in. Harris thought he heard her say, "Guess who's here, Doctor?" And didn't the doctor's acid voice reply, faintly, "Oh my God, *again?*" Harris swallowed uneasily.

When Harris walked in, Dr. Burleigh snorted thinly. "Aches in your bones again! Ah!" He scowled at Harris and adjusted his glasses. "My dear Harris, you've been curried with the finest tooth-combs and bacteria-brushes known to science. You're only nervous. Let's see your fingers. Too many cigarettes. Let me smell your breath. Too much whiskey. Let's see your eyes. Not enough sleep. My response? Go home to bed, stop drinking, stop smoking. Ten dollars, please."

Harris stood there, sulking.

Dr. Burleigh looked up from his papers. "You still here? You're a hypochondriac! That's *eleven* dollars, now."

"But why should my bones ache?" asked Harris.

Dr. Burleigh addressed him like a child. "You ever had a pained muscle, and keep at it, irritating it, fussing with it, rubbing it? It gets worse, the more you bother it. Then you leave it alone and the pain vanishes. You realize you caused most of the soreness. Well, son, that's what's with you. Leave yourself alone. Take a dose of salts. Get out of here now! Take that business trip to Phoenix you've been stewing about for months. Do you good to get away!"

Mr. Harris riffled through a classified phone directory five minutes later, at the corner druggists. A fine lot of sympathy one got from blind fools like Burleigh!

He passed his finger down a list of BONE SPECIALISTS, found one named M. Munigant. Munigant lacked an M.D. or any other academical lettering behind his name, but his office was easily reached. Three blocks down, one block over. . . .

M. Munigant, like his office, was small and dark. Like his office, he smelled of iodoform, iodine and other odd things. He was a good listener, though, and listened with eager, shiny eyes, and when he talked to Harris, he had an accent and seemed to whistle every word, undoubtedly due to imperfect dentures. Harris told all.

M. Munigant nodded. He had seen cases like this before. The bones of the body. Man was not aware of his bones. Ah, yes, the bones. The skeleton. Most difficult. Something concerning an imbalance, an unsympathetic coordination between soul, flesh and bone. Very complicated, softly whistled M. Munigant. Harris listened, fascinated. Now, *here* was a doctor who understood his illness! Psychological, said M. Munigant. He moved swiftly, delicately to a dingy wall and rattled down half a dozen X-rays and paintings of the human skeleton. He pointed at these. Mr. Harris must become aware of his problem, yes. He pointed at this and that bone, and these and those, and some others.

The pictures were quite awful. They had something of the grotesquerie and off-bound horror of a Dali painting. Harris shivered.

M. Munigant talked on. Did Mr. Harris desire treatment of his bones?

"That all depends," said Harris.

M. Munigant could not help Harris unless Harris was in the proper mood. Psychologically, one had to NEED help, or the doctor was of no use. But (shrugging) Mr. Munigant would "try."

Harris lay on a table with his mouth open. The lights were off, the shades drawn. M. Munigant approached his patient. Something touched Harris' tongue. He felt the jawbones forced out. They cracked and made noises. One of those pictures on the dim wall seemed to leap. A violent shivering went through Harris and, involuntarily, his mouth snapped shut.

M. Munigant cried out. He had almost had his nose bitten off! It was no use. Now was not the time. M. Munigant raised the shades. He looked dreadfully disappointed. When Mr. Harris felt he could cooperate psychologically, when Mr. Harris really *needed* help and trusted M. Munigant to help him, then maybe something could be done. M. Munigant held out his little hand. In the meantime, the fee was only two dollars. Mr. Harris must begin to think. Here was a sketch for Mr. Harris to study. It would acquaint him with his body. He must be aware of himself. He must be careful. Skeletons were strange, unwieldy things. M. Munigant's eyes glittered. Good day to Mr. Harris. Oh, and would he have a bread-stick? He proffered a jar of long hard salty breadsticks to Harris, taking one himself to chew on, and saying that chewing breadsticks kept him in—ah—practice. See you soon, Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris went home.

THE next day was Sunday, and Mr. Harris started the morning by feeling all sorts of new aches and pains in his body. He spent some time glancing at the funny papers and then looking with new interest at the little painting, anatomically perfect, of a skeleton M. Munigant had given him.

His wife, Clarisse, startled him at dinner when she cracked her exquisitely thin knuckles, one by one, until he clapped his hands to his ears and cried, "Don't do that!"

The remainder of the day he quarantined himself in his room. Clarisse was seated at bridge in the living room with three other ladies, laughing and conversing. Harris himself spent his time fingering and weighing the limbs of his body with growing curiosity. After an hour of this he suddenly stood up and called:

"Clarisse!"

She had a way of dancing into any room, her body doing all sorts of soft, agreeable things to keep her feet from ever quite touching the nap of a rug. She excused herself from her friends and came to see him now, brightly. She found him reseated in a far corner and she saw that he was staring at that anatomical sketch. "Are you still brooding, darling?" she asked. "Please don't." She sat upon his knees.

Her beauty could not distract him now.

in his absorption. He juggled her lightness, he touched her knee-cap, suspiciously. It seemed to move under her pale, glowing skin. "Is it supposed to do that?" he asked, sucking in his breath.

"Is what supposed to do what?" she laughed. "You mean my knee-cap?"

"Is it supposed to run around on top your knee that way?"

She experimented. "So it *does*," she marveled. "Well, now, so it does. Icky." She pondered. "No. On the other hand—it doesn't. It's only an optical illusion. The skin moves over the bone; not vice-versa. See?" She demonstrated.

"I'm glad yours slithers too," he sighed. "I was beginning to worry."

"About what?"

He patted his ribs. "My ribs don't go all the way down, they stop *here*. And I found some confounded ones that dangle in mid-air!"

Beneath the curve of her small breasts, Clarisse clasped her hands. "Of course, silly, everybody's ribs stop at a given point. And those funny little short ones are floating ribs."

"I just hope they don't float around too much," he said, making an uneasy joke. Now, he desired that his wife leave him, he had some important discovering to do with his own body and he didn't want her laughing at him and poking fun.

"I'll feel all right," he said. "Thanks for coming in, dear."

"Any time," she said, kissing him, rubbing her small pink nose warm against his.

"I'll be damned!" He touched his nose with his fingers, then hers. "Did you ever realize that the nose bone only comes down so far and a lot of gristly tissue takes up from there on?"

She wrinkled hers. "So what?" And, dancing, she exited.

He felt the sweat rise from the pools and hollows of his face, forming a salten tide to flow down his cheeks. Next on the agenda was his spinal cord and column. He examined it in the same manner as he operated the numerous push-buttons in his office, pushing them to summon the messenger boys. But, in these pushings of his spinal column, fears and terrors answered, rushed from a million doors in Mr. Harris' mind to confront and shake him. His spine felt awfully—bony. Like a fish, freshly eaten and skeletonized, on a china platter. He fingered the little rounded knobbins. "My God."

His teeth began to chatter. "God All-Mighty," he thought, "why haven't I realized it all these years. All these years I've gone around the world with a—SKELETON—inside me!" He saw his fingers blur before him, like motion films triply speeded in their quaking apprehension. "How is it that we take ourselves so much for granted. How is it we never question our bodies and our being?"

A skeleton. One of those jointed, snowy, hard things, one of those foul, dry, brittle, goudge-eyed, skull-faced, shake-fingered, rattling things that sway from neck-chains in abandoned webbed closets, one of those things found on the desert all long and scattered like dice!

HE STOOD upright, because he could not bear to remain seated. Inside me now, he grasped his stomach, his head, inside my head is a—skull. One of those curved carapaces which holds my brain like an electrical jelly, one of those cracked shells with the holes in front like two holes shot through it by a double-barreled shotgun! With its grottoes and caverns of bone, its rivetments and placements for my flesh, my smelling, my seeing, my hearing, my thinking! A skull, encompassing my brain, allowing it exit through its brittle windows to see the outside world!

He wanted to dash into the bridge party, upset it, a fox in a chickenyard, the cards fluttering all around like chicken feathers burst upward in clouds! He stopped himself only with a violent, trembling effort. Now, now, man, control yourself. This is a revelation, take it for what it is worth, understand it, savor it. BUT A SKELETON! screamed his subconscious. I won't stand for it. It's vulgar, it's terrible, its frightening. Skeletons are horrors, they clink and tinkle and rattle in old castles, hung from oaken beams, making long, indolently rustling pendulums on the wind. . . .

"Darling, will you come in and meet the ladies?" called his wife's sweet, clear voice.

Mr. Harris stood upright. His SKELE-

TON was holding him upright. This thing inside him, this invader, this horror, was supporting his arms, legs and head. It was like feeling someone just behind you who shouldn't be there. With every step he took he realized how dependent he was upon this other Thing.

"Darling, I'll be with you in a moment," he called weakly. To himself he said, "Come on, now, brace up. You've got to go back to work tomorrow. And Friday you've got to make that trip to Phoenix. Quite a drive. Over six hundred miles. Got to be in shape for that trip or you won't get Mr. Creldon to put his money into your ceramics business. Chin up, now."

Five minutes later he stood among the ladies being introduced to Mrs. Withers, Mrs. Abblematt and Miss Kirthy, all of whom had skeletons inside them but took it very calmly, because nature had carefully clothed the bare nudity of clavicle, tibia and femur with breasts, thighs, calves, with coiffure and eyebrow satanic, with bee-stung lips and—LORD! shouted Mr. Harris inwardly—when they talk or eat part of their skeleton shows—their *teeth!* I never thought of that.

"Excuse me," he said, and ran from the room only in time to drop his lunch among the petunias over the garden balistrade.

THAT night, seated on the bed as his wife undressed, he pared his toenails and fingernails scrupulously. These parts, too, were where his skeleton was shoving, indignantly growing out. He must have muttered something concerning this theory, because next thing he knew his wife, in negligee, slithered on the bed in animal cuddlesomeness, yawning, "Oh, my darling, fingernails are *not* bone, they're only hardened skin growths."

He threw the scissors away with relief. "Glad to hear that. Feel better." He looked at the ripe curves of her body, marveling. "I hope all people are made the same way."

"If you aren't the darndest hypochrondriac I ever saw," she said. She snuggled to him. "Come on, what's wrong, tell mama."

"Something inside me," he said. "Something I ate."

The next morning and all afternoon at the office downtown, Mr. Harris found that the sizes, shapes and construction of various bones in his body displeased him. At ten a.m. he asked to feel Mr. Smith's elbow one moment. Mr. Smith obliged but gave forth a suspicious scowl. And after lunch Mr. Harris asked to touch Miss Laurel's shoulderblade and she immediately pushed herself back against him, shutting her eyes in the mistaken belief that he wished to examine a few other anatomical delicacies. "Miss Laurel!" he snapped. "Stop that!"

Alone, he pondered his neuroses. The war, the pressure of his work, the uncertainty of the future, probably had much to do with his mental outlook. He wanted to leave the office, get into his own business, for himself. He had more than a little talent at artistic things, had dabbled in ceramics and pottery. As soon as possible, he'd go to Phoenix, Arizona and borrow that money from Mr. Creldon. It would build him his kiln and set up his own shop. It was a worry. What a hypochrondriac he was. But it was a good thing he had contacted M. Munigant, who had seemed to understand and be eager to help him. He would fight it out with himself. He wouldn't go back to either Munigant or Dr. Burleigh unless he was forced to. The alien feeling would pass. He sat staring into nothing.

THE alien feeling did not pass. It grew. On Tuesday and Wednesday it bothered him terrifically that his outer dermis, epidermis, hair and other appendages were of a high disorder, while the integumented skeleton of himself was a slick, clean structure of efficient organization. Sometimes, in certain lights while his lips were drawn morosely downward, weighted with melancholy, he imagined he saw his skull grinning at him. *It had its nerve, it did!*

"Let go of me!" he cried. "Let go of me! You've caught me, you've captured me! My lungs, you've got them in a vise! Release them!"

He experienced violent gasps as if his ribs were pressing in, chocking the breath from him.

"My brain, stop squeezing it!"

And terrible hot headaches caught his brain like a bivavle in the compressed clamp of skull-bones.

"My vitals! All my organs, let them be,

for God's sake! Stay away from my heart!" His heart seemed to cringe from the fanning nearness of his ribs, like pale spiders crouched and fiddling with their prey.

Drenched with sweat he lay upon the bed one night while Clarrise was out attending a Red Cross meet. He tried to gather his wits again, and always the conflict of his disorderly exterior and this cool calciumed thing inside him with all its exact symmetry continued.

His complexion, wasn't it oily and lined with worry?

Observe the flawless snow-white perfection of the skull.

His nose, wasn't it too large?

Then observe the small tiny bones of the skull's nose before that monstrous nasal cartilege begins forming Harris' lopsided proboscis.

His body, wasn't it a bit plump?

Well, then, consider the skeleton; so slender, so svelte, so economical of line and contour. Like exquisitely carved oriental ivory it is, perfected and thin as a reed.

His eyes, weren't they protuberant and ordinary and numb looking?

Be so kind as to note the eye-sockets of the skeleton's skull; so deep and rounded, sombre, quiet, dark pools, all knowing, eternal. Gaze deeply into skull sockets and you never touch the bottom of their dark understanding with any plumb line. All irony, all sadism, all life, all everything is there in the cupped darkness.

Compare. Compare. Compare.

He raged for hours, glib and explosive. And the skeleton, ever the frail and solemn philosopher, quietly hung inside of Harris, saying not a word, quietly suspended like a delicate insect within a chrysalis, waiting and waiting.

THEN it came to Harris.

"Wait a minute. Hold on a minute," he exclaimed. "You're helpless, too. I've got you, too! I can make you do anything I want you to, and you can't prevent it! I say put up your carpels, metacarpels and phalanges and—swift!—up they go, as I wave to someone!" He giggled. "I order the fibula and femur to locomote and HUMM two three four, Humm, two three four—we walk around the block. There!"

Harris grinned.

"It's a fifty-fifty fight. Even-steven. And we'll fight it out, we two, we shall. After all, I'm the part that thinks!" That was good, it was a triumph, he'd remember that. "Yes. By God, yes. I'm the part that thinks. If I didn't have you, even then I could still think!"

Instantly, he felt a pain strike his head. His cranium, crowding in slowly, began giving him some of his own treatment right back.

At the end of the week he had postponed the Phoenix trip because of his health. He weighed himself on a penny scales and watched the slow glide of the red arrow as it pointed to: "164."

He groaned. "Why I've weighed 175 for ten years. I can't have lost ten pounds." He examined his cheeks in the fly-dotted mirror. Cold primitive fear rushed over him in odd little shivers. "Hold on! I know what're you're about, *you*."

He shook his finger at his bony face, particularly addressing his remarks to his superior maxillary, his inferior maxillary, to his cranium and to his cervical vertebrae. "You rum thing, you. Think you can starve me off, make me lose weight, eh? A victory for you, is it? Peel the flesh off, leave nothing but skin on bone. Trying to ditch me, so you can be supreme, ah? No, no!"

He fled into a cafeteria immediately.

Ordering turkey, dressing, potatoes, cream, three desserts he soon found he could not eat it, he was sick to his stomach. He forced himself. His teeth began to ache. "Bad teeth, is it?" he wanted to know, angrily. "I'll eat in spite of every tooth clanging and banging and rotting so they fall in my gravy."

His head ached, his breathing came hard from a constricted chest, his teeth pulsed with pain, but he had one small victory. He was about to drink milk when he stopped and poured it into a vase of nasturtiums. "No calcium for you, my boy, no more calcium for you. Never will I eat foods again with calcium or other bone-fortifying minerals in them, I'll eat for one of us, not both, my lad."

"One hundred and fifty pounds," he wailed the following week to his wife. "Do you see how I've changed?"

"For the better," said Clarisse. "You were always a little plump, for your height, darling." She stroked his chin. "I like your face, it's so much nicer, the lines of it are so firm and strong now."

"They're not MY lines, they're his, damn him! You mean to say you like him better than you like me?" he demanded indignantly.

"Him? Who's him?"

IN THE parlor mirror, beyond Clarisse, his skull smiled back at him behind his fleshy grimace of hatred and despair.

Fuming, he popped malt tablets into his mouth. This was one way of gaining weight when you couldn't eat other foods. Clarisse noticed the malt capsules. "But, darling, really, you don't have to regain the weight for me," she said.

"Oh, shut up!" he felt like saying.

She came over to him and sat down and made him lie so his head was in her lap. "Darling," she said, "I've watched you lately. You're so—badly off. You don't say anything, but you look—hunted. You toss in bed at night. Maybe you should go to a psychiatrist. But I think I can tell you everything he would say. I've put it all together, from hints you've dropped. I can tell you that you and your skeleton are one and the same, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. United you stand, divided you fall. If you two fellows can't get along like an old married couple in the future, go back and see Dr. Burleigh. But, *first,* relax. You're in a vicious circle, the more you worry, the more your bones stick out, the more your bones stick out, the more you fret. After all, now, who picked this *fight*—you or that anonymous entity you claim is lurking around behind your alimentary canal?"

He closed his eyes. "I did: I guess I did. Oh, my darling I love you so."

"You rest now," she said softly. "Rest and forget."

Mr. Harris felt buoyed up for half a day, then he began to sag again. It was all right to say everything was imagination, but this particular skeleton, by God, was fighting back.

Harris set out for M. Munigant's office late in the day. He walked for half an hour until he found the address, and then, at the sight of the name M. Munigant initialled in gold on a glass sign outside, Harris' bones seemed to explode from their moorings, blasted and erupted with pain. He could hardly see in his wet, pain-filled eyes. So violent were the pains that Harris staggered away, and when he opened his eyes again, he had rounded a corner, and M. Munigant's office was out of sight. The pains ceased.

M. Munigant, then, was the man to help him. He must be! If the sight of his gilt-lettered name could cause so titanic reaction in the deepness of Harris' body, why, of course, M. Munigant *must* be just the man.

But, not today. Each time he tried to return to that office, the terrible pains layed him low. Perspiring, he had to give up, and stagger into a beer saloon for respite.

Moving across the floor of the beer palace, he wondered briefly if a lot of blame couldn't be put on M. Munigant's shoulders; after all, it was Munigant who'd first drawn his attention to his skeleton, and brought home the entire psychological impact of it! Could M. Munigant be using him for some nefarious purpose? But what purpose? Silly to even suspect him. Just a little doctor. Trying to be helpful. Munigant and his jar of bread-sticks. Ridiculous. M. Munigant was okay, okay.

BUT there was a sight within the beer parlor to give him hope. A large fat man, round as a butterball stood drinking consecutive beers at the bar. Now here was a successful fellow for you. Harris momentarily repressed a desire to go up, clap him on his shoulder and enquire as to how he'd gone about impounding his bones. Yes, the fat man's skeleton was luxuriously closeted. There were pillows of fat here, resilient bulges of it there, with several round chandeliers of fat under his chin. The poor skeleton was lost, it could never fight clear of that blubber; it may have tried once—but now, overwhelmed, not a bony echo of the fat man's supporter remained.

Not without envy, Harris approached the fat man as one might cut across the bow of an ocean liner.

"Glands?" inquired Harris.

"You talking to me?" asked the fat man.

"Or is there a special diet?" wondered Harris. "I beg your pardon, but, as you see, I'm down to the marrow. Adding weight seems an impossibility. I'd like a belly like that one of yours, it's tops. Did you grow it because you were afraid?"

"You," announced the fat man, "are drunk. But I like drunkards." He ordered more drinks. "Listen close. I'll tell you—"

"Layer by layer," said the fat man, "twenty years, man and boy, I built this." He held his vast stomach like a globe of the world, teaching his audience its gastronomical geography. It was no overnight circus. The tent was not raised before dawn on the wonders installed within. I have cultivated my inner organs as if they were thoroughbred dogs, cats and other animals. My stomach is a fat pink Persian tom slumbering, rousing at intervals to purr, mew, growl and cry for chocolate titbits. I feed it well, it will most sit up for me. And, my dear fellow, my intestines are the rarest pure-bred Indian anacondas you ever viewed in the sleekest, coiled, fine and ruddy health. Keep 'em in prime, I do, all my pets. For fear of something? Perhaps?"

This called for another drink for everybody.

"Gain weight?" The fat man savored the words on his tongue. "Here's what you do. Get yourself a quarreling bird of a wife, a baker's dozen of relatives who can flush a covey of troubles out from behind the veriest molehill; add to these a sprinkling of business associates whose prime motivation is snatching your last lonely quid, and you are well on your way to getting fat. How so? In no time you'll begin subconsciously building fat betwixt yourself and them. A buffer epidermal state, a cellular wall. You'll soon find that eating is the only fun on earth. But one needs to be bothered by outside sources. Too many people in this world haven't enough to worry about, then they begin picking on *themselves*, and they lose weight. Meet all of the vile, terrible people you can possible know, and pretty soon you'll be adding the good old fat."

And with that advice, the fat man launched himself out into the dark tide of night, swaying mightily and wheezing.

"That's exactly what Dr. Burleigh told me, slightly changed," said Harris thoughtfully. "Perhaps that trip to Phoenix at this time—"

THE trip from Frisco to Phoenix was a sweltering one, crossing, as it did, the Death Valley on a broiling yellow day. It was only to be hoped that Mr. Creldon the man in Phoenix with the money would be in an inspired mood about lending an amount necessary to setting Mr. Harris up in his ceramics business.

The car moved in the hot sluice of desert wind. The one Mr. H. sat inside the other Mr. H. Perhaps both perspired. Perhaps both were miserable.

On a curve, the inside Mr. H. suddenly constricted the outer flesh, causing him to jerk forward on the hot steering wheel.

The car ran off the road into deepest sand. It turned half over.

Night came on, a wind rose, the road was lonely and silent with no traffic, and Mr. Harris lay unconscious until night roused a sandstorm out of the empty valleys.

Morning found him awake and gritty-eyed, wandering in circles, having somehow gotten away from the road, perhaps because sand had layered it over. At noon he sprawled in the poor shade of a bush, and the sun struck at him with a keen sword edge, seeping into his bones. A buzzard circled.

Harris' parched lips cracked open weakly. "So that's it," he whimpered, red-eyed, bristle-cheeked. "One way or another you'll wreck me, walk me, starve me, thirst me, kill me." He swallowed dry burrs of dust. "Sun cook off my flesh so you can peek forth. Vultures lunch and breakfast from me, and then there you'll lie, grinning. Grinning with victory. Like a bleached xylophone strewn and played by vultures with an ear for odd music. You'd like that, eh? Freedom."

He walked on and on through a landscape that shivered and bubbled in the direct pour of sunlight; stumbling, falling, lying to feed himself little mouths of flame. The air was blue alcohol flame; and vultures roasted and steamed and glittered as they flew in glides and circles. Phoenix. The road. Car. Safety. Water.

"Hey!" somebody called from way off in the blue alcohol flame.

Mr. Harris propped himself up.

"Hey!" somebody called again. A crunching of footsteps, quick.

With a cry of unbelievable relief, Harris rose, only to collapse again into a park ranger's arms.

The car tediously repaired, Phoenix reached, Harris found himself in such an unholy state of mind that any business transaction would have to wait. This business of the Thing within him like a hard white sword in its scabbard tainted his eating, colored his love for Clarisse, made it unsafe to trust an automobile; all in all it must be settled before he could have any love for business or anything! That desert incident had brushed too closely. Too near the bone, one might say with an ironic twist of one's mouth. Harris grimly phoned Mr. Creldon, apologized, turned his car around and motored along a safer route to Los Angeles, thence up the coast to Frisco. He didn't trust that desert. But—careful! Salt waves boomed, hissing on the beach as he drove through Santa Barbara. Sand, fish and crustacia would cleanse his bones as swiftly as vultures. Slow down on the curves over the surf.

If anything happened, he desired casket burial. The two of them'd rot together, that way! Damn Him! And what about this little man—M. Munigant? Bone specialist. Oh God, where was one to turn?

"Darling!" trilled Clarisse, kissing him so he winced at the solidness of her teeth and jaw behind the passionate exchange.

"Darling," he said slowly, wiping his lips with his wrist, trembling.

"You look thinner; oh, darling, the business deal—it didn't go through!"

"I have to go back again. Yes, I have to go back again. *That's it.*"

SHE kissed him again. Lord, he couldn't even kiss her any more and enjoy it because of this obsession. They ate a slow, unhappy dinner, with Clarisse trying to cheer him. He studied the phone, several times he picked it up indecisively, then laid it aside. His wife walked in, putting on her coat and hat. "I'm sorry to have to leave now, when you're feeling so low. But I'll be back in three hours from the Red Cross. *I simply have* to go."

When Clarisse was gone, Harris dialed the phone, nervously.

"Mr. Munigant?"

THE explosions and the sickness in his body after he set the phone down were unbelievable. His bones were racked with every kind of pain, cold and hot, he had every thought of, or experienced in wildest nightmare. He swallowed as many aspirin as he could find in an effort to stave off the assault; but when the door-bell finally rang an hour later, he could not move, he lay weak and exhausted, panting, tears streaming down his checks, like a man on a torture rack. Would M. Munigant go away if he didn't answer the door?

"Come in!" he tried to gasp it out. "Come in, for God's sake!"

M. Munigant came in. Thank God the door had been unlocked.

Oh, but Mr. Harris looked terrible. Harris nodded. The pains rushed through him, hitting him with large iron hammers and hooks. M. Munigant's eyes glittered as he saw Harris' protuberant bones. Ah, he saw that Mr. Harris was now psychologically prepared for aid. Was it not so? Harris nodded again, feebly, sobbing. Through his shimmering eyes he seemed to see M. Munigant shrink, get smaller. Imagination of course. Harris sobbed out his story of the trip to Phoenix. M. Munigant sympathized. This skeleton was a—traitor! They would FIX him once and for all! "Mister Munigant," sighed Harris, faintly. "I never noticed before, you have such an odd tongue. Round. Tube-like. I'm ready. What do I do?"

If Mr. Harris would relax in his chair, and open his mouth? M. Munigant whistled softly, appreciatively, coming closer. He switched off the lights, peering into Harris' dropped jaw. Wider, please? It had been so hard, the first time, to help Harris, with both body and bone in rebellion. Now, he had cooperation from the flesh of the man anyway, even if the skeleton was acting up somewhat. In the darkness M. Munigant's voice got small, small, tiny, tiny. The whistling became high and shrill. Now. Relax, Mr. Harris. NOW!

Harris felt his jaw pressed violently in all directions, his tongue depressed as with a

spoon, his throat clogged. He gasped for breath. Whistle. He could not breathe. He was corked. Something squirmed, corkscrewed his cheeks out, bursting his jaws. Like a hot water douche, something squirted into his sinuses, his ears clanged! "Ahhhh!" shrieked Harris, gagging. His head, its carapaces riven, shattered, hung loose. Agony shot into his lungs, around.

Harris could breath again. His watery eyes sprang wide. He shouted. His ribs, like sticks picked up and bundled, were loosened in him. Pain! He fell to the floor, rocking, rolling, wheezing out his hot breath.

Lights flickered in his senseless eyeballs, he felt his limbs unloosened swiftly, expertly. Through steaming eyes he saw the parlor. The room was empty.

"Mr. Munigant? Where are you? In God's name, where are you, Mr. Munigant! Come help me!"

M. Munigant was gone!

"Help!"

Then he heard it.

Deep down in the subterranean fissures of his bodily well, he heard the minute, unbelievable noises; little smackings and twistings little dry chippings and grindings and nuzzling sounds—like a tiny hungry mouse down in the red blooded dimness, gnawing ever so earnestly and expertly at what may have been, but was not, a submerged timber. !

CLARISSE, walking along the sidewalk, held her head high and marched straight toward her house on Saint James Place. She was thinking of the Red Cross and a thousand other things as she turned the corner and almost ran into this little man standing there.

Clarisse would have ignored him if it were not for the fact that as she passed he took something long, white and oddly familiar from his coat and proceeded to chew on it, as on a peppermint stick. Its end devoured, his extraordinary tongue darted within the white confection, sucking out the filling, making contented noises. He was still crunching his goodie as she proceeded up the sidewalk to her house, turned the doorknob and walked in.

"Darling?" she called, smiling around. "Darling, where are you?"

She shut the door, walked down the hall into the living room.

"Darling . . "

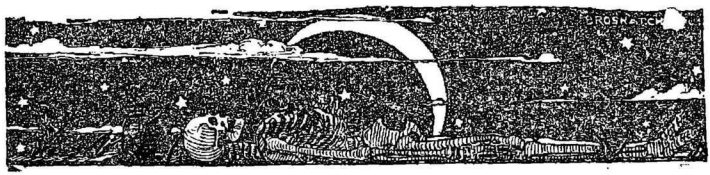
She stared at the floor for twenty seconds, trying to understand.

She screamed.. That scream came from her like a ghastly white fish torn from her vitals by some ungodly fisherman.

Outside in the sycamore darkness, the little man, pierced a long white stick with intermittent holes, then softly, sighing, lips puckered, played a little sad tune upon the improvised instrument to accompany the shrill and awful singing of Clarisse's voice as she stood in the living room.

Many times as a little girl Clarrise had run on the beach sands, stepped on a jelly fish and screamed. It was not so bad, finding an intact, gelatin-skinned jelly-fish in one's living room. One could step back from it.

It was when the jelly-fish *called you by name.*



Superstitions and Taboos

by Weill

Take Back That Which Thou Gavest

GANS FIELD and I were walking down Fifth Avenue. He had just completed his fine book *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance* and was making notes for its good successor, *The Black Drama,* when my visit to New York gave him an excuse to get away from his typewriter for a while.

It was one of those exquisite sun-swept days, radiant with vital beauty that only New York knows. Shade trees burgeoned at the street sides and the sleepy smell of new-wet pavements rose behind the lumbering sprinkling carts. Cafés stretched their bright-striped awnings to the sun, and through the gaps in crisp-leafed hedges little tables beckoned with the promise of tall, frost-rimmed glasses.

"The question," Gans said as we approached Eighth Street, "is whether a mint julep is more to be desired than a double dry Martini, or whether we should have a zombie as a curtain-raiser—" He broke off abruptly as he swerved sharply to the left, almost pushing me against a sidewalk café hedge.

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

It seemed to me that he avoided contact with a man who hobbled toward us with a crippled shambling gait as though he were a leper. "*Voleur des tombraux,*" he rasped, "*à distance!*"

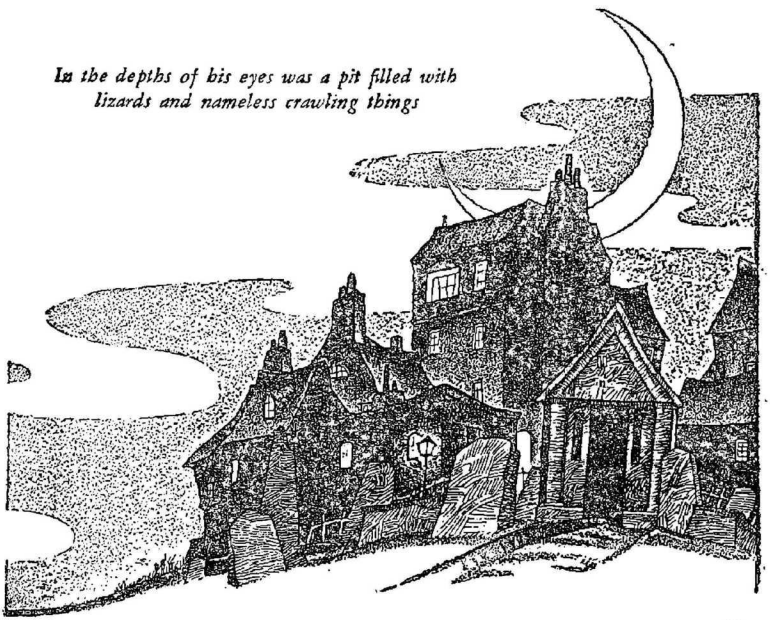
"Good Lord, Gans," I exclaimed, "that's the first unkind thing I've ever seen you do. He seemed a harmless, inoffensive sort of little man. . . ."

He had, indeed. Something out of an era that had passed. Somewhere in his late fifties, I judged, with pewter-gray mustache and imperial, his eyes almost completely concealed by black-rimmed pince-nez which trailed a wide black ribbon. He wore a suit of black mohair with a white linen waistcoat and spats of white linen above black patent leather shoes; his wide-brimmed Panama was bound with a scarf of black silk, and he leaned heavily on a black malacca cane. But his rather jaunty costume was belied by his tired, world-weary face. His eyes were strange, far-away, almost filmy with ennui, and the corners of his mouth drooped sadly, as though nothing really mattered. A foreigner he seemed, French, probably, homesick and lonely, someone to be pitied, yet Field had called him *voleur des tombeaux*—grave robber—and bade him keep his distance. "How come?" I demanded. "You couldn't have shown more aversion if he'd had the plague—"

"I hate his guts," Field cut in almost savagely. "He's a louse of purest ray serene, and if I'd done the proper thing I'd have stepped on him and crushed him—"

"Good Lord," I repeated in amazement. I'd known Gans Field for years and learned to love his hearty, bubbling laugh, his innate kindness and his all-embracing love for humanity. Yet there was hate if ever I had seen it in his dark eyes, and the lips below the little pencil line of his small black mustache were positively snarling as he spoke. "Who is he, anyway?"

"Demetrios Stepanovitch. He's old, now;



In the depths of his eyes was a pit filled with lizards and nameless crawling things

nothing but the memory of his devilishness survives, but the intent's there, make no mistake about that—"

"Oh, take it easy," I scoffed, "he can't be—or couldn't have been—that bad!"

"No?" Field's voice had an edge of sarcasm like a razor steeped in brine. "Think not?"

MARIA IVANOVA DALMATOFF and Philip Briarly were engaged, it seemed. Like many another American soldier Briarly had done his part in World War I and fallen deeply in love with La Belle France, so he stayed on in Paris where he was a reporter for the old *Globe-Sentinel*, knew everybody in the *beau monde*, the *haut monde* and the *petit monde* and adored Maria Ivanova.

Maria Ivanova, as her name implies, was Russian. She had been a pupil at the Imperial Ballet School when the Second Revolution broke and her father Major Ivan Alexandrovitch Dalmatoff had managed to escape with her—and very little else—across the border into Poland, made his way to France, served faithfully, if not brilliantly as an officer of artillery, and had been rewarded by a grateful Republique with an obscure and poorly paid berth in the *Censeur Militaire*. In this he fared better than most of his emigré countrymen who served as waiters in cafés, drove taxicabs or peddled pornographic postcards along the Boulevard des Italiens and the Boul' Mich.

Every night she danced barefoot at the Cabaret of the Silver Sparrow, to the delectation of Argentine millionaires, Americans revisiting Paris with their pockets stuffed with hard-saved vacation money, English commercial travelers enjoying an evening's entertainment on padded expense accounts and German "tourists" varying their real and more sinister business with an excursion into Paris night life, the cost of which was carefully audited and approved by certain monocled gentlemen in the Wilhelmstrasse whose duty it was to know where every *pfennig* spent by secret agents of the Third Reich went. Every morning at eleven she met Philip for *petit déjeuner* at the Café des Moineaux, and at five for dinner at the Café des Alliés; between times she worshiped him "like a nun breathless with adoration" from his sleek brown hair to his highly polished brown boots. "*Golubuska*—little dove!" and "*ogurtchik*—adored small cucumber!" she called him, and "*radost moja*—joy of my life!"

Neither of them would ever forget their first meeting. Phil, who worked the night beat had been celebrating his "day off" with a late *souper* at the Silver Sparrow. He had called his *addition* and was waiting for his change when a beam of pale gold light cut the smoke-blued atmosphere of the café. The lamps around the walls had all been lowered and the whole place was suffused in a soft twilight. Here and there a face showed with momentary clarity as someone lit a cigarette or cigar. There was a purling of flute music and the pizzicato of violins, and suddenly Maria Ivanova was out on the tiny dance floor, poised on tiptoe as if ready to take wing.

She was astonishingly beautiful. Her only garment was a smock-like shift of silver tissue sewn with seed pearls, like a spider-web bespangled with dewdrops, white wrists and delicate slim ankles were adorned with circlets of small silver bells that kept up a melodious jingle-jangle as she moved. Nude she was, or almost nude, but no more naked than the Aphrodite of Praxiteles is naked. The very beauty of her lightly veiled loveliness was like a garment clothing her against the shame of nakedness.

Her dance was something compounded of ice and fire. Round and round she floated, like a butterfly in a net of sunbeams; now she paused and listened with her hand raised to her ear as if she heard the murmur of small elfin voices underfoot; again her waving pink-palmed hands seemed beckoning to fairy spirits in the upper air. Not only her white twinkling feet, but her whole body danced; she was intoxicated with the rhythm of the music as a hashish eater is intoxicated with his drug.

GRADUALLY, so slowly it was hardly perceptible, the tempo of the accompaniment slackened. Now the music was no more than a prolonged and languid susurration punctuated by the plangent pizzicato of plucked strings. Her movements moderated gradually till she was standing with her feet together, motionless from the

hips down, while her upper body slowly swayed as if she were a mermaid rocking herself to sleep on the summit of a curling wave. She raised her hands and clasped them behind her neck, smiling from the frame of her projecting elbows. She swayed gracefully as a wind-shaked lily, dancing gravely with her head, her shoulders and her lovely twining arms. The music slowed and slackened till it faded to the echo of a whisper, and a sudden clash of harp and cymbals, drums and dulcimer came like a clap of thunder as she broke the clasp that held her filmy garment at the throat, and let the veil drop like a froth of foam about her tiny bell-ringed feet. But in the instant that the vestment fell she drew the pins from her coiled hair and let it cascade like a nuptial veil about her slim loveliness. The length of it was incredible. It was neither gold nor silver, but a marvelously lovely alloy of the two, gleaming almost white as platinum when the light fell on it directly, showing the pale, beautiful gold of clear amber in the shadows, and it hung about her like a vesture, hiding her from crown to dimpled knees like a cloak of gleaming spun-metalic fabric, lustrous as a cape of cirrus cloud touched by the last rays of the setting sun, impenetrable as a casque of shining armor.

The lights went out abruptly as the crash of the orchestra ceased, and when they came on again Maria Ivanova was gone and the waiter stood at Phil's elbow extending a saucer of small coins and whispering ingratiatingly, "Your change, *M'sieur. Vous faut-il autre chose?*"

Phil shook himself like a man emerging from a dream. "No, nothing else, thank you." He left a generous tip in the saucer and walked unsteadily to the check-booth to retrieve his hat and stick. "My God," he whispered to himself, not profanely, but very reverently, "she's beautiful! There's nothing in the world as beautiful as she!"

At the entrance of the cabaret he met Paul Pellisier, amiable as a St. Bernard pup with muddy paws, and almost literally overflowing with champagne. *"Brave comrade,"* and *"cher ami,"* the other greeted him ecstatically, threw both arms about him and almost succeeded in kissing him on both cheeks. "Come, let us have a little so small drink together; let us have ten or a dozen of them. Let us get as drunk as twenty most unpleasantly perfumed camels!" It was some time before he managed to free himself from his friend's enthusiastic embrace, and coming daylight showed a streak of gray above the eastern horizon as he walked home through the deserted streets.

Half a block ahead of him the sharp click-clack of frivolous French heels sounded on the pavement as a woman hastened on her way, and he was wondering idly what kept her out at this ungodly hour, when the hail came sharp and shrill as pain, quavering as mortal terror. "Help! *Au secours, pour l'amour de Dieu—"*

AS HE rushed forward Philip saw an undersized man wrestling with a woman, wrenching at her pocketbook and striking at her savagely with his free hand. The fellow was a typical *apache*, dressed in a greasy leather-peaked cap, a striped jersey and baggy corduroy pantaloons held at the waist by a wide scarf of dirty cotton wound round and round like a cummerbund. "Pull your freight, you fugitive from the Folies-Bergères—beat it!" Phil commanded.

"Sacré cochon—species of a stinking pig!" the other responded discourteously and drew a six-inch dirk from his waist cloth.

"Oh? So you want to play rough?" Phil raised his stick and closed in, and the footpad's yellow teeth gleamed evilly as he crouched to meet the attack.

Nine men in ten would have chopped down with the cane, enabling the *apache* to catch the blow on a bent arm and close in with his knife before a second could be struck, but Philip was the tenth man. His blackthorn whistled through the air in orthodox manner, but just before it came in contact with the ruffian's raised arm it swerved sharply and drew back to stab forward suddenly with its bone ferrule and drive a stunning punch against the desperado's forward-thrusting chin. *"Sacré Dieu,* me I am murdered!" gasped the bravo as his jaw felt the impact of the loaded stick. "I am undone, me!" His knife fell clinking to the pavement and as he bent to retrieve it Phil administered a well-aimed kick that sent him sprawling. The *apache* knew when he had had enough and limped off, one hand against

his aching jaw, the other massaging his soundly kicked posterior.

"*Mademoiselle,*" Phil bowed to the woman, "*pour vous servir*—I am completely at your service. I—" He got no further, for the breath stuck suddenly in his throat. The woman he had rescued was Maria Ivanova, the dancer from the Cabaret of the Silver Sparrow.

They walked homeward slowly, hardly speaking. She leaned against him trembling with reaction from her fright, and hardly realizing what he did he took her hand in his. In an instant, almost in the twinkling of an eye, he felt himself welded to this girl, knowing they could never again be strangers. He knew instinctly she felt the same way. They might part in a quarter-hour, never see each other again, but as long as they both lived this moment would know no death.

NEXT morning at eleven they had *petit déjeuner* at the Café des Moineaux and at five they met for dinner at the Café des Alliés, and so it had been for almost a year. When he stammered his proposal to her she had laid both hands in his and whispered, "*Tienne, Philippe mon coeur; tienne, radost moja, pour le temps et l'éternité!*—Thine I am, Philip my heart and joy of my life for all time and eternity!" Since then he had been haunted. Love haunted. He saw her everywhere, in the crowded *Métro*, in shop windows, crossing streets, in passing cars. The memory of their latest parting—the sweetness of her perfumed body in his arms—was with him like a benediction all the while they were apart, yet when they were together they did not talk much. A current warm as the Gulf Stream, strong as a tide, seemed to flow between them, he could fairly feel the love pour out of him, and presently pour back from her redoubled, and when they came to say good bye the sweet pain of their parting was itself a compensation.

That morning they had boarded one of the small saucy craft that rushed like destroyers up and down the Seine. When the ticket agent asked them where they wished to go Philip had asked for two pink tickets, because he liked their color. "Perfectly, *M'sieur, Madame,*" the *agent des billets* had agreed, knowing, as all Frenchmen knew, that all Americans were mad, "two to St. Cloud."

At St. Cloud they had found a charming little rustic restaurant perched high above the river and were enjoying luncheon of omelet, bread and butter, great, ruby-glowing radishes and a whole bottle of sparkling chablis. Such an omelet, such wine, such butter, and the breeze from the west blowing sweet as perfume from an orchard of nectarines, the green trees whispering, and the blessed golden sunshine over all!

As they sipped mahogany-colored coffee from tall glasses Maria Ivanova raised her eyes to his. They were golden, almost orange in their shade, but now they held a troubled shadow. "*Doushka,*" she besought, "you will come back to me of a certainty?"

"My dear!" he bent and kissed one of the slim white hands that rested on the table. "You know that I'll be back in just a little while. The days will seem like years—like years whose days are long—while I'm away, but this is the chance of a lifetime, darling. If Petersen had been in town he'd have drawn the assignment, but he's on leave and this showdown at Metzingerberg has blown up right in our faces. If I can swing it it'll mean I'll be a correspondent for the Home Office, not just a reporter for the Paris edition. That'll mean a hundred bucks—two thousand francs a week—an *apartement* in the Rue Saint Hyacinthe, furs and pearls and diamonds for you—"

"*De quel importance?*" She shrugged as no one but a Russian could. "I could have all these—and more—if I would but say 'Yes' to many who come nightly to the Silver Sparrow. But," the little laughter wrinkles crinkled at the corners of her eyes, "I don't want any of them without you, *lubimui moï,* and if I have you I can do without them all."

Nevertheless it was, as Philip had said, the opportunity of a lifetime. The citizens of the microscopic grand duchy of Metzingerberg had risen in red revolution, nailed His Serene Highness the Grand Duke to the door of his grand ducal palace, shot his current inamorata the Viennese danseuse Lotte Breithaur against a wall carefully whitewashed for the purpose and were now besieging the Grand Duchess and several little dukes and duchesses in the medieval

castle-fortress of Metzerbergerschloss. The world was all agog for news of it, the French and Poles debated whether to send an expeditionary force to put the revolution down, but waited to see if Russia would back the rebels with a might of armed men, the newly "elected" Chancellor of Germany, who had just completed a purge of his political opponents including former Chancellor von Schleicher, made hysterical addresses about the menace of Red Bolshevism at the threshold of the Reich and threatened to invade Metzingerberg. The reporter who could send the story of the revolution out would make his everlasting journalistic fortune. Fate had played into his hands. Next morning at a little after six he'd leave the Gare de l'Est with full credentials, a hastily packed bag, a practically unlimited expense account and his future in his hands.

"But almost anything can happen," Maria Ivanova objected. "You might be injured—killed—"

"No chance," he scoffed. "I've got a rabbit's foot."

"Un pied d'un lapin?" she repeated doubtfully.

"You said it, sweetheart. *Un charme de bonne fortune,* if you know what I mean, you little goat."

"You have my love," she answered gravely. "I shall cover you like a shield; it shall protect you like a coat of mail, *doushka."*

She was at the station when he left next morning. Bribed with a tip as large as a week's salary a porter preceded them down the platform, pushing army officers, befrilled ladies and baggage-laden commercial travelers from the way with a fine impartiality and an apologetic *"Pardon, M'sieur, 'dame,"* till he found the compartment marked *"Reservé"* with a white placard, and stowed Phil's duffel in the luggage racks. The train was snorting with impatience to be off and there was time for only a quick kiss before the guard blew his absurd tin trumpet signalling a start. As he leaned out of the window he had a last look at her, her head thrown back, her lips apart and her eyes closed, both hands pressed to her breast and her body held toward him in blind, agonized embrace.

"Good bye, *golubuska,"* he called, masking the sharp hurt of parting with assumed cynicism. "I'll be seein' you in the cemetery!" Then with a jarring jerk of couplings the train started.

THE tiny flat where Maria Ivanova and her father lived in the Rue des Huitriers was a sort of informal club for Russian emigrés. Thither, when their work was done, or when they had no work, came all the shabby-genteel remnants of the refugee colony to sop up bottomless draughts of strong black tea from the samovar that seethed and boiled at all hours, smoke long, paper-tubed cigarettes, eat black bread spiced with aniseed and talk brave talk of the brave days to come when a descendant of the Romanoffs was once more on the throne of Holy Russia and they had been restored to their old stations. Occasionally more successful members of the colony would come, too, bringing with them contributions of sweet cakes, smoked sturgeon, vodka and caviar, and of these latter the most prosperous was Demetrios Stepanovitch, a man whose antecedents were uncertain as his means of livelihood, but whose pockets were perpetually well-lined and who would on occasion advance a loan without security to his less fortunate brethren.

Maria Ivanova tolerated him for her father's sake, but kept as far from him as the slim limits of the little flat permitted. He was perhaps forty-five, slim and at first glance attractive, but his face showed signs of the efforts expended to hold its attractiveness, his hair and small mustache and imperial were gray as pewter, and there was something secret in his long agate-gray eyes that frightened her. When he looked at her she felt the hot blood mounting to her cheeks and brow, for she could read desire hard and cruel and lustful as that with which aging David looked on Abigail in his lackluster eyes; their glance seemed stripping her of every stich of covering with slow, deliberate, sadistic relish, and she recoiled from his stare as from a physical affront.

But avoiding Demetrios with Phil away was a problem to which she could find no answer. He was waiting for her in the morning when, rising, late, she started out for *petit déjeuner,* and fell in step beside her. *"Bon jour,"* she bade him coldly and hurried on, but he quickened his pace, keeping

at her elbow, saying nothing, but leveling his almost totally expressionless eyes on her until she felt herself go positively cold beneath their stony regard.

"Please," she begged at last, "I'd like to be alone." As he continued to stare silently at her she felt a sort of numbness stealing up her spine like that she had experienced when on a visit to the *jardin des plantes* she had looked down into a pit filled with lizards and nameless crawling things.

In desperation she increased her pace. He quickened his and kept step with her. Finally, unable to endure it longer, she demanded, "Why do you *haunt* me so, Demetrios Stepanovitch? What is it that you want?"

"You." His voice was flat, expressionless, almost mechanical, but she could see his nostrils quiver like those of a hound that scents its quary as he spoke. "I want you, Maria Ivanova, and by all the saints in Paradise I mean to have you. Do you understand? Nor love nor hate nor life nor death itself shall cheat me of you."

Despite the warmth of the late August morning she shivered, and her insides seemed contracting suddenly. She had no words to answer him but from somewhere she found courage to laugh. It was a lash of sound, her laugh, contemptuous, derisive, taunting. "You—you *toad!*" she gasped between spasmodic peals of simulated merriment.

She saw the acid of the insult bite into his vanity like a brand and gloried in her power to hurt him. But when he turned on his heel with a curt nod her laughter stopped as suddenly as if it had been played on a gramophone and someone had lifted the needle from the disc.

He had spoken with the surety of Fate—"Nor love nor hate nor death itself shall cheat me of you." The blessed saints knew she loved Phil until the longing for him was like a pain. Could not that love protect her from this toad-man? She loathed Demetrios as she might abhor a reptile. Would not that loathing keep her from him? And if love and hate should fail, there always remained death. Sooner than lay her hand in his she would drop herself into the Seine, but . . . uneasiness tightened on her like a shrinking garment, nor could the late summer sunshine or the cheery whistle of the blackbirds as she walked in the gardens of the Tuileries dispel the mood of apprehensive melancholy that had settled on her.

That night Demetrios was at the flat, and the next night, and the next; silent, aloof, respectful, but watchful as a cat that lets the mouse between its paws run a short way before it pounces. He never took his eyes from her. Even when her back was turned—and that was often as she could contrive it—she would feel a prickling at the back of her neck and turn to find his inscrutable gaze upon her.

Gradually she realized something she had seen for a long time without noticing. The manner of the other emigrés toward Demetrios was rather one of servile, fearful respect than friendliness. He seldom spoke, but when he did the others were silent, hanging breathlessly upon his words; when he approached a man or woman that one ceased doing whatever occupied him and waited with obsequious expectancy. He was like a puppet monarch in the midst of puppet subjects, and only she was free from the spell of his dominance.

HEADLINES shrieked across the world. Bull-voiced newsboys in a thousand cities took the cry up. The revolutionists had overrun Metzingerberg like a flood of red fury. The Grand Ducal palace had been leveled to the ground, but Her Serene Highness the Grand Duchess, once the reigning belle of every ball in Europe, had been mysteriously allowed to escape, taking her five-year-old baby girl and her seven-year-old son with her. The hero of the tragi-comedy was Philip Briarly, American newspaperman, who had bearded the rebel commander in his headquarters, arranged for the Grand Duchess' abdication, and secured safe conduct for her and her children across the border. His picture was on the first page of every paper; he was famous, he was romantic as a character from Richard Harding Davis or George Barr McCutcheon—and he was dead. A disgruntled Metzingerberg Communist, furious at the ducal family's escape, had shot him in cold blood as he was about to board the train for Paris. The revolutionists were most apologetic. They would punish the murderer severely, send Briarly's body back with a guard of honor, but—he was dead.

When Maria Ivanova read the news she did not scream or faint, she did not even cry. She just looked at the paper with set, unbelieving eyes while tears like great diamonds slipped down her cheeks. She made no move, just sat in stony silence, her face gone colorless as marble, while the great tears ran down her cheeks. At last she raised a hand and pressed cold fingertips into her cheek, then with a hard, dry, retching sob she rose, went to her room and lay down on the bed. All night she lay there, still as if upon her bier, her eyes wide open, her mind busy with its own torment. Toward dawn she rose and looked across the moonlit housetops toward Metzingerberg. "Philip, my beloved," she whispered softly. That was all.

Next night she danced at the Cabaret of the Silver Sparrow, and no one in the audience suspected he was looking at a zombie, a body lovely as a statue hewn from marble by Phidias, but with neither heart nor life nor soul in it.

"Maria Ivanova," Major Dalmatoff spoke hesitantly as they finished dinner at the modest restaurant where they took their evening meal, "I have been thinking of your future. With Philippe—may the dear God rest his spirit!—gone, you have no protector, no one to afford you shelter from the storms of life."

"I have you, Little Father."

The bleak smile that he gave her was more sad than if he had wept. "I am nothing, *golubuska*—less than nothing. A broken reed, a fallen tree—" There was a hard, dull bitterness in his words. "I am not even worthy to be called a man."

She looked at him with wide grave eyes. "Why do you say such things, Papa? You are scarcely fifty, and—"

The shrug he gave as he rose from the table silenced her. "Come, little dove," he ordered almost brusquely, "let us go," and outside in the sweet soft twilight of the Paris evening: "Demetrios Stepanovich has asked your hand in marriage," he told her hurriedly, as if he had a piece to speak and would be done with it as quickly as he could. "He can provide you with an assured future, *radost moja*, and I have consented."

"You have consented?" Stark incredulity was in her tone. "You would give me, Maria Ivanova, your own daughter, to that toad?"

"There is no other way, my darling."

"What do you mean, Little Father? What hold has he on you—on you and all the others—that you bow your backs to him as to the Tsar—may Heaven have his soul in its keeping!—or the Grand Duke Alexis? How dare he ask this of you?"

"Daughter, little daughter," Dalmatoff's voice broke with the bitterness of self-lashing sobs, "he has me utterly in his power. Me and Peter Tchaiskovski and Nicholas Illevitch—all, all of us! Oh, he is subtle as the poison spider lurking in its web, but once we poor, silly flies are enmeshed—Listen, child," he glanced about as if he feared the very stones of the pavement might hear, "he is head and front of the Boche spy service in Paris. He has hundreds—thousands—at his command for bribery. You know how hard it is for us exiles to live, how we feed upon the husks of charity or work for miserable pittances, and how our next meal often depends on the tolerance of the municipal pawnbroker. That is how he gets his hold. A little money advanced as a loan, a little more, and still a little more until the borrower is hopelessly in debt to him. Then—'all this and more too you shall have if you will get me certain information,' he promises. And when we in the censorship or the foreign office, or the post office, or wherever we are employed get him the information that he seeks—alas, then our doom is completely sealed, for not only does he hold us as a creditor, but he can denounce us to the government as spies, traitors—"

"But that would involve him, too—"

"He would be across the border long before his message of denunciation was received by the *Sureté*, while we must stay to face disgrace, perhaps the firing squad, perhaps the dry guillotine of Devil's Island—"

She drew a deep breath. "Rather than submit to his embraces I will drown myself—"

"That would seal my fate past any hope! He foresaw that and promised if you did so he would denounce me—not only me, but all of us, Maria Ivanova. Be pitiful, small daughter! I ask it not for myself only, but for all the other innocent victims of his subtlety. You hold our lives in the cupped

palms of your so little, pretty hands. If you refuse him you condemn us all to death. It is your father who begs life of you. I do not ask that you shall love him; I ask only that you shall marry him—"

A shrill sound burst from her. Hearing it the listener could not have told if it were cry or laughter. Higher and higher it rose, shriller and more shrill, until it seemed the quiet street were filled with it. And between the sharp cachinations she said words that had no meaning for him—"Nor love nor hate nor life nor death itself shall cheat me of you!"

HER wedding day dawned cold and rainy, with a wind that moaned between the dripping eaves like a dirge and sent the temperature down till the chill dampness gnawed at her bones like a starved dog. She wore a hip-length jacket of white lapin with square shoulders and bracelet-length sleeves over a gray flannel suit and a white blouse with a little mauve tie at the throat. Her father put on his old uniform, still redolent with moth flakes, and Demetrios was buttoned to the throat in an old-fashioned double-breasted frock coat. Their only attendants were Nicholas Illevitch who drove a taxi and his wife Sonia who worked as a seamstress for Gabrielle fourteen hours every weekday and sometimes all day Sunday and who though barely thirty looked to be in her late fifties. Both of them were arrayed in their best—good clothes worn shaggy at the hems and shiny at the seams—and both looked more as if they had come to a funeral than a wedding.

The aged *papa* of the Russian Orthodox Church of Saint Konstantin officiated with one very dirty little boy for acolyte, their ceremonial crowns were the cheap silver-gilt ones owned by the church and rented out on such occasions for fifteen francs apiece. No one seemed to have thought to bring so much as a single rosebud for Maria Ivanova's bouquet.

At the church door Demetrios handed Major Dalmatoff and Nicholas and Sonia a slim sheaf of ten-franc notes. "Drink to our happiness," he ordered curtly, "and—be very sure to remember—my bride and I do not want visitors. *Adieu.*" Then he hailed a taxi, almost thrust Maria Ivanova into it, and she was on her way to her new home.

She had no idea where Demetrios lived, but she was unprepared for what awaited her. The house stood in a walled garden out beyond the Fortifications, a mansion of aristocratic background struggling to maintain its dignity in reduced circumstances, but inside it was almost magnificent. The entrance hall was floored with black and white tiles set alternately like a checker board and strewn with opulent oriental rugs. On the walls hung pictures framed in dull matted gold, and through partly opened doors she caught glimpses of large rooms where teak or rosewood or mahogany furniture gleamed dully in the gray light.

A butler in a striped waistcoat with black cambric sleeves took her small bag and preceded them up the grand staircase to Demetrios' chamber. The walls were rosewood rubbed with oil until they shone like satin, and the floor of polished oak was strewn with Cossack rugs striped with barbaric primary colors. The furniture was slip-covered in brick red. Beyond the partly opened door of the room she caught sight of the bed chamber, a high-ceilinged apartment with ivory walls and a brightly waxed floor of black linoleum set with long-haired white fur rugs. The furniture was upholstered in white satin and the great bedstead spread with an ivory satin coverlet. Across its foot was draped a convent-made nightrobe of sheer white linen and a dressing gown of ivory crêpe, while on the black floor beneath the bed stood a pair of white satin mules.

She felt Demetrios' hard eyes upon her, and the blood boiled to her face in a quick blush but drained away like a wave slipping off the beach to leave her features corpse-pale as he ordered sharply, "In there. I give you"—he consulted his watch—"ten minutes to prepare yourself."

The little alabaster clock on the dressing table ticked softly, breathlessly, as if it whispered hurry-hurry-*hurry*, but Maria Ivanova neither spoke nor moved as she stood by the long silk-draped window overlooking the storm-lashed garden. When a sharp peremptory knock came at the bedroom door she did not even turn her head.

"Ah—so?" Demetrios, sinister as Satan

in black silk pajamas and dressing gown paused on the threshold. His leaden eyes gleamed suddenly, as if their lead had been scratched to brightness. *"So?"*

He did not seem to step so much as glide as he crossed the white-rugged floor, and when she felt his corpse-cold hand against her neck she cried out sharply as if a reptile had been pressed against her flesh. "So?"

She had not thought that he could be so strong. He had always seemed puny, almost effeminate in his emaciation, yet the fur of her jacket gave way under his hands as if it had been rotten muslin, and her little flannel coat ripped off like the husk from an overripe fruit. With a tearing sound her skirt gave way, her blouse, her satin slip. Then she was in his arms, his avid lips against her cheeks, her chin and throat and mouth.

She was quiescent as a statue, neither struggling nor responding to his embraces, and her passivity maddened him. *"Bozhe moy*—my God!" He panted, his voice snarling like a teased dog. Fate had dealt him all the aces, removed her lover, made her father putty in his hands, given her to him, and she thwarted him in his moment of triumph by ignoring him as if he had not been there. *Bozhe moy!* This was a spiritless, devitalized automaton that he had won by all his scheming, not a woman.

"I'll be your lover or your master, Maria Ivanova, or kill you in the process," he said thickly, and with his left hand held behind her neck he struck her savagely in the face with his right fist. "You would not respond to my kisses—will you be indifferent to my blows?"

The very force of the blow was a sort of anaesthetic. She felt a kind of numbness in her lips and something hot and salty trickled back into her mouth, but actual pain she scarcely felt at all. Again and again his fist smashed into her face, striking eyes and cheeks and mouth and chin. She realized her features were thickening, swelling under the pounding they endured, but through the hurt there ran a thought of exultation: "He'll kill me, beat me to death. I shall escape him that way!" and she smiled at him through bruised lips.

Her courage under torment drove him to a perfect oestrus of fury. She disdained his caresses, scorned to cringe beneath his blows—with a snarl of rage he released his grasp on her neck and struck savagely with both hands, beating her to the floor; then, as she lay motionless he stood over her, kicking her with soft-soled slippers, cursing, raging like a madman. . . .

She felt the first few kicks terribly, then, curiously, they seemed to soften, as if his feet had been encased in thick, soft boxing gloves. With a tired sigh, more of exhaustion than of pain, she trembled violently a moment, half rose to a sitting posture, then collapsed in a heap on the polished floor, her cheek pillowed on an outstretched arm, her silver-blonde hair, unbound, mercifully veiling her bruised face in a warm, sensuous cloud.

WHEN she awoke it was to a feeling of calm quiet. There was no sensation of pain and her body seemed to have grown curiously lighter. The room was in semi-darkness and she realized with an odd feeling of detachment that she could see only from her left eye. "He must have closed the right one with a blow," she thought but, strangely, she had no feeling of resentment. Indeed, she scarcely felt at all. She was in a sort of half-stupor, indifferent to herself and everything else.

A step sounded in the next room and she tried to turn her head to see who it was. Demetrios? Had he come back to torment her? Her head refused to obey her will. "How strange," she mused, then realized with a shock that she had only thought the words. No sound had issued from her mouth and she realized that her lips were still. She tried to raise her head, to flex her toes and fingers, wink an eyelid. There was no response. From head to foot she was in the grip of a profound lethargy, and by no effort of her will could she move a muscle. When she sought to speak no sound ensued; she sighed in vexation, but no air pressed past her lightly parted lips.

The scuff of heavy-booted feet came from the doorway, and from their labored breathing she could tell that several men had come into the room, lugging something ponderous. "This way, gentlemen, if you please," she heard Demetrios direct. "She lies in there on the bed, *ma pauvre belle epousée.* You

understand, it was so sudden—a trip upon the stairs, a fall, and *pouf! C'est fini!*"

"One comprehends, *M'sieur,*" one of the men replied perfunctorily. "But we must all go some day, somehow. At least *Madame* your wife went in the beauty of her youth, nor did she suffer long. You would have us put it here?"

"*Ah bah!*" Another of the men leant over her. "These *laveurs des morts*, they do not half earn their money. They have not even closed both her eyes!" Abruptly utter darkness fell on her and she realized he had lowered the lid of the eye through which she had been able to see.

Then horrifying revelation came. A vague, phantasmal thought that had been wafting through her brain was suddenly crystallized in her mind. These men were from the *Pompe Funèbres*—the municipal undertakers of Paris—the heavy object they had lugged into the room was a coffin—her coffin!

She tried to scream, to tell them she still lived, to beg them not to shut her in that dreadful box. In vain. Although she struggled till it seemed her lungs must burst with the effort, she could not make a sound nor stir a finger, not even raise the eyelid that the undertaker's man had lowered.

She felt herself raised from the bed and placed in the silk-tufted coffin, felt its soft wadding close about her like the tentacles of an octopus, and in a moment felt the strangling, suffocating softness of the padded lining of the lid brush on her face as they fixed the cover upon the chest and tightened the brass screws that held it.

Since childhood she had had a dread of choking. Sometimes she had wakened in the night to find herself bathed in perspiration at the terror of a dream in which she had been buried alive. Here was the realization of that dream, reality ten thousand times more dreadful than the most vivid of dreams; the terrifying prelude to the slow and awful death by suffocation in the grave to which she had been sentenced.

For centuries, it seemed, she lay there in her coffin, sightless, motionless, soundless, but with her sense of hearing sharpened abnormally. For more years than the vilest sinner must spend in purgatory it seemed she lay there thinking, hoping, praying desperately. At last a slight increase of temperature and the rattle of cart wheels outside told her morning had arrived, but daylight brought no hope. It meant only that she was that much nearer the Golgotha of her Via Dolorosa.

Finally they came. Rough hands took up her coffin and bore it down the stairs, thrust it into the black-canopied hearse, strapped it in place. The clack of horses' hoofs against the pavement sounded. They were on their way to the church where a few hours before she had been married.

All through the almost endless funeral service she lay helpless, praying as she'd never prayed before that somehow they would find she was alive before . . . "Surely, *surely* I shall regain self-control and make them hear me," she told herself desperately. "It can't be that I'll lie like this until—" She dared not complete the sentence, even in her thoughts.

Once more they raised her, put her in the hearse. Once more she heard the clop-clop of the horses' iron-shod hoofs against the paving stones, but now it seemed their tempo had increased until they rattled like a madly-beaten drum. The hearse was racing like a motor car, like an express train, like an airplane; the few remaining moments of her time above ground lessened with each revolution of the wheels. "O God, dear Lord," she prayed as she had not prayed since childhood, "grant I may not suffer this; grant that they may find I am alive in time to save me from this dreadful thing, or else, dear merciful Father, kill me quickly now. Save me—save me. . . ."

She was being carried from the hearse, raised shoulder-high, thrust forward roughly. She felt the jar against her head as the coffin, shoved forward, met with sudden resistance. What was it? What had happened? she wondered. Then suddenly she knew. She was not to be buried in the earth, but sealed in the crypt of a mausoleum, with fetid, rotting corpses above, below, on each side— She felt the pressure of the air grow heavier as the stone block was placed at the opening of her tomb; it seemed to bear upon her chest, her mouth, her nostrils—she was being smothered, choked, suffocated.

And with the dreadful realization came return to full consciousness. Too late she

was mistress of her body, able to move and scream for help, though none would ever hear her. She called aloud in agony of soul and body. The padded tufting of the coffin lining deadened her voice to a muffled moan. Her eyes were open now, but nothing but the literal darkness of the grave met them. She moved her hands. The nails scratched gratingly against the grain of the rough serrated silk with which the coffin was lined.

Then she went mad. Shrieking wild obscenities that would have brought a blush to the cheeks of a fishwife, mouthing choked, muffled curses on the day she had been born and the God that let this dreadful fate befall her, she writhed, kicked, twisted and struggled in the narrow confines of the wadded box. The coffin's sleazy silk lining ripped to shreds as she clawed at it and the cotton wadding of the tufting came away in great soft flakes to cling against her gaping, gasping mouth and sightless, staring eyes. Her nails dug through the flimsy drapery of her shroud, cutting gashes in the flesh beneath, she bit her lips and tongue until her mouth was choked with blood and her wild ravings muted to the gurgling cries of one who drowns. At last by a tremendous effort she turned over in the coffin, and the softness of the mattress on its bottom seemed to rise like water waiting for its victim to engulf her. Her heart, her throat, seemed bursting. Wave on retching wave of nausea flooded over her and she lapsed into merciful unconsciousness.

A RAY of early-autumn sunshine streaming through an open window stretched across the bed in which she lay and from a table at her side a bowl of yellow roses sent forth a cloud of perfume. She shuddered like one waking from a terrible nightmare and sighed a little moaning sigh. "Maria Ivanova," said a much-loved, long-lost voice softly, and she turned her head weakly to see Philip standing at the bedside, eyes soft with love and concern.

"Oh, Philippe, *radost moja*, I'm so glad I've died and joined you!" she whispered. "I don't know where we are, but even if it's hell it will seem heaven with you near me."

He sank to his knees and put his arms about her gently. "You haven't died, you little goat. You almost cashed in your chips, but I got to you in time and brought you here. You're in my house, and have been for almost six weeks. I reckon both our reputations have gone clear to blazes, but otherwise we're all right, dear."

"But—but they told me you were dead. I read it in *le journal*—"

"All of which just goes to show you can't believe a thing you see in the papers. The report of my death was greatly exaggerated, I assure you."

"But—"

"No buts, darling. It happened like this: When I got to Metzingerberg the first thing I did was to hunt up Revolutionary headquarters and who should be the generalissimo of the rebels but my old friend Gregor Petoski who used to be the Paris correspondent for *Pravda* and whom I taught to play poker and drink highballs. You'd have thought I was his long-lost brother, or second cousin, anyway, from the way he welcomed me, and before we'd had half a dozen whiskey-sodas he made me a proposition. About half the grand ducal army—a disorganization of some three or four thousand men—had joined the revolutionists; the rest stood pat and held a fistful of aces in the form of machine guns, a few tanks and equipment for a mechanized battalion. They'd holed up in the castle-fortress of Metzingerbergschloss, prepared to stand a siege, and he didn't think he could take the place by assault without losing too many of his men. That's where I was to come in. Her Serene Highness the Grand Duchess wouldn't trust a revolutionist, but perhaps she'd trust me if I went to her with a proposition. She was to abdicate all right, title and interest to the throne for herself and children and turn the government over to a *junta* with the understanding that a republic was to be declared and a general election held as soon as things had quieted down. Such of her army as cared to do so were to be permitted to lay down their arms and go back to their homes, the rest would be incorporated by companies, battalions and regiments into the republican army. In return she was to be given safe conduct for herself and family and such of her personal retinue as cared to follow her, to retain her personal fortune and the crown jewels, valued at about two million pasadas

—almost a hundred thousand dollars in real money.

"Petoski hadn't much hope she'd accept, they're a stiff-necked lot, these Serene Highnesses, but when I put it up to her cold turkey she fell for it like a ton of brick. Not only that, she hailed me as her deliverer—it turned out that her soldiers hadn't twenty rounds of ammunition left apiece—paraded the castle guard in my honor and bestowed the Order of the Silver Falcon on me while the band played something that sounded like a mixture of *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* and *Tipperary* but which they told me was the Metzingerberg national anthem.

"I felt like a heel when I went back to Petoski with the news, for he kissed me on both cheeks before I had a chance to stop him and hailed me as the Hero of the Revolution. It seems *his* men hadn't more than twenty-five or thirty rounds of ammunition left, and the deal I'd managed to put over broke what looked like a hopeless stalemate."

MARIA IVANOVA had not understood much more than half he said, but she managed to grasp the salient facts. "But they told me you were dead—killed—"

"A gross exaggeration, as I told you, dear. Petoski's men threw a big party that night and got full of barbecue and fuller of new wine.

"In the excitement one of 'em let go his rifle and gave me a nasty scalp wound, laid me up for almost a month, but I was never in any real danger. The rumor had gone round that I was dead, though, and they'd put the story on the wires before it could be contradicted. Of course the boys dressed the story up a bit, and played me up as a hero. I'll have one hell of a time living up to the build-up they gave me."

She nodded and gave him the wan ghost of a smile. "And how did I come here, *doushka?* I was buried alive—" she shuddered at the recollection and clung to him in a sudden excess of terror.

"Now *that* comes under the head of miracles. I hit the trail for Paris just as soon as I was well enough to travel, and when I got here the first thing they told me was that you had married Stepanovitch and died the same night. I couldn't believe it at first, but when I rushed around to your flat your father told me the whole sordid tale, even confessed his part in it, and I went out and got lit up like a church. Toward morning I stumbled into the Café Eléphant Rouge and there was Raoul Lecomte almost as high as I was and longing for companionship. Raoul drives a taxi in the daytime and at night acts as guide, philosopher and friend to Americans, Britons and other visiting firemen eager to see the night life of Montmartre and the *Quartier*. That evening, or rather morning, he was on the loose, in funds and ripe for devilment of any sort.

"'You know where she is buried?' he asked when I'd sobbed my story to him.

"'In the *Mausolée des Russes* in Ste. Honorée Cemetery,' I told him.

"'Then, name of a little blue man, why do we linger here?' he demanded. 'Let us go to her and force the tomb that you may take farewell of her in fitting fashion, *mon ami*. Come, what are we delaying for?' And like the maudlin, drunken fool I was I fell in with his crazy suggestion.

"We climbed into his rattling taxi and drove to Ste. Honorée, reaching the gates just before dawn. They should have been locked, of course, but the *intendant* was either drunk or careless, or both, and we had no trouble entering the graveyard. The bronze doors of the mausoleum were fastened, but Raoul knew the remedy for that. Fastening his metal tow-rope to the rear bumper of his taxi he made the other end fast to the handles of the doors and started his motor. The doors gave way beneath the tugging of the plucky little taxi, and we were in the mausoleum. The cement they had used to seal you in was still moist, but even so we could not clear it quite away with our knives, so we used the same technique on the slab that we'd used on the doors, and when we'd dragged it away we had no trouble sliding your casket from the niche.

"My darling—" Phil's face went grim at the remembrance—"when I saw you lying there with your face smeared with blood and your dear, lovely body contorted so horribly I went cold sober in a moment. So did Raoul. *'Misère de Dieu!'* he gasped. 'She was buried alive, that poor one. She died horribly!' and he did something I'm sure

he hadn't done in twenty years, signed himself with the Cross.

"Something, I don't know what, probably our good angel, made me put my hand out to touch you, and when I did I found your flesh warm. I felt your throat, there was a faint pulse in it. I listened at your breast. Your heart beats could be heard faintly, like the ticking of a watch enveloped in cotton.

"'Raoul, she's still alive!' I choked, and, "'*Sacré nom d'un petit bonhomme,*' he shot back, 'in that case why do we stand here like two silly goats? Let us hasten, let us rush, let us *fly* with her to your *apartement* and secure medical assistance!'

"When we finally got you here he rushed out searching for a doctor and it seemed to me it was a week before he came back, but when he did the little sawbones just looked at you, wrote out a prescription and suggested that I have him call around next morning. He kept coming every day for nearly two weeks while you lay like one of the exhibits in Madame Toussard's Wax Museum. At last your coma gave way to long spells of natural sleep with intermittent fits of delirium, but you've never been fully conscious till just now." His arms tightened round her. "Nothing shall ever take you from me again, dearest."

GETTING married took a bit of doing. Before the law Maria Ivanova was still Madame Stepanovitch, and it would be impossible for her to answer the thousand and one questions required of a bride-to-be without perjuring herself. For the same reason she could not obtain a passport, but finally they found a plan. Phil got transferred to the Geneve Bureau of the *Globe-Sentinel* and took a month's vacation. No passports were required to go from Paris to Marseilles, but their ship went outside the three-mile limit between ports, and they were married by the captain; then as an American and his wife they had no difficulty getting passports for Switzerland.

For four months theirs was an idyllic existence. The climate was delightful, the Swiss people courteous and genial. They lived in a small brown wooden house on the outskirts of the city with a fat and friendly woman to look after them. In the mornings they could lie abed while she built a fire in the great porcelain stove, then sitting up, eat breakfast of hot chocolate, small, crusty rolls, eggs and coffee while they looked through the wide window at the Juras with Mont Blanc in the distance, or at the lake which lay steel-blue nine hundred feet below them. In the evening they had dinner by lamplight, and afterward Maria Ivanova played the violin while Phil accompanied her on the piano until the warm old room was fairly redolent with music. Or they dined at one of the sophisticated gay hotels or at some small café where everyone seemed to know everyone else, where every woman looked like an adventuress and every other man seemed to have stepped from the pages of an international spy novel, and afterward they went to the theatre or cinema and held hands shamelessly in the dark; then they drove home through the clear cold starlight with the hoofs of their *fiacre's* horse striking sparks from the hard-frozen road. But always they returned to the peace and quiet of firelight and drawn curtains and the comfort of each others' arms.

THEN Phil received a summons to return to Paris. Government after government had fallen, the stench of the hell-broth already stewing in Berlin was growing more perceptible each day; the paper needed someone who knew international politics by heart, and Phil's adventure in Metzingerberg had given him the reputation of an expert. It meant a big increase in salary and tremendous prestige, but Maria Ivanova was not happy. She wept like a child driven from her home when their train pulled out of the station, nor could the pink champagne —of which she was inordinately fond—that Phil ordered with their dinner in the *wagon-restaurant* console her. "I have been happier in Switzerland than I have ever been in all my life," she sobbed when they were back in their compartment. "Oh, Philippe, *ogurtchik,* hold me tightly, I am so afraid!"

"Afraid?" he echoed tolerantly. "What's there to be afraid of, Maria Ivanova?"

"I do not know, *golubuska,* but somehow I feel I am hurrying to my doom; that our little hour of happiness is drawing to its close."

BUT back in Paris with its light and gaiety and bustle, with shopping to be done at Liberty's and the Galleries Lafayette and with a party of some sort every night, either at their flat or at the home of one of their acquaintances or at an embassy—for Phil was in diplomacy spelled with a capital D now—she forgot her forebodings and once more became radiant with happiness. Then—

She had been to a cocktail party at the Ritz and waited in the lobby for Phil who was detained at the office. From the dining room where guests were beginning to congregate came the music of the orchestra, the *Merry Widow Waltz,* and hardly realizing, she hummed in time with the gay, lilting air. "A most appropriate tune, is it not, Madame Stepanovitch?" asked a husky voice at her elbow, and she whirled, eyes gone wide with sudden fright, to face Demetrios. His lead-gray eyes were greedy between heavy lids as they inspected her from the tips of her satin pumps to the crown of her lace hat. Greedy —and triumphant.

"I think you are mistaken, *Monsieur,*" she said coldly as she grasped back self-control. I am Madame Briarly, wife of *Monsieur* Philip Briarly of the New York *Globe-Sentinel,* and I do not know you."

"But I know you, Maria Ivanova. How you came back from the grave I do not know; but you shall tell the story in a court of law when I bring suit against your husband—well, perhaps not exactly your husband, but the gentleman with whom you live—for taking my wife from me."

THE trial was a solemn farce. Americans were not popular in Paris that year, there had been too much pointed talk about war debts and defaulting debtors, and few borrowers can resist the temptation to do an evil turn to their creditors. Also the bench was venal and Demetrios had funds in abundance. He had influence, too, for the tentacles of the Third Reich reached everywhere, and more than one wearer of the judicial ermine was involved in acts of disloyalty which put him at the mercy of a ruthless blackmailer—and Demetrios was all of that.

When almost six weeks had been spent in hearing testimony and listening to impassioned arguments by *avocats* on both sides the *procès-verbal* of the court's finding was read. Maria Ivanova Stepanovitch, *née* Maria Ivanova Dalmatoff, was the lawful spouse of Demetrios Stepanovitch, and the pretended marriage between her and Philip Briarly, American citizen, was null and void. She was directed to return to her husband forthwith and the defendant Philip Briarly assessed the sum of twenty thousand francs in damages.

"They can't do this to us!" Phil raged. "We'll appeal, we'll leave their lousy country—"

Maria Ivanova raised one slim pale hand to quiet him. "It is no use, my very dearest," she said softly. "An appeal would but prolong our agony and result in ultimate disaster. It would be impossible for me to get a passport now, and even if I could your countrymen would not let me enter the United States. We have lived together without lawful marriage—the court's degree declares it to have been so—and that constitutes what your immigration authorities call 'moral terpitude.' I should be hounded from your shores as if I were a—" Her lips stumbled on the ugly word.

"Well, we'll find some way out," Phil answered doggedly. "The judgment doesn't become operative for five days. A lot can happen in that time."

It did. At five minutes past eleven next morning the bell sounded at Demetrios' front door, and when the butler went to answer it Maria Ivanova stood on the threshold. She was in black from head to foot, a black bonnet with a crêpe veil like a widow's on her gleaming silver-gilt hair, a one-piece dress of black duvetin that outlined her slim figure as the rind outlines the contours of the fruit, black gloves, black shoes, even black stockings in defiance of the mode that decreed beige for all occasions. "Tell your master I am here," she ordered as a princess might have ordered a serf, and when the fellow tiptoed to do her bidding she stepped into the hall.

"Welcome home, Madame Stepanovitch!" Demetrios greeted. He crossed the hall and stopped a few feet from her, his gray eyes seemingly all pupils, like black openings into hell. "Your room has been made ready," he added. "I tell you now as I once told you, you have ten minutes to prepare yourself."

"I shall not need ten minutes," she smiled bleakly, but with a gleam of triumph in her eyes. "No, Demetrios Stepanovitch, I shall not need ten minutes to prepare myself. I have come to give you back what you lost, no more, no less. Take back that which thou gavest, Demetrios Stepanovitch—a corpse."

She tottered as she finished speaking, swayed like a young tree in a windstorm, then collapsed at his feet. The capsule of mercuric cyanide she had swallowed just before she rang the doorbell had dissolved, and the poison worked with lightninglike rapidity.

FIELD knocked the dottel from his pipe and crammed a fresh load of tobacco in the briar. "You noticed how he limped?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's a souvenir Phil gave him when he went out to his house that night and threw him down the stairs."

"And what became of Briarly? I suppose his whole life was wrecked."

"Not his. He's back in America, editing a chain of trade journals, living over in Flatbush and rearing a brood of little Briarlys. They say his wife's a rather cozy sort of person—member of the Woman's Guild of the church they attend, secretary of the Parent-Teachers' Association, and all that sort of thing."

"Good God," I murmured. "You mean to say that he's forgotten Maria Ivanova?"

Field drummed upon the edge of the table with strong slim fingers. "I wouldn't say that. As long as he lives there'll be moments when he'll be reminded of her by the quick tap-tap of a girl's high heels, a bar of music coming through some open window, the powder-sweet scent of an evening wrap. There'll always be a secret, sacred corner of his heart that will be barred to his wife, for it will hold Maria Ivanova's shrine. No-o; I don't think he's forgotten her, or ever will.

"Waiter!" He signaled with upraised forefinger. "Another double dry Martini, please."

"Make mine the same," I seconded.

Remorse

By PAGE COOPER

GLUTTONOUS bird with your hooded eyes
Probing my festering putrid fears,
Maggoty terrors the mind denies,
Breeding in globules of unshed tears,

Carrion bird, from my straining gyves
Loosen your talons, no mark of Cain
Bloodless my forehead, no thirsting knives
Drip when my sister's soul is slain.

There are no succulent wounds, no muck
Spattered with gobbets of ghoulish bread.
Croak not of murder, my hot hand struck
Naught but the soul of my sister dead.

Votaress

By EMIL PETAJA

The grounds were littered with unspeakables, with a thousand and one products of the woman's nocturnal activities

HILDA GILPEPPER was livid.

They were in her victory garden again, at least one of them was. In mid-afternoon.

"That woman!" she muttered fiercely, seizing a broom and flying out the kitchen door with it.

Not *on* it, you understand, although there were those in the neighborhood of once-proud Gilpepper House who were known to have said that Hilda—with her tall raw-boned figure, her straight black hair and snapping eyes, her Gilpepper nose and jutting chin—would have made a creditable Salem witch.

The vegetable garden over which she la-

Heading by FRED HUMISTON

bored daily sprouted green and hopeful under a fleecy May sky. Every prospect of her tight little world pleased Hilda, and only cats were vile.

They came over the high board fence from next door. Dozens of them, sometimes at night. But this was the first time one had ventured to tempt Hilda's wrath in bald daylight.

This one was a large Tom. He had bushy gray fur, sultry topaz eyes. A beautiful specimen, but not to Hilda, who detested cats. He was stalking a blackbird, who, if the truth were known, was doing more damage to Hilda's budding garden than he was. Cats don't relish vegetables.

Hilda never thought of that. All she knew was that she hated them and was cursed with having a yardful next door. White ones, black ones, gray ones, yellow ones and tabbies. Maltese, Persians, Angoras, and every conceivable cross-breed, including some she was prepared to swear weren't cats at all but demons in feline-form.

"That woman!" Hilda cried again. It was like a battle cry, as she charged him.

The gray feline, crouching in the tall grass, turned his head quickly. He saw her coming, broom uplifted. He made for the board fence like a blurred gray streak.

But Hilda was an old hand at cat-chasing. More than one had been doomed to spend the remainder of his nine lives on three or even two legs as a result of one of her well-directed wallops.

And this magnificent Tom was no exception. He let out a protestive yowl as her broom descended on his back, just as he was making the leap for life. He fell back to the ground in a squawling bundle; and Hilda, eyes blazing, made shift to finish him off.

But just then a harshly croaked expletive from over the high fence diverted her for two seconds, and two seconds was all Mr. Tom required. He was over the fence in a trice, crying softly as he limped toward his mistress for consolation.

HILDA stood listening to the weird crooning noises that ensued. It was *that woman.* She was comforting the injured animal in some outlandish foreign tongue. It sickened Hilda's strait-laced soul.

She decided that she would have it out with the creature, right now. So she dragged the stepladder over to the fence and ascended to the top, from whence she could see over into the next yard.

The next yard was, in the words of one of our lesser-known poets, an unmitigated *mess.* Fenced on three sides by high wooden walls was a vision of squalor and neglect, a tangle of nasty-looking little sheds and fungus-grown dank arbors, a web of sinister blackart calculated to inspire a Lovecraft. It was littered with unspeakables, as well as with a thousand and one products of that woman's nocturnal activities.

The tatterdemalion of a house, a noisome wooden structure, seemed to be held together only by faith, and heathen faith at that. Hilda hadn't seen the inside of it, but she suspected the worst.

And there, in the midst of it all, like a slug-queen on a filth-heap, stood the mistress of it all. Isma Karek. Informally known as "that woman," "the cat-woman," and "that awful gypsy."

At a single glance Isma appeared to be merely one small mass of filthy black rags. A more penetrating look revealed that she did have eyes, odd green-yellow eyes, and a mottled brown face fraught with wrinkles, somewhere under that tattered black shawl of hers.

Oddly enough, there *was* something proud and regal about the way she stood there, surrounded by cats of every kind and color, soothing her hurt Tom with a grotesque black claw.

"Hey, down there!" Hilda cried, forgetting she was a lady. "You keep your blasted cats out of my yard!"

No answer.

"I've stood about all I'm going to!" Hilda went on with mounting fury. "It's bad enough to have a—a creature like you cluttering up a respectable neighborhood! W-Why this house and yard of yours is indecent! What's more—" she went on determinedly, "I'm not going to stand for it any longer! Gilpepper House used to be one of the show-places of the county, and I'm not going to have you and your cats

next to it any longer! I'm going to have the Law on you!"

No reply from the bundle of rags. Only a low caressing mumbling directed at the feline in her arms.

"Don't you hear me!" Hilda shrieked, brandishing her broom. "I've got connections on the police force, and I'll have you out of here in a week!"

No response. But now that incalculably old face turned up at her. Those lambent eyes spilled forth a malevolence so powerful that Hilda almost tumbled down off her perch.

Perhaps the revolting old hag did understand her, after all. Well, she told herself self-righteously as she stalked back through her own well-kept yard, she would understand the Law all right. . . .

LIEUTENANT JACK TRASK of the southern city's police force was Hilda's "connection." His grandfather and great-grandfather had been butlers for the Gilpeppers in the old days. That was when Hilda's grandmother was the brightest socialite in this part of the state.

In those days Gilpepper Street was *the* residential street—not just a hodge-podge of apartment buildings, funeral parlors, immigrant families, and "that awful gypsy."

Hilda was the last of the Gilpeppers, and she was fiercely determined to carry on their proud tradition, mortgage or no mortgage, servants or no servants.

Blood was thicker than water, she told herself. Since Jack Trask's forbears had bowed their heads to the Gilpeppers, that ought to mean something. Jack Trask ought to be glad to do her this one small favor.

Lieutenant Trask was an affable youngish man, and he knew all about the Gilpeppers and their proud tradition. He knew all about Hilda's skimpings and scrapings to carry it forward, too; her determination to cling to something that had long since faded into oblivion.

So he listened very patiently to her long tirade.

"Isma Karek, eh?" he remarked, when she'd finished her denunciation. "Oh, yes. I know her. She's the old woman who goes through the trash bins up and down the alleys, at night, collecting all sorts of scraps. Egyptian, I think. She's an odd character, surely. But there's never been a whisper of complaint about her before. No thieving or anything like that. We've always considered her harmless."

Hilda sat up stiffly.

"*Harmless!* With all her cats clawing up my garden and—and driving the whole neighborhood crazy with their noise! And —you just should have seen the way she looked at me!"

A cat can look at a queen, flitted over the lieutenant's mind, but he just smiled placatingly.

"It's been my experience that cats aren't nearly as destructive as some other pets," he temporized. "Take puppies, for instance. We have a tabby-cat at home. Kids love her, and she keeps the yard free of mice, I must say."

Hilda's lips quivered. A sharp impatient hiss escaped.

"Then—you won't do *anything* about it?"

"Of course I will, Miss Gilpepper," he twinkled. "I'll investigate personally. And if I find conditions there as bad as you say, I'll—"

"Yes?"

"I'll see that the place is cleaned up," he told her gravely.

WITH that Hilda had to be satisfied.

She waited eagerly for Lieutenant Trask to pay her a call after he'd investigated, as he promised he would. There was no doubt in her mind what his verdict would be. Jack Trask was a civic-minded family man. He couldn't help but be severely shocked by the nauseous condition prevailing in that woman's house and yard.

She saw him coming up the walk, from behind the crisp frayed curtains. She didn't stand on ceremony. She opened the door at once. He was hardly seated on the edge of one of her plush chairs when she exclaimed impatiently, *"Well?"*

"I saw her," he said succinctly.

"Yes, of course. But what have you to say? Isn't she a disgrace to the whole community?"

The lieutenant looked thoughtful and puzzled.

"No. I can't honestly say that. She's

strange. But then, old people are apt to get that way when they live so alone." He paused to stare down at his cap in his hands. "She answered my knock at once. She was extremely polite, and anxious to be helpful. She said she was very sorry if her cats had disturbed you. She kept calling them her 'children.' I suppose she's come to feel that way about them after all these years of living alone with them."

Hilda stared at him in astonishment.

"She *said*—"

"Why, yes. She speaks English remarkably well, considering."

"*Hmph!* The inside of her house was a sight, I'll wager!"

"No," Lieutenant Trask said calmly. "It was neat as a pin. I was agreeably surprised. And she herself wasn't anything as I had pictured from your description. Never paid much attention to her before, but she's quite a sweet-faced little old lady. Rather dark, foreign obviously, but—"

"*Sweet-faced!*" Hilda gasped, clutching the back of her chair, unable to sit still while she listened to this revelation.

A long time ago she'd concluded that men were a pack of ridiculous fools, but this ingenuous statement went even beyond what her low opinion could anticipate.

"You can't have seen her in good light," she said smotheredly.

"On the contrary, there was ample light. Come to think of it, it was rather odd, though. Seemed sort of bluish, and came from another room—a big one toward the back. Now that I think about it, all the windows were shuttered tight—except that one kitchen window. ."

"Then you saw the back yard?" Hilda demanded. "Didn't that convince you?"

LIEUTENANT TRASK smiled.

"Yes. I saw it, through that window. But it seemed unusually clean. Rose trellises, neat little cabins for the cats. None of the litter and filth you spoke of!"

"Rose trell—" Hilda muttered awedly, thinking of those hideous fungoid growths under those unpleasant, somehow suggestive arbors. "But you didn't go out there!"

"It didn't seem necessary, Miss Gilpepper. I got a wide view of it through the window. However,"—he stroked his craggy jaw reflectively—"I did take a peek into that big room where the blue light sifted from. Seemed to be some sort of shrine. Egyptian, I suppose. I'm not up on those things."

Hilda's amazed indignation was threaded through with feminine curiosity. "Shrine?"

Lieutenant Trask nodded.

"The room was half-dark, but I could make out the outline of a statue or idol of some kind on a large pedestal. Seemed to be a woman with a cat's head, made out of green stone.

"There was a large bowl in the center of the room, and the light seemed to come from inside that. A most unusual effect. There were several cats in the room, as well.

"When the old woman saw me look in there she pulled me away, smiling sort of pathetically."

Hilda sniffed.

"I knew it! She's a heathen. Practices Lord knows what manner of blasphemous rites in that room!"

Trask grinned.

"Well, if you think I can book her on what I saw you're mistaken, Miss Gilpepper. The Bill of Rights guarantees her the privilege of worshiping in any way she pleases. If she wants to pray to an old Egyptian cat-goddess, that's her privilege!"

HILDA was shocked speechless. Then she said harshly, "Then you aren't going to do anything about that woman? Not *anything?*"

Lieutenant Trask stood up and moved his big shoulders in what amounted to a shrug.

"Sorry, Miss Gilpepper. As for the cats, seemed to me you exaggerated their number. Anyway, there's no city ordinance which covers a case of this kind. Isma Karnek owns that house, clear title. She pays her taxes and asks nothing from anybody.

"Seems to me you and her other neighbors did a pretty fair job of ostracizing her when you built that high fence around her. And as far as the police are concerned at present, what goes on behind that fence is strictly her own business!"

Hilda watched him tramp off down the walk. She was frozen to the spot. Her mind

seethed with humiliation and vindictive fury.

So the world had come to *this!* Hideous heathen women were allowed to walk all over a Gilpepper! Even the city police was against her!

There was no doubt in her mind that *that woman* had cast some unhallowed spell over Jack Trask, made him see her and her house as she wanted him to see it, not as it actually was.

She paced the faded carpet.

What was to be done? If Isma Karek had played her heathen tricks on Jack Trask, obviously she would do the same with any gullible idiot of a man whom she might appeal to. And Hilda Gilpepper wasn't the appealing type.

As for the other neighbors, they were a wishy-washy fly-by-night lot. No use even consulting *them.*

She pursed her thin lips determinedly.

There was no other way. She must take the law into her own hands. It was up to her, and her alone, to clean the community of this heathen menace. . .

Several nights later the neighborhood was roused by the frantic, frightening scream of: *"Fire! Fire!"*

It was the old Karek shack. Went up like tinder, dry and old and brittle as it was. And along with it all the sinister ramshackle mess of outhouses behind it.

The firemen complimented Hilda Gilpepper. For it was she who first noticed the blaze—it was doing nicely by that time—and sent in the alarm. It was clever of her, too, to have kept the garden hose playing on that high fence until it was drenched and redrenched clear through. Otherwise the fire might have spread onto her property, it being closest.

All that was left standing, when the ravening flames had had their way, was the brick chimney, and a large odd statue on a stone pedestal. It was blackened by soot and flame, but it still retained the semblance of a woman with the head of a cat.

As for Isma and her numberless progeny, they were nowhere to be found. They had simply vanished. Nor did they find so much as one cat-corpse. It was very mysterious.

On the night of the full moon Hilda was awaken out of sound sleep by what seemed to be the concerted wailing of many cats. But that couldn't be! It was impossible! There weren't any cats. They had all disappeared the night of the fire, along with that dreadful gypsy woman.

She opened her eyes to see a vivid sidewise splash of moonlight on the floor below her open window. She waited.

There it was again. A low agonized wailing that curved unharmoniously upwards until it become a high-pitched scream. Inhumanly human. Like a terrified child. Or like—a fragment of poetry flitted across Hilda's mind—*like woman wailing for her demon lover.*

Her nerves snapped. She couldn't stand it. She got up, flung on a robe and slippers, and padded to the window.

The garden was bathed in rich shimmering moonlight. It was very beautiful, a luminiscent fairyland. Titania and Oberon appeared on such nights as this.

But on the other side of the high board fence it was quite different. Spectral blue light played over blackened ruins and over a strange ritual. .

It was a cat-ring. Isma's cats had come home, and they formed an immense chain, their tails fluffed, their backs arched, as they marched solemnly around and around, howling in unison.

It was evident they were performing some ancient and unholy ceremony, here by the light of the full moon.

There was patterned deliberateness in every motion, every sound.

At the center of the ring was the large statue—the statue of a woman with a cat's head—and at the foot of its pedestal crouched the biggest cat of all.

Hilda shivered.

She watched for some time, her indignation waxing and growing. It seethed into anger, which burbled into cold fury, which finally boiled over into action.

"I'll put a stop to this—once and for all!" she declared.

She picked up her father's 12-gauge shotgun, loaded it grimly, shoving half a dozen extra shells loosely into her robe pocket, and marched down the winding stairs.

She swept into the moon-drenched garden like an avenging fury. She moved

the stepladder softly by the wall and stepped stealthily up to the very top of it, and drew careful bead on the monstrous black cat crouched under the statue.

The felines were occupied with their orisons and took no notice of her. Not until the shotgun went off—with a roar that shook the house-tops for blocks.

The caterwauling stopped abruptly.

The crouching cat-priestess caught it right between its green-yellow eyes, and with a single scream of pain and rage it leaped into the air, then fell back at the foot of the cat-god, and lay still.

Hilda gave a cackling cry of triumph. Fierce joy set her shivering. She'd killed one—the biggest of the lot!

Now the cats were all looking at her silently. Just looking, with large enigmatic eyes, as she stood up there, her hair in a wild gnarl, one knee propped on the fence top to balance herself, laughing like a mad woman as she reloaded the shotgun.

She started to take aim again. Then she saw something in the white moonlight that made her shriek with unbridled terror. The heavy gun tumbled from her fingers—and then she tumbled after it—falling—falling—falling.

They were on her like unleashed demons, clawing, biting, mauling, snarling. She uttered one quavering scream of utter despair, and then it was over. . . .

Lieutenant Trask was the one who was sent to investigate. He arrived alone, ahead of the others. The killers had vanished again, but there was no doubt as to how Hilda Gilpepper had died.

The other corpse, the stepladder, the shotgun, all told the story.

It wasn't at all a pretty sight, what was left of Hilda Gilpepper. Nor was the other corpse pretty, with its face blown off by 12-gauge shot.

Gingerly Lieutenant Trask pulled aside the tattered black rags which concealed the rest of it, and he saw, as he had expected to see, the shrunken body of Isma Karek. . . .

The Sorcerer to His Love

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

WITHIN your arms I will forget
The horror that Zimimar brings
Between his vast and vampire wings
From out his frozen oubliette.

The terror born of ultimate space
That gnaws with icy fang and fell,
The sucklings of the hag of hell,
Shall flee the enchantment of your face.

Ah, more than all my wizard art
The circle our delight has drawn:
What veil phantoms thence have gone,
What fearful presences depart!

Your arms are white, your arms are warm
To hold me from the haunted air,
And you alone are firm and fair
Amid the darkly whirling storm.

The Dark Brothers

By HAROLD LAWLOR

"*I'LL get my big brother after you!*" Even today I'm not able to write the above line without glancing over my shoulder apprehensively. Which will give you some idea of the lasting effect that the weird and unsavory foundling, Tommy, had upon me. I say "weird and unsavory" advisedly, though at the same time honesty forces me to admit that he was undeniably the most attractive and well-behaved child I've ever met in forty-odd years of dealing with children!

Attempting to reconcile these two opposing statements will not be easy, as I know.

Have you ever met a creature of the nether land
one of Night's dusky children?

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

And it well may be you won't agree with me that my explanation of the peculiar series of events I'm about to set down is the true, the rational one. But even you will be forced to admit that the whole thing can't be dismissed as mere coincidence. And, admitting that, I defy you to produce a better explanation!

I didn't know it at the time, but I see clearly now that the circumstances under which Tommy first came to my notice were decidedly characteristic. This was on the very first morning I, Hubert Gadsby, assumed my duties as the new superintendent of the Foundling Home, a privately endowed institution, here in the town of X—. There had been mismanagement under the old regime, and in the resultant shake-up almost every head had fallen. Of the former staff, there remained only Mrs. Ohlenrodt, the chief matron, and Laura Anson, who was to be my secretary.

At ten o'clock on that first morning, then, I was engaged at my desk in going through some papers when there came to my ears the sound of heated words and a noisy scuffle from the hall outside my office. Going to the door I opened it just in time to hear the sharp impact of a hand on flesh, and to see a small boy trying in vain to break away from the relentless grasp of the matron, Mrs. Ohlenrodt.

To say that I was dumbfounded is to put it mildly; Abusive treatment of the children placed in my care is something I have never condoned. Surely it is unnecessary to add that I lost no time in going to the two and disengaging Mrs. Ohlenrodt's hand—not too gently, I assure you!

The matron turned on me a face of such fury that I was appalled, but for the moment I ignored her. It is never wise to chide an adult before a child. I looked down at the unhappy boy, and said as gently as I could, "Run along into the library, son, and wait there for me till I come, will you?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir." And he bowed with a funny little awkward bob of his head that was definitely engaging. He seemed not at all alarmed by his recent distressing experience—a fact, I may add, which did not perplex me. Children are amazingly resilient.

My smile faded as I turned to the matron. "If you'll come into my office for a moment—" I suggested coldly.

SUCH was my anger that I dared not trust myself to speak immediately. The matron sank into the chair alongside my desk and kept her gaze sullenly averted, affording me the opportunity of studying her. I realize it is not always possible to judge people accurately from outward appearances, but I must confess I was nonplussed. Mrs. Ohlenrodt was a large woman, motherly in manner and aspect. And her face, now that the sullenness was fading, was, I thought, a good-humored, kindly one. And yet I had just witnessed with my own eyes her savage attack upon a helpless child!

"I don't know what my predecessor permitted," I began at last sternly, "but I want it clearly understood that I do not propose to tolerate corporal punishment of the children, no matter what the provocation. If such has been your deplorable habit—"

The woman looked at me indignantly. I have never struck a child before in my life, Mr. Gadsby!"

"Indeed?" I waited.

She plucked nervously at her starched apron. "It's that—that boy, Tommy!"

"He was insubordinate?" I probed. "Insolent, perhaps?"

"N-no."

"What did he do then, that you felt impelled to punish him?"

The woman thought a moment, and the strangest expression of bewilderment began to creep over her face. "N-nothing," she admitted. Unwillingly.

"Really, Mrs. Ohlenrodt!" I raised my eyebrows.

"Oh, I know it sounds preposterous!" the matron said desperately. "But I can't help it, Mr. Gadsby! There's something wrong with that child! He follows me around. He—he seems to *creep* up on me, until I feel that I must use force to drive him away! I don't know why he does it; I've always used him kindly. If he dislikes me, he's the only one. The others are very fond of me."

"Indeed," I said again, somewhat skeptically.

To my surprise, Laura Anson spoke up from her desk. I'd quite forgotten that she

was in the room. "It's true, Mr. Gadsby. The others love Mrs. Ohlenrodt. And children don't pretend about such things, you know."

That was true enough, as I knew myself from my long experience in dealing with children. Nevertheless there was something not quite open and above-board here. Either Mrs. Ohlenrodt was emotionally unstable, and hence not to be trusted with the children in her care, or else she was misguidedly trying to shield Tommy from the consequences of some serious breach of deportment. However, I determined to reserve judgment for a while.

"Perhaps you're over-tired, Mrs. Ohlenrodt," I suggested, rising. "Suppose you take the rest of the day off."

It was obvious that she was still agitated, but she merely bowed her head, and made no reply. When she'd left the office, I looked over at Miss Anson who had resumed her typing. Some quality of awareness that seemed to hover about her made me wonder if she'd understood something that I had missed.

"Rather odd, that," I said tentatively, hoping to draw her out. For a moment I thought she meant to speak, but she checked herself. "You were going to say?" I hinted.

"Really, Mr. Gadsby, I'd rather *not* say."

And, although I've never married and my dealings with the gentler sex have been few, I knew it would be futile to harry her. But her evasion only served to arouse in me a sense of mystification. Something, surely, was being kept from my knowledge?

I determined to question the unwitting instigator of this contretemps.

ACCORDINGLY, I went to the library in search of Tommy, half expecting to find that he'd disobeyed me and had not gone there as I'd requested. But he was there, sitting quietly with a volume of *Treasure Island* open in his hands. My grandmother used to sit with just such stiff-spined Victorian erectness, so that as a child I'd once asked, "Why don't you lean back, Grandma?" And she'd replied, "Ladies and gentlemen never lounge, dear." I give this little flashback of memory purposely, because, absurdly enough, it made me feel even more kindly disposed toward Tommy. I'd been very fond of my grandmother.

I stood there now, in the doorway, watching him. He was certainly a handsome little chap—sturdily built, with long-lashed dark eyes in a fresh-colored face, and curly hair of a sooty, lusterless black. I judged him to be about nine years old.

I coughed slightly, to attract his attention. Instantly he closed the book, and stood up politely. "Yes, sir?"

It had been my intention to question him there in the library, but on second thought I brought him back to my office where we would not be disturbed. Miss Anson looked up as we came in, but immediately returned her attention to her typing. Tommy smiled at her, and I was distressed to note that she did not return the smile.

When he was settled in the chair alongside my desk, I was somewhat at a loss as to how to begin. "Well," I said finally, "we seem to have had a little trouble this morning. Have you any idea as to why Mrs. Ohlenrodt should have slapped you?"

"No, sir." Tommy kept his eyes fixed expectantly on my face.

"Has she ever slapped you before?"

His eyes widened in amazement. "Oh, *no*, sir!" he said. Quite as if the idea were unbelievable! Quite as if I myself didn't know that she had slapped him, scarcely fifteen minutes before! To my surprise, I found I was losing interest in questioning the boy. A curious sense of lethargy seemed to be stealing over me. I passed a hand over my eyes.

"Well," I said weakly. "I'm very sorry it happened, Tommy. And at least I can promise you that it will never happen again."

I stifled a yawn. What was the matter with me?

"Yes, sir." Through a haze, I saw the lad had got to his feet. He did a strange thing then. He patted my hand, almost paternally. "Don't you worry about me, Mr. Gadsby. I can take care of myself."

And now I come to the part of my narrative that I do not like to set down. I am, I think, a kindly man; and my fondness for children is genuine, and not hypocritically assumed. But at this touch of Tommy's small hand on mine, my head swiftly

cleared. My inexplicable torpor vanished. I jerked my hand back. And I had an almost uncontrollable impulse to push the boy roughly from me! Indeed, I think the only reason I did not is because the impulse was so foreign to my true nature that I was temporarily paralyzed.

By the time I'd recovered, Tommy was already at the door of my office, prepared to leave. I wondered if he had noticed my incredible reaction to the touch of his hand. I thought not. And then I had another unpleasant shock.

He faced me, his back to the door. "Please don't punish Mrs. Ohlenrodt," he said.

I quite forgot my momentary repugnance. Evidence of a generous nature in a child is always heartening to find. My voice was genuinely warm when I answered, "That's splendid, Tommy, splendid."

But I had misinterpreted his words.

"Because you don't have to," he said. "She'll be sorry she hit me. You'll see. *"I'm* going to get my big brother after her."

A childish threat, to be sure. But the expression on his small face as he said it was anything but childlike. Never have I seen such active malice on the face of a human being.

The door closed behind him.

There was a feeling of uneasiness in the region of my spine. I glanced over at Miss Anson who was looking, or so I thought, disturbingly smug. "And has he a big brother?" I stammered foolishly.

"Of course not," she said. "I suppose it's pathetic, in a way—an orphan's desire to feel and pretend that he has a family. Just the same, that kid gives me the willies. I don't know why. But there's something about him."

There was, indeed. I said nothing, but I was prepared to think volumes. Nevertheless, by dint of much effort and press of urgent work, I succeeded in putting Tommy out of my mind for the rest of that day. A good thing, too, since trouble and a still stranger development awaited me on the morrow.

EXCEPT for Miss Anson and myself, the rest of the staff had their living quarters in the Foundling Home. When I arrived next morning at eight o'clock, it was to find a little cluster of agitated people awaiting me in the reception hall. As I came in, they looked up at me with the imperfectly subdued excitement of people who have bad news to convey.

"Is something wrong?" I asked Miss Anson, who'd evidently arrived just a few minutes before me.

She came toward me. "It's Mrs. Ohlenrodt," she said. "Anna, the housemaid, found her dead in bed this morning."

"Good God!" I was profoundly shocked. The woman had seemed the picture of health only yesterday. "Have you called the doctor?"

"Yes. Dr. Maynard is up there with her now."

There seemed something strange, or at least reserved, in Miss Anson's manner. I had a very strong, if fleeting, impression of this, but I didn't stop to question her. Instead I mounted the stairs to Mrs. Ohlenrodt's room.

Dr. Maynard was there alongside the bed, looking down at the body of the matron, and rubbing his chin perplexedly.

"I'm Gadsby, the new superintendent," I introduced myself. "What was it—her heart?"

"Ordinarily, I'd say yes," the doctor replied. "But I admit this is puzzling. As you know, periodical physical examinations are required of the personnel here in the Home. I examined Mrs. Ohlenrodt only a week ago, and her physical condition was excellent. Excellent. There was certainly nothing wrong with her heart, or other organs, then."

"But—"

"There'll have to be a post-mortem, Mr. Gadsby," the doctor said. "In the circumstances, I'm unable to issue a death certificate."

I was much distressed by something in the doctor's face. "Surely you're not suggesting the possibility of something being—amiss?"

The doctor shrugged. "I don't know. There's no outward evidence of it, I confess, but I shouldn't like to venture an opinion until after the post-mortem."

It was obvious that Dr. Maynard thought there was something decidedly queer about the matron's death. When the body was

removed, I went back to my office. It was while I was going through the lower hall that an odd thing happened. Suddenly I was overcome with an unpleasant sense of drowsiness. And a peculiar sensation in the small of my back, marked in the extreme, warned me that I was under surveillance. I wheeled just in time to catch some slight motion at the door of the library.

"Who's there?" I called out sharply.

It was Tommy. He advanced a little farther into the doorway that I might see him. And perhaps it was only a shadow but it seemed to me there was a most baffling expression on the child's face. Malice. A sort of smug satisfaction. The next instant it was gone, and I was sure I had only imagined it.

"I've been reading, sir," he said. He coughed diffidently. "It's too bad about Mrs. Ohlenrodt, isn't it?" His bright eyes watched me.

"Yes, Tommy." I had no wish to pursue the subject. "You may return to your book."

I went on, but at the door of my office I stopped, suddenly thoughtful. How had Tommy known of Mrs. Ohlenrodt's death? Of course he might have overheard us talking about it when we were grouped in the hall, earlier. But at that time he was, or should have been, at breakfast in the dining room.

Something else occurred to me. On impulse I went back to the library.

"Tommy, when you were angry with Mrs. Ohlenrodt yesterday, you didn't do anything to—to harm her, did you?"

The boy's dark eyes widened. "Oh, no, Mr. Gadsby."

I SUPPOSE I must have been thinking of poison. But at his denial, I felt heartily ashamed of myself for questioning a child thus. I remember thinking that I must have taken leave of my senses, entertaining such grave suspicions of a nine-year-old boy.

Tommy was still watching my face. "All I did," he went on earnestly, "was to tell my big brother on her."

I smiled faintly. He was, after all, just an imaginative child. He smiled back and laid a hand, as if reassuringly, on my arm.

And again I felt it! A strong impulse, almost overpowering, to push the child from me! I muttered something, I don't know what, and beat a hasty retreat to my office. My nerves, I decided, were sadly on edge this morning.

I wish I might say that my office was a haven of peace. But quite to the contrary. Everything seemed to be going wrong, and it was all Miss Anson's fault. The girl, usually so efficient, didn't seem to hear me when I spoke to her. And when she did finally hear me, she couldn't seem to understand what I was saying. She was irritatingly vague and clearly had something on her mind.

"What is the matter with you?" I finally asked testily, when for the third time I'd asked for a certain file only to have her hand me the wrong papers.

She stood there, rubbing her index finger up and down my desk. "Mr. Gadsby—"

I waited impatiently.

"Mr. Gadsby, you'll probably think I'm silly, but—"

Again she hesitated, so that I barked irritably, "For heaven's sake, girl, come out with it!" It had been a most trying morning.

Miss Anson looked at me resolutely. "Very well. Mr. Gadsby, I wish you'd question Tommy about Mrs. Ohlenrodt's death."

I stared at her. Now surely this was peculiar. That Miss Anson should entertain the same suspicions of the boy that I had. I didn't tell her immediately that I had already questioned him, but instead I asked, "Why?"

Miss Anson looked embarrassed. "It's just a feeling I have that perhaps Tommy might know something about it."

The girl was concealing something. I felt it strongly. I questioned her quite insistently, but she only gave me evasive answers.

"I—I can't be sure I'm right," she said finally. "It all seems so preposterous. How a child could—" She broke off, baffled.

And not another word could I get out of her, although I'm afraid I grew quite heated toward the end. But she was adamant, and I was forced to take refuge in angry, frustrated silence.

Naturally I waited with considerable

trepidation for Dr. Maynard's report on the findings of the post-mortem. A scandal—or, at any rate, a mysterious death about which people could speculate—at the very beginning of my tenure of office would not serve to endear me to the board of trustees. The doctor telephoned me late that afternoon, as he'd promised he would, and my relief was indescribable when he told me that absolutely no trace of poison had been found.

"Ah!" I mopped my forehead. "It was her heart, then."

"It must have been." Dr. Maynard's voice lacked assurance over the wire. "Though, frankly, we could find no trace of organic disease. As a matter of fact, Mr. Gadsby, we really found no valid reasons whatever—natural or unnatural—for Mrs. Ohlenrodt's death!"

Well! Strange, certainly strange. But that, apparently, was the end of it. I don't know what is usual in such cases, but I believe a certificate was finally issued ascribing the death of Mrs. Ohlenrodt as being due to chronic myocarditis. But I knew Dr. Maynard was not satisfied. And neither was I.

And perhaps it was my imagination, but it seemed to me from that date on, Tommy began to wear a most enigmatic smile.

I BLAME myself for subsequent events. It's true that Miss Anson, knowing what she knew should have warned me. But it's weak of me to lay the onus at another's door. The fault is mine. I was the one who suggested Tommy to Mrs. Heaslip.

Because I was afraid of the boy, I was determined to get him out of the Foundling Home.

Yes, afraid. Almost from the beginning, I was aware that he was following me, stalking me about the home. There'd be an unpleasant creeping sensation in the small of my back as I'd go through the halls. I'd turn on my heel sharply, as if to fend off attack from an enemy. And there Tommy would be—skulking in some doorway, or dodging behind a piece of furniture. Or I'd be sitting at my desk and look up suddenly, sharply aware. And Tommy would be peering at me from the middle distance, his eyes shining brightly like those of some strange animal from the darkness of its lair. Does that sound extravagantly imaginative? Well, perhaps. But I was deucedly uncomfortable. It was—I can't begin to describe how it got on my nerves. When I'd ask him what he wanted, he'd say, "Nothing, sir." And scurry away. Leaving me to wipe a brow that was wet with nervous sweat.

He continued to repel me, and though I fought against it and continued with an effort to treat him as kindly as ever, I was afraid that one day my aversion might overcome me and I would harm the child. It seems absurd on the face of it. After all, a boy of nine—to outward seeming courteous, quiet, well behaved! Not the least of my my distress was caused by the suspicion that I was making a fool of myself.

But at any rate I can assure you there was nothing absurd to me about the uncomfortable state of mixed emotions in which I was living.

Mrs. Heaslip came one morning a few weeks after the death of Mrs. Ohlenrodt. She had lost a son a few years before who would have been nine had he lived. She and her husband were interested in adopting a boy of the same age. It was not a sudden decision; they had been thinking it over for quite a while.

I had been waiting for just such an opportunity. Immediately I sent for Tommy, though there were other nine-year-olds in the Home whom I might have suggested.

He came into my office with his usual engaging mixture of shy confidence and old-fashioned courtesy, and I could see that Mrs. Heaslip was greatly taken with the boy. Since it is difficult for some people to be natural and direct in making friends with a child while onlookers are present, I murmured a pretext for leaving the room, taking Miss Anson with me. I wanted the interview to be a success more than I could remember ever wanting anything before.

In the library I was not particularly surprised when Miss Anson observed: "I hope it goes off all right, and she takes Tommy. But of course it would be a year before—"

I knew what she meant. Here at the Foundling Home, the adoption procedure differs somewhat from that of other institutions. A child is taken into the home of his prospective foster parents for a year—

on probation, as it were. During that time, our investigators make periodic visits to see how well the child is adapting to his new surroundings, and how well the parents are adapting to the child. In a year, and only if satisfactory adjustment has been made on both sides, the final adoption papers are drawn up. In that year's probationary period the child can be returned by, or taken away from, the prospective parents.

If I interpreted Miss Anson's remark correctly, she was as anxious to see Tommy out of the Foundling Home as I was, and only feared that he might be returned in short order. Little did I suspect the basis for her fear!

But, as it happened, it looked as if Tommy weren't even going to leave us at all. It couldn't have been fifteen minutes before he came to us in the library.

"Mrs. Heaslip is leaving," he said. "She wants to see you, Mr. Gadsby, before she goes."

I must confess to a great feeling of disappointment. Perhaps it had been a mistake to leave them alone together. I looked down at Tommy, carefully concealing my chagrin. "Didn't you like Mrs. Heaslip?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" he cried enthusiastically. "But—"

HIS face clouded, and I hadn't the heart to question him further. It was only too evident that Mrs. Heaslip was the one who had not been eager.

And yet, when I rejoined her in my office, she said, "I was drawn to the boy at first, but—" She broke off and smiled faintly. "Do you know, I think I must be nervous. At any rate, I'd prefer not to make a decision until my husband sees Tommy. Would it be all right if he came with me this evening?"

"Of course."

I usually went home at five o'clock, but I immediately decided to wait over and be present when the Heaslips returned. But I'm afraid I gave up hope. If Mrs. Heaslip had sensed this peculiarly repellent quality in Tommy, then surely Mr. Heaslip would too. Still, perhaps I could do something. Perhaps if I myself feigned a great attachment for the boy his value would be enhanced in their eyes.

Which was most reprehensible of me. And not truly indicative of a character which is, I trust, normally upright.

Yet that evening something occurred that made me wonder if I were slowly losing my mind. For when Tommy came into my office I forced myself, as part of my plan, to put my arm around the lad. And I felt nothing—absolutely nothing—of my former aversion! Not only that, but my heart genuinely went out to the boy—so much so that I felt myself fiercely reluctant to see him leave the Home! Found myself jealously hoping the Heaslips would decide against him!

But Tommy made an instantaneous success with both of them! So much so, that they insisted on taking him home at once. And I was so dazed by this strange turn of events that I permitted it. For Tommy had made no conscious effort that I could see to enchant the Heaslips or myself. He had remained only his usual self. Cool, polite, a little detached; extraordinarily adult in his manner for a child.

Surely I must be going mad? What of Mrs. Heaslip's coolness of the morning, now miraculously vanished? What of me, so actively unwilling to part with a child whose presence had continually repelled me for the two weeks just past?

What was the *secret* of Tommy's baffling personality? For a riddle, an enigma, I was sure it was.

ON THE next afternoon but one, Miss Anson came into my office with an early edition of the evening paper, and placed it before me without a word. It was folded to the obituary notices, and I followed her pointing finger.

Frank Heaslip, superintendent of water mains for the township, had been found dead in bed early that morning. Death was believed due to natural causes.

Miss Anson and I exchanged glances. The same thought was plainly in both our minds. Tommy? Could this death bear any resemblance to Mrs. Ohlenrodt's?

"Are we being—ridiculous?" Miss Anson whispered.

I was half inclined to agree with her that we were, but I frowned uncomfortably. Why should the same probability

leap so readily to the thoughts of both of us, unless there was also—a *possibility?*

I reached for the telephone. A nurse answered at the Heaslip home, and told me Mrs. Heaslip was prostrated and unable to talk to anyone. I called again several times in the next few days, but it wasn't until the morning after the funeral that Mrs. Heaslip telephoned me, and said she was anxious to see me on an urgent matter.

In the meantime, I had persistently questioned Miss Anson, only to have her repeat, "Wait. Wait until we know something a little more definite."

When Mrs. Heaslip finally called, I drove over immediately. Tommy was sitting on the front porch of the huge, old-fashioned house as I drove up. He was scrupulously neat as always, and his valise was on the swing beside him. My heart sank, when I saw that valise. I halted in my step, and said warily, "Hello, Tommy."

"Hello, Mr. Gadsby." His smile was warm, welcoming. "I've been waiting for you, and so has Mrs. Heaslip, I guess. She's in the living room with the nurse."

Mrs. Heaslip, clad in black, was half reclining on a divan. She asked me to sit down, and the nurse who'd admitted me left us alone together. Mrs. Heaslip not only looked wan, she was palpably ill at ease.

"This isn't going to be easy for me to say," she began, plucking nervously at the afghan which covered her. "But I've decided to send Tommy back to the Home."

I was not unprepared for the statement. I waited.

"You'll think I'm a fool," she went on, obviously embarrassed, "but—I can't stand that child. There's something about him—"

So here it was again.

"Has he made trouble?" I asked.

"N-no," she said vaguely. "At least, he's been well enough behaved. But, Mr. Gadsby—oh, I don't know how to tell you! The second morning after we took Tommy from the Home, my husband—*struck* him!" In her agitation the woman began to weep. "I wonder if I can make it clear to you. Mr. Heaslip was the gentlest of men, and yet—" She broke off, and eyed me excitedly. "Do you know, I was there when he slapped the boy, and even though I was horrified by Frank's action, I found myself glad that Tommy was being punished. Yes, glad! Found myself wanting to slap him too!"

"But what had he done?" I asked.

"That's just it! He'd done nothing! Absolutely nothing. That's why I've been so afraid, so perplexed. Since then I have not dared trust myself alone with Tommy. I haven't seen him unless the nurse was present, and even then—I have to steel myself to keep from driving the boy from me by any means! But that isn't all. That's not what's so frightening. For, stranger still, at night when dusk falls, I have the queerest longing to take him into my arms, to embrace him—"

She broke off, her eyes wide with horror. "Mr. Gadsby, I'm terrified! Do you think I could be going insane?"

I murmured soothingly, and after a minute probed as gently as I could. "You say it was just the next morning then, after Mr. Heaslip slapped Tommy, that he was found dead in bed?"

"Yes." Her eyes filled again. "I could not help thinking it was like—oh, a punishment. Retribution."

I couldn't let this go on. "Nonsense, Mrs. Heaslip. Anyone's heart might fail suddenly?"

"That's just it!" she cried excitedly. "Frank didn't have heart disease. Why, it's only two weeks since he took out new insurance, and passed a rigorous physical test without question. The doctors don't know now what caused his sudden death."

OBVIOUSLY, though, she had no suspicions. Before I left, I thought it safe enough to ask, "Did Tommy make any threats to Mr. Heaslip the day he was slapped?"

The widow shook her head.

"He said nothing at all?" I persisted.

She tried to remember, then smiled faintly. "Oh, he did say something about his big brother. He said he'd get his big brother after Frank. But that was nonsense, of course. Tommy has no brothers, has he?"

"No," I said, and left.

But—nonsense? I wondered.

While driving back to the Home, I'm not ashamed to admit that I sat as far

away from Tommy as the front seat of my small car permitted. The boy came along amiably enough, after saying an unemotional goodbye to Mrs. Heaslip. At the Home, I told him to run upstairs to the dormitory, and wait until I sent for him. I needed a moment or two to collect myself.

Miss Anson looked up as I came into the office.

"Tommy's back," she said flatly.

I wondered aloud how she knew. She couldn't have seen us come in.

"I always know when he's around," she said, and shivered. "So he was sent back? So something *was* wrong?"

I DIDN'T think it strange that she should ask those questions. Quickly I told her the story Mrs. Heaslip had related to me, and when I finished, Miss Anson looked down at her hands thoughtfully.

"Again," she said. "Again."

And I knew that at last she was going to tell me all she knew about Tommy.

"I didn't want to tell you before," she said, "because I wanted the boy to have a fair chance. I wasn't sure. And, anyway, my suspicions seemed so fantastic, so highly improbable. But Mr. Gadsby, this is the *third* time Tommy has been returned by foster parents."

I waited, knowing there would be more.

"The Browns took him first," Miss Anson went on. "Two days later, Mr. Brown was dead. Six months after Mrs. Brown returned Tommy, the Whitmores took him. And in a week, Mrs. Whitmore was dead. In each case, the survivors returned Tommy saying they hated the child—they didn't know why."

I hardly knew what to say. "These deaths—there were no reasons for them?"

Miss Anson shrugged. "I can't tell you definitely about that, because I don't know. But I do know both those people were the picture of health when they were in here shortly before they died."

"Three times!" I said. "Four, counting Mrs. Ohlenrodt. And you think, in each case, that Tommy—?"

"I don't know," Miss Anson admitted. "It wasn't until after the matron's death that I began to grow suspicious. Still, *something* is wrong—terribly, terribly wrong. I can't believe it is nothing but a series of fantastic coincidences."

Nor could I. The pattern had grown too apparent.

In the end I sent for Tommy, prepared to question him relentlessly. At first I don't believe he realized the purpose of my inquiry. It wasn't until I questioned him about the Browns and Whitmores that his face clouded.

"Did they harm you in any way?" I asked. "Punish you?"

He made no answer. He sat there beside my desk, his hands folded quietly in his lap. But I thought I sensed sudden wariness behind his quiet manner and downcast eyes. Plainly he hadn't expected me to know about the Browns and Whitmores.

"If they did," I persisted, "did you threaten them? Did you say you'd get your big brother after them?"

Tommy shifted uneasily. He made no answer.

Even now I can't understand what prompted my next question. I think subconsciously I must already have begun to guess the riddle, and it was fighting its way to the surface. For I leaned forward, and my voice dropped low. "Tommy, who *is* your big brother?"

He looked at me, his eyes dark wells of sadness. They were reproachful, those eyes. And fear was in them, too. But queerly I felt that it was fear, not of me, but *for* me. And queerly I knew that I would not go on with my catechism—not that day. It was getting late, and night was already falling.

I asked the boy to come and stand in front of me. And secretly I wondered if I'd slap him when he did! But, no. I put my hand beneath his chin, and tilted up his face. My anger faded. I felt only a strange tenderness. I held him close.

"I'm trying to help you, Tommy, but you're making it very difficult for me. Because you refuse to answer my questions, you understand that you must be punished, however little I like to do it?"

He smiled faintly, acquiescently. It was not a triumphant smile at defeating me. Nor was I defeated. My determination to solve the mystery was stronger than ever, and I know now Tommy felt it.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I thought, I'll have the truth.

I cleared my throat. "I'm going to send you to bed with only a light supper. In the morning, I mean to find out if there was any mystery behind the deaths of Mr. Brown and Mrs. Whitmore. And if there surely was, Tommy, I'll question you again. And this time, I mean to have the answers. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." He turned away, but at the door he paused. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gadsby," he said gently. "I like you, you know. You've always been nice to me. I wouldn't want—"

As if he'd said too much, he opened the door and fled. Was that alarm on his face, there at the last? What was the meaning of that troubled look? Was that half-finished sentence a veiled threat?

I glanced over at Miss Anson, who was looking white and frightened. Clearly she didn't expect me to see another dawn. Clearly she expected Tommy—to tell his big brother on me!

BUT in the morning I was still alive. And Tommy was gone. Vanished as if he'd never been. Nor has any trace of him ever been discovered from that day to this.

But I know now in my heart who he was. One of Night's dusky children.

It was Anna, the housemaid, who found the note under his pillow, and brought it to me. I read the few lines in the round, schoolboy handwriting:

"I'm going away, Mr. Gadsby, where you'll never find me, though I will return at night, as always. I told you true when I said I liked you, but I didn't like your questions today. You had no right to ask them. It was none of your affair.

"And if you bother me tomorrow I'm afraid I might get mad. I'm afraid I might even have to get my big brother after you."

And he had signed his name. A name at which I stared. And no longer wondered.

"So that was it," I said. "So that was it."

"Mr. Gadsby! Mr. Gadsby! What's the matter? You look so strange."

From a far, far distance I could hear Miss Anson calling me—over and over. Silently I handed her the note, and I pointed to the signature.

"I—I don't understand," she faltered. "I never knew his last name, but what—"

"That was why we fought him off during the day, when we unwillingly felt him creeping up on us. That was why we embraced him gladly at night." I looked at her. "His name was Sleep. Tommy Sleep."

Miss Anson shook her head reluctantly. "But even so, that doesn't explain the other things . . the mysterious way those people died . nor Tommy's talk of his big brother—"

"Oh, yes, it does." I said softly. "For haven't you ever heard that Sleep — is *Death's* little brother?"

Mr. Lupescu

By ANTHONY BOUCHER

THE teacups rattled and flames flickered over the logs.

"Alan, I *do* wish you could do something about Bobby."

"Isn't that rather Robert's place?"

"Oh you know *Robert*. He's so busy doing good in nice abstract ways with committees in them."

"And headlines."

"He can't be bothered with things like Mr. Lupescu. After all, Bobby's only his *son*."

"And yours, Marjorie."

"And mine. But things like this take a *man*, Alan."

The room was warm and peaceful; Alan

An active imagination is no curse to a child—but just what is imagination, and what isn't?

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

stretched his long legs by the fire and felt domestic. Marjorie was soothing even when she fretted. The firelight did things to her hair and the curve of her blouse.

A small whirlwind entered at high velocity and stopped only when Marjorie said, "Bob-*by!* Say hello nicely to Uncle Alan."

Bobby said hello and stood tentatively on one foot.

"Alan. . . ." Marjorie prompted.

Alan sat up straight and tried to look paternal. "Well, Bobby," he said. "And where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"See Mr. Lupescu, 'f course. He usually comes afternoons."

"Your mother's been telling me about Mr. Lupescu. He must be quite a person."

"Oh, gee, I'll say he is, Uncle Alan. He's got a great big red nose and red gloves and red eyes—not like when you've been crying but really red like yours 're brown—and little red wings that twitch, only he can't fly with them 'cause they're rudder-mentary he says. And he talks like—oh, gee, I can't do it, but he's sweli, he is."

"Lupescu's a funny name for a fairy godfather, isn't it, Bobby?"

"Why? Mr. Lupescue always says why do all the fairies have to be Irish because it takes all kinds, doesn't it?"

"Alan!" Marjorie said. "I don't see that you're doing a *bit* of good. You talk to him seriously like that and you simply make him think it *is* serious. And you *do* know better, don't you, Bobby? You're just joking with us."

"Joking? About *Mr. Lupescu?"*

"Marjorie, you don't— Listen, Bobby. Your mother didn't mean to insult you or Mr. Lupescu. She just doesn't believe in what she's never seen, and you can't blame her. Now supposing you took her and me out in the garden and we could all see Mr. Lupescu. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Uh, uh." Bobby shook his head gravely. "Not for Mr. Lupescu. He doesn't like people. Only little boys. And he says if I ever bring people to see him then he'll let Gorgo get me. G'bye now." And the whirlwind departed.

Marjorie sighed. "At least thank heavens for Gorgo. I never can get a very clear picture out of Bobby, but he says Mr. Lupescu tells the most *terrible* things about him. And if there's any trouble about vegetables or brushing teeth all I have to say is *Gorgo* and hey presto!"

Alan rose. "I don't think you need worry, Marjorie. Mr. Lupescu seems to do more good than harm, and an active imagination is no curse to a child."

"You haven't *lived* with Mr. Lupescu."

"To live in a house like this, I'd chance it," Alan laughed. "But please forgive me now—back to the cottage and the typewriter. Seriously, why don't you ask Robert to talk with him?"

Marjorie spread her hands helplessly.

"I know. I'm always the one to assume responsibilities. And yet you married Robert."

Marjorie laughed. "I don't know. Somehow there's something *about* Robert. . . ." Her vague gesture happened to include the original Degas over the fireplace, the sterling tea service, and even the liveried footman who came in at that moment to clear away.

MR. LUPESCU was pretty wonderful that afternoon all right. He had a little kind of an itch like in his wings and they kept twitching all the time. Stardust, he said. It tickles. Got it up in the Milky Way. Friend of his has a wagon route up there.

Mr. Lupescu had lots of friends and they all did something you wouldn't ever think of not in a squillion years. That's why he didn't like people because people don't do things you can tell stories about. They just work or keep house or are mothers or something.

But one of Mr. Lupescu's friends now was captain of a ship only it went in time and Mr. Lupescu took trips with him and came back and told you all about what was happening this very minute five hundred years ago. And another of the friends was a radio engineer only he could tune in on all the kingdoms of faery and Mr. Lupescu would squidgle up his red nose and twist it like a dial and make noises like all the kingdoms of faery coming in on the set. And then there was Gorgo only he wasn't a friend, not exactly, not even to Mr. Lupescu.

They'd been playing for a couple of weeks only it must've been really hours 'cause Mamselle hadn't yelled about supper yet but Mr. Lupescu says Time is funny, when Mr. Lupescu screwed up his red eyes and said, "Bobby, let's go in the house."

"But there's people in the house and you don't—"

"I know I don't like people. That's why we're going in the house. Come on, Bobby, or I'll—"

So what could you do when you didn't even want to hear him say Gorgo's name?

He went into father's study through the French window and it was a strict rule that nobody ever went into father's study, but rules weren't for Mr. Lupescu.

Father was on the telephone telling somebody he'd try to be at a luncheon but there was a committee meeting that same morning but he'd see. While he was talking Mr. Lupescu went over to a table and opened a drawer and took something out.

When father hung up he saw Bobby first and started to be very mad. He said, "Young man, you've been trouble enough to your mother and me with all your stories about your red-winged Mr. Lupescu, and now if you're to start bursting in—"

You have to be polite and introduce people. "Father, this is Mr. Lupescu. And see he does, too, have red wings."

Mr. Lupescu held out the gun he'd taken from the drawer and shot father once right through the forehead. It made a little clean hole in front and a big messy hole in back. Father fell down and was dead.

"Now, Bobby," Mr. Lupescu said, "a lot of people are going to come here and ask you a lot of questions. And if you don't tell the truth about exactly what happened, I'll send Gorgo to fetch you."

Then Mr. Lupescu was gone through the French window onto the gravel path.

"IT'S a curious case, Lieutenant," the medical examiner said. "It's fortunate I've dabbled a bit in psychiatry; I can at least give you a lead until you get the experts in. The child's statement that his fairy godfather shot his father is obviously a simple flight-mechanism, susceptible of two interpretations. A, the father shot himself; the child was so horrified by the sight that he refused to accept it and invented this explanation. B, the child shot the father, let us say by accident, and shifted the blame to his imaginary scapegoat. B has of course its more sinister implications; if the child had resented his father and created an ideal substitute, he might make the substitute destroy the reality. . . . But there's the solution to your eye-witness testimony; which alternative is true; Lieutenant, I leave it up to your researches into motive and the evidence of ballistics and fingerprints. The angle of the wound jibes with either."

THE man with the red nose and eyes and gloves and wings walked down the back lane to the cottage. As soon as he got inside he took off his coat and removed the wings and the mechanism of strings and rubbers that made them twitch. He laid them on top of the ready pile of kindling and lit the fire. When it was well started, he added the gloves. Then he took off the nose, kneaded the putty until the red of its outside vanished into the neutral brown of the mass, jammed it into a crack in the wall, and smoothed it over. Then he took the red-irised contact lenses out of his brown eyes and went into the kitchen, found a hammer, pounded them to powder, and washed the powder down the sink.

Alan started to pour himself a drink and found, to his pleased surprise, that he didn't especially need one. But he did feel tired. He could lie down and recapitulate it all, from the invention of Mr. Lupescu (and Gorgo and the man with the Milky Way route) to today's success and on into the future when Marjorie, pliant, trusting Marjorie would be more desirable than ever as Robert's widow and heir. And Bobby would need a *man* to look after him.

Alan went into the bedroom. Several years passed by in the few seconds it took him to recognize what was waiting on the bed, but then Time is funny.

Alan said nothing.

"Mr. Lupescu, I presume?" said Gorgo.

Outbound

By PAUL ERNST

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

IT WAS a highly successful party. At least sixty people milled around the Plenner penthouse; three girls and a securities broker had fallen into the fountain in the center of the vast living room; and the black glass bar was nearing the end of its large liquor supply.

Sigert, of course, was everywhere, the perfect host, laughing, expediting drinks, making sure that no one went too far or

How innocently she had entrusted her life to this man, never thinking—never guessing.

really got hurt. But in the midst of this he could find time to come to Harriet and smile down into her brown eyes with his light gray ones.

"Fun, darling?" he whispered.

"Mmmm," responded Harriet.

"Nice going-away party?" Sigert Plenner, who claimed Switzerland as his home, spoke English with scarcely any accent.

"Wonderful, dear." Harriet squeezed his arm with the forgivable tenderness of a bride of only two months.

"Say a large goodbye to New York, Harriet. You won't see it again. I mean, not for quite awhile."

He moved off, and Harriet nodded at a tall, graying major returning with a drink for both of them.

"I'll just peck at this," she said. "With an ocean voyage starting tomorrow, I won't want too many drinks tonight."

Her eyes dreamed over the words. An ocean voyage tomorrow, to Buenos Aires! A grand party like this tonight! No more boredom with a morose, tired man whose evenings were spent recuperating from long days at a gloomy factory. Not that Albert could live any other way; Harriet was quick to grant her former husband that. His was a war product and he had to give its manufacture all his energy now.

But there was no reason why his wife should give up living too, so she'd rebelled at last—when Sigert stared at her with light gray eyes in which were kindliness and charm. And, shortly—love. Now life was just beginning for her—at thirty-eight.

The major beside her laughed. "A long way off? You look like a young girl dreaming."

She laughed too, a happy, tinkling sound. "Hardly a girl!"

"Young enough," the major said. He was a rather elderly major, in supplies in Brooklyn, so he didn't represent too heavy a war note. Harriet was so sick of war. "You'll take the Argentineans by storm," he predicted.

SIGERT, across the room, crinkled up his pale kind eyes at Harriet, and moved his head to indicate a rendezvous in the next room. She nodded and started edging her way toward it among bare shouldered women and black clad men who were mainly Sigert's friends. For many years she'd lived too retiring a life with Albert to know many people in this set. How many years she'd wasted!

Harriet saw Edna Barnes, tried to avoid her, and couldn't. Edna, too thin, too nervous, chasing fun too hard, was sure to say something catty. She did.

"What a picturesque man, darling," she shrilled, flicking a glance toward Sigert. "He's marvelous even if slightly mysterious. Let me know if you get tired of him."

Harriet struggled on.

"A great improvement on poor Albert," Edna's shrill voice persisted. "I doubt if Albert ever threw a party like this. He wouldn't know how."

Harriet said something meaningless and light and inched on toward the door. Edna was deft at lancing doubtful spots, had pricked one with the word, "mysterious."

Albert had touched on this also.

"But what do you really know about this fellow, Harriet? He's handsome, he knows some people we do, he lives well. But what do you *know*?"

"I know I love him with all my heart," said Harriet.

Albert had been infuriating. "Don't talk like a bad play. What's his background?"

She'd explained to Albert as Sigert had explained to her. With war exploding all Europe, Sigert's past must be taken on faith. Believe him, it was a not unfavorable past.

"All right," Albert had said, "Forget the past. What's his present? I don't want to sound grim, but he's six years younger than you, and you have quite a lot of money."

Icily Harriet had pointed out that Sigert was a wealthy man, that he'd met richer women than Harriet without making love to them, and that age made not one speck of difference.

"He doesn't act like a wealthy man," said Albert.

No, his fortune was all in Argentina, and right now he could get none of it out. But he had it! And even if he hadn't, Harriet would be proud to help him financially.

"You've got it bad, haven't you?" Albert had sighed. "All right, you can have your divorce. But please, please be careful!"

Harriet Plenner, formerly Mrs. Albert

Ralston, had reached the door now. She went into the next room and Sigert smiled at her from the library desk. She went to him, heels loud on strips of bare floor, and she shivered a bit. He caught it instantly.

"It is bleak with our personal things crated, isn't it?" he said, hands on hers. He had unusual hands, very muscular, very expressive.

"Yes, it's barren looking, Harriet murmured, feeling an odd chill touch her. "More than you'd think."

FLOR little was actually gone from the subleased penthouse—a few pictures, rugs, small personal articles. Yet the small touches, gone, made a difference. Only four crates of stuff. (It was wonderful that Sigert could take them, even in their cabin. In fact, it was wonderful he'd gotten the cabin at all—a deluxe one with wide plate windows, instead of portholes, giving on the sea. He had some influence with the Argentine Ship Company.)

Sigert glanced cautiously at the closed door. "I just heard from the steamship agent," he said. "A pompous gentleman. How did he phrase it? 'It would be advisable for you and Mrs. Plenner to be aboard the Buenos Aires Belle by seven A.M.'"

"Seven!" exclaimed Harriet. "I thought it sailed tomorrow night sometime."

Sigert shrugged. "Sailing times are made as baffling as possible, dear. There's still a war on."

Harriet looked at the pearl rimmed watch on her wrist.

"But Sigert, it's nearly three right now."

"I know. We'd better go to the boat as soon as the guests have gone. It's a real farewell party. With the hour of its closing we will be—outbound." Sigert's hand was gentle around hers. "Which reminds me—you'd better sign that power of attorney for me, dear. We'll want money on the boat, and you may be ill."

"Of course," said Harriet. "As soon as people go——"

Sigert hadn't heard her. He'd opened a desk drawer and drawn out the document. It rattled in the stillness, and Harriet felt that odd chill again. She said in a small voice, "Sigert, perhaps—"

His face was instantly understanding.

"Would you rather not, my dear?"

Harriet was ashamed of her uneasiness. She'd entrusted her life to this man; how much smaller a thing to entrust him with all her possessions? "Where's the pen, Sigert?"

She signed the power of attorney, and Sigert herded in an unsteady couple for witnesses and herded them out again. He thrust the document negligently into his pocket.

"This 'advisability of being aboard by seven' alters things, my darling. I'll start charmingly giving our friends the—what do you call it?—the bum's rush. Meanwhile, why not go to our room and take a nap?"

"But a hostess—" Harriet began.

"I'll see that no one ever misses you," Sigert said.

He tossed her a kiss and went out, big, distinguished, handsome. Beside him Albert would look like a gnome; and if Harriet reflected that gnomelike Albert was more predictable and easier to please than Sigert, the thought passed soon.

The Plenner bedroom was bare of personal accessories, but strewn with locked luggage and the several heavy crates. These showed Sigert's efficiency; they were of inch planking, screwed instead of nailed. One was left open, and was empty save for Sigert's iron exercising weights at the bottom. He'd said this was for last minute stuff.

Harriet went to the vanity case with its triple mirror and turned the light on. A woman of apparently thirty looked out at her, rather short, rather plump, with light brown hair and eyes. A few months ago this woman had been plain, a well-to-do matron with gray at her temples. She was not plain now with the girlish thrill in her eyes and the excited pink in her cheeks.

South America, freedom from war gloom, romance! It was the kind of life you read about, offered suddenly to a thirty-eight-year-old woman who heretofore had known nothing more intriguing than two cocktails before dinner instead of one.

Romance, love of a desirable male in whose pale gray eyes was kindliness and charm as well as power.

Harriet's hand, at the nape of her neck where a small curl was loosened, sud-

denly froze in that position. Her mind, a bright pattern an instant before, suddenly went blank. As blank as her eyes, which stared into the mirror like the eyes of a hypnotized person—stared at the partly opened closet door—

No, not at the door! At a woman's hand, on the floor, just to be seen in the crack between door and jamb.

Slowly Harriet Plenner turned, face so white that it had a snow-blue sheen, fingers partly open like vermilion tipped claws.

The hand, stark, still with an awful stillness, was not just a trick of the mirror. It was really there, visible in the opening though the rest of the body lay unseen on the closet floor.

Without knowing that she moved, Harriet crept toward it, body inclined backward as though a strong cord pulled her on, as though her legs worked on their own volition. And she saw the blanched white wrist above the hand, and on it a lustrous patch, and the beginning of a sleeve of some brown stuff. And then she screamed. . . .

Comforting, muscular fingers chafed her wrists. Something cool and wet was against her forehead. Harriet opened her eyes and would have screamed again if a gentle hand had not touched her lips. Then she saw that she was all right, there was help at hand, Sigert was here with another man whose name she could not remember.

"What happened?" Sigert said. "Marshall and I were in the next bedroom getting some coats when we heard you. Darling, what happened?"

Harriet's gaze urgently commanded Sigert to get the other man out of the room. Sigert caught it smoothly. He straightened up, taking the wet cloth from Harriet's forehead, and turned to Marshall. "Everything seems under control, old man. I'll take over. Thanks for coming with me."

The man nodded sympathetically, glanced again at Harriet, then said to call if they needed anything. He went out—and Harriet caught Sigert's strong arm to her.

"My God, Sigert," she whispered. "The closet! There's a . . . a body in it. There's been a murder here tonight. Someone killed a woman and put her body in my closet."

Sigert's jaw dropped. He whirled to stare at the closet. Then he got up and went to it and opened the door wide. He glanced back at her, and Harriet saw that his amazement was gone and in his face was perplexity —and worry.

"Harriet." His voice was very kind. "Can you come here?"

She shrank down on the bed. "Not for anything on earth! That Thing on the closet floor—"

"But that's just it, dear. Lord, I wonder if we'd better put off our sailing, take you to some specialist. . . . Harriet, there's nothing in the closet."

"Nothing?" Harriet said. "You're s—*Nothing?*"

"Come and see."

Without his arm around her, she could not have walked from bed to opened door. And without his arm around her she would have fallen when she looked into the closet. The empty closet! Empty, that is, save for a suitbox on the floor where, till packing, rows of shoes had been.

"But I saw! A dead woman! Sigert, I *saw*!"

HE SHOOK his head, smiling a little now. "Some woman guest must have thought this door led to a bathroom and passed out on the floor. Then your scream woke her up and she got out before I came in answer."

Harriet pressed her hands against her eyes, looked again. The closet was empty except for the suitbox. It must be as Sigert said. Determinedly she thrust from her the shock of seeming to see the limp hand, of seeming to know that the woman who owned it lay there dead.

"Lie down," Sigert commanded her. "I'll have the place cleared in another fifteen minutes. Try to sleep. Then you can try on this little present I bought you this afternoon."

Smiling, he put the suitbox from the closet floor, beside her on the bed.

She watched him leave reluctantly, and lay there shuddering, opening her eyes now and then to stare at the closet. The empty closet! How could you see a thing that clearly when there was nothing to be seen? A woman's dead hand, a brown sleeve, the lustrous glint of an ornament on the doubled wrist. A dead woman on the closet floor. But

there'd been nothing there but the present in the suitbox, beside her now.

"Sleep," Sigert had said.

But Harriet had never felt farther from sleep. Doubts as to her sanity assailed her. And the queer, clammy feeling she'd had in the library touched her again. She lay on the bed, body rigid and chilled, heart pounding. Quite a few minutes passed before she could say firmly to herself: "This is ridiculous! I've had a nightmare somehow, a waking nightmare. I can't let it upset me so. And Sigert is within instant call. There's nothing to fear."

She made herself get up, and in bracing herself her hand brushed the box. Her fingers touched it lingeringly. So many presents from Sigert, a lot of them wearing apparel selected with a taste and accuracy of size you'd never suspect in so masculine a man. She opened the box.

A suit was in it. A smart, quite gorgeously plain traveling suit. It was of soft, fine tweed, brown, intriguing the fingers just to touch. She took out the brief, chic coat and made herself go to the closet again, where a full length mirror was fastened to the door.

She felt almost normal now. She was ashamed of her peculiar hallucination, and had an explanation for it: She was more tired than she knew; she had dozed on her feet for an instant—and everyone knows you can have a complete dream in a fraction of a second.

She dismissed Sigert's theory that it had been some woman guest who had passed out; she doubted if anyone could have got out of the bedroom before Sigert came in answer to her scream.

She passed the empty case which had nothing in it yet but Sigert's exercising weights, and opened the mirrored closet door wider. She stood before it in her evening dress, holding the jacket, looking rather guiltily for the label to see what smart shop the suit had come from. She didn't see any label.

She put the jacket on and felt it hug her shoulders, exact in measurement as usual. It was a beautiful coat. She started to turn for the skirt, to put that on too. Started to turn, but didn't.

Again she froze before a mirror, but this time not at sight of something else, something behind her. This time it was at sight of herself. In the breathless, pulseless pause, she heard Sigert's pleasant voice far off: "Goodnight, goodnight. So nice of you to come."

Then silence. Absolute silence, till a moment later, it was broken by the sound of his hard heels. The guests were gone, all of them. You could sense that from the texture of the silence and from the way Sigert was walking, away from the front door, back along the hall to this far room where his wife stood before a mirror—

Stood before a mirror, looking at the curve of her wrist, and at the lustrous patch made there by a pearl-rimmed watch, and at the brown sleeve just above.

There was a tap at the door, but it didn't sound like a tap, it sounded like far thunder down a black valley.

Harriet knew now why the one case had been left open, "for last minute things." She knew why it was so solid and why the iron weights were in the bottom. She knew why so de luxe a cabin had been obtained on the boat—with wide plate windows giving to the sea instead of narrow portholes.

And she knew now whose was the blanched, dead hand she'd seen, with the rest of the body out of sight on the closet floor.

"Harriet," Sigert called gently from the hall.

He'd said, "Say a large goodby to New York . . . you won't see it again." He'd said, "I'll see that no one ever misses you."

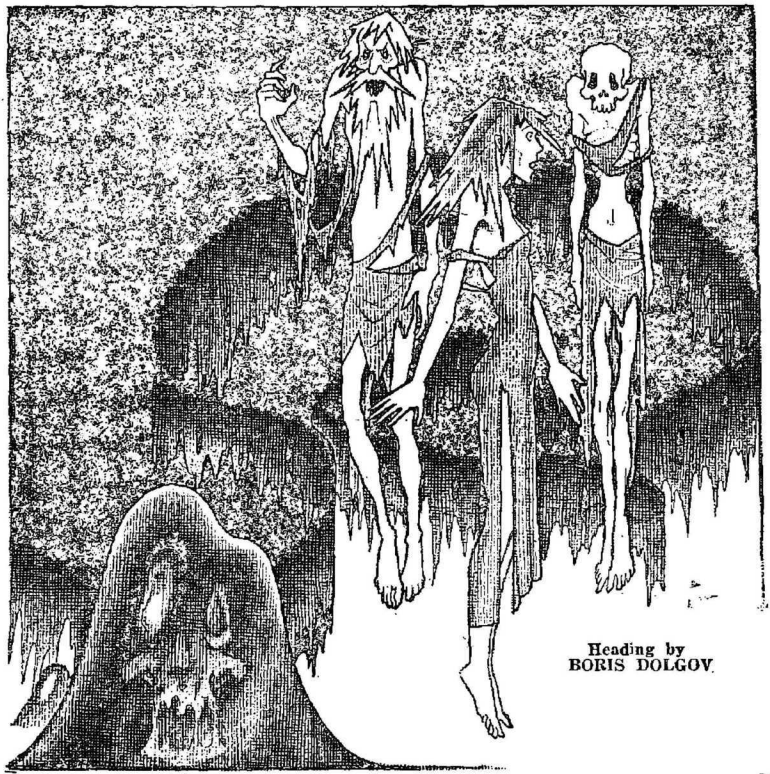
"Harriet!"

Rigid as a statue, staring at the mirror, she saw the door open, saw her husband's handsome face and the light gray eyes which had held such kindliness and warmth. But as the eyes met hers and read the knowledge and the horror there, the kindliness and warmth drained out. They were just pale gray, watching her, watching, while he walked around the bed and past the weighted wooden box and toward her.

The Thing From the Barrens

By JIM KJELGAARD

I, GEORGE MALORY, graduate geologist, could only guess about The Thing that came from the barrens. I saw the horrible outrages it committed; but never The Thing itself. Pug Davenport saw it. Now, his head literally torn from his body, Pug lies in the cemetery at North City. His should be a world-honored grave; Pug might have saved all humanity, and certainly saved the five hundred people



Heading by
BORIS DOLGOV

Many guessed about the horrible Thing that came from the barrens, but only one knew and he lay in the cemetery!

who made their homes in North City. He—. But hear the story.

I told myself that I did not know why I was staying in North City. "Farthest north metropolis" we called ourselves, after the Blanding Corporation built our city, peopled it, and then abandoned everything when the radium ore petered out. I could have gone when Blanding quit, collected my salary, and taken a job in Russia. But I didn't go, and our so-called metropolis of five hundred people did not fold either. Some left. But others drifted in to take their places and the population remained static.

I lived because I had an independent income, others did whatever there was to do. Pete Gallagher set up his store, Joe Urschel came along with his saloon, a few men did odd jobs, and most of the remaining 300 adult males went into the barrens to trap. That was a hard life, the trappers would be gone for weeks and sometimes months with no intercourse whatever with other human beings. But they brought in plenty of white foxes, ermine, caribou hides, wolf pelts, fisher, and wolverenes.

Though I often went into the barrens to hunt caribou and wolves, I did no trapping. Frankly I lacked the hardihood to start out with a few dogs and a three months' supply of grub to spend a three-month long night facing the lashing gales and everything else that could roar across the winter-bound arctic. Then I did not need the money. It was a dull life, but I had never intended to make it a permanent one. I read my books, and imported new ones, to keep abreast of developments in my own field.

But when I told myself that I did not know why I was staying in North City it was a lie because I did know. I stayed because of Marcia Davenport. That's right, a girl. Ask me why and I cannot answer you. I had dined and danced with what supposedly are the most beautiful and charming women in the world, those found in the salons of New York, Paris, Santiago, Moscow. And I was madly in love with the little daughter of a fox trapper, a girl so devoted to her drunken and worthless father that the most she had ever given me was a friendly smile and a kind word. But I could neither help myself nor leave North City without her, and if Pug Davenport had taken his daughter and gone to the North Pole I would have followed and built my igloo as close to theirs as possible. It was that way.

Marcia and Pug had blown into North City with the first settlers Blanding had sent in. Pug was a wizened little man with a cross-hatch of red veins hopelessly netting his features. He was supposed to be an explosives expert. But I suspect that, back in what must have been a very checkered career, he had been an expert on anything you'd want to name, including safe-blowing and larceny. When Blanding pulled out, Pug stayed in the house they gave him and went in for fox-trapping. Marcia—

How can I tell you about her? Does it mean anything to say that she was a girl, almost twenty years old, beautiful, tall and lithe, with raven hair through which shone coppery overtones? That doesn't express it. All I can say is that what happens to maybe one man in a million had happened to me. I knew that I could never go anywhere unless she went with me. To have her as my wife would be the consummation of everything. If I could not have her, to be near her was second choice.

But all during the twenty months since they had come to North City, Marcia's time had been given to Pug. She took him home when he was drunk, which was whenever he had any money. She nursed him through his hangovers, and when he was home spent all her time making for him the things he liked. When he was out on the barrens she worried about him. That little, drunken, worthless father of hers had woven such a spell about her that she seemed unable to think of another man.

But yet she *must* think of other men! She was young, alive, human! Some day, I hoped, she would break the shell she had built around herself and let me in. That was the day I lived for. Meanwhile I had danced with her a few times, and when Pug was out on the barrens I could go see her once in a while. That was what kept me hoping.

The fox trappers had been out on their lines for six weeks now, and the half-light of winter had blanketed North City for two, when I stepped out of my house into the

street. There was not much snow, farther south they get more of that than we do and most of what falls here is blown away by the wind. That had been from the east for the past twenty days, and there were deep drifts along the eastern walls of all the houses.

I had intended to go down and see Marcia when I dimly made out a dog team lying in front of Joe Urschel's saloon. As soon as I was close enough, I saw that it was Pug Davenport's team. That was a surprise. In spite of his habits Pug is tough and hard, and usually stays out on the barrens as long as anybody. This time, I figured, his thirst must have become unbearable. Evidently he had just blown in, and Marcia didn't know he was here. But she would appreciate somebody's giving him a hand, and I went into Urschel's.

URSCHEL had his own power plant. Every spring the *Nanook*, North City's supply ship, brought him twenty fifty-gallon drums of gasoline to run it. I blinked in the unaccustomed glare of electric lights, and looked at the bar. Two of North City's winter residents, Moose-Hide Allen and Al Pettigrew, were hanging over it. Urschel would have starved if he depended on winter trade; his big killing was made when the foxtrappers came back. Furs were currency, and he was getting rich. Now there was a great pile of white fox furs, bigger and silkier than I had even seen before, on one end of the bar. I stepped up.

"What'll you have, George?" Urschel asked.

"Make it scotch."

I fingered the drink he poured, and looked at the pile of foxes. A white fox is a little thing, some of them aren't much bigger than cats. But those pelts were nearly wolf-size, and yet definitely they were foxes. Pug Davenport, somewhere out on those lonely barrens, had found a breed of foxes the like of which man had never seen before.

Don't smile at that. Spread a map of the North American continent before you. From Key West, Florida, to Point Barrow, Alaska, you cannot find an unnamed place. You can then understand why cartographers, and even some explorers, have declared the world an open book with no new frontiers. Actually nothing could be farther from the truth. Even though it takes you only a tenth of a second to move your pointing finger from one named place to the other, it might take you one hundred days to walk between those same places. That's what we had around North City. Men had gone into the barrens, but not into all of them. Even in thickly populated states there are still places where no man has set foot. A lot of things that we never dreamed existed are yet going to be found right in our own back yards.

I looked at the pelts again, noted their size and texture. Ordinarily it pays to give strict attention to your own business in North City, but I asked Urschel:

"Where'd you get 'em?"

"Pug Davenport brought 'em in. Said I should send half the money for 'em down to Marcia and he'd drink up the rest."

"Wow! He should be able to drink until July!"

Urschel looked at me, his eyes hard, "He will be."

"No offense meant," I told him. "Give me another drink."

I took the drink he poured and backed against the bar to look around the unlighted back end of the room. Pug Davenport sat at a corner table, the darkest and most inaccessible one he could find, with a bottle of whiskey before him. As I looked he tilted the bottle to his mouth and drained out a teacup full. I waited a minute—Pug can be ugly when he's drunk—then took my drink and walked over to him.

"Hello, Pug," I said.

He looked at me, and shrank as far as he could down into his chair. His trembling hand strayed out to grasp my sleeve.

"Zhorzhe," he said unsteadily. "Sit close to me, Zhorzhe."

He pulled a chair around and me down on it. Again he raised the bottle, took a drink that would have floored an ordinary man, and his right hand, took a firm grip on my left arm. I frowned. There was something here that should not be. I had known Pug Davenport to be almost anything except afraid. He went farther out on the barrens than anyone else and laughed at those who dared not go with him. Always

he had been ready to face anything. But now, both from the way he gripped my arm and in the way his eyes met mine, I knew that he was terrified. I told myself that he was probably in the first stages of the D.T.'s. But when I moved he whispered again:

"Zhorzhe, don' leave me alone!"

For a second, I don't know why, I was very disturbed. But I fought for a grip on myself and tried to talk him out of it.

"You certainly brought in a wonderful catch of foxes," I tried to be casual. "Where'd you get 'em?"

He looked at me, staring as though he hadn't the least idea of what I was talking about, and let his glance rove to the pile of furs on the bar. For a full minute he didn't say anything. Then he shuddered violently.

"It's the duckfoot," he whimpered. "The duckfoot an' the stick. You should shee what it done to Matt Brazeal."

"What duckfoot and what stick, and what did it do to Matt Brazeal?"

Pug stared into space. "I tried to shake it off," he whispered. "I tried to. The trees was all green there, big tall trees. Thass where the foxshes lived. I tried to shake it off but it followed me. It caught Matt Brazeal, and you should shee what it done to him. It will come here."

That was nonsense. In the first place there aren't any trees in the arctic. In the second place this talk of a duckfoot and a stick doing something terrible to Matt Brazeal, another North City fox trapper, was just the inane ramblings of a trapper who had too much to drink. As for the duckfoot and the stick following Pug to North City— Marcia was needed here. I stood up, put my hand on Pug's shoulder, and shook him. He blinked into drunken attention.

"Pug," I said clearly, "sit right where you are. No duckfoot and stick can get you in here. The door's shut."

A PATHETIC expression of hope and relief crossed his eyes. He mumbled something that I did not hear.

"I'm going to get Marcia," I said. "We'll keep you safe from the duckfoot and the stick. Don't move until I come back."

I pulled my parka about me and went back into the wind-blasted street. Pug's four huskies were stretched in their traces, sleeping, and they raised indifferent heads when I came out. I had seen them before, but only now did I notice how thin and worn they were, and the blood that stained the snow beneath their paws. For a moment I looked uneasily at them. Wherever he had come from, Pug had certainly given his dogs a lot of punishment. I— That was silly. There couldn't be any truth in the wild, disconnected story he had told. Tall green trees, foxes big as wolves, and a duckfoot and a stick that had done something terrible to Matt Brazeal. Only the foxes were real and—

Exactly where had Pug Davenport taken those pelts? Certainly no other man had ever seen foxes like them. Somewhere back in those God-forsaken barrens Pug might even have found trees. But the duckfoot and the stick—

I broke into a run. The darkness seemed unreal, full of moving things. Deliberately I slowed to a walk. A man had to keep his head and there was nothing with which he could not cope as long as he let nothing excite him. Whatever Pug Davenport had seen on the barrens—

"Cut it out," I told myself. "He didn't see anything."

I swerved to Marcia Davenport's lamplighted house and knocked on the door. Marcia opened it, and a gust of wind blew sugar-like snow across the kitchen floor. I slipped inside, shut the door behind me, and let my hungry eyes feast on her. Somehow the loveliest pictures my mind ever drew were never quite so lovely as she herself. And always, when I was near her, I wondered why she should even think of marrying me or any other man. A god would be a more fitting mate for Marcia Davenport. She smiled.

"Hello, George. Take off your parka."

I stood against the door, the parka swinging about my knees. For a second I groped for words, wondering how to break gently to Marcia the news that Pug was back and having a real bender up at Urschel's. Common sense came to my rescue. In a good many ways Marcia was exactly like Pug, not afraid of much and seldom hesitating to tackle anything.

"Pug's back," I told her.

She nodded, grasping at once everything I meant. "Is he bad?" she asked quietly.

"Quite bad. You'd better come."

"All right. Just a minute."

She went into another room, and when she came out she was wearing the exquisite fawn-skin parka that Pug himself had made for her. Marcia smiled at me, and grasped my elbow reassuringly. I groped happily beside her, thoroughly ashamed now of my own near-panic. Somehow it seemed that nothing could ever go wrong as long as Marcia was near. There was something deep inside her that seemed incapable of being moved or even ruffled by anything from the outside, a quiet strength. Whatever came, Marcia could face and cope with it. And right at that moment I thought more strongly than ever that this girl beside me represented not only the highest type of womanhood but the highest of humanity.

TOGETHER we walked up the street, Marcia bending her head against the wind and holding tight to my elbow to steady herself. We were nearly opposite Urschel's when I had an almost irresistible impulse to cross to the other side of the street.

There seemed to be something over there overwhelmingly magnetic, something that I could not see but only feel. Marcia was one step ahead of me, pulling me by the arm and looking questioningly up into my face.

"Come on," she made herself heard above the steady roar of the wind. "I must go over there!"

I took another step forward and stopped in my tracks. Deliberately, forcefully fighting some mighty summons that pulled me forward, I took two steps backward and the pressure lessened slightly. A cold hand seemed to be stroking my spine, a clammy breath pouring down my neck. I recognized those symptoms as the awakening of fear, terror such as that which was reflected so plainly in Pug Davenport's face. I tried to summon reason to my aid. But all I could be sure of was that, though I did not know what lay on the other side of the street, I did know that it was something to be very much afraid of.

"Come on!" I shouted. "Pug's in the saloon!"

"But I must go across the street!"

"Come on!" I screamed.

Fighting for every inch, doing my utmost to resist the powerful impulse that said I must cross the street, I half dragged her toward the saloon. When we had gone ten feet farther, we seemed to pass out of the orbit of whatever had tried to influence us. So strong had been my pressure on Marcia's arm that immediately we both stumbled into the snow.

We arose and brushed ourselves off. Marcia, puzzled, turned around.

"I don't know why," she said. "But I had the strangest feeling back there that I must cross the street."

"Nonsense!" I told her. "Come on."

We reached the saloon. Joe Urschel had no sign in front of his establishment. But he did keep an electric fan turned on the window before the bar in winter so that frost would not cloud it and passers-by could readily see a place of refreshment. I glanced up at that window to see the faces of Al Pettigrew and Moose-Hide Allen plastered against it. Their eyes were staring, their mouths agape. Plainly they had had some terrific surprise or shock. Careful to swing Marcia the other way when we entered, I pointed to the back end of the room.

"Pug's there," I said.

She hurried back, and I approached the two men who were staring out the window.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Ur—Urschel!" Al Pettigrew ejaculated.

"What's the matter with Urschel?"

"He—he floated away!"

"What!"

"That's right," Moose-Hide said. "He was goin' over to Pete Gallagher's for a set of hinges. But as soon as he got across the street he turned an' went down it, right to that little black stick layin' thar. He stood thar a minute or more, rockin' back an' forth an' like to fall. Then he floated away! His laigs was two feet off the ground."

"You're crazy!"

"George, I ain't crazy an' I ain't drunk!" Moose-Hide said angrily. "Urschel's parka was wrinkled, like a rabbit's fur when a

wolf's haulin' it. But nothin' carried him. He floated!"

SOMETHING seemed to pervade the room, a cold and fear-inspiring presence that had no shape or form, but yet had definite being. I turned around to see Marcia bent over her father, stroking his temple with her hand and swing the bottle of whiskey behind her. Pug groped for it like a pleading child, and Marcia permitted him a short drink. Pug fell across the table, hopelessly drunk, and Marcia sat down opposite him. I walked back.

"How is he?"

"He'll be all *right*, George." Marcia smiled at me and I felt weak all over.

"Did he tell you anything?"

"He had some story about a duckfoot and a stick, and said that I must keep away from the stick or I'd never get away. I think he's more bushed-out than drunk."

"Yes, that's it," I agreed. "He's bushed-out."

That's a term we apply to anybody who's been out in the barrens too long, and has gone a little crazy as a consequence. Association with others generally fixes them up. But I knew that Pug Davenport was not bushed-out and now I knew also that, wherever he had caught those foxes, he had also met some unreal, inhuman thing about which the whiskey that fogged his brain prevented his telling us. Doubtless the surprise had been mutual. But whatever the monster was, it had followed Pug back to North City and was preying on human beings! I walked to the front of the saloon and looked thoughtfully at Urschel's 30-06, hanging on a rack of caribou horns over the bar. Al Pettigrew sidled down to me.

"Wha—what do you s'spose it is, Doc?" he asked.

"Nothing at all, Al. By the way, what became of Pug's dog team?"

"They took off down the street, sled an' all, howlin' like banshees. Doc, there's somethin' out there!"

"Nonsense!" I snapped—anything to avoid a panic. "What could be out there?"

"You ain't foolin' me," Al said suddenly. "I seen it."

"What did you see?"

"N— Nothin'."

"There you are. Don't go starting crazy rumors. I'm going out there."

"I'm stayin' here," Al mumbled.

"Keep the door locked if you're afraid."

"I aim to."

"I'll go with ye," Moose-Hide offered.

"No thanks. You needn't."

I took Urschel's big 30-06 from the rack and stepped out on the porch. My intention was to stand there, and blast the stick with a soft-nosed bullet from the gun. But when I looked the stick was not there. Nor was there any indication of the powerful force that had tried to drag Marcia and myself across the street. Carefully, the gun leveled, I walked to where the stick had been. A strange, musty odor, vaguely like that of an aroused ermine, pervaded the air. Slowly, a step at a time, I went forward. The snow was blowing down the street, a fine mist of hard flakes. But it had blown over the place where the stick had lain, and I stopped short. Just ahead of me were half a dozen long, triangular tracks almost exactly like those that might be left by a duck walking in the mud. But these tracks were longer than my own, and proportionately wide.

I gasped, and raised the rifle for something to shoot at. But there was nothing, only the musty odor and the half-dozen tracks, that were lost in snow-blown nothingness. Slowly I turned around, saw Swede Thomas' half-breed daughter step out of her house at the end of the street. A slim girl, with her father's coloring and her mother's patient acceptance of whatever came, Lorna turned suddenly and walked to the other side of the street. She stopped short, swaying back and forth, coming dangerously near falling but always rising again. It was then that I saw the black stick, directly between her feet.

I yelled, and ran as fast as I could. But before I was able to cover half the distance I saw Lorna Thomas rise in the air. Her parka was wrinkled, as though something had hold of her there. The little black stick was on the other side, floating through the air about three feet from the ground. I flung myself to one knee and leveled the rifle. But at once the futility of my own position became apparent.

There was nothing to shoot at, nothing

except the dangling girl and the little black stick. I sighted squarely between them and pressed the trigger. A hollow, chuckling sound rose high above the seething wind and floated back to me. Whatever carried Lorna Thomas broke into a run so swift that I was unable to keep them in sight. I shot again and again, and ran as fast as I could.

But all I found was the line of huge duck tracks that again faded into wind-blown snow.

I WAS terribly shaken when I got back to the saloon. For a few seconds wild hysteria threatened. I grabbed a bottle, took a long pull, and slammed the bottle down on the bar. Al Pettigrew sidled up to me.

"I told you," he leered. "There is somethin' out there, ain't there?"

That, more than anything else, sobered me. Al Pettigrew was the sort of nameless spawn, product of a father who had never seen him and a mother who had never wanted him, that you'll find in the north or anywhere else. He had a weak and flabby face in which abject terror lived. I, product of a high-class home and the finest scientific training man can provide, was supposed to be just a little better than that.

"Yes!" I snapped. "There is something! Now shut up!"

Again I tried to bring reason to my aid, calling up and rejecting every scientific rule and theorem I had ever heard of and inventing a few on the spot. But nothing applied. There was no precedent for this. All I knew was that a monster had come among us, a monster with a trap that held people helpless. The trap was easier to figure out. Doubtless it was some sort of metal with a very strong magnetic attraction for living flesh. Neoglaunce had properties similar to that, and probably this was some variety of such a metal. The creature that bore it must have form and substance, but was of a pigmentation that could not be discerned by the human eye. Certainly every resident of North City was doomed unless we could find a way to stop it. But how can you take action against that which you cannot see? Now that The Thing had discovered human haunts, when it was finished with North City it had only to go south. Then—?

I walked back to where Marcia was still sitting beside the drunken Pug. Now the arctic day had changed to the deeper gloom of night, and the lights glowed brightly. Marcia had folded her parka into a pillow, placed it under Pug's reclining head. Pug began to snore.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

Marcia smiled, and again I felt that curious weakness. I would have licked her boots for her any time, and when she smiled I would have cut off my own arm if she'd asked me to.

"He's all right," she said. "Let him rest. I don't think he's slept in the past two weeks."

"Okay," I tried to sound casual. "Let him spend the night in his chair. But hadn't you better lie down? There's a cot in the back room."

"No, thank you," she smiled again. "I'll sit with him. I'm really used to it, George."

"Good enough."

I returned to the front of the saloon, for the first time thankful that this girl had been so engrossed with her sick father that she'd scarcely noticed anything else. Al and Moose-Hide looked uneasily at me as I laid the 30-06 across my knees and pulled a chair in front of the door. If anything came in that door, I determined, it was going to cross my dead body before it got to the girl in back.

"Ain'—ain't you takin' this a mite serious?" Moose-Hide demanded.

"Lie down," I said. "Try to get some sleep. We've a job to do in the morning."

"Well—I s'pose it's all right if you say so."

All night I kept vigil before the door, the cocked rifle across my lap. It seemed unreal, almost ridiculous. I, George Mallory, waiting with a rifle across my lap for something that I could not see when it came. As the slow hours dragged by it seemed sillier than ever, and all my thoughts of last night even more silly. No, there had to be some more reasonable explanation of everything. The thin gray daylight crept upon us, and I think that is the time when I dozed off.

I was awakened by a rush of cold air in the face, and jumped up. Moose-Hide sat on the bar, nonchalantly swinging his legs.

I looked toward the back end of the saloon, saw Pug still sprawled across his table.

"Where's Marcia?" I demanded.

"Why, she said she was goin' to take an' get Pug some hot vittles," Moose-hide drawled.

"When did she go?"

"Mebbe two minutes past."

I sprang to the door and looked out, just in time to see Marcia Davenport, across the street, standing directly over the little black stick. She bent forward, until her head almost brushed the snow, and straightened. I gasped, took one step toward her. But, even as I did, I saw her lifted into the air and begin to float away. The little black stick floated beside her.

I WAS ice cold. If Marcia Davenport was not alive in it, I knew that the world would offer no more inducement for me to stay alive. But yet I did not run after her. I was thinking more completely and swiftly than I had ever thought before.

I raced to the back of the room and slapped Pug Davenport across the cheek. He mumbled, and shifted his head to the other arm. I slapped him again and again, and when slapping did no good poured a bucket of cold water over his head. Pug awoke slowly, and blinked at me.

"Pug!" I screamed. "Listen! The duck-foot and the stick, they have taken Marcia!"

Never before have I seen so swift a change in any man. Pug leaped erect. There was no trace of fear in him now, no hesitation. And at that moment I was very proud to be a human being. This little derelict had come in from the barrens, terrified by something that had taken place out there. But when the same thing threatened his daughter, Pug could forget his own fear to go to her aid. He snatched the 30-06 from my hands and raced out the door.

Though my legs are longer than his, it was very hard just to keep up. Again, as soon as we got outside, there was an aura of ermine musk. A hollow exclamation, a parody of that which might come from a human hunter who has just bagged an especially fine head of game, seemed to linger in the air. And there were the duck tracks, huge triangular marks in the snow. If I breathed any sort of prayer it was one of

thanksgiving that there was no blowing snow this morning to cover them.

We raced out of town into the barrens, stopping where The Thing had stepped, running as hard as we could. And it was a half-mile away, almost in North City's back yard, that we came upon the snowbank. Something huge and powerful had piled that snow, and I looked with glazed eyes upon the things that were hanging from it. The skins of Matt Brazeal, Joe Urschel, Lorna Thomas, stretched on the snow as we would stretch bear skins! The frozen, nude carcasses were cast haphazardly into the snow before it. I gasped. A trapper that sought the skins of human beings just as we sought those of foxes. I saw Marcia.

She was hanging, head down, from the snowbank. The black stick, on top of the bank at her feet, seemed to be holding her up. There was absolutely no evidence of anything else, yet I knew something was there. From Pug Davenport's throat there rolled a hoarse, terrible, snarling, animal cry.

"Aaaa-gh!"

HE THREW himself down on one knee and leveled the rifle. I could still see nothing, but he took a steady aim. He pressed the trigger, the rifle blasted. At the same time a fine spray erupted from the snowbank. I saw Marcia slide from it, crawl a little way through the snow, and get up to run toward me. More snow flew, there was a great threshing, as though up there near the bank some mighty animal was in its death throes. Pug shot again, and again. A wild scream split the air. I saw a line of duck tracks coming toward us, and Pug shot again. He clubbed the rifle and raced forward to give battle to whatever opposed him. A huge bloodstain spread on the snow.

I heard Pug gasp, saw him borne backwards on the snow. His throat seemed of its own volition to be constricting, his eyes bulged, and horrible, gasping breaths sputtered from his open mouth. I sprang forward, receiving a mighty blow that sent me reeling back. When I had recovered, Pug Davenport lay quietly on the snow.

The line of duck tracks, marked frequently by huge splashes of blood, was

wobbling across the barrens. I saw them reach the Sheep River, and another terrible scream floated back as the ice parted and the river's freezing waters opened to receive The Thing. When I looked for the little black stick it was nowhere to be seen.

Marcia was coming toward me, like one awakening from a dream. She looked down at Pug, and I saw the agony that crossed her eyes. Just as swiftly I saw her conquer it. She shook her head.

"Wh—what happened?" she asked. "I left Urschel's, and that's the last I remember."

I stared past her, fascinated by the black, gaping hole in the river where The Thing had gone down. With an effort I tore my eyes away from it, looked back at Marcia. Strength returned, and with it came sense. I looked straight into her eyes, anything to keep her from turning her head to see what was left of the three human beings trapped by The Thing.

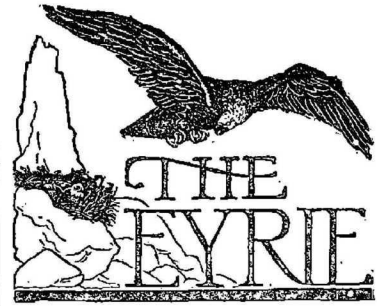
"He—" I began, and stopped. "Marcia, when grief is gone let pride replace it. North City lives because Pug Davenport died. I—"

I dared not continue, to blurt out the truth and have this girl who to me meant more than anything else on earth question my own sanity. At the moment I questioned it myself.

But not after Marcia walked up to me, buried her face in my chest, and started to cry. Then I knew that at last Marcia Davenport had given herself to me, that happiness and delight would spring out of the seeds planted by death and terror. I looked once more at the tracks and the great blood splashes in the snow. The wind would cover them, the Sheep River did not give up its dead. As I gathered Marcia a little closer to me I looked down at the face of her father. For the first time it seemed a peaceful and a happy face.

And I blessed the thought that had bade me wake Pug Davenport up, and set him out to rescue his daughter. The Thing was of no color that normal eyes could see. But Pug's eyes were the only ones in North City that did not react normally.

Of all the men who had ever been there, he was the only one who was totally color blind.



Stay Tuned for Terror!

IN REPLY to the many letters from our readers asking about the WEIRD TALES radio show, we are very glad to pass on the information that "Stay Tuned for Terror" is now being heard over WMAQ in Chicago.

If you are in the area served by this 50,000 watt station (WMAQ) you'll be able to dial a real listening thrill thrice weekly, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, at 10:45 p.m., CWT.

Just before this magazine went to press we met Johnnie Neblett of Neblett Radio Productions, who is largely responsible for fulfilling the dream of many fantasy readers; namely, to put a really fine "weird" show on the air. We told Johnnie Neblett of the reader interest in the program as evidenced by letters to us. He in turn enthusiastically assured us that he is doing everything he can to bring the show to an ever larger audience. We won't be satisfied until every last WEIRD TALES reader, no matter where he is from New York to California, can Stay Tuned for Terror in his own community.

Once Upon the Earth

ALTHOUGH not new to writing by a long shot, Jim Kjelgaard presents his first story in WEIRD TALES' pages this issue. He says he can't explain exactly why he wrote this fantasy yarn except "I've always been very much interested in such things."

The author of "The Thing from the Barrens" writes further for the Eyrie:

Of course this yarn is pure fantasy, but one speculation sort of leads to another. You can start just about anywhere you please and end up with a pile of imaginative mist with just enough element of truth in it to make you wonder if, after all, your imagination is running 100 percent wild. For instance, consider elephants.

It is thought that hairy elephants, mammoths, still roamed the North American continent, perhaps in considerable numbers, when Columbus touched these shores. Certainly they were known to the Indians, rude sculptures of mammoths have been discovered in various places. If that isn't enough evidence, whole mammoths have been dug out of northern glaciers and ice deposits. It isn't very hard to go places from there. All you have to do is walk out almost anywhere and look at a big tree. If you look at a big enough hemlock or pine, it's a safe bet that you can consider it four or five hundred years old. We cut a hemlock one time that, by counting the rings on its trunk, we figured was about thirty years old when Columbus landed. Regarding that tree as a living thing, which it is, you can begin to think of what it might have seen.

What walked beneath it? Mammoths? Hairy rhinoceri? Camels? How much could that tree, if it was able to talk, enlighten man? What battles has it witnessed? How much does it know that man does? How much has it lived through that, so far, man has not even guessed?

With that one you're off on a whole realm of speculative fancy There just isn't any end to it. You think of things that might have been and— Sure they're weird. That's why

WEIRD TALES prints 'em and that's exactly how "The Thing from the Barrens" was born. It's something that probably never was but might have been, and I got a great kick out of writing it.

Jim Kjelgaard.

9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

WRITE TO MARTIN WARE, SECRETARY

• This is your club—a medium to help you get together with other fantasy and science-fiction fans. Readers wanted it—they wrote in telling us how much they would enjoy meeting others of similar tastes.

• Membership is very simple: just drop us a line, so that we can enroll you on the club roster, and publish your name and address in the magazine.

• A membership card carrying the above design—personal token of your fellowship with the weird and fantastic—will be sent on request. (A stamped, addressed envelope should be enclosed.)

Abominable Snowman

In two of the better known H. P. Lovecraft stories "The Weird Shadow Over Innsmouth" and "The Whisperer in Darkness" the author mentions the Abominable Snowman and some readers may not know what he means. In the perpetual snows of the Himalayas have been seen footprints that furnish one of the great mysteries of science. The natives believe that they are caused by a creature that is half man and half beast, known as the Abominable Snowman. This creature has not so far been seen by any European. Yet there is a strong belief in these Mi-go or Murka as they are called by the superstitious natives of Nepal and Tibet—and sufficient indirect evidence has been gathered by European mountaineers and travelers to warrant an expedition to investigate the mystery.

The legend of the Abominable Snowman extends for hundreds of miles through Nepal, Tibet, Sikkib, and Ghutan, and the descriptions given by natives of these countries are strangely alike. The stories relate that the Snowman is a monstrous biped, white-skinned and covered with black

hair. According to the natives, the larger examples devour yaks which they disable by hamstringing. Some of the Sherpas of Nepal and Bhutias of Tibet swear to having been chased by these creatures and lurid pictures of them are to be found in many monasteries of Tibet.

European mountaineers have seen strange tracks in the snow far above the permanent snowline. Mr. H. W. Tilman, the leader of the 1938 Mount Everest Expedition has described some remarkable tracks on a snowfield in the Karakorams. They consisted of a line of round indentations the size of soup plates and could not be attributed to otters, birds, or any of the other creatures that were suggested as having caused them. Strange tracks have been observed by members of expeditions to Kinchinjunga and other peaks. Not long ago, an English lady, Miss Macdonald of Dalimpong was crossing a high pass into Tibet when she was startled by a terrific roar that shook the ground and was totally unlike the roar of any creature she had heard before. A Polish expedition, investigating these strange tracks, reached a height of 20,500 feet on Nanda Devi in July, 1939, when an avalanche crashed and killed two of the explorers. If anyone knows anything else about the Mi-go or the other things Lovecraft wrote about will he or she please write and tell me. I will answer any letters.

Paul Doerr

203 E. State Street, Sharon, Pa.

NEW MEMBERS

Miss Anthoula Thomas, 2 Delville Rd., Germiston, Transvaal, South Africa
Tykie Constantinadies, 90 Lake Ave., Benoi, Transvaal, South Africa
Bernadine Snook, 509 Frederick St., San Francisco 17, Calif.
Joanne Shaw, 612 Cole St., San Francisco, 17, Calif.
Diane Aylesworth, 20 E. Evergreen Ave., Youngstown, Ohio
Terry Hensley, Box 863, Albany, Tex.
Don Thompson, 59 Halsey St., Newark, N. J.
H. Glenn Martin, Jr., 250 Irving St., San Francisco, Calif.
Winchell Graff, 818 W. 70th St., New York 23, N. Y.
Nell-Irene Chagiu, Burnette Inlet, via Wrangell, Alaska
Anthony Miller, Bellshill, Lonarkshire, Scotland
Mrs. Ethel Antone, 732 Pine Ave., Long Beach 2, Calif.
Elizabeth Yatchmanoff, Burnett Inlet, via Wrangell, Alaska
H. S. Evzovitch, 704 Brant St., Windsor, Ont., Can.
Greg Ritcnour, N. Y. State Hospital, Bay Brook, N. Y.
Marguerite Donohue, 158 Green St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Lorna Hall, P. O. Box 94, Mountain Home, Idaho
Walter O'Daniels, 170 Claremont Ave., New York 27, N. Y.
Livingston Wright, Jr., Marshfield Hills, Mass.
Jack Murtagh, 509 Selwood Rd., Hastings, New Zealand
Miss Tony Marciano, W.L.A. Hostel, The Shooting Box, North Creake, Fakenham, Norfolk, Eng.
Dolores Ramsey, P. O. Box 355, Homerville, Ga.
Jack Friday, 1109 Morton St., Camden, N. J.
L. Virbutis, 51 Vernon St., Waterbury 66, Conn.
George Kellington, 176 Sterling Pl., Brooklyn 17, N. Y.
Leon Reed, 601 South & Chicago, Marionville, Mo.
Thomas McCann, 4254 Tackawanna St., Philadelphia 24, Pa.
Robert Pitts, 11 May St., New Haven, Conn.
W. J. Bowell, 145 Granville Ave., Slough Bucks, Eng.

We're sorry that lack of space prevents the inclusion of the names of all New Members. The rest will appear next time.

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

AMENHOTEP IV
Founder of Egypt's
Mystery Schools

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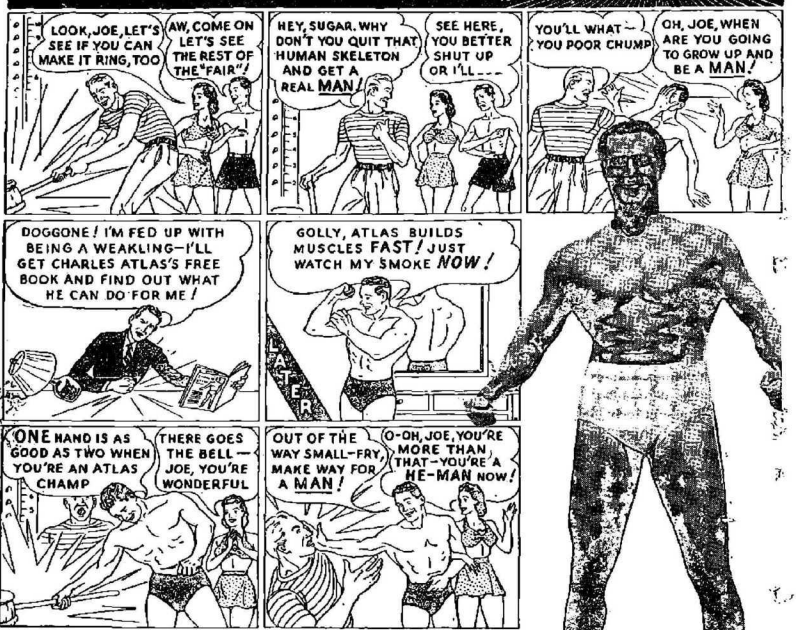

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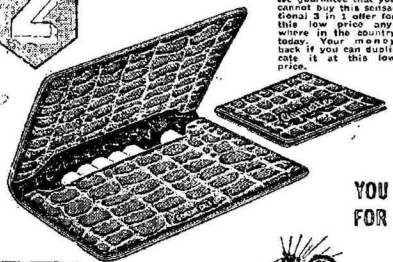

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