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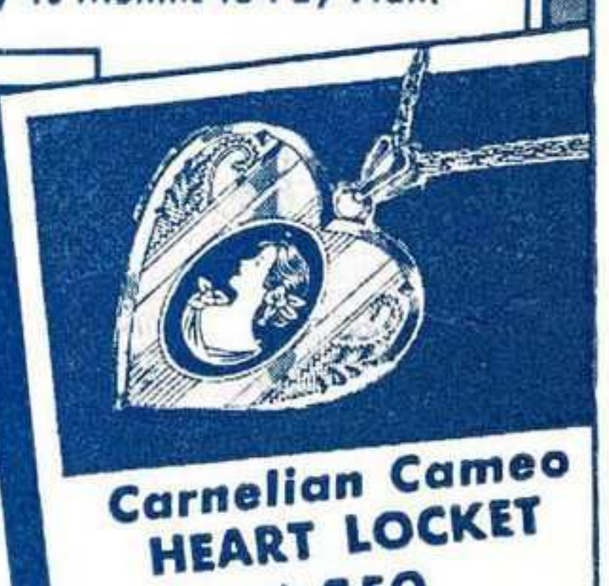
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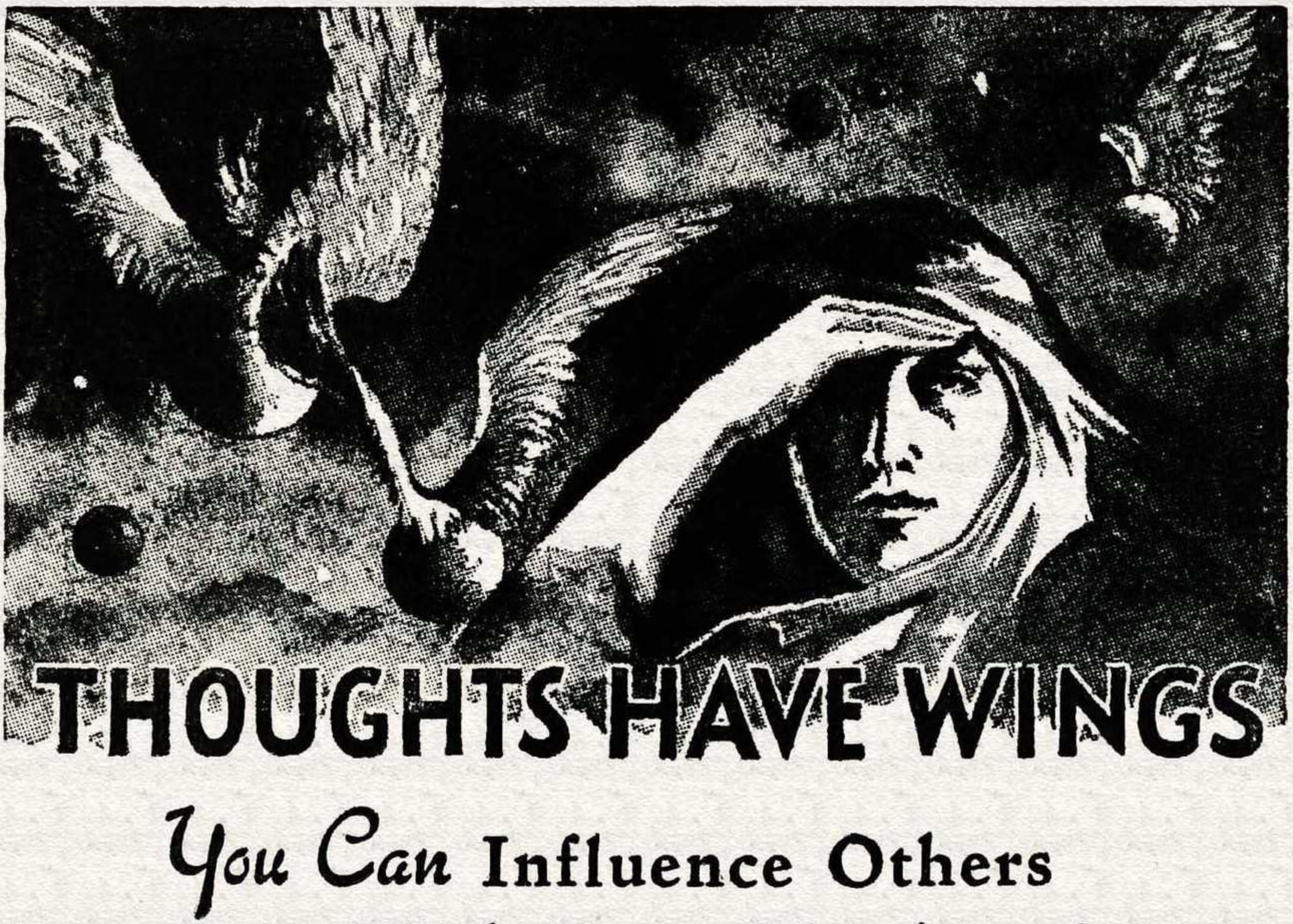
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WEIRD TALES

SEPTEMBER

1940



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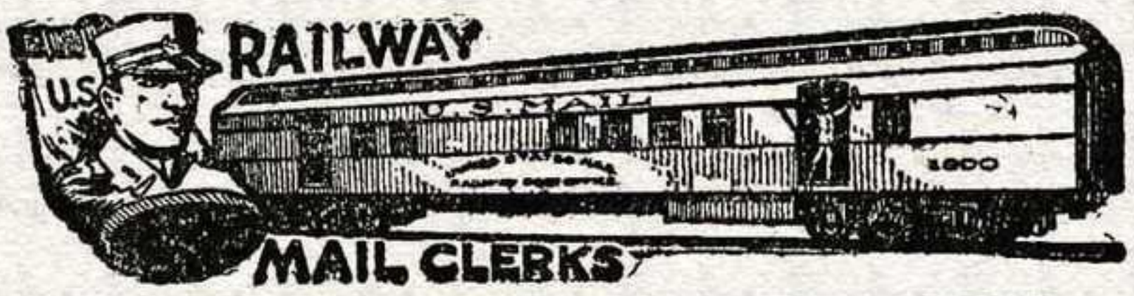
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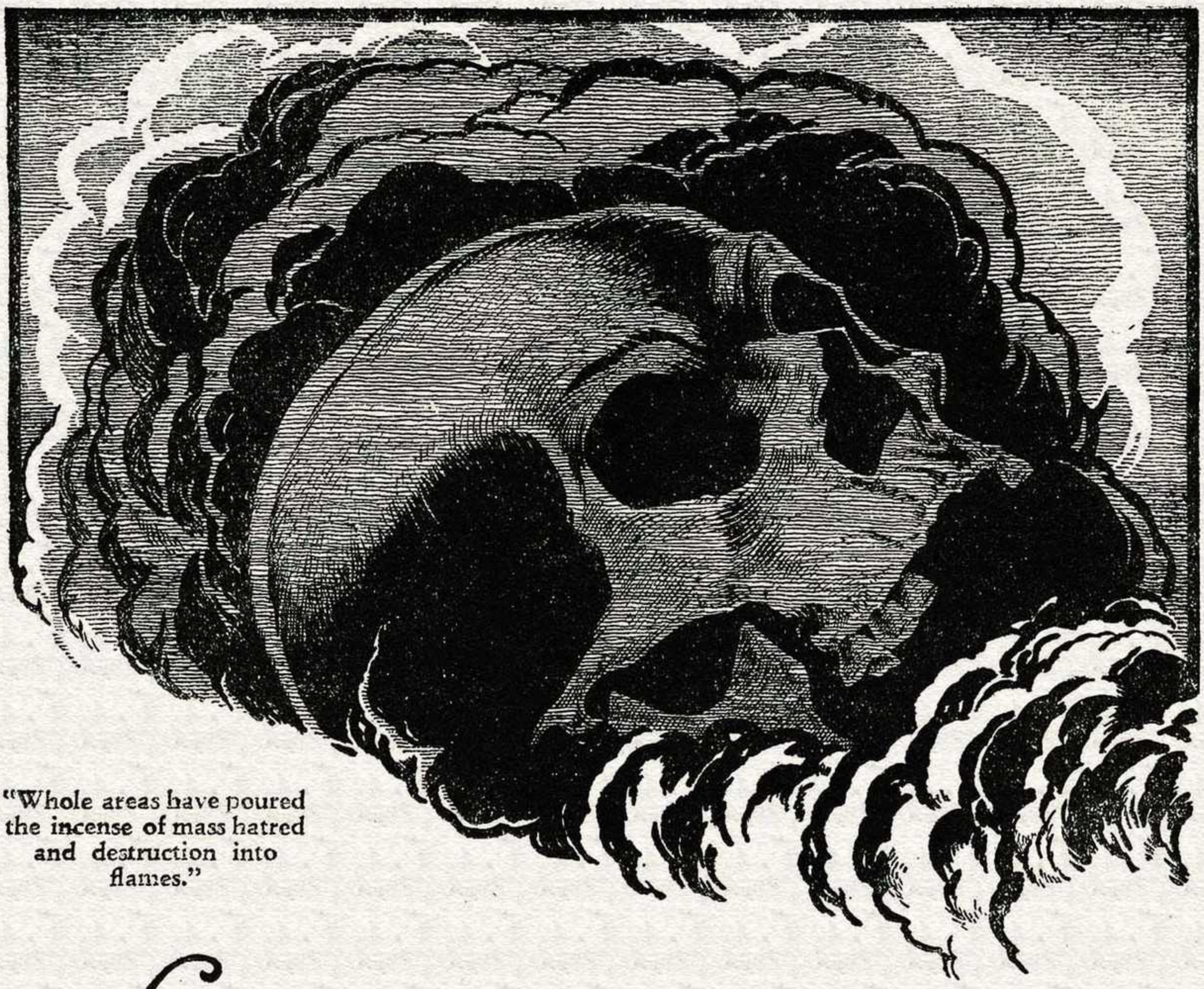
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Seven Seconds of Eternity

By ROBERT H. LEITFRED

In 2001 A.D. Science discovers a world where men can starve in three seconds.

HIGH and remote against the sky at sunset reared the steel control towers of New York's vast transportation system. The four-speed sidewalk bands moved silently north, south, east and west as ten million earth beings were shunted back and forth in ceaseless movement.

Subway and elevated trains no longer existed. The city had outgrown them. Street cars had vanished. So had taxis and private cars except in the outlands beyond the great city. And these moving sidewalk bands extended as far north as Peekskill. There was no pushing, crowding or waiting, for the moving bands were endless and always in motion.

This modern transportation system, developed from the ancient escalator principle, was high above the city streets. The first band, wide and roomy; moved quite slowly. The second, somewhat faster. By merely stepping from the slower to the faster moving bands, passengers could control the speed they wished to travel.

Of noise there was little—only the deep

reverberations of turbines far underground, turbines that furnished light, power and heat to all the island and the sprawling boroughs extending to the outlands beyond East River.

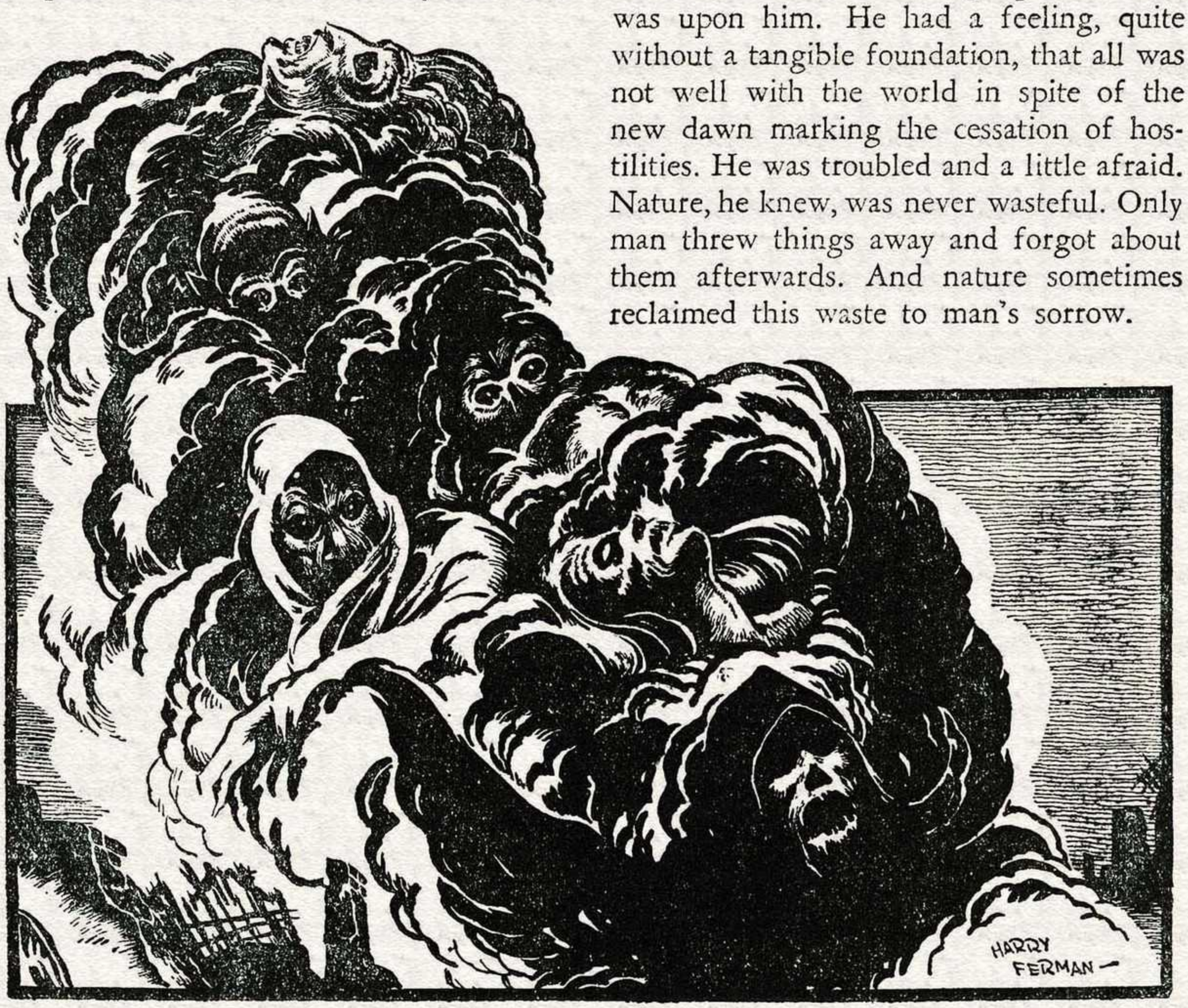
New York, in the year of 2001, had become the world's largest city. Jupiter, the seventh month of the earth's new calendar, was drawing to a close. And the world was at peace—had been at peace for two months following ten years of frightful slaughter and sacrifice to the red god of Mars.

The sudden death of the powerful Asiatic war lord, Marshal Huen Feng Zaryoti, in his headquarters cabin plane seven miles above San Francisco's Golden Gate, where he was directing his fleets operating on water and in the air, had closed the final chapter of world domination by one man.

Zaryoti might have won that lightning war against North America had not a combination of forces set in motion by a young scientist, working with difficulty against the bureaucracy of government, found a way to combat the world's most deadly weapon—the atomic bomb.

On the top floor of a hundred story building close to the heart of the great metropolis, in a laboratory that was as modern as the first year of 2000, stood this young scientist, Aaron Carruthers. He was slightly above medium in height, with the eyes of a dreamer, and a jaw of a man who knew how to fight. Even in repose, as he stood by the quartz glass window, gazing with worried eyes into the darkening sky, he did not seem quite at peace.

Nor was he. A strange presentiment was upon him. He had a feeling, quite without a tangible foundation, that all was not well with the world in spite of the new dawn marking the cessation of hostilities. He was troubled and a little afraid. Nature, he knew, was never wasteful. Only man threw things away and forgot about them afterwards. And nature sometimes reclaimed this waste to man's sorrow.



FOLLOWING Marshal Zaryoti's death and the destruction of his battleship and air flotillas, the thrust against the Americas had collapsed. All over the world the hearths of mammoth steel plants had gone stone cold.

No longer did smoke pour into the sky above steel and ammunition centers. For ten years the clean air of the world had been fouled with gases from towering chimneys, bomb explosions, and incendiary fires until the combined waste products of unburnt powder, acids and burning metal blotted out most of the sun's rays, and turned the moon into a baleful, nyctalopic eye that leered down on the skeleton of all civilization that had survived war's carnage.

This waste which man in his prodigality had allowed to escape unused, had not vanished. Nature for some obscure reason had collected and formed it into masses that resembled white Nimbus clouds high above the earth.

Aware of this vagary of nature, Aaron Carruthers had been watching the phenomenon incuriously at first, then with mounting interest as the weeks passed. There was something about these clouds that suggested a morbid virility. Rain did not destroy or disperse them. They seemed to hang torpidly and sluggishly around a five-thousand-foot altitude, most of them over the United States between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean.

As the young scientist was about to turn from the window, he heard the mounting whine of a siren from the street canyon below the moving sidewalk bands. Had the siren stopped after the initial blast, he would have paid no attention to it. But the siren wailed five times which meant, not a fire or a disturbance, but the warning signal of something approaching a national disaster.

He flung one last glance at the mysterious clouds darkening the western heavens, then returned to his desk in his main experimental laboratory.

Karl Danzig, his friend and assistant, was just placing a cordless electronic phone on its cradle. A queer, tight smile was on his face. Carruthers noticed it only in passing as he noticed the paneled whiteness of the room, its electrical and atomic machines, dynamos, generators and strange motors encased in glass and plastic.

"What's happening, Karl?" he asked.

"Don't know exactly. Nobody seems to know—yet. A lot of people died in the lowlands beyond the Ozark Mountains. No reason for their sudden deaths. Thousands of people and animals. A scourge of the most virulent type."

"Any details?" Carruthers' eyes were vaguely troubled.

"No more than what I just told you. First news and pictures of the stricken area are being sent over the Continental News Television panels. Nothing's been censored yet."

"We'll do some televisioning ourselves," announced Carruthers seating himself before the complicated dials of his ethervision panel. He thrust a switch forward with his foot, clicked two more with his slender fingers and slowly began to revolve a dial.

The silver surface of a magnetic vision screen became clouded as if in the throes of a mighty dust storm. This lasted only for a few seconds until the space tubes warmed to their task. Then the silver of the magnetic screen faded into a dull gray, and from gray to a greenish blue.

Queer noises flowed from the sound-producer—the shuffling of feet, the murmur of thousands of voices, and the gentle throb of the city's underground turbines.

Suddenly both men were seeing one of the many television panels located at strategic points throughout the city. And they saw the same news pictures as the thousands on the street saw—the rows of dead

numbering many thousands. The faces of the victims bore no marks of injury or suffering. All were calm and peaceful as if they merely slumbered. Announcers in various communities appearing momentarily across the television panel had no solution to offer as to how these thousands had met their deaths. The cause was buried in obscurity. Only the effect was visible.

BY MORNING of the following day a strict censorship was clamped down on all news pertaining to the disaster. Which meant that Washington did not yet know the cause and was unwilling to even guess less the population become frightened and break into panicky mobs.

Carruthers wasted no time trying to contact government officials. He knew it would be useless. He merely sat back and waited, knowing they would come to his laboratory as they always came if the G-2 Chief of National Intelligence had charge of the mysterious disaster.

At ten o'clock precisely, the eyes of a golden Bhudda on the young scientist's desk glowed redly. A few seconds later Karl Danzig opened the corridor door. Langham, Chief of Intelligence, came into the laboratory.

Carruthers did not rise to greet him. It wasn't necessary. He pointed to a chair. "I've been waiting for you to come as I knew you would. Sit down. We'll talk it over."

Langham lowered his lanky body into a chair and said morosely: "You've always got everything figured out, Aaron. I might have called on some other scientist. As a matter of fact the President almost demanded that I call the Emergency Council into session. I persuaded him, however, to allow me to talk with you first."

"That's kind of you, Langham, and a little embarrassing for me in case I should fail to measure up to your faith in me. But I can see after the first cursory examination of your facial expression, that you're deeply worried. You don't know which way to turn. The President, and the nine men who now run our government in place of the antiquated Congress and Senate, are more concerned over this national catastrophe than they're willing to admit. As a matter of fact, Langham, they're downright frightened. Right?"

Langham nodded slowly. "The ordinary things and events can be dealt with, Aaron, with ordinary methods. What happened last night at sunset and early again this morning was not in the least ordinary. It looks to me like a scourge of Providence."

"Nonsense. God doesn't wantonly destroy people. They destroy themselves. Now get down to facts. What's the situation, and what's expected of me?"

"The situation in brief is this: last night forty thousand people west of the Ozarks died suddenly and without any tangible clue as to the cause visible for us to work from as yet. In the more populous Michigan, a hundred and fifty thousand met the same mysterious fate. That's a hundred and ninety thousand human beings stripped from our population in less than twenty-four hours. What's the answer?"

Carruthers sat quietly for several minutes before answering. "The end of our American civilization," he announced, "if death continues at the same tremendous rate. There doesn't seem to be any other answer."

Langham frowned. "There are persistent rumors in Washington that our earth, especially North America, is being bombarded by powerful electro-paralysis rays from a distant planet, and that an invasion from inter-planetary space can be expected this coming year."

Carruthers waved a negligent hand towards the complicated machines in his laboratory. "Such rumors," he stated, "are

without any basis of fact. Any outside disturbance of an electrical nature would be instantly recorded on the thermo-cell plates which register every electrical charge striking the earth from out in space. I built the thermo-cell machine for this one purpose. Mars, Venus, Jupiter — all will have to be ruled out. Our disaster is purely earth-made."

He rose to his feet and motioned Langham to follow him to another part of his spacious laboratory. "I'm going to show you something, Langham. All right, Karl. Start the Class Y motors. We're going to take our Chief of Intelligence through space to the devastated areas."

He seated himself before the complicated dials of his ether-vision panel, clicked on the foot switch, and slowly began to twist dials with both hands. The smooth perfection of invisible motors made a faint humming.

As it had the night previous, the silver surface of the magnetic vision screen became clouded as if in the throes of a mighty dust storm. Slowly the silver faded to gray, and from gray to a greenish blue.

Carruthers now switched on the current generated by the Class Y motors. Beneath the screen a battery of infra-red tubes glowed sullenly, and the greenish-blue on the screen paled into the natural light of day. Mirrored in the screen appeared a range of mountain peaks.

"The scene of the disaster lies beyond these mountains," he explained. "I'll locate it in just a minute." His fingers contracted on the dial controlling the V-type directional antenna, and the mountains faded into rolling countryside dotted with small farms.

"Watch closely," he cautioned. "We're close to the devastated area beyond the Ozarks." Shifting landscape flowed across the screen. "There you are, Langham. Look closely. What do you see?"

"I see," frowned Langham, bending towards the scene materializing before his eyes, "fenced grazing land. The grass—it's dead. So are crops in adjoining fields —and trees—why—why everything has been destroyed—not only human lives, but all manner of growing things. Everything is dying if not already dead. Leaves are falling from shade trees. Orchards stripped to their stark branches of leaves and fruit. There isn't a thing alive. Good God, I didn't realize—"

"It's worse than you think, Langham. You're only seeing a small section of devastation. It covers a strip thirty miles wide by nearly sixty miles long. To the right on the screen as I shift our vision to the north you can see the border line that separates the living from the dead. On one side of this border crops are still growing, grass is green, and everything is as it should be. On the other side of the demarkation line, extending thirty miles to the south, everything has been wiped out. That's all that's important in this section of the country."

HE POINTED the directional antenna northward to the Great Lakes and centered the beam on the State of Michigan. Again the ether-vision screen glowed as the second path of death appeared on its magic surface.

"Conditions here in Michigan," Carruthers pointed out, "are identical with those west of the Ozarks. Human casualties were greater, however, because of a denser population, but otherwise the scourge of death follows the same pattern except in one important detail. This detail, I believe, may furnish us with what I consider a most amazing clue. I wonder if you see what I'm driving at?"

"I think I do, Aaron. In fact I'm quite positive. There's a circular area, roughly ten miles in diameter, squarely in the middle of the death swath that was not contaminated. The grass is still green, and the

trees are alive. What do you make of this second phenomenon?"

"As yet I don't know what could have happened," said Carruthers. "But I have a vague, wild and probably unsound idea that—"

The electronic phone buzzed softly. Carruthers picked it up, listened for a moment, then handed the instrument to Langham. The Chief of Intelligence, following a short conversation, replaced the instrument in its cradle.

"The call," he explained, "was relayed through Washington. Came from Professor Marsh of the Luce Observatory in Indiana. He reports that it's snowing in the southern part of the state, but that the flakes being blown from the sky are *not* snowflakes. There seems to be——"

"Wait!" Carruthers was consulting the meridians on a world globe and making swift calculation. Without another word he adjusted the directional antenna and sent the ether-vision ray towards Indiana. In an incredibly short time the cities of South Bend and Terre Haute appeared on the screen. Another adjustment. There was nothing resembling snow in the field of vision.

Deeper south probed the ray, swinging like a pendulum to east and west as it moved through space. Far to the south it caught up with the storm.

"Look!" The voice of the young scientist was tense.

Across the screen flowed farmland, country roads and farm buildings. Above them from dense cloud masses piled high against the blue swirled gusty winds laden with whitish particles like snowflakes.

Farmers, apparently scenting the air for rain, could be seen staring into the sky. Children, barefooted in the dust, also had their eyes upturned. And then the summer snow enveloped them until there was nothing visible on the screen but a quivering whiteness.

Quite suddenly the storm clouds lifted, and farmers and barefooted children were again visible. But they were no longer looking hopefully into the sky. They were prone on the dry ground. So were any cattle in the near vicinity. Lightning couldn't have stricken them swifter.

LANGHAM continued to lean forward. There was a puzzled glint in his eyes. He had seen something that was not reasonable. What he demanded was a forthright explanation that would go to the heart of the problem. "Snow, Aaron! Is this the devastating force that——?"

"What we saw wasn't snow. Of that statement I am positive. Keep one important fact in mind. There is no moisture visible on the roofs of farm buildings, or on the metal surfaces of farm machinery. And there would be if what we just witnessed was snow."

"Then somebody, or some group on earth, is endangering our civilization with destructive rays."

"Again no. The phenomenon is of mankind's own making. I'll know positively as soon as I can procure some of that white substance."

Langham thrust out an aggressive jaw. "How? Look at those corpses down below. Look at the cattle. Why a man couldn't come in contact with that white stuff without being struck down at once. I'd say the thing was impossible."

"Not so impossible as you think. There is a way, and a very easy way of obtaining samples of those white flakes. Here. Take the electronic phone and contact Professor Marsh at once. Tell him to send a number of the Model 7 air-expansion rockets into the clouds above southern Indiana. With the air and dust samples these rockets will pick up as they pass through the clouds, we will be able to make an immediate analysis. Is that clear?"

"Quite," nodded Langham.

While the Chief of Intelligence was contacting the Luce Observatory in Indiana, Carruthers thought out and planned his first move. "Karl," he ordered, "get everything ready in the chemical laboratory for exhaustive analysis tests." He switched off the ether-vision machine and said to Langham who had completed his instructions to Marsh at the Luce Observatory. "Will Professor Marsh help us?"

Again Langham nodded. "The rockets will be sent up at once, and the metal chambers holding air and dust specimens will be sent to us here by a stratoship. It ought not to take more than two hours."

"Excellent. That gives us plenty of time to complete our arrangements here before we start for Michigan."

"Why Michigan? What's the sense in——?"

"Don't ask so many questions. Danzig will remain here. You and I will journey by the fastest ship available in government service to the area where the poison clouds rolled across the earth. My reason for this trip is to examine that spot where the poison failed to destroy the vegetation although it was directly in its path."

"I think it's hopeless, Aaron, but I'll order transportation at once." His eyes became thoughtful. "What's on your mind?"

"The fate of our civilization," said Carruthers grimly. "These poison clouds can wipe us out in an incredibly short time if the wind blows them earthward again. We've got to combat them, destroy them before they destroy us."

"All right. I'll do anything you suggest, and the government will back me. But how can you hope to combat this stifling, swirling menace. God, man, you haven't a chance!"

"Listen, Langham. We survived the plague of hunger following the second world war back in 1945—or rather our forebears did who lived during that period of world shock. We lived through another starvation period when the crops all over the world were attacked simultaneously by insects. And we'll live through——"

He stopped suddenly and ran nervous fingers through his hair. "Langham," he went on, "I don't like to speculate on what might happen if we fail our civilization now. The ten-year war was horrible enough on the world. We escaped it by a miracle. And if we escape the present catastrophe, there'll have to be another miracle. So don't probe too deeply for my reasons for doing certain things. I'll explain as best I can as we go along."

"I know, I know, Aaron But I have to make some kind of a report to my superiors. They expect and demand it. Then there's the Continental News and Television service to contend with. There are thousands of people to whom I am responsible in time of national danger. We'll have to tell them something."

Carruthers stared thoughtfully out the window. "Do you understand the principle of the catalyst?"

"Vaguely. But what has that to do in the present emergency?"

"Considerable. Catalysis," he explained, as if lecturing to a class of students, "is the phenomenon occurring in chemistry when the speed of chemical reaction is materially altered by the presence of some additional substance called a catalyst which itself remains unaffected. Metallic sodium, for instance, is the catalyst which miraculously assists in the polymerization of isoprene into synthetic rubber.

"Similarly, there is some chemical, liquid or metal, which served as a catalyst by changing these poisonous white clouds into an innocuous gas or liquid residue that is definitely not harmful. Whatever the substance is, it took the sting from the deadly chemical. If it hadn't, there would have been no patch of green in the path

of devastation where the death clouds swept across Michigan.

"Two things confront us which form the major problem. We must know the exact nature and type of poison in those white clouds. And we must find and identify the substance that acted as a catalyst in altering the poison mass into something harmless. Until we have these elements identified, we can't make a single important move towards combating the menace that confronts us. Maybe you can think up something quicker — something that can be done without any preparation."

"No, Aaron, I can't. I'm merely a man of action. I don't pretend to be anything else. Fighting nature in one of its ugliest moods is out of my line. Don't mind if I keep asking questions. That's the only way I can find out. The public has to be told something. But if we're going to Michigan, I'd better order a fast scouting plane. We'll board it from the ramp on the Air Terminal Building. By the time we get there, our transportation will be waiting for us. Meantime I'll inform the press and television agencies that we have the situation well in hand and that further reports will be on the wires later in the day. That suit you?"

THE young scientist nodded and began to gather certain instruments together and make several contacts with the city's most competent chemists and metallurgists instructing them to report at his laboratory at once under orders from the President. On his way to the corridor door he gave final instructions to his assistant.

"Those containers ought to be here by noon, Karl. So will three of our country's greatest bio-chemical men—Haley, Grange, and George Vignot. Their immediate task will be to isolate and identify the poison. However, I think I'll be back in the laboratory before they're finished."

With Langham close beside him he traveled on the moving sidewalk bands south and east to the Air Terminal Building where a sleek, almost transparent plastic plane awaited the take-off.

As he shouldered his way through the milling masses, he had the feeling of being very tiny in contrast to the forces of an implacable nature arrayed against him. It wasn't too hard to fight against men, and the diabolical machines evolved from their brains. Men and machines were calculable. Nature was not.

Standing on the swift-moving express band and feeling the wind on his face made him think of moving air currents. His eyes swerved upward at the clouds massed above the great city.

Were these friendly clouds that signified rain, or were they serried ranks of malefic fury? He wanted above all things to maintain an attitude of calm unmarred by fear. So much depended on what he did within the next few hours. Suppose he should fail? Suppose his puny efforts were suddenly defeated by a shift in cloud masses followed by a down-driving wind? Would rain fall from the nimbus packs, or would the city be blanketed in a whirling blizzard of deadly, white poison flakes? He took off his hat and bared his head to the cooling breeze. By spells he felt cold and hot.

"We're close to our station," announced the stolid Langham. "In ten minutes we'll be out of the state and headed towards Michigan. I hope your theories are going to work out. If they don't, it's going to be hard to explain."

"In that event," said Carruthers grimly, "there won't be any necessity, for there won't be anyone to explain to."

WHERE the ground dipped slightly in the very center of the ten-mile area of land that had escaped the devastating scourge of the white poison flakes, Carruthers found the grass damp with an oily

residue which he rubbed on the palms of his hands. It made them sticky. He tasted it with his tongue. Slightly bitter and tinged with a musky odor. The residue was wholly unfamiliar.

A corps of surveyors had taken accurate measurements of the immune area and had staked out its exact center. At this point Carruthers set men digging. Ten feet down in a sandy crater that was barren of rocks the laborers uncovered a glinting chunk of metallic substance which was brought at once to the young scientist.

Carruthers examined it briefly. His eyes became questioning, grave. Was this the one thing he was seeking? Was this going to be the means of destroying the deadly cloud masses?

Langham looked at it and grunted. "What is it?"

"A small meteorite. Weight, probably ten pounds."

"You think, then, that this meteorite was responsible——?"

"Unless something else is found, I think I am holding the catalyst that caused the alteration of poison clouds into harmless precipitation."

Langham shrugged. "Sounds crazy to me."

Carruthers said nothing. His mind and eyes were on the laborers digging in the crater now forty feet in diameter. At the end of two hours he gave orders to stop excavating, and to place the area under temporary guard. Then with Langham striding beside him he returned to the plane and ordered the pilot to take them with all possible speed to the Air Terminal Building in New York.

The moment he entered his laboratory he knew that something had happened. Grange and Haley sat glumly before test tubes and microscopes, hopeless despair on their faces. Bearded George Vignot had his hands clasped behind his back and was looking out the quartz glass window.

Carruthers placed the meteorite on a marble slab and turned to his fellow scientists. "Find anything yet?"

Vignot swore softly and with considerable feeling. "Find anything? How can we find anything? We have nothing to work with. The tubes arrived a half hour ago in lead containers. We had to arrange a method of handling the poison before we could apportion a certain amount to each of us. Bah! You tell him what happened, Haley."

Haley, a sad man with a long face, stared at the meteorite Carruthers had placed on the marble slab. "What's that?" he asked.

"I think," said Carruthers, his mind wandering momentarily, "that I have found the catalyst that changes——"

"Stupid imbecile," snapped Haley. "No wonder our experiment bogged down before we could even get started. When did you reach the city?"

"About fifteen minutes ago our plane crossed the Hudson at a Hundred and Eighty-seventh Street."

"Ummm!" grunted Haley, glancing at his watch. "Thought so. Well, there'll be no testing in this laboratory to discover the nature of the poison. It's all gone—turned to a few drops of oily liquid that's good for nothing but to dump down a sewer. You think you've found the catalyst, Carruthers? I know damn well you have. And it's a perfect catalyst without any doubt. The moment you brought it by plane over Manhattan Island, our samples of poison ceased to exist in their original chemical formation. They became instead—nothing."

"I guess," said Carruthers ruefully, "I must be getting absent-minded. It never occurred to me what might happen here in the laboratory when I arrived with the meteorite. At any rate we have in our possession a means of destroying the poison clouds."

"Wait a minute, gentlemen," Langham broke in. "I have just finished talking over the electronic phone with the city's chief medical examiner. And his report, following a post-mortem on one of the victims brought to this city, seems to indicate that death was caused by the inhalation of a gas similar in molecular structure to Methyl-Arsene Hydrate. You all know what that means?"

Grange, who up to this point had not spoken, shrugged and said, "There is no known antidote for Methyl-Arsene Hydrate. It is a gas that was abandoned a few years ago as unmanageable."

"But we have a perfect catalyst," reminded Carruthers, "that definitely has a withering effect on the gas. It's been proven. All that is necessary is to place meteorites in twenty or more planes, and send them into the sky where the clouds are thickest. There'll be precipitation, but it will be harmless. It's our only chance."

"Do you realize how much area those clouds cover at the present moment?" asked Grange.

"Thousands of miles no doubt," said Carruthers. "But is there any limit to meteorites? The museums all over the country are filled with them. Imagine the blasting effect of one weighing several tons as compared with the ten pound specimen I brought back from Michigan."

"I think Carruthers' idea is sound," said Haley. He turned on his nearest confrere. "Vignot, if you've got over being angry at the reaction of a catalyst, tell us what *you* think."

"Bah!" rumbled Vignot. "I think nothing. My mind is a blank—a vacuum. I had a beautiful experiment arranged. I had my vials, beakers and test tubes laid out in an orderly arrangement. And what happens? Before my very eyes I am cheated of a daring experiment by which I proposed to astound you men who should still be back in the institute memorizing the formations of elemental atomic structures." He snorted and flung a question at Carruthers. "Young man, you seem to know a great deal. Tell me, where did you get the idea of the poison clouds in the first place?"

"I witnessed their deadly action with Chief of Intelligence Langham by means of my ether-vision machine. You've heard of it no doubt."

"Yes," conceded Vignot. "Who hasn't?"

"But before witnessing this destruction of humans, animals and vegetable matter, I had formulated a theory that has worried me for a long time. In other words I constructed an hypothesis on the mental assumption that man destroys, while nature, always profiting by man's wastefulness, inevitably takes back into her arms everything man has wilfully or unconsciously thrown away into the scrap heap of land and air.

"Listen. A blundering hypothesis? Perhaps it is, and yet parts of it seem to fall into the right pattern of reasoning. America may have escaped the last ten-year war, but she hasn't escaped its unalterable consequences. For nearly a decade its mills and factories have worked feverishly turning out the deadly instruments for mass slaughter. For as many years the fumes of its sprawling chemical plants have poured their reeking gases back into the sky. And with them have mingled the smoke of countless battles fought and lost, and fought again.

"Ships have gone up in flames. So have homes where men lived in peace with their families. Ammunition dumps, towns, cities, whole areas have poured the incense of mass hatred and destruction into flames, explosions, and mammoth waste. And this terrific accumulation of gaseous waste, forever freed from mankind's use, has floated upward into the paths of trade winds whipping constantly around the world.

"Cleansed from soot and acid stains, these poisons have gathered themselves into cloud packs that range over the earth seeking a way to return to the geological structure from which they have been born a thousand times. Clustered together they look curiously like flakes of white snow. Only they aren't flakes of snow as Professor Marsh of the Luce Observatory has pointed out."

He paused momentarily, then resumed. "Chemical action has now formed these poisons into crystals of bewildering geometric designs and given them scarcely any weight. They move in clouds high above the earth until vagrant currents of air force them downward. Then they swirl like whispering germ plasms over everything. And their touch is the touch of death. That, gentlemen, is the essence of my hypothesis. Wrong or right, our duty is clear. In this meteorite we have the weapon for carrying on our war against the poison clouds in the sky. We have merely to augment our meteorites, and the battle can start today."

"Let's start right now," urged Langham, anxious to engage in physical movement. 'I'm tired of listening to theories. I want to see something done."

"You furnish the planes," ordered Carruthers. "Have them dispatched to the Air Terminal Building within the hour. And you, Grange and Vignot, will arrange with the museums for the borrowing of twenty meteorites. Haley, I want you to contact your friends in the Meteorological Bureau for last minute data on clouds, their rate of movement, and the direction of their movements. This data is to be given to the pilots for their information."

"That's a difficult assignment," said Haley. "The sky is filled with clouds. How will we know the harmful from the harmless ones? They all look alike from the earth."

"Get data covering only the cloud masses over the Ozarks then. Definitely those are poison clouds above its peaks."

Within a few moments the laboratory was empty as men hastened to complete their appointed tasks. Carruthers called in his assistant. "Go to the landing area on the roof of the Air Terminal Building, Karl, and wait there for Langham. Tell him that I'm remaining in the laboratory to follow the course of the planes with the ether-vision ray."

"Anything else?"

"I'll repeat my instructions so there will be no misunderstanding. Following the delivery of the borrowed meteorites to the take-off platform on the Air Terminal Building, one is to be placed in each of the planes assigned to fly through the clouds massed over the mountains. That is the arrangement. The emergency eliminates any careful planning. But if the presence of the meteorites in the planes destroys the clouds as efficiently as already proven twice, most of the menace should be under control by nightfall. Later we'll systematically cover the entire country. You'd better remain with Langham, Karl, until the planes return. I guess—I guess that's all."

Karl Danzig nodded and hurried from the laboratory.

AFTER the corridor door had closed behind his assistant, Aaron Carruthers started the Class Y motors. While they were warming to their task of generating their mysterious electrical energy, he examined the meteorite that was still sitting where he had placed it on the marble slab.

Something about its touch arrested his attention. A very faint magnetic current seems to flow from the sky material into his fingers and up his arms. An emanation of some sort. Queer he hadn't noticed it before.

He placed it on a non-conductive cradle and played an infractor lamp upon its shin-

ing surface. As beams passed through it and registered on a mineral classification chart, he could determine, without making a physical analysis of the mass, the elements of which it was composed.

What surprised him most was not the usual metal present in the mass—iron, nickel and thorium—but a peculiar substance lately discovered but little known on earth. Mineralogists had named it Neutronium. Here, then, was a meteorite of great rarity, one that was no permanent member of the solar system group whose speed could be no greater than 26 miles a second when it entered the earth's atmosphere.

Undoubtedly this piece of mixed metal came from some planet far out in space. To have passed through the fixed meteorites spinning around with the earth, its speed must have been greater than 26 miles a second to obtain the Velocity of Escape, but not great enough to entirely consume it with the tremendous heat of friction.

Thinking of this peculiar circumstance and its inherent possibility caused a twinge of uneasiness to creep along the young scientist's spine. In spite of himself he did not feel that all was as it should be in the war against the poison clouds. He searched his mind for the reason and pounced on the presence of Neutronium in the meteorite's mass. Was it the Neutronium, then, that rare and little known metal, that acted as a catalyst?

The question disturbed him still further after he had taken the meteorite from the non-conductive cradle and tested it for radioactive emanations. The dial needle jumped to the highest point of the scale and quivered against the steel peg that kept it from going farther.

He knew then that he had stumbled onto a radioactive element that was altogether different from the three known series recognized by physicists as the uranium-radium, the thorium, and the actinium series. This new emanation made a fourth. How powerful the ray might prove to be, and how dangerous it might be to handle was something the young scientist could not determine without additional research. And there wasn't time.

He returned the meteorite to its former position on the marble slab and sat down before the ether-vision machine. By this time the planes must have started on their strange mission.

Slowly turning the dials after clicking on the various contact switches, he watched the magnetic screen's agitations. Since he had the dial readings on the Ozark location, it was a simple matter to find the scene of the recent disaster again.

As the screen cleared and tangible objects began to take shape on its magic surface, trees, rocks, cabins and winding streams began to filter into view. He followed the slant of hills till the ridge of the highest point of land appeared, then slanted the vision rays into the sky.

Grayish masses of tumbling clouds moved slowly before him. He increased the power intensity and saw beyond them into the upper reaches of the sky and there began his search for the planes.

A tight smile bent his lips as he discovered them flying in a course from east to southwest. They were bunched in close formation, twenty in all, and bearing down fast on the clouds hovering above the mountain peaks. Carruthers rubbed the palms of his hand on the knees of his trousers. They were moist and not quite as steady as they should have been.

He raced the ether-vision ray towards the flight and picked out the flight leader's ship. The revealing beam passed through the plastic fuselage as if it didn't exist disclosing the plane's interior. The pilot was leaning slightly forward, eyes scanning the sky ahead. Beside him was a big chunk of metallic substance—a meteorite.

A cloud swirled darkly across the silver screen. Carruthers slowed the action of the ether-vision ray and everything seemed to stand still. A twist on the magnification control knob caused the plane to assume gigantic proportions until the distortion destroyed its shape. But the distortion brought something into the screen that Carruthers had to see — flakes of whitish substance that looked like snow. Without any question of doubt, the planes were roaring through death clouds.

He turned the magnification knob back to normal, and the leading plane assumed its correct proportion. Only it wasn't in the same position. It was tilted upwards almost perpendicular as if out of control.

It *was* out of control!

The ether-vision ray picked out the pilot. His body was slumped forward against the stout webbing that kept him anchored in the seat. His hands hung limply, swaying like pendulums with each lurch of the plane. His eyes were wide open and fixed on the infinity of space somewhere ahead. The flight leader was stone dead.

Aaron Carruthers chewed on his lower lips till it bled. His heart retched painfully. He focused the all-revealing ether ray so that he could observe the main group of planes. All around them swirled the whitish mist like coiling streamers of translucent gauze. Formation had become broken. Planes were tumbling down from the sky, their motors whining, spitting and coughing.

Some curved upward at such steep angles that they stalled, went into tight spins, then plummeted earthwards to destruction. Some whipped around in circles before nosing down in uncontrolled power dives, while others raced straight on into eternity with death at the controls.

The answer in all its glaring error was there for Aaron Carruthers to place down at the end of the problem. And he knew it was the wrong one. All his knowledge, scientific and mechanical, had played him false. He had erred—not in his hypothesis of nature and man—but in the idiotic assumption that every meteorite was like every other meteorite in its fused, conglomerate mass. And twenty human beings, pilots of the planes, had been needlessly sacrificed because of that error.

He buried his thin face in the palms of both hands. Being by nature a sensitive man, the very stupidity of what he had done left him stunned and half sick. But this weakness was only temporary—a mere bowing of his head while he gathered his strength for renewed combat against a pitiless foe.

CHIEF OF INTELLIGENCE LANGHAM returned to the laboratory later on in the afternoon. His verdict was scathingly complete. "You've made a terrible blunder, Aaron. Not one of those flyers came out alive. Everyone sacrificed because of a crazy idea."

"Wait, Langham. Let me explain."

"What good are explanations? The whole sordid business has been turned over to the Cabinet for investigation. Secretary of the Air Force, Gettering, swears you must have lost your mind. And the President feels that I shouldn't have come to you in the first place. Any national catastrophe should have been referred to the Emergency Council as I told you this morning. So I guess we won't need your help from now on."

"Do you realize, Langham, the potential risk you're assuming in getting rid of me at this point? This is no ordinary catastrophe. It's something that's been accumulating for the past decade. Now listen. I'll want twenty more planes. Do I get them?"

"Not through any help of mine."

"How about the Army and Navy?"

"You'll have to take your case personally to the heads of both services."

Carruthers set his jaw in a firm line and put through two calls to Washington. And though the young scientist stressed the urgency of his need, both Secretaries refused to send any more planes on what they called "addled-brain missions" that could only end in a second disaster for their pilots.

"I could have told you their decisions some minutes ago," Langham pointed out, "and saved you the annoyance of listening to their refusals to cooperate with you."

Carruthers shrugged. "The annoyance of their refusal to aid me is small indeed. I might have expected it. But I didn't expect such treatment from you, Langham, in view of what we've been through together."

"You still think then, that meteorites can be used? We've tried them and failed. Listen, Aaron. Be reasonable. Isn't that tragic failure enough to convince you that you're on the wrong track?"

Carruthers pointed to the various intricate machines in his laboratory. "Don't you suppose I made a great many failures before I achieved perfection in building machines such as man has never constructed before? Failure is as much a part of our lives as success. I'll admit I made a terrible blunder a few hours ago when I sent twenty men to certain death. I saw their planes go twisting and diving to destruction as clearly as I see you now. And it hurt me, Langham, way deep inside."

Langham pursed his lips. "You had your chance, Aaron. And you failed. The problem passes from your hands into those of the Emergency Council composed of our greatest living scientists. It was my suggestion that your name be placed on the list of these great scientists. You belong there. The President refused. He wouldn't listen to reason."

"You weren't so reasonable yourself when you refused to listen while I explained the cause of my first failure."

"I'm sorry, Aaron."

Carruthers pointed to the meteorite on the marble slab. "Your Council's deliberations will get them nowhere without the knowledge I alone possess at the present moment. I'm not bragging. I'm stating a fact. Within that conglomeration of metal are two elements practically unknown and unobtainable on this earth—a radioactive emanation of an unguessable nature, and a strange metal called Neutronium. I don't know positively which element caused the disintegration of the poison clouds. Possibly it's a combination of the two. In any event, there isn't enough of either to be used on a large scale."

"I'll present the meteorite," suggested Langham, "to the Emergency Council. They can make experiments and discover a method for themselves. Any objections?"

Carruthers smiled wearily. "A waste of time, and probably human lives. There is only one way possible to create more Neutronium or its radioactive element. That's a secret I uncovered a year ago but haven't yet made public."

"What you have done, others can do?"

"Possibly, if given the time. But it isn't quite that simple. New metals can be created by a combination of other metals with the help of a catalyst in some instances. But the method won't work when it comes to Neutronium for this one reason. Neutronium, aside from what is present in this meteorite, exists only in the Periodic Table Chemical Elements with the atomic number ninety-nine. It's the newest and rarest metal in existence."

"Our Council will find some."

"The metal simply doesn't exist."

"Then they'll create some."

"The laws of nature as existing on earth have failed. Man might, following years of experimentation, stumble onto the secret. But the chances are remote."

The warning eyes of the golden Buddha announced a caller. Carruthers walked

to the corridor door and opened it. Through the opening came his assistant, Danzig, and George Vignot.

"Carruthers," boomed the older scientist, "that was the finest piece of stupidity I ever witnessed. Awful. Terrible. Well, what's the answer? There must be some reason back of such a colossal failure."

"What difference does it make," Langham interrupted. "The mistake was made, and that's that. You've been appointed to the President's Emergency Council, Vignot, to help combat the poison clouds. I'm returning to Washington at once, and I'll take you with me if you care to go."

"I haven't accepted yet," said Vignot testily. "Who else is on the Council. Is Carruthers a member?"

"No."

"All right. Check my name off the list. Now listen, Langham. I have all the respect in the world for your position. But we're up against something that all the powers of your Intelligence Bureau can't control. Carruthers was on the right track, but somewhere in his calculations he erred. That's why I'm here—to check his reasoning and equations."

Langham had not reached his present position because of an appointment by the Chief Executive. He was a shrewd man. And the presence of George Vignot in the laboratory, and his faith in Carruthers suggested possibilities he could not afford to ignore.

"Before you gentlemen do anything," he stated, "would you mind if I contacted my office for a report on conditions as they exist at the moment?"

"Not in the least," said Carruthers. "Use the electronic phone. It's faster than the ordinary instrument."

Langham picked up the curious instrument that was without wires of any sort. For perhaps fifteen minutes he listened to a flood of reports coming in from all parts of the country. His jaw twitched as he listened. When he finally returned the instrument to its cradle his voice was troubled, and lines of worry had formed about his eyes.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "there is little we can do. Whole populations are being wiped out. Nearly all of our transport planes, both passenger and express, have been grounded. There have been seven major railroad accidents in this state and that of Pennsylvania, and the clouds of death are gradually settling lower."

Vignot said calmly. "I've been listening to reports myself before coming here. They're not pleasant to contemplate. There is only one small section that's absolutely safe, and that's within the ten-mile area radiating outward from this laboratory. Don't you understand, Langham, that you can't ignore or abandon what Carruthers has already demonstrated?"

"I haven't any authority in this emergency, Vignot. My orders come direct from the President." He sat down heavily. "Aaron," he continued, "I'll listen to anything you and George Vignot have to say. If in my judgment I believe you have the right solution, I'll stake my reputation and position against your plan. How long will it take to arrive at some conclusion as to the best method of dealing with this menace overwhelming our nation?"

"One hour of consultation, checking and preparing," said Carruthers, his deep-set eyes aglow with the fires of concentration. "And seven seconds of the most dangerous existence mortal man will ever live through. These seven seconds as we reckon time will be to me an ordeal that will cover many, many days of earth time. For they will be lived on another planet."

Langham squinted at the young scientist, shrugged and kept his thoughts unexpressed.

Vignot rumbled deep in his throat. "Seven seconds off this earth would be an experience I'd like to go through with my-

self, Carruthers. Does the journey extend to a larger or a smaller planet?" His eyes were bright with expectation.

"Smaller. Infinitely smaller. So small, Vignot, that man has not yet devised a microscope powerful enough to make this metal planet visible to the naked eye."

"Talk," ordered Vignot, gruffly.

CARRUTHERS rose to his feet. "I'll talk after you've checked what I have already discovered within the atomic structure of this piece of meteorite. Place it on the non-conductive cradle and turn the rays of the infractor lamp upon it. Then test it for radioactivity."

Methodically George Vignot tested the metals imprisoned within the meteorite. His eyes glowed as he worked. "I'm not as familiar with Neutronium as I should be, Carruthers, but I recognize its presence in the mass.

"Astounding! This is a discovery of the first magnitude."

He examined it further, and his face crinkled with concentration. "Hmmm!" he grunted. "I'm completely baffled. Radioactivity most certainly. But it doesn't belong to any of the familiar groups. What do you make of it?"

"Nothing as yet. The discovery is almost as new to me as it is to you."

Vignot combed his beard with long, white fingers. "I understand your error now in the light of the two rare elements existing in this particular meteorite. One of them, Carruthers, destroys the poison gas. Maybe both. Difficult to separate the two. And the radioactive element is undoubtedly an integral part of Neutronium." He blinked rapidly. "What we need is more of the metal."

"That's obvious."

"I'm not omnipotent," said Vignot, "so I can't read your mind. Suppose since the specified hour won't last indefinitely, you explain, if you know yourself, how you propose to increase our supply of Neutronium?"

From a specimen drawer in a wall cabinet Carruthers removed a block of dull metal. "Know what this is?"

"Carboralium."

"And it's peculiar qualities?"

Vignot stroked his beard as he pondered the question. "Carboralium is a peculiar metal with a powerful affinity for any metal it is brought in contact with."

"Does that affinity suggest anything?"

"Bluntly, no."

"Very well. If I had twenty bars of this metal, and changed the metal's atomic structure so that it was exactly like that of Neutronium, we'd have twenty perfect catalysts with which to wage war against the poison clouds."

Langham broke in. "If you can change steel into gold, then I'll grant you can turn this Carboralium into Neutronium. Rubbish. I'm a practical man, and I have to do things in a practical way. The days of miracles have passed—if there ever were any."

"I doubt," added Vignot in his rumbling voice, "if one metal can successfully be turned into another even with the use of the fickle Carboralium. But it's within the realm of possibility to charge those blocks of Carboralium with the radioactive element, provided——"

CARRUTHERS partially closed his eyes. "Provided if what?"

"Provided they could be placed in contact with a mountain of Neutronium. An experiement with Carboralium and Neutronium in contact with each other over a considerable length of time would undoubtedly change the atomic structure of the Carboralium, or would at least change it into a radioactive substance that would, conceivably, act as a catalyst in changing the poison clouds into a harmless precipitation. But where will you find the mountain

of Neutronium? And—oh, well," he shrugged. "What's the sense in all this. We're licked at the start. There is no mountain of this rare metal. There is only a few ounces perhaps."

"The mountain of Neutronium," interrupted Carruthers in his quiet voice, "lies within the meteorite mass."

"Bah!" Langham rose to his feet. "Never have I heard such utter nonsense. You've lost your mind completely, Aaron. I thought there was a catch to all this argument. My time is too valuable to waste any longer. I'm returning to Washington where I can listen to the plain language of the street."

"Sit down, my friend," said Carruthers patiently. "My hour hasn't ended yet." He called to his assistant. "Karl! Get in touch with the Bronson Metallurgy people and have them send twenty of their twelve-ounce bars of Carboralium to the laboratory at once."

To Vignot he said, "I've always had a vast respect for your intelligence and ability. I hope, before the hour is past, that you will not disappoint me."

"A mountain of Neutronium," grumbled Vignot. "Preposterous!" He began to pace the floor and watch Carruthers place certain articles on the desk top. "Going somewhere?" he asked. "I notice you're taking along food tablets. Miserable things. A man could starve on the damn concentrates. A man needs bulk food."

"I might not need them, but I'm taking them along just in case food is scarce."

"Taking the testing apparatus with you, too? How about power?"

"A few dry cells furnishes all power necessary."

"How far are you going?"

"Haven't calculated the distance. Haven't had time. But it amounts to a trip through interplanetary space. Only instead of going out amongst the stellar constellations as we know them, I'm going in the opposite plane—downward and inward within the realm of the atom itself."

Vignot continued to pull thoughtfully at his beard. "A trifle difficult to follow you, Carruthers. However, as I mentioned earlier, I'm not omnipotent, but I have a vast patience, and an insatiable curiosity regarding the atom. Would you object if I went with you?"

"Not at all. Help yourself to the food tablets."

"You're insane," raged Langham. "Both of you. Please be serious, Aaron."

"God knows," said Carruthers grimly, "I was never more serious in my life."

Langham looked at his watch. "Fifteen minutes left of the hour you mentioned. Then what?"

"The twenty blocks of Carboralium will either be transmuted into Neutronium, or they'll be heavily impregnated with the necessary radioactive element we need to destroy the poison clouds threatening our civilization."

WHEN only five minutes of the fatal hour remained, Karl Danzig announced that the bars of Carboralium had arrived. Under Carruthers' directions they were carried into a large room at the far end of the laboratory—a room with high walls against which were placed complicated machines of plastic and burnished metal.

In the center of this room was a slab of quartz slightly tinted and dulled so that there was no reflection from its smooth surface. It was sunk in the floor, its upper surface about half an inch above the floor level. To the right of it, but on the same level, was a smaller slab of the identical material. Surrounding the two slabs was a low protective railing that formed a square roughly twelve feet in all directions.

But the most important inventions within the room, aside from the complicated cabinet panels of plastic and burnished

metal, were the electronic tubes. Because of the tremendous heat generated by their action, they were enclosed in liquid-cooled metal casings, and were mounted one above the other close to the protective railing on a direct line with the two slabs of quartz.

Vignot's keen eyes surveyed the room and its strange equipment, then focused questioningly on the young scientist. "Perhaps, now that we're all here together, you'll take us into your confidence and tell us what it's all about. These are the strangest looking inventions I have ever seen. Those tubes of metal, mounted one above the other, resemble machine-gun barrels."

"The likeness ends there. Instead of shooting bullets, those tubes produce two different types of rays. They form an integral part of my electronic exploration apparatus not yet announced to the world. One of those tubes aimed at the slab in the center of the space within the railing is a vanishing ray. The second is a restoration ray. Each serves a definite purpose.

"What I proposed to do is to turn the vanishing ray on whatever rests on the large quartz slab. The beam envelopes it. A curious phenomenon then takes place. Objects grow small and finally disappear into the ether. But that isn't the end. The vanishing ray, continuing past its first target, strikes against whatever is on the second slab. In our experiment that target will be the meteorite. So that whatever vanished from the larger slab is projected onto and into the meteorite."

Following this brief explanation, he transferred, with Danzig's help, the bars of Carboralium to the sunken quartz slab. Beside them he placed everything he proposed to take with him in his trip through the elements.

When these preparations were completed he said to Danzig, "I think, Karl, I am about ready. Take your position near the controls." He looked towards Vignot. "We have here a variation of the ether-vision machine I perfected some time ago. Only this goes a great deal farther than earth space. A screen panel is used, but only for centering the beam on the two targets."

Vignot shook his head sadly. "I have never been so confused in my life. I don't know what to say."

Carruthers shrugged. "Only a few seconds remain of the hour I mentioned. If either of you gentlemen care to risk your lives in a trip through the elements, I am giving you the opportunity, but I'm not recommending it. Think it over while I make final preparations."

He switched on the power. A deep hum filled the room as the motors settled to their tasks. The lights in the room flickered, and a twilight glow seemed to invade the room. The dial beneath the young scientist's fingers revolved slowly.

Sparks of minature lightning glowed in the screen before him. He watched them intently for a moment then said warningly: "Take it easy, Karl, with your power. Slow down the speed of your reflectors. That's better. Double check all meter readings. Ready now? I'm going to increase the power of the dimensional tubes. Watch those meter needles."

"I'm watching," said Danzig.

"Good so far. Give me a reading."

"Point six eight one."

"Too high. Turn the control bands back towards the blue. Steady. What's the reading now?"

Danzig working the control bands with infinite patience said, "Point six seven nine."

Carruthers studied the vision screen intently. It was glowing with a bluish radiance that was like looking into the heart of an immense sapphire. "Perfect," he approved. "Lock the dials against accidental turning. We can't risk having the beam a

fraction of a millimeter out of focus." He again spoke to George Vignot. "The ray is tuned to the vanishing point frequency."

Vignot stared at him. "Really serious?"

"If you're going with me," sighed Carruthers, stepping over the low railing and walking towards the quartz slab, you'd better come now. The hour is up." Then to Danzig, "Set the dials of the inverse dimensional tubes at point six seven nine, and use the power from the Roentgen series of tubes."

The twilight bathing the walls of the laboratory began to quiver with eerie, bluish shadows. Karl Danzig's crouched body, as he sat behind the control switches, became very indistinct.

Carruthers' voice sounded detached and mechanical. "The cathode emanations coincide exactly with the interference chart. Keep an eye on your electronic flow gauges, Karl. And remember, the time lapse must be exactly seven seconds."

"Right," nodded Danzig, closing the switch controlling the Roentgen series. His eyes were steady as he watched the dark blue points of flame darting from electrodes slowly arch in a half circle to the right, then move counter-clockwise to the left.

"TIME is up," announced Carruthers. "I'm leaving now."

"And I'm going with you." Vignot stepped over the barrier.

Langham tried to stop him. "Don't be a fool, man."

George Vignot laughed deep in his throat, grabbed Langham by the arm and hauled him to the slab where Carruthers was waiting. "Here's another passenger," he rumbled.

"You don't have to submit to this experiment if you're afraid, Langham," said Carruthers.

"It isn't that I'm afraid, Aaron. It's just that I don't believe in all this nonsense. It seems like a childish game for the three of us to be standing here in this one spot—"

"Contact!" shouted Carruthers.

Danzig promptly threw on the full power of the inverse dimensional tubes. A low clear hum filled the laboratory. From the electronic ray gun opening poured a strange light. It did not lance forward with blinding speed, but rolled towards the three men in a slow-moving mass that bent, twisted and coiled back on itself as it moved ponderously upon everything resting on the quartz slab.

When within a few feet of its target it began to expand fanwise, up, down and sideways in an all-enveloping movement that encompassed everything on the slab.

Relentlessly it embraced them in a great, shining arc. Their bodies became luminous, transparent, and alive with vibrations they did not feel. Then, slowly, they began to diminish in shape and height. As their bodies dwindled in size, the arc of shining light shrank correspondingly until everything on the quartz slab—Carboralium, testing instruments and the three earth beings—disappeared into the core of the vanishing ray which continued to travel forward until it impinged itself against the center of the meteorite.

There followed a sharp click. Danzig had switched off the electronic tube's power. Eyes fastened to the big second hand of a clock on the control board, he watched it revolve in its first complete circle that ticked off one second of earth time.

To the three men on the quartz slab an amazing thing was happening. The walls of the room were extending upward, downward and outward with the speed of light. Mountains reared up before their startled eyes until they appeared as high as the moon. But they were only the walls lengthening in direct proportion of their diminishing bodies.

The throb of motors swelled into a roaring blizzard of sound that blasted against their ears like a thousand riveting hammers. Their bodies lost all weight as the vortex seethed around them. All physical movement, all thought ceased as space engulfed them.

Gradually the twilight in which their bodies hung suspended darkened into a void that enfolded them like masses of black velvet. There was no pain, no feeling of suffocation. There was only exhilaration and uplift.

Suddenly from out of the folds of velvety night appeared a glowing orb of light that resembled the moon, yet was not the moon.

Around it in space appeared other and smaller pinpoints of light resembling stars and planets.

Just how many minutes and seconds the three men remained in this queer state of suspension none could guess. Vignot would have estimated the time as ten seconds. Langham would have placed it at thirty. And both men would have been wrong for time, as far as they were concerned, was almost standing still on all earth clocks.

To Carruthers, who had passed through the elements once before, the time elapse was too infinitesimal to measure. He did not even care right then. There was nothing for him or the other men to do but stare at worlds and new planets appearing in unfamiliar Stygian sky all around their bodies.

After a long, endless dropping through space, the feeling of movement began to slacken. The air around their bodies took on a heaviness. The lightness fled from their bodies. Then, from somewhere out of the chaos enveloping them, came a great outpouring of sound like a ripping thunder clap. Simultaneously a bludgeoning mass struck them, rolling them over and over on some hard surface. They had arrived on the meteorite.

George Vignot swore gustily as he scrambled to his feet. "Have we all fallen down an elevator shaft?" he wanted to know.

"Not this time," said Carruthers. "And don't start wandering around in the dark. Remain in this one spot until it gets light enough to see. There's no telling what's nearby. The ground beneath us seems to be metal, and there may be crevices of immense depth within inches of us."

The three men sat down close together and looked up into the heavens arching above their heads. Langham twitched uneasily and pointed upward. "Damnedest looking moon I ever saw. Even familiar constellations aren't visible. Am I dreaming?"

"No," said Carruthers, "you're not dreaming. The disk of light shining above us is not the moon. Nor have we left the laboratory. We're all three of us deep into the meteorite, and there we will remain until my assistant releases the power from the restoration ray which brings us back to earth."

"I'd say," observed Langham, "that the seven seconds have long since ended."

"Far from it. As a matter of fact the seven seconds have hardly begun. As for that moon you see, it is nothing more than a wandering electron quite like the one we are on at the present moment. The firmament will seem strange and unreal. Instead of the sun forming the central body of our present planetary system, we will live under the rays thrown off the atom itself. For we are a part of its nucleus."

"Rubbish," growled Langham. "I can't stay here all night. I've got to get back to Washington. Don't you understand the menace that is overtaking our people? We may be on an electron. I wouldn't know. But I *do* know I want to get off it. I want to return to the earth where I belong."

"Keep in mind the seven seconds," urged Carruthers. "No matter what hap-

pens, Langham, our time here is limited to seven earth seconds. Don't get impatient with me or with events. We're here for one purpose—to find our mountain of Neutronium."

He paused, and in the quiet that followed, Vignot spoke. "I wouldn't have believed this experience possible. Seven seconds. I believe I understand now, Carruthers. Time, as reckoned on earth, is moving with ponderous slowness in comparison with the rapid acceleration of time here on the electron. Why, listen. According to my idea of time between the earth and this tiny electron on which we exist at the moment, your assistant still has his hand on the last switch he used. His thoughts are still what they were when we disappeared. And they'll remain that way for days to come. Seriously, seven seconds is going to cover a long period of time on this planet."

Carruthers nodded. "Let's not think about it any longer."

OVER the rim of distant hills rose the atomic sun. Daylight dawned with startling abruptness. Carruthers built a monument of metal boulders. "This marker," he explained, "will serve as a focal point from which we will orient ourselves until we find something better. Fresh food and water should be our first concern. I'll entrust that task to you, Langham, while Vignot and I start an immediate search for the source of Neutronium."

Following his initial period of unbelief, Langham accepted the altered conditions of life as he found them. Under his feet wherever he walked was nothing but shining metal that extended into valleys and over rounded hills. "I'm willing to believe anything from now on," he told Carruthers. "How long will this seven seconds of life here continue?"

"We'll be here on this metal planet for a long time—a great many days. All we have are food tablets. And we must find some way to supplement that diet or we'll find ourselves without energy for exploration. We must also find a place to live and serve as a base. Food and a place to live will be your job."

At the close of the third day following their arrival on the metal planet, the three men stood on a high plateau staring out upon a green and fertile valley Langham had discovered. The area of lush greenness extended as far as they could see.

"Marvelous," enthused Vignot. "I wouldn't have believed such healthy verdure could exist. And without doubt it is nothing more than earth soil imprisoned in a small fissure of the meteorite."

"Where there is soil," said Carruthers, "there is life. But look. The metallic strata on which we are standing is of a different hue than the rest over which we have come." He tested it with the battery-powered instruments. "Iron and nickel, and a trace of Thorium."

"Too bad," shrugged Vignot. "But let's examine Langham's newly-discovered Eden. There may be partridge or other earth delicacies in the groves of trees."

They descended into the valley. But its lushness was deceiving. The trees were stunted and of a mixed variety. They examined the soil for traces of wild life. There was nothing to indicate that any form of wild life existed.

Somewhat disappointed they broke branches from the trees and constructed a rough cabin inside of which they built beds of the softest branches they could find.

Since the period of actual daylight was less than five hours, they did not have as much time for exploration as they needed. Nor did they have the darkness necessary for sleep. After a week of chaotic existence they realized that their hours of sleep extended through the dark and part of the day. It was confusing.

While the two scientists explored the planet for the source of Neutronium, Langham roamed the valley in search of wild fruits, vegetables and game. As the swift days passed and he found nothing more than a spring of rather bitter water, the gaunt spectre of hunger began to stalk the three earth men.

One morning, long before the atomic sun had appeared over the horizon, Carruthers disappeared. Seven short days and nights passed. Still he remained away. Vignot was worried as he climbed to the plateau and peered into the distance for some sign of the missing man.

There was little chance of trailing anyone on the smooth surface of the metal planet. Only in the valley could the marks of a man's shoes be traced. As Vignot stared down into the valley he could see Langham going bravely forth along a trail he had worn smooth in his perpetual quest for food.

For a long time the older scientist stood looking around him, then walked swiftly towards the monument marking the exact point of their first contact with the electron. The way was well marked with a row of small chunks of metal that ended at the monument.

When Vignot reached it he made a singular discovery. The pile of Carboralium blocks was gone—every last one of the blocks. He peered at the spot where he had last seen them, hesitated, sighed and began to walk in a small circle, his eyes studying every inch of metal beneath his feet.

His search was finally rewarded. Carruthers had left a sign. Scratched in the metal planet with the point of some sharp instrument was an arrow.

Vignot knelt beside it and took a sight in the direction indicated by the straight line indicating the arrow's shaft, then started westward by electronic standards. A hundred yards farther on he found a second mark—not an arrow this time, but a large inverted V.

He believed he understood now. Carruthers must have discovered something of importance and had returned for the Carboralium. Vignot quickened his steps hoping to overtake the younger scientist before the short electronic day ended in darkness. His eyes were glowing now with suppressed excitement.

NIGHT darkened the metal planet. Strange galaxies of stars moved across the heavens. Langham sat alone outside the rudely-constructed dwelling, ears attuned to any revealing sound. There was none to be heard except the occasional rustle of leaves falling from the stunted trees, or the sharp snap of a broken branch.

Memories of food caused pangs of desire for most anything but the food tablets. True, they were keeping him alive, but they weren't keeping his energy at a normal level. He could feel a gradual decrease of strength from one day to the next. Today he hadn't explored as much territory as he had the day before. On returning to the frail structure that was home he had felt weary and depressed.

He kept wondering where Carruthers had vanished to, and what had now happened to George Vignot. He did not sleep that night, or other nights following. All he could do was to peer through the murk of darkness and listen for the first soft footfall announcing the return of either of his two companions.

The short days passed with bewildering rapidity. His hair had become long and unkempt. And for the first tme in his life he was wearing a beard. He looked at his hands. They were white and semi-transparent. The soles of his shoes had worn through from his exploration trips within the valley. How long, he kept wondering, would this insecurity continue.

Many, many times during the metal

planet's swift circling around the atomic sun he thought of what Aaron Carruthers had said regarding the time element. By turns, doubt and faith took possession of him as he tried to find something tangible to cling to in the vast loneliness engulfing him. He was not afraid. It went deeper than fear itself. Yet, whatever it was, it oppressed him more than he cared to admit. Only by recalling his young friend's comforting words did he sense that these hardships could not last forever.

"Keep in mind the seven seconds. No matter what happens, Langham, our time here is limited to seven earth seconds. Don't get impatient with me or with events. We're here for one purpose—to find our mountain of Neutronium."

Then disaster rolled upon him. It struck at noon on the day following. The atomic sun darkened as rolling tremblors shook the metal planet to its very core. The cataclysmic wrenchings, following the first shock, seemed powerful enough to split the planet asunder. All around him in the valley where camp had been established, trees began to fall.

With lips set tightly, Langham climbed wearily over the planet's quivering surface to the plateau above the valley. The exertion left him weak. When he finally reached it his ears were throbbing with a horrible metallic din. It did not take him long to discover the cause. And a fear he could scarcely control suddenly overpowered him.

Wherever he looked across the rolling terrain beyond the plateau, immense boulders of metal were tumbling about in an orgy of grinding, smashing upheaval. Two of them missed his body by inches. A third one tripped him. He fell, and the heaving metal beneath his body made him dizzy. He could not stand erect. The metal earth beneath him was like a sea of undulating waves.

Something struck him in the forehead. Lights, sudden and blinding, flashed before his eyes. He could feel the jar of impact, sharp lances of pain, then merciful oblivion blotted out everything.

MILES to the west where the passage of centuries had built up a moraine of metal boulders, George Vignot staggered grimly towards his goal—a reddish mountain. His beard was matted, and his lips cracked. Days had passed without water touching them. Hunger of colossal proportions gnawed at his vitals. He fought down these desires as something too trivial for thought.

His eyes were inflamed from the reflection of the atomic sun on the glimmering metal. And like Langham he was thinking of what Aaron Carruthers had explained about the time element.

"Seven seconds," he muttered to himself as he stumbled along. "I can die a hundred deaths in that time. Can die of thirst, hunger or damned weariness from floundering around on an electron—a minute speck in a world of elements too small even for the most powerful microscope to reveal. Seven seconds. I wonder how many have elapsed? God I'm tired!"

His inflamed eyes brightened upon discovering another inverted V. "The red mountain," he mumbled. "That's where Carruthers will be. That mountain must be pure Neutronium!" He paused and wiped the back of his hand across eyes that ached unmercifully. "Well," he sighed, "it's taken me a long time to get this far. And there is nothing else to do but keep on going."

Determinedly he started towards the metalic moraine he must cross to reach the red mountain on its far side. But he never reached it. At this moment the tremblor struck with brutal, devastating force. The moraine of metal boulders seemed to boil upward like slag in a steel furnace, then belch down upon him.

He turned and ran. Looking backward as he raced over the buckling earth, he saw that the whole moraine was in motion. The upward thrust of the tortured planet had forced the metal boulders from the gouged stream bed where they had lain for centuries, and they were now rolling towards him in a grinding, screaming mass.

The sight of the vast upheaval did something to his eyes already weakened from the glare of the last few days. George Vignot went suddenly blind. And the metal planet, rocking beneath him as he fled from the destructive avalanche, destroyed his sense of balance. Vertigo assailed him and he fell on his face.

The grinding roar immediately behind him hammered against his ears like a peal of sustained thunder. He got to his feet, fell down, and struggled erect again swearing futilely at a weakness he could not quite overcome. But anger and blinding rage stimulated the adrenalin glands. A tide of strength poured into his blood stream banishing the vertigo.

He started to run a second time, and had taken about forty steps when he crashed headlong into an enormous boulder. The shock knocked him backward. He gritted his teeth and groped towards the barrier that had checked him. With probing fingers he explored its smooth surface. He could not reach its top. It must be a large boulder. Yet was it large enough to stem the avalanche already upon him?

Keeping in contact with it, he circled to the far side, heard the crash as the crest of the avalanche struck the great boulder's forward edge, then felt it rock gently. With something like a prayer on his lips, George Vignot sank to his knees and heard the grinding mass roar harmlessly out across the metal planet on both sides of the giant boulder behind which he crouched.

Reaction made him weak again. He buried his bearded face in the crook of an outflung arm. "Seven seconds," he breathed. "How many have passed? How many are there still to live through?"

ONLY the red mountain came through the quake without any appreciable change or disruption for there was nothing on its smooth flanks to shake loose except a single human being.

Huddled in a cup-like depression with his back against one side and his feet braced against the other, Aaron Carruthers rode out the quake. Beneath him were the bars of Carboralium and his testing instruments. Above him, stretching into an infinity of space, towered the red mounatin of Neutronium.

The bars of Carboralium were in contact with it, drawing on the tremendous source of atomic energy from its very core. Each day since his arrival at the mountain Carruthers had taken the bars away from the metal and tested them for radioactive emanations. Each day radioactivity had increased.

He knew he had been away from his companions for a long time, that what water he had taken with him was gone, that his food tablets were becoming fewer and less potent as a substitute for food.

It had been a long ways from the valley where they had made their headquarters, farther than he cared to think about. He had been testing various parts of the planet without success when he chanced to place his instrument at an angle that made the pointer act as a magnetic needle. It had at once become violently agitated.

Still holding it at this unusual angle he had observed that the emanations were strongest in the west. His first impulse had been to return to where he had left his companions and acquaint them with his discovery. But the irresistible urge to find the source of the element he was seeking

had been too overpowering, and he had returned to the monument, strapped the blocks of Carboralium to his shoulder, then with the blade of his knife had left scratched trail markers to show the way he had gone.

How many days ago that had happened he didn't know. He had slept, awakened, and slept again. It seemed ages and eons in the past. As he lay in the depression he could feel a gnawing sensation deep inside him. This was hunger. He looked at his clothes. They seemed much too large for him. Food, solid food, was what he needed. Emaciation was robbing him of his strength. The quake that had so violently disturbed the rest of the planet did not seem important.

He looked at the sky that was darkening swiftly, and suddenly night was upon him. Hunger returned to torment him. It occurred to him that he should seek out his two companions. Had they survived the shock? He thought also of the metal boulders he had used to build the monument. By now they must be widely scattered.

He yawned. A heavy stupor assailed him. Closing his eyes he slept uneasily until the atomic sun shot over the rim of the metal planet and awakened him. The need of doing something was strong upon him. But what was there to do?

His body felt curiously heavy as he crawled out of the depression and climbed part way up the red mountain where he could look across the rolling panorama of metal. As far as he could see there was nothing visible but shining metal—not a cloud, or bird, or insect, or any moving thing.

From sheer force of habit he looked at his watch. But the earth time division of twenty-four hours each day and night didn't check with the days and nights of the metal planet.

He placed the watch back in his pocket. Dimly he felt that he *must* find Langham and Vignot. Loneliness was creeping upon him though he was not yet aware of it. The bars of Carboralium would be safe in the depression along with the testing instruments. Yes, he would return to the wooded valley. Once there he would explain where he had been and what he had done.

But stupor and a heaviness of body drained him of energy. He found it difficult to walk back to the depression where he had started from. It was as though his feet were encased in leaden shoes. Inertia compelled him to lie down again on the metal bars of Carboralium. He fell asleep almost immediately.

It seemed years later when he awoke in the darkness of atomic night. His body was stiff and full of aches. And a strange vibration was quivering through every part of his body. He managed to turn on his back though the effort was out of all proportion to the physical act.

IN a semi-stupor he stared at the strange constellations in the atomic sky. A rhythmic pulse at the base of his spine soon became an annoying disturbance. He tried to pull himself to a sitting position and discovered he could barely lift his arm. It lay heavy on his chest after the exertion.

It was then that he noticed his fingers. They glowed in the dark with what looked like purple ribbons of flame. His dormant brain quickened at this phenomenon. He knew now what was happening. Small wonder he found it almost impossible to move. His body was teeming with radioactivity. This potent force, acting like earth magnetism, was anchoring him to the mountain of red metal.

Sweat broke out on his forehead. He moistened his lips, closed his deep-set eyes, and fought against the stark reality of his helplessness. Chained to a mountain by a power that had gradually crept upon him. Was this to be the end?

"Queer," he muttered aloud. "I know I'm still in my own laboratory. I know it as well as I know I can't move. During the day the atomic sun will shine upon me. At night I will feel the chill of dark. There'll be more suns and more chills. I will be unable to eat my food tablets. Starvation will come slowly and irrevocably. Yet it will come as night follows the day. And my bones will dry and bleach with each short day of atomic sunlight—"

His voice trailed away. Something bright and hard was stinging his eyelids. He opened them slowly, curiously. Lancing down through the atomic heavens was a shaft of living flame that bent, twisted and grew larger and brighter until its vast radiance covered the whole atomic sky with a luminous mantle.

The lips of Aaron Carruthers began to twitch. "Oh God!" he breathed as the vortex plucked him from the depression and hurled him into an eternity of tortured space.

KARL DANZIG was still feeling the pressure of the contact switch on the ball of his thumb after clicking off the vanishing ray when a buzzer sounded. The big second-hand on the clock beside him on the control board had circled the clock's face once indicating a single second had passed.

With eyes still on the moving hand he picked up the electronic phone. The robot voice from the city's power station said mechanically: "All electric power users ordered to switch off energy machines at once. Short circuit in main turbine line."

The face of Danzig paled. His eyes had followed the second hand three times around the clock's face. Four yet to go and the power likely to go out at any moment. The laboratory could not exist without electrical power. It turned generators which in turn created the super-power needed for the electronic exploration machine using the vanishing ray. If that power were suddenly cut off——

Danzig did not hesitate. The second hand was barely a quarter of the distance around the clock's face towards the fourth second when he switched on the restoration ray.

It shot from the end of the liquid-cooled casing and splintered against the meteorite.

An aura of ghostly radiance climbed from the sunken quartz slab to the ceiling of the laboratory. There was no sound for a moment but the deep hum from the inverse dimensional tubes. And then the silence was broken as metallic blocks spilled from the sunken slab to the laboratory floor.

The aura tapered away. Danzig switched off the restoration ray and climbed over the barrier. But he wasn't needed. Three dim forms were materializing out of the fading light—the forms of three men with heavily bearded faces, sunken eyes and wasted bodies.

George Vignot's deep rumble filled the laboratory. "Carruthers, we're back. Do you hear? We're back!"

Aaron Carruthers stepped from the slab and stood leaning against the barrier. Langham walked slowly to his side. There was wonder and amazement in his tired eyes. Nobody spoke.

"Everybody all right?" asked Danzig.

The lights flickered and went out. Danzig turned on a battery lamp. "Sorry, Aaron, about the sudden change in the time element. But the moment you left, the central turbine plant warned me of an immediate shut-off in power due to a short-circuit. You and the others had been gone but three and a quarter seconds when I flashed on the restoration ray. I didn't dare wait the full seven seconds."

Carruthers said in a husky voice, "If you hadn't acted the way you did, Karl, none of us would have come back alive."

"God," breathed Danzig. "You men look starved."

"What day of the month is it?" asked Langham, rubbing his eyes.

"It's still the same day," explained Carruthers, "almost the same hour. We were off this planet for three and one quarter seconds. Look!" He pointed to the bars of Carboralium. "You, too, Vignot. I had them with me on a red mountain of Neutronium. I slept on those blocks for what seemed like a hundred years. And after a while I couldn't move. It was as though I was chained to them and the mountain."

"I was headed for that mountain," nodded George Vignot, blinking rapidly. "Then the world exploded. Maybe it was an electronic earthquake. It came just as I was about to cross a moraine of metal boulders. I was following your inverted V's marked in the metal ground. Well, the metal rocks began to move upon me as if some powerful force had pushed them upward. They rolled towards me in an avalanche that was the most awful experience I ever want to go through again. I went blind, stumbled into an immense boulder and found shelter behind it. But I'm not blind now. Queer. I don't understand it."

"Does anybody?" asked Langham, "least of all myself. I'll admit," he added in a shaky voice, "that I was in a place where no mortal man had ever been up to the moment we reached that metal planet. I'll admit that I was thoroughly frightened when it seemed that the planet was about to tear itself to pieces during the quake. I'm years older in experience and wonder at the marvel of it all. But what does it all add up to? Three and one quarter seconds. Was it but a moment of wasted eternity, or was——?"

"Wait," broke in Carruthers. "Wait only a few moments longer. Karl, will you test the Carboralium blocks. I'm still shaky."

But Danzig was already kneeling beside the sunken slab with one of the blocks in his hands. These are not Carboralium blocks any longer, Aaron. They're reddish in color, and tingling to the touch. I'll test it with the infractor lamp."

His report came quickly enough. "Neutronium without any question of doubt. Radioactivity present in the same proportion as that emanating from the meteorite."

"I still can't believe it," sighed Vignot. "It's against all laws of metallurgy."

"I've got to get in touch with my office," said Langham.

"And when you do," Carruthers told him, "you're going to demand twenty fast planes to be placed at our service at once."

"No," frowned Langham. "I can't disobey Presidential orders.

"Twenty planes," insisted Carruthers. "And they're going to fly ten miles apart and not in close formation. Each plane will carry a block of our radioactive Neutronium. You can't say no, Langham, not after the experience you've been through in obtaining the perfect catalyst."

Langham set his stubborn jaw. "What you suggest, Aaron, is treason against the President."

"And what about treason against the people? Each hour of delay places their future in deadly jeopardy. Is it possible, Langham, after what you have gone through, that you can still doubt? Maybe you can't see your own face, but I can. You've grown a beard. Your cheeks are sunken. You're gaunt and undernourished. For a great many days you've lived within the nucleus of the smallest cluster of elements God ever created.

"You've lived at a pace so swift that in the interval of less than four seconds you found yourself threatened by starvation. You've witnessed a miracle of alchemy. And I'm not telling you something you don't already know. You are your own

best witness. The shackles of your unbelief have been snapped in a thousand pieces. Unless you're a plain damn fool, you, and you alone, will be responsible for the extermination of our civilization."

"My God!" raged Vignot. "Am I to starve to death while you two gibbering skeletons rattle about and get nowhere in your driveling argument. Langham, if you don't quit saying no and ranting about treason, you'll drive us all insane. Write or phone the order for twenty planes——"

"Listen, man——"

"No. You listen. I'll talk. As a member of the Emergency Council selected by the President, my orders have authority behind them. Call the nearest air base squadron at once. If you don't, you'll go down in history—if there is ever any history written after the year 2001—as the monster whose stubbornness destroyed the lives of a hundred million people. Karl, order some food, will you?"

MAJOR BURKE, commanding the Death's Head squadron of combat planes, returned the telephone to his desk. His jaw was twitching slightly when he spoke to his adjutant. "Orders from Wing Commander. Special flight of twenty of our fastest combat jobs. Same objective as before. Alteration in flight formation. Ships to fly ten miles apart. Rendezvous same as earlier in the day—roof of the Air Terminal Building where the pilots will receive final instructions from G-2 Chief, Langham."

Dusk was not far away when Langham, Vignot and Aaron Carruthers alighted from an army plane at an emergency landing field at the foot of the Ozark Mountains. A staff car took them part way up a mountain peak where clouds were thickest. In his hand Aaron Carruthers had the latest report from the U. S. Meteorologist Bureau.

It read: "Warm, dry winds from the interior. High pressure area over Rocky Mountains. No rain possible east of the Mississippi."

Langham, consulting his watch, said, "Time's up! They should be flying over the mountains by now." His lips thinned into a straight line. "What's the weather report?"

"Dry," said Carruthers, anxiously scanning the eastern sky. "No prospect of rain east of the Mississippi. Ah! Here they come. I can see three of them. They're flying fast, and miles apart as ordered. Look, Vignot! Observe those clouds. They're beginning to pull apart and drift towards the planes. In ten seconds we'll know beyond a shadow of doubt——"

"The shadow of doubt is there for all eyes to see," broke in Langham, bitterly. "Look at that red-nosed plane almost above us. It's in trouble. Something's happened the same as it happened before. It's circling crazily. Yes, and it's coming down. Can't you see? Your catalyst weapon isn't any better this time than it was the last. That pilot is probably dead right now. And in five seconds the whole flight——"

"Rot!" snorted Vignot. "There's something on the plane's windshield that's preventing the pilot from seeing clearly. He's heading for that emergency landing field to get it cleaned."

He placed a big hand on Aaron Carruthers' shoulder. The young scientist had his head bowed as if he couldn't face a second failure. "Hold out your hand, Carruthers, and feel what's in the air. Moisture. Showers of it. And it isn't rain—not in a thousand years. It's the oily residue that forms when the perfect catalyst breaks up the molecules of the poison-polluted clouds. It's the same vicious stuff I found in my test tubes when you inadvertantly brought that Michigan meteorite within its destroying ten-mile radius and ruined my beautiful experiment."

"You're right, Vignot," admitted Langham a moment later. "And so is Carruthers. I'm sorry, Aaron, to have been so damned stubborn. But the things you have revealed to me this day are miracles I can't and probably never will comprehend."

Carruthers lifted his head. A heavy burden had rolled from his weary shoulders. "I'm not blaming you, Langham. There are moments when my own comprehension fails. Sometimes I lie awake at night. And stark fear comes to haunt me —fear that some day I'll lose control of the forces I have created. But I'm utterly weary, and I know that you and George Vignot are, too. So let's go home."

He held out his hand palm upward. Wet drops showered upon it. He rubbed his palms together. They became sticky with the oily residue. He found a smile from somewhere within his overly-tired body and forced it to his lips.

Speechless now, he stared into the sky at dusk. And there wasn't a cloud in sight—anywhere. There was only a vast silence that precedes the coming of peaceful darkness, and the far-away throb of motors in the combat planes as they droned westward in the wake of the setting sun.





"Ask yourself this, stranger: what is it that shines through Kathleen's eyes at night?"

The Valley of the Undead

By HELEN WEINBAUM

Once in a century, from the graveyard in the Strath of Tiraney
rose those who had died; yet they were not dead.

NOW, on the moors, the name Tiraney is seldom mentioned, and the curious depression called Strath * of Tiraney is gone. Myrtle grows thick in the once bleak lowland as if it would cover with living green all memory of the tainted past.

No, the name Tiraney is seldom mentioned.

* Level place by a waterside (Gaelic).

For, though the curse has gone, mayhap the *little folk* who invoked it still live somewhere and, as no one knows what might anger them, it is better to let inactive spirits lie. To remember too much might be dangerous.

Yet, had it not been for the young Kathleen and the man who loved her, Martin Lane, and the way he walked through horror and death and the powers of darkness to save her, the moorland people might live in dread of the Eve of Michaelmas, might bolt their doors and windows and hide their heads beneath the blankets to save their eyes sight of the village Tiraney, come up from the dead—nay, from the worse than dead—for one night every hundred years.

But now it can be told. The curse is gone—the wind smells fresh—and myrtle grows green on the Strath of Tiraney.

HE HAD seen her first crying on the moor and had dismounted, wondering what heartbreak a girl as pretty as Kathleen might suffer. Hearing his step she turned, raising tortured violet eyes framed by black lashes stuck wetly together, dark curls clustering damp about her temples.

"Is there nothing I can do?" he asked. 'I'm Martin Lane—from t'other side of Galwick."

Hurriedly she dried her tears on the sleeves of her coarse garment. "'Twas nothing."

She darted her eyes sideways like a frightened hare, taking but fleeting sight of his rugged, wind-tanned features and the lean, cool strength of his body.

Beside him the horse reared wildly, tearing its bridle from his hand, and neighing shrilly, galloped off down the moor.

"Strange!" Martin turned to watch the flying hooves. "'Tis the first time Milady showed caprice."

"Would 'twere the only thing strange on these moors," she sobbed. Half sigh, half sob.

"And why do tears flood your pretty eyes?" Gently, Martin tried to release her from fear. "Who are you now, to be crying on the moor?"

She pleated a fold of her sleeve between her fingers. "I'm Kathleen," she answered slowly, "and I cry because I cannot help but cry in the Strath of Tiraney."

The light lessened as a cloud passed before the sun, and at once the wind seemed cold. She raised her eyes, startled, as if to measure the darkness; then, for a moment, veiled them.

"Then why do you come?" he asked. "Why not stay nearer home?"

"I *must* come." Wearily she raised her lids. "There is something here . . . something . . . the same thing, mayhap, which sent your horse careening down the moor—which frightens the wild ponies from this spot. Yet, it draws me almost as if," she paused, "as if my life were bound up somehow with it,"

The sun came through the clouds, lighting her face. Wistfully, she smiled.

He shook off a feeling of oppression. There *was* something, and yet . . . mightn't it be only this girl's superstitious fear affecting him? True, there was the story of a young boy found frightfully dead—face twisted, eyes wide—staring—on the Strath of Tiraney. Rumor had it that an aged woman was responsible, a woman who double-bolted her door to travelers and poor things lost on the moor at night . . . *a woman called old Kathleen!*

"Who is old Kathleen?" he asked abruptly, breaking the spell the soft, even burr of her voice had left.

"My great-grandmother." She spoke coldly, drawing herself erect. "I live with her—up there." She waved toward a bleak, rockbound ledge.

At her withdrawal, pity flooded Martin's mind: she seemed so small and help-

less to stand alone against the world in defense of old Kathleen. Suddenly he wanted to protect her, to help her fight the ugly rumors.

He drew her to him, feeling her slight body quiver against his like that of a frightened animal.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered, not knowing yet what it was she feared, but having the certainty deep in him that whatever it was he would help her destroy it. The strangeness he had first sensed in her vanished; she was all woman as she lay trembling in his arms. "You're beautiful, Kathleen," he breathed.

Momentarily she clung to him, seeming to need the protection of his strength. Then, "Beautiful," she repeated bitterly. "Beautiful—by day!"

Quickly she pulled away and ran across the moor, her full skirts billowing behind her in the wind.

"Wait!" He started after. "Wait, Kathleen. I meant you no harm, indeed. . . ."

She continued running, leaving his words to echo lonesomely across the land.

When she was out of sight, he turned disconsolately to find Milady. But call as he would, he got no answering neigh. Wearily then he started to walk—it was many a mile to his destination—and, after a few minutes, looked up to find himself beneath the rocky ledge where, clinging like a maggot to a piece of rotting wood, was the cottage in which Kathleen lived.

He stopped short at sight of an ugly, wrinkled face peering over the sill—a face so wrinkled that the mouth and nose were lost in their layers. But the eyes stood out—large, violet, angry! They were Kathleen's eyes, and yet . . . no. Kathleen's eyes were bemused, haunted. *These eyes had seen what Kathleen only feared to see!*

For a moment, their eyes clung together. Then forcibly Martin drew his away, unwilling to let them rest longer on the repulsive ugliness of the woman's face.

She spoke in a hoarse cackle. "Go away! This is my land." Struggling with the window, she slammed it shut.

MARTIN hurried on, trying to forget that the woman in the cabin was a blood relative of Kathleen's.

Behind an ancient altar, two upright stones capped by a limestone slab, he came again upon the girl. She smiled, lowering her eyes shyly under his gaze. Her face seemed elfin-like in the light of the setting sun and, curiously, Martin found himself remembering the old woman's eyes glittering with hate above the window-sill. Yet, if Kathleen's eyes were strange, they but added to her beauty. And never before had he encountered beauty comparable to hers!

"Milady's gone," he explained. "I'm afraid I'll have to walk."

"'Tis a long walk to the other side of Galwick." Her voice burred softly.

"Then perhaps you will go partway with me."

He waited, half expecting her to refuse, but her eyes darted sideways to the sun and she nodded assent. "To the edge of the moor," she answered. "The light will last till then."

As she padded along beside him, Martin tried to draw her out, liking the way the soft cadence of her voice caressed his ears. But she seemed reluctant to speak and half frightened of him.

"Do I seem so strange to you, Kathleen?" he asked at last. "You don't to me. I feel as if I'd known you forever—as if, in some dim childhood past, we played together on the moors." He drew close, linking his arm in hers.

As if the warmth of his body gave her courage, she spoke more freely. "No, not strange. Yet, until today, save for the wild things of the moor, I never had a

companion. Until today," her voice lowered, "I had never felt the touch of another human being's hand. I've been alone —all soul alone—alone, except for—" She stopped abruptly.

"For what?" he prompted.

She looked up sharply as if to measure his reception of her words. "Voices," she said softly, "the voices in the Strath of Tiraney. Ever since I've been a child I've heard them—almost heard them—almost understood them—almost, but not quite. Yet something draws me back to listen. They're the voices of the *little folk.*"

"There are no *little folk,* Kathleen," He spoke reassuringly.

"Yes!" Her voice rose emphatically. "There are! I know! And I know too that they have put a curse upon us—old Kathleen and me."

"How do you know them?"

She hesitated. "Because of the offerings we leave for them at night," she said after a moment. "*They never touch them!* They never touch them, but they upset the dish and grind the food into the ground."

"The work of some mischief maker—"

She sighed. "No. Would that it were! But who roams the moors at night? It's evidence of the curse, Martin. I first had hint of it when, as a child, I asked about the voices in the Strath.

"It was near Michaelmas Moon," she mused, "and old Kathleen seemed frightened. Mother had died that year, leaving us two alone. So I asked old Kathleen who it was I heard murmuring in the Strath. She chuckled. 'You hear them?' she asked. 'Good! Then the curse holds for you. I shall die in time.' She wouldn't say any more."

Releasing her arm, Martin looked down at the black, wind-blown curls near his shoulder. "An old woman's ramblings," he said comfortingly. "Don't dwell on them. Your great-grandmother must have been very old—even then."

"Very old," she repeated slowly. "Yes —she was very old—even then—" As she stared at the red half-disk of the setting sun, her voice faded to nothing.

Now, at the edge of the moor, a cold wind struck them. Martin followed Kathleen's eyes, wondering what in the sunset could perturb her. When he turned back, she was gone. With a heavy heart, though he did not know why, he watched her slight figure scurry into the teeth of the wind across the moor.

Though she was no longer with him, something of her lingered, some strange magnetism of her voice or body. He continued slowly, wondering about Kathleen and knowing, though reason was against it, that he *must* return.

RETURN he did, half against his will at first, then eagerly as his mind fell captive to her charm. He invented reasons for riding through the Strath, trying to talk himself from his attachment to Kathleen even while he strained his eyes across the land to find her. But reason could not cure him. Always, at sight of her, his heart thumped madly.

After that first day, however, he took care to tie Milady securely to one of the ancient limestone altars lest he be left stranded on the moors again when night came on. Then, for a few hours, he and Kathleen would be together, sometimes taking shelter from the wind behind a rock or a clump of furze, sometimes walking into it, letting it sweep all but their companionship away.

Martin spoke often of his life on the other side of Galwick. She seemed eager to hear of it, questioning him wistfully as to his contacts with other men, making him more and more aware of the lonely life she herself had led. Yet still she always fled from him before the sun had set—fled swiftly across the moor at the first hint of darkness, hardly waiting to

bid him good-by. Then he would recall the strangely bitter words she had spoken at their first meeting: *beautiful—by day!*

At last it so dwelt upon his mind that he returned to the moors one evening after he had told Kathleen good-by. And, as he waited for the sun to set and the evening to come on, he remembered things she had spoken of, half willingly, half unwillingly, remembered how the words had started slowly, hesitantly, from her; then how they had picked up speed and come rushing, tumbling over one another as if, now that the dam had broken, they would relieve her mind of what it harbored. Still, all the words had been about the old Kathleen and none about herself.

Strange that a young girl should lead a life of fear, influenced by random words of a woman over a hundred years old. Strange that the young Kathleen believed her great-grandmother could not die. And yet—yet—

Kathleen had told him of how the old woman had fallen from a cliff and suffered no injury; of how she had been sick unto death and yet recovered; of how a great boulder had crashed through the cabin roof, missing her head by but the fraction of an inch. Still, did that mean immortality? True, the woman had lived to watch a daughter and a granddaughter age and die—perhaps waited now to watch the young Kathleen—but did even *that* mean a spell was on her? Martin asked Kathleen.

"I don't know," she whispered, frightened. "She wears an amulet—'to keep the *little folk* from exacting vengeance' she told me once."

"Vengeance for what?" he asked.

"She will not tell me."

Poor thing, to be so beset by fear! Martin felt guilty waiting now to spy on her. Yet he *must* know the meaning of her words: *beautiful—by day!* Now, more than ever, he loved Kathleen and wanted her for his wife. Tonight he would ask her. Tonight, when he took her in his arms and kissed her—*in the dark!*

MILADY neighed shrilly, pulling at her tether to escape. The sky darkened, and Martin pulled his collar closer against the howling wind. They were some distance from the Strath of Tiraney, yet somehow he felt an eeriness reach from it. He rose quickly, making his way across the darkened moor to the small cabin clinging to the ledge.

A small candle cast its feeble light through a window. He peered up from below, hoping to find Kathleen outside. She was not in sight. He walked slowly to the top, thankful for the howling wind which hid noise of his movement.

When he came on a level with the house, he saw Kathleen. She was seated at a table, her back turned toward the window.

Old Kathleen faced him, her shining eyes peering malevolently from her wrinkled face. Though he stood in the dark outside—the moon had not yet risen—she stared straight into his eyes; he felt she saw him as clearly as if it were day.

Then, in the same words as before, she croaked, "Go away! This is my land."

Startled by her voice, Kathleen turned. By the change in her expression, Martin felt that she too saw him in the dark outside. But he forgot other emotions at sight of her face. She looked lovelier than ever in the candlelight. What a fool he had been to let her random words bother him!

"Kathleen," he called. "It's Martin."

She turned her back to the window, murmuring, "Go away."

"Let me in, Kathleen." He walked around to the cabin door and waited. When there was no answer, he tapped gently on it. "Let me in."

"Go away, Martin. Please." Her voice came faintly from inside.

"Then come outside. I must talk to you."

I won't come out." Her voice was strained, fearful.

"Why not?" the old woman asked. "Why not? Your lover waits. Go. Let him see ye—in the dark!" She gave a hoarse, cackling laugh. "Let him see what that little boy once saw—the one who—"

"Stop!" Kathleen screamed. "Stop, I tell you!"

Martin heard her sobs beating the cabin walls.

"Come out, Kathleen." He made his voice stern to cover the ominous pounding of his heart. "I shan't leave the moor tonight until you do."

"Go," the old woman croaked. "Let him see ye."

There was a long silence. Then he heard slow, reluctant footsteps on the floor.

The door opened and, for a moment, he saw her figure silhouetted against the light. Then it shut, leaving the moonless night even blacker than before.

The wind had died and over the moor hung a vast, heavy stillness. Time had stopped . . . life had stopped . . . waiting . . . for Kathleen!

He felt her presence in the dark before him, but he could not move. Then she spoke, and the reality of her voice shook him, for a moment, from foreboding—for a moment only, until the portent of her words pierced his mind.

"My eyes are closed, Martin. Take me in your arms once, as you did that first day on the moor. Take me in your arms and kiss me once—before I open them!"

As in a dream he stepped forward, closing his arms about her, feeling her cling to him with the tenseness of a drowning man. He kissed her, feeling suddenly safe in the knowledge of his love.

The wind rose, beating their bodies angrily as if it would break their embrace. Kathleen clung more tightly and he felt her tears upon his neck. But, after a moment, she drew away, pushing his hands from her.

"Look now," she whispered.

Through the black darkness shone two silver disks, glowing with red fire at their centers. A chill took Martin's spine; there was something vile, unnatural, evil, in their light. Involuntarily he recoiled.

"Don't be afraid." Her voice came bitterly. "You're looking at me—Kathleen. These are my eyes!"

Her eyes! It was as if some demon peered at him through the dark—some satanic, unclean hell-hag. *Not Kathleen!*

"I do not blame you, Martin." Again she spoke. "I see the horror in your face. 'Tis the same horror I saw in the eyes of a little boy—the night he died."

"You?" he breathed. "You . . . killed . . . him. . . ."

"He came on me unexpectedly." Her voice was tearful. "I didn't know that he was there until he screamed. And, please believe, Martin, that never since then have I showed my face outside the cabin after the sun has set. . . ."

The echo of her words beat dully against his ears as he stared at the luminous, evil disks.

"One thing more," she said softly, "what makes you shudder and recoil is not the real Kathleen. I am the same. *These are some other being's eyes!*"

Neither spoke for a moment. Then the darkness was broken as she opened the cabin door to go inside. Something in her mute acceptance of her misfortune and of his reaction to it tore at Martin's heart. If she were ill of a sickness he could understand, it would not affect his love. He would help her, pray for her recovery. This was no different. Through no fault of her own she was ill, needing his protection even more because she suffered from something frightening and unknown.

Despising himself for the moment of delay, he clutched her arm. "It makes no difference. . . . Marry me, Kathleen. I love you."

"Marry you?" she breathed. "How can I? *Look at my eyes!* Could you wake at night to see them shining in the dark? Could you sleep, knowing they were there beside you? Could you live with the curse upon them?"

"Yes." Strength surged through his body. "If all else fails, I can. But together," he pressed his lips against her hair, "together, my dear, we can break the curse! Come." He drew her inside the cabin. "We'll get old Kathleen to tell us how. . . ."

As if she expected them, the old woman waited, her eyes fastened stolidly on the door. "I shan't talk," she croaked. "No need to ask."

"You *must* talk." Martin drew Kathleen within an encircling arm. "We're to be married. I've the right to know."

Old Kathleen's eyes shone evilly and, suddenly, he realized that they too would shine silver in the dark.

"Ye'll never know from me," she cackled. "If ye want her, take her. 'Tis your own risk." Folding her arms complacently, she tightened wrinkled lips over her toothless gums.

Martin's anger burst. "Evil creature!" He stepped forward, towering over the shapeless figure in the chair. "What have you to gain by ruining Kathleen's life?"

"Peace," the old woman answered.

"Peace," he scoffed. "You'll writhe in hell if my prayers can make you. If there *is* a curse, tell us! Tell us why, so we can fight against it."

Hate glinted the woman's eyes. "I shan't talk!"

"Then there is no curse," he said triumphantly, "no curse but the thoughts in your evil mind."

"Have ye ne'er heard of the village Tiraney?" the old woman smiled slyly.

Tiraney! The word echoed and re-echoed in the silence.

"No!" Kathleen sobbed wildly, "not that! *Not that!*"

The hag shrugged. "Ye'll never learn from me." She turned to Martin. "Yet, if there be no curse, ask yourself this, stranger: *what is it that shines through Kathleen's eyes at night?*"

"There is a curse," the girl said hopelessly. "I've always known . . . my eyes . . . the voices in the Strath . . . our nightly offering spurned by the *little folk* and ground into dirt. I can't marry you, Martin." She turned suddenly to face him. *"They'll never let me!"*

"They cannot stop *me*, dear heart." He drew a hand gently across her cheek.

Behind them old Kathleen rolled with laughter. "Work fast then, lad, work fast. Next week brings the Eve of Michaelmas. . . ."

ON MICHAELMAS EVE the wind blew cold. Already there was the smell of winter in the air. Furze crackled dryly beneath Milady's hooves as Martin rode over the moors to the cabin on the ledge.

It was his wedding eve as well. Tomorrow he would take Kathleen to the other side of Galwick to become his wife. Yet his heart was heavy with foreboding of what tonight would bring.

Tiraney and the Eve of Michaelmas! Somehow the two were tied together with Kathleen, though even if she knew how she would not tell him.

Now, overcome by a strange restlessness, he spurred Milady to a faster pace. Tonight was the night! He must be on hand to save Kathleen from the menace at which the old woman had hinted when she said, *"Next week brings the Eve of Michaelmas. . . ."*

A dim light shone from the cabin window. Dismounting below the ledge he tied

Milady, feeling the flesh crawl on his neck as she reared in inexplicable terror.

It was not quite dark. The air was electric. He ran hurriedly up the path, steeling himself against fear which he tried to believe unfounded.

At the top, he stopped suddenly. Beside the cabin was a spot strangely green with myrtle. *A new-made grave!*

Kathleen? The question rose silently shrieking in his throat. Numbly he stooped to pick a spray of myrtle, placing it over his heart.

"Kathleen!" At last he found his voice. Shouting her name, he burst into the cabin. It was empty. But on the floor was a drying pool of blood and near it a blood-stained knife.

Then he saw the paper, covered with an old woman's spidery script. *I shall die,* it began. *Bury me deep, east-west, and cover the grave with new myrtle. For somehow I shall outwit the curse and die. But for you who go to take my place in the risen village this Eve of Michaelmas, I leave the story of Tiraney. Read it well, Kathleen.*

I skip lightly over the reason for the curse. Enough to say that the village was blessed by the little folk until, becoming rich, it became proud, spurning to leave offerings to the spirits who brought prosperity.

So the little folk became angry and on an Eve of Michaelmas one hundred years ago took their revenge. Tiraney was cursed . . . cursed to rot and disappear into the mist . . . to be there and yet not there . . . to be not alive, not dead! To reappear once every hundred years, for one night only!

By sinning, I escaped. I loved a man from a neighboring town and met him, on the eve of my marriage to another, outside the gates.

Together we saw Tiraney disappear! The unspeakable horror of it still haunts my mind . . . the howls and shrieks of the villagers as their bodies were taken by the little folk . . . rigid wood and stone rotting to nothing in the mist. . . . In a moment the whole village was gone. We fled in terror.

But Tiraney is not dead. Always I have known that the curse waits for me. Tiraney is not dead; it is still in the Strath, an invisible ghost village of tortured, undead souls. The little folk will exact their last full measure of revenge.

Yet they shall not torture me. I shall outwit the curse and die. . . . My place waits for you, Kathleen. . . .

Martin stared numbly at the last, ill-omened words which trailed with ineffable weariness from the page. Old Kathleen had managed somehow to die. There was the blood-stained knife, the pool of blood, and the grave covered with new myrtle outside the cabin. But where was his Kathleen? Alive, or in some limbo, half alive, undead?

He ran hastily from the cabin, stumbling around the ledge, his eyes glued on the darkness ahead where the Strath of Tiraney lay. There was no moon and the wind had died. The air had a strange, acrid smell which caught his lungs. Loose rocks rolled beneath his feet, and once on the moor furze tangled about his legs, sending him sprawling to the ground. He picked himself up, cursing the delay, and continued.

At last, far ahead, he saw a dark figure walking slowly through the night. Kathleen! His shouts made turmoil in the still, heavy air, but she did not seem to hear. On she walked, steadily, inevitably, toward the Strath.

Ahead was dark. Then, suddenly, a mist lifted, uncovering in the Strath of Tiraney an ancient village, its heavy gates just swinging open. Still heedless of Martin's shouts, Kathleen walked through. The gates closed silently behind her.

As Martin ran swiftly toward the village, a dankness filled his nostrils. He choked at the strong, fetid smell of decay

and rot tainting the moorland air. In the moment before he reached the gate, he felt a strange reluctance to enter, to bring his live, pulsating body into this village of the dead; but thought of Kathleen's danger spurred him on.

He put one hand on the ancient gate to push it open. With a nauseous, rotten sound it splintered under his touch. As if it were a curtain of spider web he pushed the crumbling wood aside and entered.

Inside was a village of yesteryear: ancient well holes, rutted, cobbled streets, outside each house a crude altar on which to place nightly offerings to the *little folk*.

But Martin had little time to look about. Kathleen was far ahead, moving with the purposeful, rigid tread of a sleepwalker. His shouts rang hollowly through the quiet streets. Inconceivable that Kathleen could not hear them! Yet she did not turn.

Then, for a moment, Martin had the feel of presences around him . . . things . . . the buzz of voices . . . bodies pressing close to his. . . . But hardly had he felt them when they were gone. He was walking in a void of his own, his lungs once more free to breathe the rank air of the rotting village.

A DARK form passed him, clothes hanging in ragged tatters from the bony frame. But worst was the face! Horror closed his throat at the look of diabolic, inhuman evil on it. Then he saw the eyes, and cold flesh crept up his spine. *The eyes shone silver like Kathleen's!*

The luminous orbs drifted downward from his face. Suddenly the figure stepped back, covering its own dead face with bony, withered hands. A shriek rose—a horrid, terrifying shriek!

Martin hurried on. Other figures passed, but there was no time to wonder at their fear of him, nor to guess the source of their evil auras. Yet through his worry for Kathleen, he did realize that the things were but half human, and that half was only the rotting bodies which prowled the streets. What inhabited those bodies he feared to think. Probably there was not enough soul left in any one of them to rebel at the vile, unnatural use to which their bodies were being put.

Wrinkling his nostrils against the stench of death and decay, Martin strained his eyes after Kathleen. Near the end of the street, she turned into a gateway and walked up the path to the house. When he arrived, the door had already closed behind her back.

Again the wood crumbled under his fingers as he shook the knob. Inside he found Kathleen in a candlelit room, her eyes fixed sightlessly before her.

He hurried to touch her—to take her in his arms—but stopped abruptly. She neither saw nor heard him enter.

Then, suddenly, he became aware of the tattered decorations of the room in which they stood. It was fixed as for a wedding: dry flowers, dusting to nothing in the faint breeze his movements made; festoons of rotting ribbon; a small altar at one end.

He took Kathleen's lifeless hand, raising it to his lips. She did not seem to know. Her arm dropped heavily down when he released it.

"Kathleen!" He seized her shoulders, shaking her roughly in an effort to bring semblance of life into her eyes. She stood unanswering, staring blankly through him as if he were not there.

Hopelessly he knew a spirit not her own was in her, that evil powers had seized her body to fill the place left by the old Kathleen. He *must* get her away from this ghost village, into the sunlight where evil demons could not exist.

He put one arm around her to lead her from the house. In his close embrace she seemed to waken. Strength took her body as she fought loose of his grasp, her eyes

wide with terror, frightened, pain-racked moans coming from her lips.

Shocked by her resistance, he released her. She walked past him, arms outstretched to someone behind him. He turned.

One of the *things* of the village stood in the room, its evil, disintegrating face unspeakably horrible in the sputtering candlelight.

Again Martin felt spirit forces battering against his mind. The place seemed filled with invisible beings—phantasms, chimeras—all seeking to push him backward, toward the door. He fought with all his will against them, holding his ground.

"Kathleen." The *thing* spoke in a voice which came hollowly from the bowels of its being. "Ye have been long away."

She rested her hands on the fleshless fingers, looking trustfully into the diabolic face.

"Tonight is our wedding eve." Again the voice sounded, empty, lifeless, like the thing from which it came.

"Our wedding eve," she murmured.

Frenziedly Martin seized her shoulders, swinging her around to face him. "You can't marry him. Look at him, Kathleen! Look into his face. *He's dead!*"

Her eyes rested unseeingly on his own. Then silently she turned away, placing her hand again on the half-covered bones.

"I must fulfill my destiny." It was as if she were repeating by rote words taught her long ago. "You kept me from it—before."

"Before!" Martin shouted in an effort to make her understand. "That was your great-grandmother, Kathleen. *Not you!*"

He stepped between them and, swallowing his nausea, faced the decaying thing. It drew back, moaning.

"I love her," Martin shouted. "Can you say the same? It was another woman—a woman now dead—whom you loved."

The creature stepped backward still farther. It was as if fear broke a hole in its dead consciousness so that, for the first time, Martin's words penetrated.

"Nay," it said half sadly, "there is love in Tiraney no longer. I take her in marriage, not in love." Making a wide circle around Martin, it approached her. "But I have waited too long, Kathleen. Here. Eat of the biscuit which will plight our troth."

On the extended bones lay a dirty, moldy crumb. Kathleen took it and raised it to her mouth.

"Don't eat it! Not here!" With a quick movement, Martin struck her hand, sending the crumb spinning into the darkness of the floor. *"Eat in limbo and you dwell there forever!* Come with me, Kathleen!"

Grasping her hands, he placed them against his breast, hoping the live beat of his heart would waken her. She touched the spray of myrtle from old Kathleen's grave and screamed wildly.

He tore it from his lapel, forcing it into her hands. For a moment she held it, screaming the while; then dropping it, put hands to her side, her head, her heart, closing her eyes in pain.

THERE was a faint whir . . . the air stirred with movement. . . . The *thing* covered its rotten face and moaned. At the sound, Kathleen opened her eyes to stare at the moldering room about her, gasping in horror at sight of the creature's rotting body, suddenly seeing things as they were in the tainted city. Fear contorting her face, she sank slowly to the floor.

Again the spirits beat Martin's body, seeking to wedge themselves into his mind. He was helpless against them. Then, gathering all his strength, he stooped to retrieve the myrtle. The moment his fingers touched it, his body was free.

Lifting Kathleen's inert form, he car-

ried her through the broken door into the village street.

From the house came a sad, frustrated wailing, wafted after them like the last, futile mouthing of a curse. Martin clutched the spray of myrtle tightly, knowing that in it lay the safety of his body and Kathleen's. The curse of the *little folk* was useless against the aura of the blessed weed.

Leaving the rotting city gates he sped over the moor, hurrying to leave Tiraney far behind. Kathleen, still unconscious, lay heavily in his arms.

Finally, too tired to go further, he stopped, putting her gently on the ground. Her skin was cold, her eyes closed, her breathing shallow. It seemed each faint breath must be her last.

Feverishly he slapped her wrists, forced air into her lungs. She grew neither worse nor better, but lay as if under a spell, breathing only enough to keep life still in her body. For hours he worked over her; then, exhausted, lay down hopelessly to rest. Kathleen was not dead . . . and yet it seemed something of her was gone. Though she lay alive beside him, perhaps the evil ones had fled her body too violently when he had forced the myrtle into her hands. Perhaps, he thought hopelessly, some vital part of her had been left in the ghost village, and he had saved only the shell of the girl who had been Kathleen.

Then, on the eastern horizon, a faint hint of light appeared. The Eve of Michaelmas was over. Today was to have been his wedding day. . . .

The sound of a deep sigh roused him. He turned quickly to Kathleen, hardly daring to believe, chaining his bounding hope lest his ears had deceived him.

As he watched, her breathing deepened. The sun peeped wanly over the horizon, casting a pale light on her face. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Martin!" She smiled up at him. "Today is our wedding day."

Weak with relief, he kissed her forehead, happy in the knowledge that the horror of the night was past and that nothing of Kathleen remained in the dead village.

She was all here—all his!

Suddenly he bethought himself of Tiraney and turned. The village was gone; only a thin mist lay caught in the Strath, a mist thin and smoke-like which dissipated itself upward into the sky even as he watched. As the village had disappeared, Kathleen had become whole again.

NOW, on the moors, the name Tiraney is never mentioned, and the curious depression called Strath of Tiraney is gone. For Martin Lane planted the blessed weed myrtle over the spot where the ancient village stood, sprinkling it with holy water to break the curse.

And yet some people say that on the Eve of Michaelmas a wailing comes off the moors, a sound like the frustrated crying of the *little folk* who wake to find they have not exacted their last full measure of revenge.

But that is only hearsay. Few people walk the moors at night, and those intrepid ones who do may have mistaken the crying of a child lost from his mother whose feet have become tangled in the thick myrtle which twines and intertwines among itself.

Perhaps the spell of Tiraney is broken; perhaps not. Only one thing is sure: *the eyes of Kathleen Lane no longer shine silver in the dark!*

An Adventure of a Professional Corpse

The Blind Farmer and the Strip Dancer

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

One man finds that death is at a premium, and that dying brings big dividends.

MY PROFESSIONAL engagements as an obliging corpse have always been legitimate.

I really make a most convincing corpse—I wish you could see me. Certainly none of my clients can complain that they have not had their money's worth. You see, my heart is on the right side of my body, and it beats very slowly—barely forty to the minute. In fact, it does not really beat at all.

It just flutters. By drinking the liquid that my uncle discovered in a remote South American village, I am able to fall at will into a sleep that has every appearance of death itself; even my lips turn blue. The liquid kills the sensory nerves and removes all traces of abdominal reflexes. It makes me unconscious, and I am, to all intents and purposes, dead.

Physically abnormal as I was, the discovery that with a little medical assistance I could make an excellent living by simulating death, really opened to me the only vocation for which I could hope. James F. Bronson had found a profession.

My chief trouble was in keeping out of the hands of crooked clients. I might have been a rich man a dozen times over, had it not been for my own code of ethics.

After I picked up young Dr. Roesche and instituted him as a partner in my operations, things went beautifully. He had brains and was straight as a string. Once he was satisfied that I would enter into nothing illegal, I could count absolutely upon him. Poor Roesche! As a medical man, he was always tempted by the scientific aspects of my case; but he was always headed off by the necessity of three meals per diem.

"It's nothing rare to have the heart on the right side as you have, Bronson," he would say. "Your attendant peculiarities, however, are different. With a heart that flutters instead of beating regularly, and a slow heart at that, and with your barrel chest that even cheats a stethoscope, you're worth prolonged observation—"

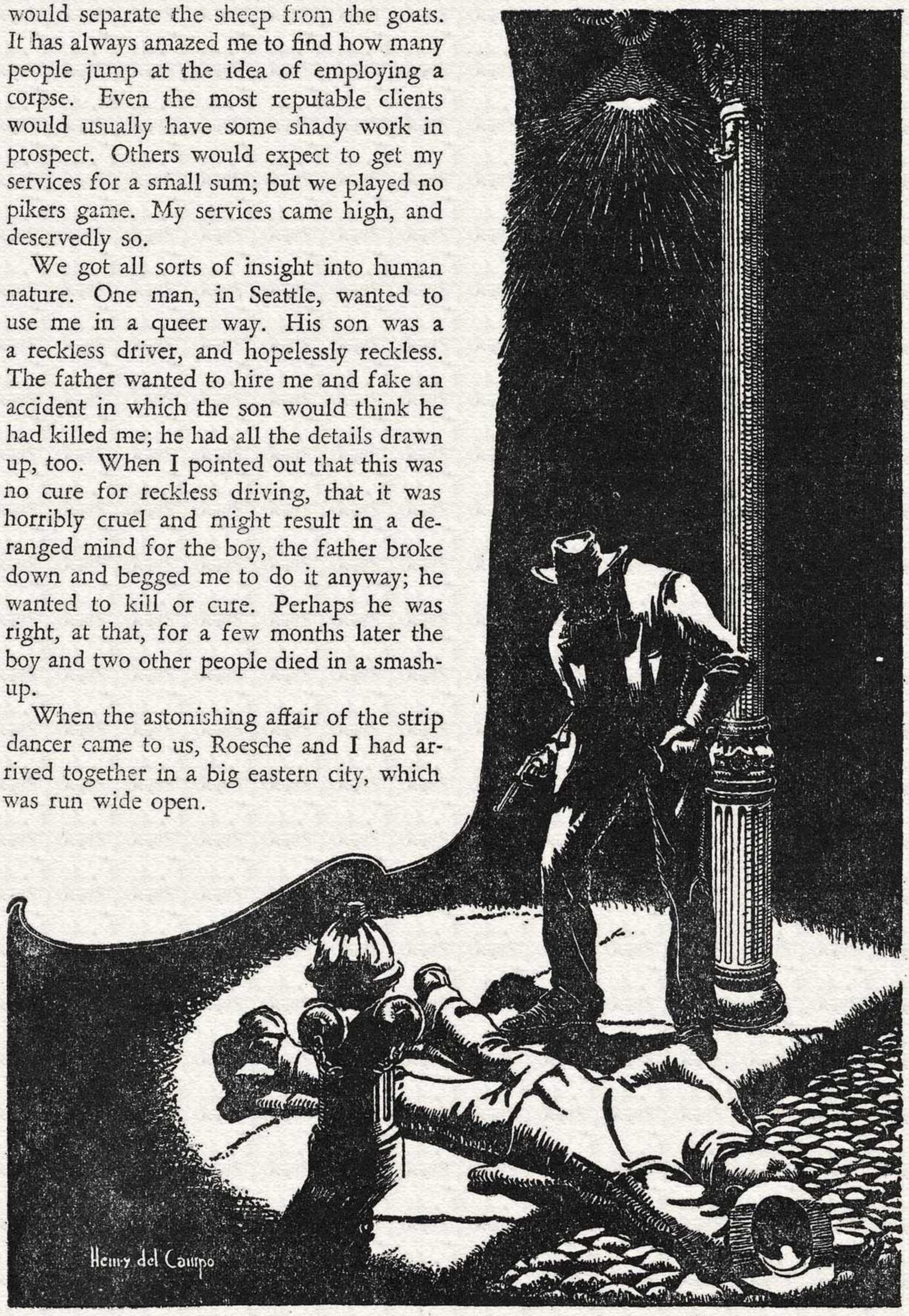
"What's the bank balance?" I would ask, and that settled it.

It was Roesche who really put my original profession on a business basis. He would precede me to a chosen city and conduct the discreet advertising we employed. The replies flocked in, and he

would separate the sheep from the goats. It has always amazed me to find how many people jump at the idea of employing a corpse. Even the most reputable clients would usually have some shady work in prospect. Others would expect to get my services for a small sum; but we played no pikers game. My services came high, and deservedly so.

We got all sorts of insight into human nature. One man, in Seattle, wanted to use me in a queer way. His son was a a reckless driver, and hopelessly reckless. The father wanted to hire me and fake an accident in which the son would think he had killed me; he had all the details drawn up, too. When I pointed out that this was no cure for reckless driving, that it was horribly cruel and might result in a deranged mind for the boy, the father broke down and begged me to do it anyway; he wanted to kill or cure. Perhaps he was right, at that, for a few months later the boy and two other people died in a smash-up.

When the astonishing affair of the strip dancer came to us, Roesche and I had arrived together in a big eastern city, which was run wide open.



"'And there ain't no danger of him coming back. . . .'"

On this occasion I took over the answers to the advertisement myself. One of the first that I opened hit me right between the eyes; I could feel a certain desperate quality in the words that appealed to me. It lies before me as I write:

"Dear Sir:

I would like an interview. You may be able to help me, and no one else can. The lives and happiness of several people may depend on it. Your advertisement has given me courage to make this appeal. Please see me.

Viola Dane."

She appended her address.

I gave her an appointment, and when she showed up, Roesche was parked in the bathroom of our hotel suite. I never interviewed anyone without precautions, as I had a horror of being entangled in anything that might prove downright illegal.

Miss Dane was small but exquisitely proportioned, radiant with the most superb youth and beauty; you would have thought she did not have a trouble in the world. She was very expensively gowned. Her jewels were magnificent enough to be vulgar. I was not surprised when she informed me that she was a dancer in a night club here, a famous one.

"I can pay for your services," she said almost impatiently. She was suffering from some intense agitation. "But can you really pretend to die, so it would look real? Would a doctor be fooled?"

"Many doctors have been," I said, smiling. "That is, under ordinary circumstances. I won't submit to hospital or fluoroscope tests, of course. Suppose you tell me how you expect me to help you?"

Experience had given me quite a professional air. Also, I had let my beard grow, the better to conceal my natural pallor and to preserve it. This lent me an appearance of age and dignity.

"Well," she responded, "there was a man—a man named Ascher—"

Right there, she bogged down. She was pale and nervous, unable to go on, her slim jeweled fingers twisting and untwisting.

She seemed gripped and checked by a certain horror of saying any more, yet driven to it by a still more powerful necessity.

"What do you charge?" she asked, as though trying to gain time. I helped her, by explaining that my fee depended entirely on the work in view, and by stressing the fact that nothing illegal would be considered.

And still her face was white and set, her eyes were desperate. Nothing I could say would penetrate her agitation or put her at ease.

"I—I'm going to be married before long," she blurted out. "But that has nothing to do with the matter, really."

SHE paused again. I gave no hint that I knew she was lying. If a woman's going to be married, everything in her life revolves around that focal point. Suddenly she got off on another tack.

"Viola Dane is my professional name," she said. "My real name is Viola Hartzell. I used to live on a farm near Lebanon; that's fifty miles from here. My folks are there now. My father's nearly blind; cataracts. I haven't seen him or my mother for—for two years."

This came with a rush. Her composure was returning, she was getting her emotions under control, and now she settled down to what she must say. And she showed a delicacy about saying it, a hesitant choice of words, a slight flush as she spoke, which proved that, whatever her business, she was no hardened sinner.

And this was perhaps curious, for she was a strip dancer in that night club, the type of girl most persons would think callous and long past any delicacy. Which goes to prove that generalities are wrong,

and that none of us really know much about our neighbors.

"There—there was a man named Ascher," she said again. "Felix Ascher. He was a commission buyer, and he was in Lebanon at harvest time buying up crops. We raise a lot of fruit around there. This was two years ago, or a little more. It's awfully hard for me to say, Mr. Bronson, but I must make you understand. I really knew nothing at that time, and I suppose it was my own fault. You see, my father was a terribly stern man—"

I began to feel ashamed of the fact that Roesche was listening, as she proceeded.

Well, it was the old story, or I thought it was. This man Ascher skipped out, and in her back-country town a girl who had a baby and no marriage license was up against plain hell. And this poor kid had been up against something far worse. Her old man was one of these hellbent puritans who would wreck the whole world rather than compromise with Satan, and who ruled his own roost despotically. And her father had aimed to treat her like Sally Jennings. She went on to tell me about Sally.

"She was an awfully nice little girl, Mr. Bronson, sweet and shy and pretty. In high school she got to going with Willy Smith, who worked in the men's furnishings store after school hours. Well, it came out that she was going to have a baby, and she did. She was more surprised than anyone else; I guess she never did know just how it had happened. She was only fifteen, you see. That was five years back. Her folks took the baby away from her and she never did know where it went.

"She's still there in Lebanon. She does the housework at home, and sometimes she comes downtown and everybody looks after her and talks, but nobody will associate with her or even speak to her. She looks like she spent half her time crying, and I suppose she does. Willy still works in the store, but he never liked her after that happened. Anyhow, his folks wouldn't let him marry that kind of girl, though Sally's father tried to make him do it. So that's what I had to look forward to all my life. Do you get the picture?"

I got it. She was flushed and earnest now, the words rolling out of her without any hesitation. She made me see this poor little tyke of a Sally, condemned to a living hell all the rest of her life in that backwater town.

"What happened?" I asked quickly. "With you, I mean."

She laughed. Not a hard laugh at all, but one of really happy triumph.

"Oh, I let them think I was broken-spirited and hopeless. And before the baby was born, while I could still get around pretty well—I just skipped out one night and headed for the city. It was pretty tough going, but I won through. The baby's with me now, and you bet he stays with me, too!"

"Good for you!" I exclaimed. "Where's Ascher?"

"Oh, him! Nobody knows." She accepted a cigaret and was grateful. "He just disappeared. He went out west and could never be traced. Believe me, I tried! Well, Mr. Bronson, that's why I'm here. I want you to be Felix Ascher."

"You—what?" I blurted out. Just then the telephone rang. It was Dr. Roesche, from the adjoining room, with the door closed now.

"Listen, Jim," he said. "I was reading about this girl in the paper last night. She's playing around with that fellow Wilson—you know, the one who inherited all the paint and varnish millions, and who made such a God-awful fool of himself on Broadway last year. He lives in this burg. The paper said wedding-bells might ring shortly."

"All right," I replied, speaking for her benefit. "Suppose you come upstairs. I want

you to meet a lady who's here. Five minutes? Right."

I rang off and turned to Viola.

"That's my partner, Dr. Roesche. He must work with me in whatever I undertake, so he'll have to hear what you say. I can sketch in the story for him later. Now, what's this about wanting me to be Ascher?"

SHE pressed out her cigaret.

"The idea came to me when I read your ad." she replied. "First, I want to make you understand the reasons. My mother and I have always been very close, but she'll never go back on her principles. My father's not well, he won't live long; but they'd never let me come near them as things are now. This whole affair has just about broken my father's heart. He's stern and hard, but we always did love each other very dearly, and I'm the only one of their children left. There's the big element—affection. The only way they'll receive me or see me, is as Ascher's wife, so I'm going to be just that. If you could see them and know them, you'd realize that their position isn't as unreal as it seems."

Just then Roesche came and knocked. I brought him in, introduced him, and in a few words sketched the situation as though he knew nothing of it.

"But where'll I come in, Miss Dane?" I asked in some perplexity. "All those people will know that I'm not Ascher."

"No. We'll deal with my mother, my father, and my Uncle Ezra who lives with them; just those three. They never had dealings with Ascher, I doubt if they ever more than saw him in passing. And with your beard, that makes everything quite certain. I can get a marriage certificate forged easily enough. You go there with me pretend to be Ascher and the father of little Felix, and my husband. Do you see now?"

I did not, and said so. It looked fantastic and senseless to me.

"I don't go around pretending to be another man, Miss Dane, except as part of my own work. My business is simulating dead men."

"That's exactly the point," she broke in eagerly. "I'm coming to that, Mr. Bronson. I know that my folks would like nothing better than to give the baby a home. If I could leave him with them, he'd have a good home, a fine upbringing. They'd love him dearly and he'd inherit all my father's money. I thought we might go there for a short visit, just two or three days. Then you could die. You might be quite ill when we got there. It wouldn't involve anything wrong at all. It would simply make everything right between me and my parents."

"And," said Roesche, "you'd be rid of the kid and free to marry someone else."

That shot went home. She looked at us, her cheeks burning, her eyes ablaze. Before she could burst out with hot words, I cut in quietly.

"You mentioned marriage, Miss Dane. Let's have no evasions, please. I hate to pry, and yet I must satisfy myself. Does the man you're going to marry know all this story?"

"He knows all of it; every bit," she said.

I believed her, and somehow I felt a little flash of admiration for her. Why? Hard to say. She wakened it, that's all. I could well credit that her impulses might be mixed, that she might have more than one end in view. People are not simple; they are complex. They seldom move along straight lines to some sure and single objective.

"Then," I replied, "he must be a very fine and understanding man."

"He's not." A trace of a bitter smile touched her lips. "He just doesn't give a hang. I didn't say I was making a love match, did I?"

This was her one show of hardness, and

I was sorry I had wakened it in her. At least, it proved to me that she was no liar.

"Give me a chance to talk this over with Dr. Roesche," I said. "I'll telephone you after luncheon; I can't jump at decisions, in my business. But I warn you that such a plan will be expensive. I take big chances and get paid accordingly.'

She pulled three rings from her fingers and dropped them on the table.

"You can get five thousand for these anywhere, or I can. Is that enough?"

It was. I told her to keep the rings until she had my answer, and with this she left us. When she was gone, I lit a cigaret and looked at Roesche.

"What d'you make of it?"

"Simple enough. She's got the paint and varnish account hooked," he said cynically. "Wilson won't marry her and take over the kid. So she parks the kid in a soft spot and is free. Then she lands him for keeps and alimony later. But what of it? Nothing illegal that I can see, and her money's good. Why not?"

Somehow I could not quite agree with him. What stuck in my mind was the story she had told me so earnestly, the picture of that pitiful little Sally Jennings, and this girl's own initiative in evading a similar hell. A girl who had fought like that for her illegitimate child was not parking him in order to cut loose. Not much.

"Maybe not." Roesche shrugged at my argument. "But she's doing it. She's tempted to do it in order to marry Wilson. Then she'd be set for life, see? You notice what she said, that he didn't give a hang about her story. He wouldn't. He's a wild one himself."

After lunch I telephoned Viola and then went to her apartment. The baby was there, with a nurse, and he was a cute kid right enough. When I was alone with Viola, I went at her without evasion.

"I want to understand this thing fully, Miss Dane; and somehow I don't get it. Isn't there more to the whole thing than you've told me?"

"Yes, there is, but I don't know how to make you see it," she said slowly. "Your friend, Dr. Roesche, puts a cold blanket on me. I don't like him."

"He's the only man I'll trust to bring me back to life and handle all details. Of course, I'm not interested in the morality or ethics of your purposes—"

"It isn't morality. It's everything here, inside of me," she broke out, with both hands at her breast. Her eyes were shining with a strange new light. "It's the baby. What chance has he got in the world, with me? If they think he has a name, everything will be right for him at home, he'll be welcomed and loved, he'll have a chance for a fine straight life there—"

Almost incoherent, she broke off. Suddenly she smiled and leaned forward, looking me in the eyes.

"See here, Mr. Bronson! I just can't explain; I can't find the words. But I feel sure you'll understand if you only go there. I'm quitting my position Sunday night. We could drive up there on Monday. If you'd spend an hour on the farm, you'd realize everything that's so hard for me to tell you. I can't fight your thoughts, your ideas of me, except by giving you other ideas. Will you do it? Then, if you don't want to go through with the rest of it, I'll quit."

And she meant quit, too. Upon the word, the lights went out of her eyes and her shoulders drooped for an istant. This decided me.

"We leave on Monday," I said. "What's the name of the town—Lebanon? I'll have Roesche go on by train and wait for word from me."

She brightened, and flashed me a smile. "Thank you! Come around for me at two, on Monday afternoon. We can be up there in an hour and a half. Will you drive my car? Good. And I'll have the five thousand dollars ready for you then, too."

SHE was as good as her word. When I took her bags out to the car on Monday afternoon, she handed me an envelope with the money in it. And I noticed that she was not wearing her rings.

I drove, and she held the baby; the nurse was left behind. Roesche had gone on to await word from me at the Lebanon Hotel, and he was rather sour about it all, still insisting the game had a catch in it somewhere. He did not cotton to Viola Dean any more than she did to him. I rather thought he might be right, too; but it was this very uncertainty, this element of risk, which made my odd profession so fascinating to me.

We drove up into the fruit country, and she greeted every hamlet, every landmark, with delighted recognition, as though she had been away twenty years instead of two.

She was sparkling, eager, filled with excited suspense. As we drove, a disturbing thought occurred to me, and I voiced it.

"If we're staying with your people, won't they expect us to occupy a room together?"

She gave me a quick, gay laugh. "Oh, you don't know our farm! There's room and to spare; that's why my uncle lives with us. I had two brothers and a sister, and they're gone now. The flu epidemic carried them off. I'll take one room with the baby, and you can have another room next it; that'll be quite all right. What worries me is whether you'll be able to fool our old country doctor. He's pretty shrewd."

I smiled. "I can stand any but the most simple test of all—a mirror to the nostrils. I can't very well stop breathing, you know. But I'll take care of that, all right."

We came to Lebanon in good time. It was a sleepy little town around a courthouse square, and nothing to be proud of. As we passed the dingy hotel, I thought of Roesche holed up there, and chuckled. Then we were heading out into the country.

Twenty minutes later, we were at our destination. And it astonished me.

The farmhouse was large enough, truly; it was well painted, and everything about the place was neat as the proverbial pin. Having been brought up on a farm, I could appreciate the fine points of this one.

"Here, hold the baby!" exclaimed Viola Dane. Then she was out of the car and dashing for the side door of the house. I held the baby and waited for the resultant explosion.

There was none. Nothing happened for a long time; it seemed long to me, at least. At length the baby let out a wild squall, and this got action. Viola came out, and her mother with her; a handsome, muscular woman of forty-five, with splendid stalwart features and brave eyes. A fine, straightforward woman, who came to me and gave me a quick grip of the hand, a sweeping, searching look, and then turned to the baby.

"Take your husband inside, Vi," she said. "Give me that child—glory be, my own grandchild in my arms! I'll go get your Uncle Ezra. He's in the orchard. We're hiring the spraying done, now, with a power sprayer. Welcome to you, son. Go right in."

No frills about her. She headed for the orchard, and Viola led me toward the house.

"It worked, it worked!" she breathed excitedly. "I didn't even have to show the forged wedding license; I don't want to do that if I can help it."

I went in with her, and not a bit comfortable about it either.

Her father was a massive, stooped man of fifty, practically blind and much broken; he seldom left his chair. Yet he had a remarkable face and a more remarkable personality. He gripped my hand, passed his fingers over my face, put an arm about

his daughter, and tears crept out on his cheeks.

"I'm glad you folks are here," he said very simply. "It's been a long time. Where's the baby?"

"Mother's got him," Viola replied. "She went to bring Uncle Ezra."

That was all; no dramatics, no religious sentiment, no Old Homestead stuff. Yet the man's personality, strong and stark and dominant, was over the whole place. No reproaches to me. He talked about the homely things of the farm, the animals and crops and changes. He was the kind of man who does his praying behind closed doors; the strong kind. I began to sense that if the girl had gone a bit wrong it was probably her own fault—as she had admitted.

Her mother came back with the uncle. He was a fine deep-eyed man, saying little but making himself felt. A younger man than Hartzell, he had the same quality of deep reserve; he was the one who kept up the farm nowadays.

Mrs. Hartzell was different. She was brisk, always busy about something, always chirping out bright comments. Those straight, stalwart eyes of hers left you with the feeling that she knew a lot she didn't care to say.

There were no servants; just the three of them here, one crippled and done for, the other two running the place. They were homely, competent, calm. The whole place reflected the people in it. If Hartzell had money, as Viola had suggested, it was in the bank; things here in the house were not for display but for comfortable use.

"Well, I guess you folks want to get settled," Mrs. Hartzell said at length. "Fetch in your luggage and I'll get the south room ready. Ain't in much need except of airing."

Viola drew her mother aside, speaking quickly and softly, but the blind man's ears caught the words.

"What's that? Heart trouble? Real sick?" he repeated, leaning forward. "Son, I'm sorry. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd call you by that name. I've come mighty close to cursing you; and now I'm glad your trouble ain't to my door. Ma, you'd better telephone Doc Torrens to come and look him over. I got a lot o' faith in Torrens."

Viola staved this off, somehow. We fetched in the bags and got settled, and the afternoon wore on. The more I saw of this house, the more I was impressed by its placid, steady strength; no other words could express the feeling.

Dusk was gathering, and Mrs. Hartzell was bustling about her belated dinner, when Viola took the baby upstairs to get him down for the night. She asked me to come along. Her mother had got an old crib out of the attic, and she put the baby to bed in this. Then she turned to me.

"Well, what's your decision?"

"Oh, that's all settled," I told her. "Go on with it, of course."

"And do you understand my reasons, the things I couldn't explain?" She gestured toward the sleeping child. Her voice was soft but passionate. "Think what his life would be with me, an artificial life, with servants and money and all sorts of deviltry; and think of him here in this house, living this life, simple and fine and good, with these people—can you see that it'll break my heart to give him up, and yet it's the only thing, the only hope, for his whole life and future?"

She made a mistake in asking me. After the brief contact with these people, I began to see things with different eyes. I began to feel that Roesche had been right about her. And I resented the idea of tricking these relatives of her.

"You may be thinking of his future," I said, "and you may be thinking of your own. It's no affair of mine."

She flinched, as though I had struck

her, but I went on downstairs and left her there. It was none of my business, after all; and I hate these sentimental women.

My words must have got under her skin, for she was pretty distant all evening. I occupied a bedroom to myself, without incident, and in the morning got hold of her, alone. We had to settle on a program.

"All right," she said quietly. "Shall we say tomorrow afternoon, late?"

"Good enough," I replied. "Make it five o'clock? Then I'll drive into town this morning, see Roesche, and make arrangements. What about the undertaker, the funeral, and so on? You've got to think about that angle."

"I have already," she said. "Country people around here don't go in for embalming, much. The undertaker will bring a coffin from town tomorrow night, and you'll be buried next day. I thought Dr. Roesche might come out and spend the night, and get you away. He could be a friend of mine from the city—though I hate to call him a friend," she added spitefully.

"Then I'll have him come out with your Doctor Torrens."

WHEN I announced that I was driving into town that morning, Uncle Ezra said he'd go with me and fetch back a sack of chemicals for the sprayer. There was nothing for it but to take him along, so right after breakfast the two of us got off.

We were no sooner away from the farm than Ezra Hartzell ran a hand over his short, square beard, and made a remark that petrified me.

"Viola's a right smart girl," he observed meditatively. "I wonder she ain't scart that the real Felix Ascher might show up some day."

I turned and gave him a look, and what he read in my face brought a thin smile to his lips.

"Ain't no use in wasting a lot o' talk," he went on. "I don't hold it against you, none. You're her husband, and I guess you know the whole story. It was cute of you folks to come here this way and fix things up with her ma and pa. That ain't my business; I'm glad of it."

"What makes you think I'm not Ascher?" I got out. He chuckled, and the chuckle sent a shiver through me.

"Easy enough, son. After she left home that way, I left too. I follered this man Ascher clear out west, and caught up with him. And there ain't no danger of him coming back. Not ever. I ain't told a soul about it, not even her pa; he don't hold with settling matters that way."

I was wordless before the implication of what he said; his silence was as grim as his hard straight eyes. The less talk the better, I thought. He had no intention of spoiling Viola's little plan, took me to be her actual husband, and was satisfied with the whole affair. Talk was risky. So I changed the subject and he never referred to it again.

We left the car before the antique hotel and separated. I found Roesche in one of the slatternly rooms, and he greeted me with relief. We lost no time in settling all the details of our business.

"The blowoff comes at five tomorrow afternoon," I told him. "And at five o'clock, you be talking with this Doctor Torrens, see? When the telephone call comes, you run out to the farm with him. You're a friend of Viola's from the city. I'm afraid of these country doctors; they're shrewd, as a rule. I want you to make the mirror test yourself."

Roesche chuckled. "Sure; leave that to me. I'll get ahead of him with the mirror, all right. How about the funeral arrangements?"

I explained Viola's plan. As he would be at the house, he might arrange to telephone the undertaker; thus he could insure

getting a solid top coffin. The effects of the drug would last several hours, and during the night he could replace me with a couple of weighted bags and screw down the lid hard and fast. Once we got this done, I could make my getaway and all was jake. That Roesche could steer everything properly was certain. We were accustomed by this time to be ready for any emergency that might arise. On one occasion Roesche had even helped sit up all night with the corpse.

So I drove back with Uncle Ezra and his sack of chemicals, and we talked farm on the way home.

All this day and the next, I hung around the place. The Hartzell's pretended no affection, but treated me with a homely politeness; Uncle Ezra really took a shine to me, thinking that he had pierced my secret, and rather respecting me for the part he thought I was playing.

Viola put sunshine into the house, and her parents were insane about their grandchild. At first I was tempted to think they would have forgiven everything if she had just shown up with the baby; but I soon perceived otherwise. That father of hers, under the surface, was like grim death. Legitimacy meant everything to him; a matter of principle. Viola had figured things out very correctly after all, and her apparently fantastic scheme was the only one to have gained the end in view.

During these two days, I was astonished at my own changing viewpoint of everything in life—a temporary change to be sure, due to the influence of these people around me, but a very definite change. All the old standards of life and living seemed false, unreal, far away. If I could feel this so strongly, Viola Dane, who was emotionally stirred besides, must have felt it even more acutely.

So far as her child was concerned, this was the ideal place for him. No doubt about that.

WEDNESDAY afternoon drew on. It was four o'clock; in another hour we would put on the act. I was on the front porch, talking with Hartzell, who sat in his chair drinking in the afternoon warmth. Viola was helping her mother in the kitchen. The telephone rang, and Mrs. Hartzell answered, and then came to the door.

"It's a friend of yours from the city, son," she said to me. "A Doctor Something—I couldn't get the name. Why don't you ask him to come out for dinner?"

"Thanks, I will," and I made a jump for the room inside. Something was wrong, or Roesche would never be ringing me.

"Hello!" I said. "This is a surprise; glad to hear from you! So you're in Lebanon? The folks would like you to come out to the house for dinner. You will? Fine!"

"I'm not the only one," came the voice of Roesche, more sardonic than usual. "Pin your ears back, Jim! That fellow Wilson was just here—yeah, the paint and varnish playboy. He was asking how to get to Viola's place.

He's on the way there now, and burning up the road. If there's any hitch in the program, give me a ring back. If not, I'll stick to the outline."

"Fine," I said, and rang off. "He'll be out, Mrs. Hartzell," I said. "Viola, let's take a walk down the road—what say?"

She knew something was up, and whisked off her apron. We sauntered away from the house, and once we were out of sight, I halted and told her about Wilson. She went white as a sheet.

"Oh!" she said. "Then—then he must have found that I went away with a man. He's frightfully jealous. And he's come—"

"He sure has," I said, as she paused. "Looks like his dust down the road now. That's why I got you out here. Whatever play you make, make it here, away from

the house. Going to tip him off to the game?"

Her head came up. She gave me one look, and in this moment I caught a flash of her mother in her face.

"I am not," she said quietly. Then she turned away, looking down the road at the approaching dust, in silence. It was none of my business, but I was curious to see how she would handle her marrying friend.

It was a big car, a roadster, and Wilson was in it. He was nothing to write home about; a flabby-faced man with hot, intolerant, arrogant eyes. He brought the car to a halt and stared at us, without getting out.

"Hello, Vi!" he exclaimed. "Hope I'm not intruding on your rural felicity?"

"You are," she said in a curt voice. It sounded, somehow, like her father.

"Oh, come now!" Wilson lost his sneer. "What do you mean, running off like this without a word to anybody? I came along to meet the family, Vi—"

"Well, you have your wish," she said. "Mr. Wilson, this is my husband, Felix Ascher."

Her words hit out like a blow. I was dumbfounded; Wilson sat there with his jaw hanging. Then he straightened up.

"My God!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "You mean—is this the man—"

"This is the man," cut in Viola steadily, calmly. "And we're married. If you hadn't come here with a sneer on your lips, I'd have told you in another manner; but you've asked for it and you can have it straight."

Wilson never uttered another word. He blinked at me, looked at Viola, then leaned forward, started his engine again, and drove away.

"Whew!" I drew a deep breath. "There goes a lot of money, Viola. You certainly didn't use much tact in the way you broke the news."

"Tact? To hell with tact!" She whirled on me savagely, angrily, her voice lashing out at me. "I'm sick and tired of your taunts and disbeliefs. You've thought all the time that I just wanted to be free to go marry that man. Well, maybe I did, among other things, but I've changed my mind. I'm going to stay right here with my baby, understand? That's all there is to it. Now come on back to the house and do what I've paid you to do, and I never want to see you again."

She flounced away toward the house. When I got over my amazement, I followed her, and chuckled to myself. She had certainly put a final and complete spoke in Roesche's argument and in our half suspicions of her!

And I was glad. All the fine things I had sensed in her at our first meeting, were now confirmed.

Our program went off like clockwork. I put the drops in my eyes, took the dose of the drug that would put me to sleep, and as Roesche had timed the mixture and dosage accurately, there was absolutely no mistake.

At five o'clock, Viola telephoned to Dr. Torrens in Lebanon. Roesche was in his office, and came out to the farm with him, took care of the mirror test the first thing, and assisted to certify that I was dead as a doornail.

I DO not wish to convey any sense of jaunty smartness on my own part. I was only too poignantly aware of the grief and shock that this business must bring to the good people around. This is one aspect of my singular profession from which I always shrink.

It is the only form of harm I have ever knowingly done anyone, and is not nice to think about even now.

Roesche did his work, as always, with the perfect timing and aplomb of a vaudeville artist. That night he brought me

back to life; and before departing in the darkness, I helped him screw down the lid on my own weighted coffin. We had no chance to talk of other matters, however.

Not until he joined me in the city, two days later, could he ask me what had become of the paint and varnish playboy. I told him, and he whistled softly.

"So I was wrong! And that explains it, too—the change in her. Well, I have to hand it to that girl after all."

Six months later, we were in the City of The Saints, deeply involved in a ticklish job which made us a pile of money but can never be put into print. One morning, Roesche came into my room, wearing an expression of cynical exultation.

"Say! Remember that girl back east—that strip dancer, Viola Dane? Well, cast your headlights on this, and then tell me how wrong I am!"

He put before me the rotogravure sheet of a Sunday supplement, which carried a lovely photo of Viola Dane, pretty much in the nude. Beneath it was the caption:

THE SCREEN'S NEWEST RECRUIT
Beautiful Viola Dane, Acclaimed By Critics
As Having The Most Beautiful Figure
in Hollywood

"How's that?" exclaimed Roesche. "Am I right, eh? Am I right?"

"No," I said. "You're wrong, and you were always wrong about her. She just weakened, that's all."

Which was probably the case. Some of these days I'll ring her up and ask her.

Temple in Samarkand

By GERALD CHAN SIEG

I think that I have known before
This crumbling vaulted corridor.
In some lost dawn of ages dead
My sandals trod this stony floor.

Through these high windows glowing red
Surely a light was dimly shed
Even as now, and as I stand
So I stood then with bowed head.

Surely the brazen censers spanned
The alter; music slow and grand
Floated sublimely up the air;
And on my hand there was a hand.

Dim shattered dream! The light is here,
The altar rising tier on tier,
The rubied windows robed in dust.
Even the chanting priests appear.

But on that dawn of ages lost
There was a hand where now is none,
Where now a thinning shaft of sun
Touches my fingers like a ghost.



"He lay staring up into the cruel eyes of the demon."

Heart of Atlantan

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

The Voice of Destiny is above all gods—even above the Sun and Moon.

THERE are sins beyond the urge of the appetites, beyond the desires of the senses. Sins besides which murder is but an idle pastime, and all lesser evils mankind in the frenzy of bestial passions indulge in at expense of their fellows, pale into the category of mere mistakes.

For Man is a creature possessing two natures, a material one which can only transgress the laws of the material plane, and a spiritual one by which he may soar to heights undreamed, or descend to depths unfathomed.

For the sins, follies and mistakes of earth, there is punishment provided, or

atonement to be made. But for the sins spirtual there is retribution, grim, lasting, inexorable, and none dare say if it will ever end.

And whose sins thus, and is punished, had best welcome his fate, and hope to outwear it with the slow passage of the years, nor seek to escape it, for though he may seem to do so, having found, perchance, the method, yet always remains the Law that in effect says: "As ye sow, so shall ye likewise reap!"

And sin they never so greatly, yet will that awful Law, with inexorable exactitude, requite them in just and perfect measure, proportionate to the harm they have done—

As It has dealt with me!

LEONARD CARMAN and I sat in my study, smoking and talking as old friends will after long separation. Our conversation ran along the lines of the ancient civilizations, now veiled in the murk of impenetrable mystery.

"And the veil can never be lifted," I mourned. "Nor will these mysteries ever be solved. There are no more Rosetta stones inscribed in unknown tongue together with one familiar to modern scholars. And some of the great lost races and their works passed so long ago that absolutely no traces, however slight, remain to show that ever they lived and moved beneath the sun and moon and stars. Unless," I added, as an afterthought, "science makes greater progress with some form of radio than is now possible."

"I'm not so sure about that," Carman interrupted. "It's barely possible that some fragmentary bits of knowledge *can* be recovered. Perhaps not to the satisfaction of exact science, but still of sufficient interest to satisfy your prying curiousity as well as my perfectly normal interest."

"Wherein do the two differ," I snapped.

"Your curiosity concerns itself with how they lived, what they wore, and the progress they made along the lines of material achievement," he replied, smiling slightly at getting a rise out of me; which, by the way, I had never succeeded in doing with him; for a more equable temper than he possessed, I had never encountered, while mine is short-lived at best, and, also, highly explosive.

"While my normal interest is chiefly concerned with their intellectual attainments, the extent of their knowledge regarding the finer forces of nature and their possible uses," he elucidated.

"Just what are you driving at, Leonard?" I demanded, his words arousing within me a rapidly awakening interest.

"Simply that I believe they progressed along quite other lines than we of this modern age, thus giving rise to the tales of an 'Ancient Wisdom,' now lost. And I likewise think that under certain circumstances, it may be recovered, if not wholly, at least in part."

"And the method?" I queried. I was not at all skeptical now. He'd fully convinced me, and I felt, even before he replied that he already had a working basis with which to make an attempt to solve the otherwise unsolvable.

"I can have the method here any evening you may select," he assured me gravely.

"Right now, if that is possible," I stated, and he agreed. He stepped to the phone and called a number, and a moment later —"Otilie?" Apparently the answer was satisfactory, for he asked: Can you come to where I am, this evening?" Again the response was as he desired, for he gave minute directions for reaching my place. I was curious about this "Otilie," and showed it, and he increased my mystification by smiling enigmatically, and saying, "Wait."

In about fifteen minutes a taxi stopped before the house. Carman went to the

door to admit the strangest-looking being I've ever seen. As I had surmised from the name, "Otilie" was a woman, but such a woman!

She was a hunchback; wry-necked, with a pronounced squint in her left eye. Her nose had been mashed flat at some time, her mouth hung slackly open, revealing gnarled yellow fangs, and she walked with a decided limp. Add to all this, a muddy brown skin and you have the picture. All in all, she was the most unprepossessing figure imaginable—until I noticed her hands. They were beautifully kept, with long tapering fingers, and seemed those of an artist or a musician.

Later, I learned that Otilie was a Finn, and that she was wholly illiterate. But when one looked at those hands and listened to her voice, a clear, bell-like contralto, one forgot all else about Otilie in sheer, downright fascination.

"Get me a stack of paper and a few pencils," Carman demanded. Rapidly he cleared the top of my library table, placed a chair for Otilie, and escorted her to her seat as if she had been an empress.

"Under normal conditions," he explained rapidly, "Otilie cannot read or write. But under other conditions she does some surprising things with automatic writing."

I felt disappointed, let down. So his "method" was merely automatic writing! I think he saw my feeling reflected in my face, for he smiled tolerantly and told me very gravely:

"Henri, you've known me for a long time, and you know that I do not lie to my friends. When I state that Otilie is phenomenal, and has proven it time and again, to my entire satisfaction, I think that you may well believe it.

"Otilie," and he turned to the queer-looking woman, "do you know anything about Atlantis, or the dead and gone civilizations of antiquity?"

"No," she said. "Otilie knows nothing of those. What do you want to find out? I'll try and see what we can get."

She picked up a pencil, inspecting it critically, laid it flat in her hand, and commenced making long, slow, magnetic passes, stroking the pencil with the fingertips of her right hand. And as she stroked. the pencil, her face, which, despite her grotesquerie, wore an habitual expression of pain and sullen discontent, assumed gradually an abstracted expression, and her usual harsh breathing grew calm and even. The change was so amazing I was dumfounded. She appeared remote, detached, as if between herself and the ordinary world were measureless gulfs of time, space, and condition.

She ceased stroking the pencil, poised it on a sheet of paper, and nodded slightly at Carman. For a minute or so the pencil moved in aimless figure eights, and Carman looked at me with deepest significance.

Suddenly the pencil started off, apparently by its own volition. Watching closely, I am prepared to state that Otilie's hand followed the pencil, rather than the pencil following her hand.

"Atlantan," it wrote, and paused, again describing figure eights. Yet Carman had queried concerning "Atlantis." A second later it wrote "Tekala, priestess of Atlantan," Then, "Kalkan the Golden."

"And who was Tekala?" queried Carman softly.

OTILIE'S face grew rapt, her eyes lit with an inward fire, her entire figure and features were transformed.

"H-m," grunted Carman. "This is a new one. Never saw Otilie like this before. Wonder what's coming."

We were not long in finding out!

"Who is Tekala?" The deep, mellow tones of Otilie's voice became wistful, dreamy, filled with a strange reverent awe. "She is lovely, beautiful, with all the

beauty I never had and can never have! But she says I am to let her speak for herself."

Silence reigned supreme in that quiet study of mine, but Carman and I felt the presence of a fourth personality, one of an alien nature, with a will so terrific in its impact that ours were less than naught beside it.

Added to that was a queer impression of incredible antiquity, plus age-long sorrow, patience beyond human concept, and longing unendurable.

Abruptly the lights dimmed, grew dully red, blinked and went out. Otilie gulped, audibly, Carman whistled softly, and I swore feelingly. Then I noted a faint glow of light close by Otilie and wondered vaguely if she were becoming phosphorescent.

But the glow increased, became a faint aura gradually growing in brilliance to a nimbus whose center was a radiantly, exquisitely beauteous being, formed of tenuous light. It was, at moments, hard to distinguish from its nimbus, while at other moments it became clear and distinct, revealing itself as a form unmistakably feminine in contour, yet robed and shrouded in particles of light, so that its actual apparel was largely a matter of conjecture. Yet there was majesty expressed in that luminous figure, a stateliness shown in the poise of the head, and an air of conscious power compelling respect.

"This," I thought, "is no materialization flummery common to séances, but a geunine apparition—progressed to a stage far in advance of ordinary humanity."

It took me but a second to think thus far, and it took less than that long for our shining visitant to grasp my thought, read it, and appreciate it at its true evaluation. She stared at me for a long minute, then smiled slightly—and oh, the pathos of that smile! It would have wrung the heart of a stone image ! It brought a lump to my throat, and caused my eyes to sting and blur with an unaccustomed mist.

And again the radiant vision stared unbelievingly, but then, to my utter surprise, it—or *she,* rather—moved swiftly till the outer edge of her aura was well within a foot of my body, and there she stood, obviously *reading* me as a scientist might study some strange and unusual form of life.

Meantime I gazed up into her face, watching it change from curiosity to undestanding, and from that to genuine hope and satisfaction. And I know that I would have given anything and everything I owned could I but lift from her the burden of sorrow, or whatever it was which gave even her smile such wistful pathos.

But apparently our visitor was not as yet completely satisfied, for she moved over beside Carman, her nimbus well nigh touching him. She started, as if surprised, but her expression of doubt lightened somewhat, as does that of one who recognizes an old friend.

One look she cast at Otilie, and that look bespoke absolute pity for the poor ugly travesty, who was watching her with visible adoration writ large in her strange eyes, and again our visitor nodded, as to a friend well liked.

Once more she nodded, vehemently this time, and moved with the speed of light, standing by Otilie's left side. She stretched out her shapely right arm, laying her hand caressingly on Otilie's shoulder. I saw Otilie shudder with ecstasy at the touch, and then her hand began following the pencil, but with a speed I'm positive the poor creature could not have achieved unaided.

But that pencil was bewitched; it was writing in letters and words of liquid golden light! And its first question showed plainly the interest our visitor took in all three of us:

"How are you named, you man of a younger race, who are of so deep intuition

that you can read my lost condition in my features; and who holds so great sympathy and pity that you would alleviate my lot, if you could?

"And who are you, man with the calm gray eyes, you to whom emotions are strangers, being replaced by curiosity instead, ever seeking to probe into the secrets of antiquity and the lost lore of the elder races?

"And who are you, little Sister whom I envy, for you have the most precious gift in all the world—freedom, while my body and mind are held helpless prisoners in a dreary prison, not even on the bosom of the kindly earth, but far down in the dim gloom of the bed of old ocean?"

And at that point Carman interrupted. "Lady," he asked in all seriousness, and his very tone bespoke his absolute belief in what she had caused to appear on the paper, "lady, you speak of yourself as being a prisoner, yet you have appeared *here!* And if indeed you indited that message through the hand of Otilie, I ask you to explain how you know our language, if you are of such great antiquity as your appearance implies."

"I am an Atlan," flashed the response on the paper beneath Otilie's hand, "and this is but my projected spirit you do now behold. As to my understanding of your language—bethink you: If I be indeed of so great antiquity as I have claimed, and if I wield sufficient powers to be enabled to appear to you here, then in the course of all the long ages, I have had sufficient time in which to learn it."

CARMAN nodded, fully satisfied, gave our names, Henri d'Armond; Leonard Carman, and plain Otilie. Then he coolly voiced the same question I was about to ask:

"May we be told—"

"Who I am, and why I thus appear before you? For long I have sought the society of wise men of this day and age who could understand and believe, and perchance, help me to escape an eon-old doom. And it seems that at last I have found my goal—or have I, for I dare not hope too greatly.

"But let me tell you three my tale, which will fully clear up the mystery of the Lost Land—and afterward—who knows? At the least, it may entertain you, and may meet with credence, and perchance I shall feel less lonely thereafter in my prison cell—"

And then, as Carman nodded eagerly, the pencil fairly flew across the pages, and Carman read the words aloud, while Otilie and I hung spellbound on every word as the strangest tale ever told unfolded itself:

I AM Tekala. I am that woman who with a single motion of her hand destroyed a continent and its inhabitants! Truly, a terrible tale to tell in such few words; therefore I will amplify.

It was late in the day, and the sun was slowly sinking to his rest in the calm waters of the great western sea. In the streets of Kalkan the Golden, sacred city of the sun-god, the lights were commencing to gleam; and overhead the silver stars were adorning the purple skies with gorgeous splendor.

I stood beside old Ixtlil the high-priest on the flat top of the highest tower of the great sun temple. The unearthly beauty of the scene held us both, old *paba* [father; priest] and young priestess in breathless enthrollment for a moment. It was a spell I dreaded to break, yet something within me drove me to voice the question which had vexed me for over a year.

"Tell me, O *paba,*" I said softly, "who am I, and who my parents, for I never knew them. All I remember is the temple, and naught else know I, and my sister-priestess Malixi taunts me when, daily, we

prepare the flowers for the altar. Tell me, O *paba*, and relieve my mind."

Very gravely the old *paba* surveyed me, and I saw in his keen old eyes a twinkle of tolerance for my youth and natural feminine curiosity, which not even the temple discipline could entirely eradicate.

"Tekala, little Daughter of Heaven," he murmured, laying his gentle hand on my bowed head, "it were better that you know not, for it is an evil story; but it is your right to know. Also, there is another reason why you should not, but of that, later. So—

"You are the first-born of wicked king Granat and his no less evil consort, Queen Ayara! But they wanted a man-child, and being what they are, when you disappointed them, you were placed in a boat on a dark, stormy night, and sent adrift, the tide running strongly out at the time. That was some sixteen years gone.

"A fisher-craft picked you up in the dawn, far out of sight of land. The captain, an adherent of the Old Gods, brought you to me, deeming you more than mortal, so beautiful a babe you were, and your robe so richly embroidered.

"The symbol embroidered on that garb of yours told me your identity. So I went straight to the royal palace carrying you in my own arms, whence not king, queen, or the most brutish guardsman dared remove you lest the wrath of the Sun God punish such sacrilege.

"Full into their sneering royal faces I hurled my denunciation of them and their evil ways, prophesying that in a day to come the babe they'd rejected would repay them, unless they accepted the will of the Lords of Life, and reared you as parents should.

"They laughed in my face, bidding me rear the brat, myself, if I wanted her. So, seeing that through them spoke the voice of Destiny—which is above all gods, even the sun and moon—I bowed to them and left their palace. Two sons have come to them since that time, and young demons they are! And I say that when Granat and Ayara pass to their appointed places—which are *not* in the sun-mansions—those two princes will complete the work begun by their parents, and this race of Atlan will be wiped forever from the face of the earth, so thoroughly that naught remains but a tradition!"

The old *paba* lapsed into silence. I felt his eyes probing me, reading my soul. A strange look came on his beautiful old face and he whispered:

"Our Lord the Sun forfend! Let it not be by *her* hand . . . not hers . . . not hers!"

So low his tone I knew the words were not for my hearing. . . .

FROM the temple below us arose confused shoutings, thunderous crashes, and a chorus of ear-piercing screams and shrieks from the quarter where dwelt the priestesses. I nearly swooned! But old Ixtlil was a father indeed in that moment. He grasped my shoulder and shook me back to common sense.

"It has come," he said quietly. "The blow falls sooner than I expected, but 'tis ever thus! Now, Tekala, hasten after me, for this temple is no longer a safe place for you."

Down a narrow winding stair he led, and I followed, until I wondered if we would never cease descending. Finally we came into a great circular room, and across this he led into a small crypt.

"This is no time for false modesty," he said sternly. "Take off all your robes immediately."

Dazedly I obeyed. In the center of the little room was a big, flat disk of copper let into the floor, and to that Ixtlil motioned me, and I stepped on it. What he did I know not, but from all directions at once came peculiarly tinted light-rays of purplish hue, beating on my skin like a

shower of needles. After a time Ixtlil did something which caused the purple rays to give place to a brilliant flood of light like that of the sun on a clear day.

He pointed to a wide, tall silver mirror against one wall, and I saw myself, and marveled at the magic which had changed the pale gold of my flesh to a brown tint so dark that I looked like any savage maid of the outlands. Even my light brown hair had become blue-black.

Truly the tale of Ixtlil's magic had not stated the half! Men said that he was past-master and sole custodian of all the magic lore and ancient wisdom brought from the stars by the Shining Ones, that he knew the secret of Life. In short, he was believed to be all-wise and all-powerful, but that could not have been true, or—but perhaps it *was* true, and in his mysterious way he worked through my hand, despite his aversion to using me, whom he loved, as an instrument.

HE brought a robe fashioned from a beautiful pantherskin, a broad belt of silver bosses and links, a bow and a quiver of arrows, a long-bladed bronze knife, and bade me dress and equip myself. Then he handed me a leathern pouch attached to a beaded baldric so that it hung from my right shoulder to my left hip.

"In this pouch," he stated, "are a full year's supply of tiny food tablets. One will sustain you for an entire day. Also, there is a bottle of jade containing a wine so potent that one drop allays a day's thirst even in the hottest desert. Ten drops on the tongue of a dying man can renew his lease of life for a year, unless his wounds are hopeless. A small box of basanite contains a salve that heals wounds, sores, and bites of insects and reptiles, be they ever so poisonous. This ring"—and he slid an armlet of some dull, white metal lighter than chalk, above my elbow — "will become icy-cold whenever an enemy is nigh, but it will glow, warm and comforting, at the proximity of safety.

"Long ago I foresaw this catastrophe, and made all in readiness against the day of your need. Come now!" He pressed a stud against one wall and a section opened.

"Through that," he commanded. "Follow the passage. It is a long tunnel, and will take all day to traverse. Here is a bundle of torches to light your way. The passage slopes upward, finally, and emerges in the face of a cliff at the edge of the wild lands of Korgan. Wait till the stars proclaim midnight, then retire ten paces inside, sit on the floor, and look out of the opening. A star will apparently hang barely under the arch of the exit. Mark that star well.

"Stay in the tunnel until well after dawn, then survey carefully your surroundings ere you emerge, lest enemies see you, but if all seems clear, strike out across the desert holding to the direction whence the star arose. Keep that as your objective until the hand of Destiny leads, instead. And now, Tekala, princess as well as priestess of Atlantan, go! As for me, I must hasten back to the Great Shrine—"

"Let me return with you," I sobbed. "Send me not from you, O my spiritual father! I can handle bow and knife as well as any young man in Atlantan, thanks to the training we priestesses receive! Surely if danger threatens the Great Shrine of our Lord the Sun, my place is there! Why must *I* be thrust forth into the wild lands of Korgan, the Desert of Demons, while my sisters are privileged to defend the temple? Let me return, I say, and if need be, die—"

"Nay!" his voice was stern, implacable. "That, above all else, you cannot, must not do! In the wild lands, your hands may keep your head, but back in the temple, certain death is your lot! Child, in your veins is the old royal blood of the *Itans,* the ancient kings who founded Atlantan

and the Atlan race! Granat and Ayara turned from the pure worship of Sun-God and Moon-Goddess and the simple offerings of fruits and flowers, to the dark mysteries of Mictla, god of Evil and lord of Darkness! And when king and Queen betook themselves to evil ways, courtiers and populace followed the prevailing fashion.

"And now, Mitcla's wicked priest, Tizoq, has prevailed upon our rulers to allow him and his depraved followers to stamp out the worship of the ancient gods of our race! The old order is doomed, yet in time the destroyers may go too far, and arouse the wrath of the Eternal Ones, and then—remains Tekala, of the Blood-Royal, Queen of Atlantan and all her colonies! And in her hands will lie the power to bring a recalcitrant people back to the pure gods of the Elder Days, and a new and better era will dawn for our race. But for now—again I say: *Go!*"

I sank to my knees, and thence to the floor, prone at his feet, sobbing bitterly. He raised me, blessing me in solemn, holy words, laying his venerable hands on my head; kissed me on my brow, making the signs and symbols of Sun and Moon on my breast with his forefinger, and—abruptly turned and left! Weeping with despair, I turned and entered the tunnel, going straight away from all the life I'd known and loved.

FIVE days alone in the wild lands of Korgan!

I think most maids would have gone mad in that time, had they been bred as I, in the peace and seclusion of a temple. But now I know what then I did not comprehend—that when old Ixtlil placed his hands on my head and blessed me, he was transmitting a portion of his own spiritual strength and a generous share of his own magic powers to me—and I sorely needed them!

I'd got my direction from the star, and had carefully calculated so that I might hold the same course by night or day. And the white armlet helped in its mysterious way, for whenever I deviated, be it ever so slightly from the direct course, a chill ran up my arm, changing to a warm glow as soon as I rectified my course.

For the first two days I'd foolishly traveled during the hot, daylight hours, but then realized it was overtaxing my body. Wherefore, I rested all the third day in a little patch of shade cast by a clump of stunted bushes, and thereafter I traveled by night.

Idling there as I rested, my mind went back to the temple, and then I began to realize somewhat of Ixtlil's blessing. Gradually I commenced to see clearly. I saw the Ancient Shrine, and the great symbol of our Lord the Sun lying on the floor, battered, bent, its burnished golden surface defiled with dirt and dried blood. The entire place was a wreck. Dead bodies lay in all directions. A priestess I'd known and loved as an elder sister lay naked, slashed and torn. Priests who had died—surely the followers of Tizoq had done their work well in honor of their devil-god.

My soul went sick within me. But I prayed long and earnestly to Sun-god and Moon-goddess for the dead whom I'd known since earliest childhood—that they might dwell in his golden mansions by day, and rest in her silver chambers by night, and presently I felt better. But then a dreadful thought arose in my mind, and would not down: What of Ixtlil?

The heat haze of the desert grew dark as I looked. Surely it was not yet night? Then I knew that I was gazing into a crypt beneath Mictla's temple. Dim, gigantic figures, half human, half owl, wholly demon, were sculptured on the walls. Their great round eyes, made of some luminous yellow stone, gave off enough light to see the venerable *paba* with heavy

bronze fetters about wrists and ankles, and around his waist a heavy chain.

A prisoner! That kindly old man! And then, more clearly, I saw his face. A prisoner? Nay! A servant of the high gods whom not fetters nor chains could bind. He did but wait whatever was destined, serenely assured that, come what might, at the last he would enter into his reward.

I like, even now, to think that across those drear distances of demon-infested desert he sensed me, knew that I was near him in spirit, for his lips moved, and I am sure that his words were: "Tekala, little sister, you do not forget."

WHILE resting next day a tiny breeze came up, and as I enjoyed its caress —suddenly I heard it! And held my breath in sudden fright, although the armlet gave off no warning chill. It was a strange, wild, sobbing moan rising to a dolorous wail like a lost soul in search of the unattainable. Toward evening the keening died out, but I was shaken by fears and knew not whether to go onward or—

The armlet went cold! I rose to my knees and peered about, but naught could I descry. So I decided it was an intimation I'd best leave that place. Promptly I started, and well for me that I did! Just before darkness fell I glanced back, I knew not why, save that the armlet had not warmed up since its warning chill. I had just topped a rise and stood on the crest of the long sloping ridge of sand, and I could still see the place where I'd spent the long, hot day.

I saw far more than I expected! A dozen figures moved about the spot where I'd lain and slept. Although I could not hear their voices I knew they had correctly interpreted the signs I'd left. And when a bit later they grouped a moment and then started on my trail, I knew my peril. My sole hope lay in the possibility that they could not follow in the night. Which would give me a good ten hours advantage. But I merely deceived myself when I entertained that idea. The ridge whereon I stood ran in a long slant down into a great basin which, in some far-distant era, must have been the bed of some inland sea.

Reaching the floor of the huge bowl I lay flat and stared up at the crest of the ridge standing sharply against the stars. And over the comb of the ridge poured my pursuers. Down there I was invisible to them, but once they reached the floor of the basin, my chances were poor indeed of escaping their keen eyes. I betook myself to precipitate flight, running like a scared cat for at least two hours ere I constrained my racing feet to a slower gait.

Even so, I think they would have overtaken me ere dawn, save that once again that eery ululation came throbbing and wailing through the night. It bore a distinctly forbidding, angry, menacing tone—yet the armlet on my arm grew warm again, which cheered me immensely.

Deciding that the source of the sound —whatever it might be—was friendly to me, and quite otherwise to my pursuers, I hastened toward it as directly as possible. But it was well after midnight when I first saw, looming dimly against the stars, a tall, indistinct bulk, yet oddly suggestive of the human form. But a human form—so enormous? Never was a statue, even of a god, that big, but ere another hour had passed, I knew it surely for a robed and seated image, female in shape.

Was it a goddess of some forgotten race, pre-human perhaps? or was it an effigy of some demon holding suzerainty over this desolate land? Speculation availing me nothing, as usual, I pressed forward as if it were a well-known and welcome goal—a sanctuary against those savages who sought to capture me, for what purpose I could surmise only too well!

Dawn revealed that my pursuers were closer than I liked. To my relief I saw that none carried bows, although each carried a long spear and several throwing-knives. But their faces and their bodies! The apes in the royal gardens of Kalkan the Golden were actual beauties by comparison, both in features and figures; the chief difference being that the savages were hairless as to their bodies and of an ashen-gray hue. They were without exception, hunchbacked, their necks so short they seemed sunken into the wide shoulders; heavy, squat bodies with long powerfully muscled arms, and short, thick legs with great splay feet.

Finally they drew within bowshot, and I felt that I was done for. Yet still the armlet remained warm, unless I looked back, but in that case it instantly changed. Spread out, crescent-wise, the humped men raced forward, running two bowlengths to my one. Two I slew with a couple of hard-driven shafts from my bow—and then the horns of the crescent passed me and began closing in. But my armlet stayed warm, and the great figure, which I now could see plainly was hewn from one enormous rough boulder, was but a short distance away. And I felt if I could gain its feet, I'd be safe. But I knew, too, that never could I make it. At the apex of desperation, I halted, arrow nocked, bow half raised, fairly aflame with fury. The humped men hesitated, one or another shifting a foot gradually, sneaking a little nearer—it became evident I was to be taken alive. Then I cursed them. By Sun and Moon, by earth and air and fire. I cursed them by day and by night, sleeping or waking. By famine and pestilence, flood and tempest, by thunder and lightning and wind—

And as that last word fell from my lips a moaning screeching howl ensued! The sands of the desert came alive, rising in dense, dun-hued clouds that swept forward, roaring at terrific velocity. And in the space of a single breath—my pursuers were not! Only a low, crescent-shaped ridge showed where they had stood. Yet not one particle of grit from that hard-driving sandstorm had touched me!

I was all alone, staring dazedly at my work—aye, my work! Over me stole the assurance that old Ixtlil had indeed endowed me with more of his magic power than I was as yet capable of comprehending.

With neither let nor hindrance I walked, albeit somewhat shakily, the remaining distance to the feet of the huge figure of the Old Stone Woman who brooded ever, staring out across the desert, waiting for the world to attain to its supreme wickedness.

THAT immense figure was, in reality, a vast rock-hewn temple, shapen to the symbolic semblance it bore by the hands of a people so long passed into oblivion that no legend of them remained. The main entrance was between the two feet. The temple proper was wholly under the skirt of the robe and below the waistline. From there up it rose into the air as a high tower, hollow, within which ran a winding stair leading to a chamber occupying the entire head.

It was when I gained that lofty chamber that I learned the source of the mysterious noises; for the winds that blew free up there, even when the desert below lay gasping for lack of a current of moving air—the winds, I repeat, entering through the nostrils and eyeholes and escaping through the parted lips, caused the sounds which had at first terrified me, and after, guided me.

Times there were, as I learned ere all was done, when those winds uttered chants of warning, of prophecy, and once, a soul-shaking shout of triumph. Also, nightly, voices sighed and whispered,

and I, listening, learned from them the secrets of the olden days—of magic, of gods and demons, and of the dreams of the ancient dead.

There was no one with whom to associate.

So far as I could ascertain by short trips of exploration in the near vicinity, there never had been a city or village built around the temple. And surely there should have been some traces remaining, for whoever they were who had used that temple, they were giants, judging by the heights of the lifts of the stairs. I was of average height, but while I could with ease tread the steps of the great Sun-temple in Kalkan, there in the old Stone Woman temple I was obliged to raise my foot as if treading two steps at a time!

One room I found in that temple wherein were thin slabs of stone, graven with writings in small characters, bearing no slightest resemblance to our heavy, ornate Atlantan hieroglyphs; yet here again the spiritual gifts of Ixtlil became manifest, for I found that after poring over a slab the better part of a day I was able to read much of it. And after a few more days of study, I read the writings quite freely, much wisdom thus being revealed!

NEARLY a year had come and gone since Ixtlil sent me forth through the underground passage from Kalkan the Golden to the wild lands of Korgan. Again and again had I sought out old Ixtlil, throwing myself into that state wherein the sight of the soul views clearly the events taking place at a distance. And always I found him still the captive of Tizoq, still chained in the crypt below the foul temple of Mictla. With practise I'd grown able to comprehend the purport and meanings of conversations without necessity of catching the spoken words. It appeared that Tizoq ever sought to gain by coaxing and threats, some mighty secret from Ixtlil, and ever Ixtlil withstood the desire of Tizoq.

Time and again I contacted my mind with the mind of Ixtlil, beseeching him to unleash his fullest powers and compel Tizoq to release him, that he might fly into the desert and come to where I dwelt in safety and seclusion; but ever Ixtlil made the same reply: "Nay, Tekela, little sister; It may not be!"

Nor would he ever vouchsafe any explanation, but I knew I was beholding a servitor of that mightiest power in the universe, that power which Ixtlil had once spoken of as "Destiny," and that the eon-old struggle between Good and Evil was in full swing in that darksome crypt. And I bowed my head and wept, for my heart misgave me. I knew that Tizoq was totally mad wih hatred and jealousy, for never had he possessed powers such as Ixtlil wielded. That I could sense as clearly as if I were in the damnable temple of Mictla, in the city of Kalkan the Golden, where stood the flat-topped altar beneath the looming effigy of the hybrid devil-god, half man, half owl.

NOW, with a disembodied consciousness, I could see that a vast concourse of people filled the fane of Evil to overflowing, keeping the temple guards busy maintaining an open aisle all the way from the narrow entrance to the foot of the three steps leading to the broad dais whereon stood the altar itself.

It was a most important ceremonial impending, for I saw my parents, King Granat and Queen Ayara, and with them my two bad brothers, Dokar and Quamac. Then came the blare of trumpets and roll of drums announcing a processional. Tizoq, leading, was followed by his devilish acolytes, in the midst of whom walked Ixtlil.

Despite his bonds he walked with head held high on his finely molded lips a calm smile, in his brilliant eyes a light of

pity—not for himself, but for all the world—and surely no great Emperor ever strode to his throne with truer majesty than walked the aged *Paba* toward the altar of his adored Sun-God's demon enemy, Mictla.

Even the acolytes of the God of Evil betrayed by their attitudes—which sentiment seemed general—that they held this gentle old man in actual dread. For all that he was fettered and surrounded by his enemies who hated and feared him, yet the spell of his spirit dominated them, and they knew it, fearing that at any moment he might loose upon them the unguessable, even as they would have done had conditions been reversed.

The drums and horns increased their din as Ixtlil mounted the three steps, but then the clamor ceased. The great effigy of Mictla appeared to assume life and motion. Its wings unfurled, were outstretched as a canopy over the altar, and from the round, cruel, yellow-gleaming eyes a flood of light poured down, illuminating the scene as plainly as daylight. From the ugly mouth beneath the curved beak came thrice repeated the chilling, evil owl notes.

The *paba* was seized violently, and his naked form stretched on his back atop of Mictla's altar, where he lay staring up into the cruel eyes of the demon.

What humiliation had Tizoq in his malicious mind as he approached the recumbent Ixtlil? The owl-priest raised a hand. Again came three owl-notes from the demon-figure. Five acolytes seized the venerable *paba*—one at each wrist and ankle, and one with both hands clutched in his silvery-white hair. Tizoq raised his right arm on high; in his fist shone a knife whose blade was of ragged-edged volcanic glass. Tizoq's arm swooped down—I strove to shut my eyes by pressing both hands over them. And saw just as clearly! For a moment Tizoq bent above his victim, then turned facing the worshippers, crying:

"Thus deals the god Mictla with the high-priest of his arch-enemy, the Sun-God!"

Tizoq held up to view a dripping human heart!

"Behold, ye people! Bow ye before the power of Mictla! Lo, the heart of the first human sacrifice to the new god of Atlantan!"

He turned and flung the pitiful, quivering, sacred thing straight into the open beak of the devil-god.

I KNOW not the words adequate to make plain to other understandings the awful anguish rending my very soul. Ixtlil, the holy one of Atlantan to die thus! My brain, stunned though it was by that sight of horror, was a volcano of hate and wrath, surcharged with desire for such vengeance as would make the devils in Mictlan cower in terror and seek to hide beneath the white-hot rocks of the great Sulphur Sea!

As moves a corpse animated by a life not its own, I rose from my place and started down the winding stair from my chamber in the head of the Old Stone Woman. On the landing level with the huge swell of her breasts, I stood vaguely wondering why I had halted.

Then a small spot of vivid crimson, like a drop of rich blood a-sparkle in the sunshine caught my eye and held my vacant gaze. Hesitant, as one knowing not what she does, I stretched forth a finger and touched that ensanguined spot—and from above, there pealed a thunderous shout of triumph from the lips of the Old Stone Woman. Dully I wondered why. Then a door, hitherto invisible, swung open, revealing a chamber in the left breast. I entered. Eyes still a-stare, I stood striving to understand. Suspended in the air, level with my face, yet upheld by nothing visible, hung a blood-red heart

of enormous size which pulsated and beat like any organism, and yet was formed of a single crimson gem!

Directly beneath the beating heart stood a low stone table on which lay a tablet of polished black onyx, and atop of this a bronze mallet. I could have held back from that table as easily as I could have held back from breathing! And as I bent above the onyx tablet, in letters of living flame which faded as soon as noted, there formed the words:

"Tekala! In the day when your heart becomes harder than mine, lift this mallet, and if you dare, smite! Yet remember—vengeance is of the Gods!"

Vengeance? . . . Smite! . . ."

The flame within my brain roared like the surges of a volcano's angry, molten sea!

Crash!

The pulsating heart of Atlantan burst into a scintillant shower of glittering red slivers at the impact of the mallet in my hand. And ere the tinkle of tiny falling fragments had ceased—

Roar upon roar of thunder, continuous, flash following upon flash of lightning, until the world was all a-glare with purple-white fire. The Old Stone Woman, ponderous as she was, swayed and lurched like a ship on a stormy sea as earthquake shocks added their destructive forces to the universal cataclysm! And *I?* I lay down on the cupped floor within that harsh stone breast, and slept! Aye, like a wearied babe cradled in its mother's comforting bosom! Nor did a single dream disturb me; and as for the tempest's turmoil, and the earthquakes, their din was but a lullaby wooing my sick spirit to deeper, most restful slumber.

HOW long that slumber lasted I never knew. Time had ceased when I awoke. Above, the skies were black as never midnight had been, and the very foundations of earth were trembling as each shock came with terrific violence.

My mind, inevitably, went out to Kalkan the Golden. Aye, Mictla's foul temple still stood, or at least, a part of it. The great fane was but a heap of tumbled ruins, yet the effigy of the Owl-Man Devil-God was unharmed. And on the ruined dais about the altar, some standing and some crouched, were assembled Tizoq, Granat, Ayara, Dokar, Quamac, and a few of Mictla's evil acolytes and dancing-women. Drawn up in solid ranks before them, facing outward, were the men of the Purple Cohort, the King's own bodyguard—and they were sorely pressed to defend their charges.

Down the streets converging upon the fane came people fleeing in terror before walls of water inexorably flowing inward. The sea had risen—or had the land subsided? The spears of the guards were dripping gouts of crimson, for the dais was the sole refuge, and many strove to reach it.

Even as I gazed, a levin-bolt sped straight from the black vault of heaven. Full on the round head of Michtla's effigy it smote with a vicious crackle—I sensed it, I say, in the distance! The great idol reeled, swayed, lurched far over, then with a dull roar it precipitated itself ponderously on the group occupying the dais. A cloud of dust arose, soon settled by the driving rain. I saw Tizoq, or, rather, his dead, ugly face, peering, hideously convulsed, from beneath a pile of debris. Then the waters reached the place, and naught remained save tossing, tumbling waves a-play with strange flotsam!

The terrific forces unleashed when I shattered the ancient heart of the Old Stone Woman were destroying an old land as well as an ancient people. The awful quakes were rending chasms wide and deep in the bosom of the solid ground, and long dormant earth-fires streamed upward. And ever the sea overcame the land. Shattering explosions took place as water and

fire met. The entire continent of Atlantan became the picture of hell let loose. There was not a city left, and even the villages of savages in the wild lands were swallowed up in the vast cracks, or incinerated by leaping, roaring, whistling flames. Yet the Old Stone Woman still stared into space, waiting for a dying world to reach its end. And ever the inward rushing waters were victorious over earth and fire alike.

ATLANTAN was no more beneath the sun! The great continent with its millions of men, women and children, its temples and colleges and palaces, its gardens and glorious cities and fertile countrysides, its rivers and mountains and lakes and plains, its mines with eon-old hoarded treasures of precious metals and gorgeous gems, Atlantan rests at the bottom of the mighty ocean from which, ages agone, it arose!

And I, whose hand struck the fatal blow bringing all that to pass—because I usurped the prerogative of that awful power, 'Destiny,' I am still alive, nor can I ever die while earth endures; for in the hollow of the harsh breast of the Old Stone Woman, enclosed in a new red crystal heart, by Destiny's inexorable decree, I am compelled to take the place of the old shattered heart of Atlantan, there to remain ever young and undying until Atlantan shall again rise from the sea-slime!"

* * * * * *

THE writing ceased. We three—Carman, Otilie and I—sat staring at each other, in speechless amazement. Suddenly Otilie sighed softly and slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

"Good Lord!" Carman ejaculated. "The strain was too prolonged for the poor creature! Help me, Henri, to lift her to the table-top."

But Tekala's "projection" raised a minatory hand. Gliding to where lay the prostrate form, she knelt, placed the palms of her hands on Otilie's temples for a second, and calmly arose, nodding confidently at us.

To our infinite surprise, Otilie awoke none the worse for her experience. Carman attempted to condole with her, but Otilie waved him aside scornfuly.

"I'm all right," she stated. "For a minute I was out, no? But the Shining Lady" —as she designated our visitor—"gave me of her strength, and I feel stronger right now than ever in my life! And I would cheerfully go through a greater strain for her any time she needs me!"

Tekala started with surprise, as if she could hardly believe what she heard, but then an expression of absolute love for Otilie came upon her face as she signed her to take up her pencil again.

"It seems," Otilie's hand transcribed. "That I have found three friends, and I have searched the world over, inspired by such hope, but fearing that never should I succeed in my search.

"Tell me, you who are named Leonard, what would you do, were you Tekala?"

"Let me understand you more fully," Carman replied gravely. "Are *you* here, or in the heart of the Old Stone Woman?"

"My undying body is in the breast of the Old Stone Woman," Otilie wrote. "But all which is Tekala's self is *here!* Oh, I tell you that in all the long ages that have passed since the great cataclysm, I have had ample time to develop powers more than mortal! I could, with ease, materialize here and now, for you, but to what avail? Ere long my will would grow wearied and I should again become but a luminous shadow. But, oh! To be free, in a proper, physical body—"

And right there, Carman interrupted:

"If I were you, I would search the wide world over for a suitable body, one young

and fair, take possession thereof, and leave my old body right where it is till doomsday!"

"But my punishment—the will of the gods?" Tekala was visibly shocked.

"I'd not worry about the gods," Carman counseled. "The gods passed when Atlantan sank, nor can the lost gods ever return!"

"But where shall I find a body whose tenant is willing to be supplanted? I would not dispossess a soul in whom the love of life runs strongly. And I cannot, will not take a dead body—there are laws I dare not transgress—"

And at that point Otilie interrupted, somewhat diffidently, but decidedly, and in her melodious voice was a queer note of reverence and pleading.

"O Shining Lady! Can you use such an ugly body as mine? For if you can, I pray you, take it! I have nothing to live for! I am so ugly that little children run from me in the streets, and what man so low as to love poor, deformed Otilie? Perhaps with your powers you can make this twisted form straight and my hideous face fair. If so, tell me what to do, O most Beautiful, and I will gladly obey! But one thing do I ask—let there still be enough left of Otilie to remember how ugly she was, and know how beautiful she has become! Lady—Lady Tekala! Help poor Otilie! Set free her soul, and take her warped body and twist it to your own semblance! It would be the sole mercy I ever knew in all my dreary life, and it is mercy that I ask!"

Had Otilie struck Tekala the effect would have been the same! Tekala reeled and almost fell, but recovered her equilibrium and glided to Otilie. Long and earnestly the two looked at each other—the ugliest woman I have ever seen, and the loveliest woman the world has ever beheld—and what silent message passed between them I dare not even surmise. But obviously both were satisfied, for Tekala bent her regal head and kissed Otilie full on her mouth. Carman and I, watching, saw a look of unearthly ecstasy transfigure Otilie's features, and then the unbelievable happened!

Otilie swayed and fell, lying on her back, and Tekala, standing there, turned about facing us, gradually leaning back and little by little merging herself with the other form lying so still on the floor, until the transformation was accomplished and the two had become one! And we two, staring spellbound, incredulous, saw the poor, twisted body of Otilie straighten, the bosom swell and heave, and the grotesque features slowly bloom into loveliness beyond all words!

Tekala arose from her recumbent position and faced us in triumph, and truly if she had been beautiful before, now she was Beauty's self! She held out her exquisite arms to me—*me,* Henri d'Armond—and her voice that still spoke with Otilie's deep, rich, bell-like resonance, uttered the words I'd hoped to hear, but had never believed possible:

"Henri, my beloved, I am yours, take me!"

In an instant my arms were about her, my lips claiming hers in insatiable hunger—my brain swaying, drunken with happiness, experiencing rapture unearthly—

There came a terrific *crash!* I saw a blaze of unbearable brilliance filled with figures not of earth, and in their midst yet dominant, a great Face, calm, majestic, awful in its inexorable justice. And I knew, even in my stunned and bewildered condition, that I looked full into the sublime countenance of Destiny itself, that power which is above all gods, and which I, a mere mortal, had, in my presumption, defied when I aided Tekala.

At the same moment I experienced an irresistible force snatch her from my arms despite the fervor of my embrace. I heard

her voice, heart-broken, calling despairingly:

"Henri! Henri! Never again—"

My senses left me and I fell to the floor, unconscious.

HOW long I lay there I cannot say, but when my senses returned—I could see nothing but a blaze of light. Of Leonard Carman there was no trace, nor of Tekala.

Dimly I heard a voice saying in deep contralto tones:

"Mr. d'Armond, are you alive?"

"Who speaks?" I demanded shakily, and heard the welcome reply:

"I, Otilie."

She helped me to my feet. My hand groped until I found hers. I heard her sobbing.

"Are you hurt?" I questioned, stupidly, for I was still dazed.

"Not hurt," she gasped. "But oh, that poor, dear, lovely lady, Tekala! Her gods were not dead, after all, even if Mr. Carman said they were—and they have taken their vengeance upon her—and me! For I am again Otilie, ugly as ever, and you—what have they done to you?"

"I—am blind," I replied shakily. "Nor do I ever expect to see again! Help me to a chair."

Uttering little words of pity and sympathy, she complied, and as I felt her warm tenderness for me in my misfortune flow through me with the touch of her hand, I said, weakly:

"Otilie, I need you! Will you come and live with me and take care of a poor, blind fool?"

"I—I—am so ugly," she sobbed. "But if you need me—and can endure my presence—yes."

Otilie and I were married the next day. After all, I am rich as compared to her and can make life a little more bearable for her in her unfortunate condition. It is purely an arrangement of convenience, yet she takes excellent care of me, forestalling my slightest wish. She at least is happy. Yesterday I heard her singing as she went about the house.

As for myself—I am blind, as I said before. Ten years now I have dwelt in darkness—tortured by memory, and blessed by memory.

Three months ago I saw dimly a dull red light glowing in my everlasting gloom. Later it came again, growing stronger. At first I thought it was my sight returning, and found out that I was wrong. Ultimately it became a crimson glory like incandescent blood. And I knew it for what it really was!

Within the swelling breast of the Old Stone Woman, deep in the ocean's eternal gloom there beats still the great crimson crystal heart. And imprisoned, undying, facing each other yet unable to move, within the pulsating Heart of Atlantan are the two beings I loved, but who, in their arrogance, set at naught the awful fiat of Destiny—ancient priest and ancient priestess, whom Tekala recognized as Ixtlil of old, but yet the Carman I knew who counseled Tekala to her fall, and the priestess Tekala, whom, for so brief a moment I held in my arms, and whose lips I pressed but once ere she was torn from me! And there, undying and unchanging, they wait, wait, wait until Atlantan once more emerges from the depths.

"'I can speak with certainty, for I tested the mechanism myself — with my own head!'"



The Reward

By ROBERT CLANCY

A man's life hangs by a thread—when he has been beheaded by one.

"MY FRIEND," said Yuan Hu, "You have placed me in a most uncomfortable situation."

Hargreave grunted. Not half as uncomfortable, he thought, as the situation you've got me in.

"Is it true," continued Yuan, "that you have saved my life from a poisonous snake. And yet in doing so, you have committed an unpardonable offense. You have violated the holy interior of the Temple, where none but consecrated priests may dare to enter."

"Couldn't you overlook that offense, in view of the fact that it saved your life?"

Yuan Hu's silence and immobility completely refuted that suggestion. After a long pause, Yuan continued:

"According to our ancient law, a stranger who violates the sanctity of the holly inner Temple must be beheaded. There is no way out. And yet I must reward you for saving my life."

Hargreave wondered what the "reward" would be. A lavish funeral, no doubt, with special rites performed.

"And so," Yuan concluded, "I must keep you a prisoner here until I solve this problem."

Yuan Hu left the room, leaving Hargreave alone. Beautiful prison . . . carpeted and draped in red, gold emboidery, jade statues; but two days later it began to get on his nerves. There was no company except a servant who came periodically, but could not or would not say one word.

Finally Yuan Hu returned on the third day, in the dark of the early morning hours, and awakened Hargreave.

Yuan was actually smiling. "I have solved my dilemma. Come with me."

Hargreave followed, his heart pounding. Through the long hall Yuan led with his lantern, and into the Green Room they went.

"Sit down on that chair," Yuan Hu instructed, "and be perfectly still."

Hargreave complied. What was that queer looking mechanism on the wall back of the chair?

Sit perfectly still, Yuan said, looking fixedly into Hargreave's eyes. Hypnotized by that look, there was little else to do. Then, there was a little whirring sound around him.

"Continue sitting still, my friend. I have just performed my duty. I have beheaded you."

Hargreave's first impulse was to leap with surprise. He had felt nothing at all. But partly from Yuan's hypnotic stare, and partly from an instinctive warning within him, he remained motionless.

"Listen carefully," said Yuan, "the mechanism which has beheaded you is so fine—finer than the thinnest silk thread—that although it has severed your head from your body, none of the veins, arteries, tendons or bones have been disturbed from their positions. It is so fine that there will not be much flow of blood; just a little, which will soon clot. But," he warned, "if you lean forward, your head will fall from your body, as a petal falls from the plum flower. And if you become excited or fearful, or cause your pulse to beat faster, there will be too much of a flow of blood, and you will lose your life's blood.

"Neither must you speak or swallow," Yuan continued, "for that will change the position of the larynx. You must remain seated, motionless, in an upright position, without excitement or fear, and you must breathe calmly and evenly. If you can do this for twenty-four hours, everything will, by then, be entirely healed. The cut is so fine, that even the bone will be knit by that time. You will then be free to go, and I will present you with precious gems such as you have never seen. Thus will I be fulfilling my double duty."

Yuan Hu arose, his eyes still fixed on Hargreave's. "Do not fear. What I have told you about the wound healing in twenty-four hours is true. I can speak with certainty, for I tested the mechanism myself—with my own head! You see, we Orientals can tolerate long waiting. We know well the virtue of patience. That is the secret of our survival."

With that, he turned and left the room, carrying out his lantern, and leaving the room lit only from the window, by the dimness between dark and dawn.

The effect of Yuan's hypotism was wearing off. Gradually, Hargreave was

coming to himself—but becoming more dazed as the numbness wore off. He wanted to laugh, shriek, at the sheer idiocy of the situation. A man sitting down, with his head cut off—and still living. Or was he living? Or was his head cut off? With subconscious self-control, he remained still, breathing calmly, evenly. He sat for a while, his mind a blank.

Then a thought struck him. Perhaps Yuan Hu was playing a joke. Perhaps he hadn't cut off his head at all.

After all, it was a bit incredible. It must be one of those forms of mental torture in which the Chinese excel.

A sudden sharp ring of pain around his neck weakened that theory. But maybe that pain was also psychological? Very carefully, keeping his body as rigid as possible, Hargreave lifted his hand slowly, slowly to his neck. Slowly he placed his hand underneath the pain. He felt a warm trickle on it. Slowly he brought his hand in front of his face. That red stain wasn't imaginary.

Another thought occurred to him. Perhaps the mechanism hadn't sliced through his neck. Perhaps it had merely made a circular scratch around, just enough to let blood flow and be convincing. He was seized with a diabolic temptation to lean forward to see whether his head would fall off. But would he "see"? He decided that such an experiment would be too risky.

The light of dawn grew brighter—the sun rose—and threw in a slanting beam of light. The sun, thought Hargreave, rising and setting every day. This is just another day for it. Tomorrow would be another. He wondered what that slanting ray of sun would find on the dawn of the next day. Would it find Hargreave's headless body slumped over in the chair, and his bodiless head rolled on the floor, with a horrible grimace, and the green carpet soaked with red blood?

He watched the rays of the sun changing, the shadows shortening, marking the progress of the day. Soon he felt hunger and thirst. The realization came to him that he must calmly suffer these for twenty-four hours. And no sleep! What if he should become drowsy, and in spite of himself start nodding? There wouldn't be more than one nod.

And so he sat immobile as the day grew bright. Outside, he heard birds singing, and in the distance he heard voices.

His neck throbbed and pained. He wanted to swallow. The motion was coming as if by itself. He made a great effort not to swallow. This was torture! Wouldn't it be better to get it over with? He could not last twenty-four hours. Why suffer so long? The end would come anyway.

A fiendish urge came upon him to lift his head from his body. Wouldn't that be funny? Such a little act would end it all! It would be interesting to note all the reflex actions, if only some scientist were there to observe. How long would consciousness remain after the head were removed? Would the eyes see? How long would the action of the body continue? How long could the hands hold the head?

HARGREAVE lapsed into a state of semi-consciousness. The light of the sun, the noises from without, the room, all seemed to mingle together in a curious harmony, a humming, vibrating unity. Was this the "attainment" that Orientals sought in their motionless meditations?

He felt his limbs growing stiff. Perhaps he was dying. He remembered Yuan Hu saying that he tried it with himself. But, hell! these Orientals were different. They could lie on nails, walk on fire, bury themselves for three days.

Endless, endless, tortured waiting. Not daring to move, growing stiff, the throbbing pain still at his neck, hunger and

thirst keening at him. Was this life? Yes, life, for there is no pain in death. But life at low ebb. Death must be approaching.

The shadows lengthened. Night would soon fall. And then the real struggle. The birds stopped singing, the voices stopped, it grew darker and darker. He watched anxiously the fast dying light, as though he would hold on to it. Then darkness and silence. Complete darkness and silence.

Night. At least during the day there was some comfort in light and sound. But now—

And he would have to fight sleep. Could he sleep in an upright position? Could he dare to close his eyes? His whole body was numb and stiff—maybe there would be an involuntary motion.

As night went on, the darkness palled upon him. It seemed to be a cold black emptiness that rushed past him, full of fearful things. In his weakened condition, he reflected, his mind would be open to hallucinations. He would see and hear things. He would become afraid. The excitement of fear would finish him.

His eyes were hurting from having remained open and looking in one direction for so long. He closed them, and as he did, a drowsiness came over him. But he had to fight sleep. Yet he must not make too great an effort . . . he must not get excited. He opened his eyes; they hurt; they began watering. He blinked, and his lashes stuck somewhat together. It was an effort opening again. There must also have been some blood coming from his eyes.

He felt that he was going to be afraid of the darkness. If only he could think thoughts that would drive away the fear! But as he stared into the blackness, he could only think of what creatures, what foul monsters of the night must exist there. Staring into the thick night, he saw moving shapes—slimy, writhing things. A foul dragon with gleaming, evil eyes, with jowls dripping blood. How easy for this dragon to take his head in its maw!

Stop! Stop imagining those things! He must raise his thoughts to something that could not make him fear. In the night outside, stars were shining up in the heavens. How calm and refreshing they were. He would think about the stars. He fell into a semi-trance. He felt as though his head were no longer attached to his body. There was an emptiness beneath his head.

His head was rushing through the night. It was rushing through endless space. It was going up to those stars.

Was he dead? Had his head really fallen off? Was this his head making this journey through space? There was no feeling, no pain. Just an endless moving. Suddenly, his head seemed to be falling down through space—down it rushed—or was the space rushing up? The motion slowed; there was a little angel standing nearby. A pretty creature, shining, beaming, smiling at him. She threw a sprinkle of flowers before her and beamed brighter—

Hargreave's senses slowly returned. The angel—it was the window. Dim streaks of light were coming through, growing brighter. Dawn!

The numbness and stiffness were gone. He could move his arms. He felt his neck. Healed! Slowly, he arose from his chair, tried to move his head to one side. It hurt a little—but it could move!

The door was opening. Yuan Hu entered. "I have kept my promise, my friend. I have the gems here for you. Let me now show you the way out."

"Do you know, Yuan," said Hargreave, "I think you've given me something more valuable than gems. You've shown me the virtue of Patience."

Yuan Hu smiled and handed him the gems.

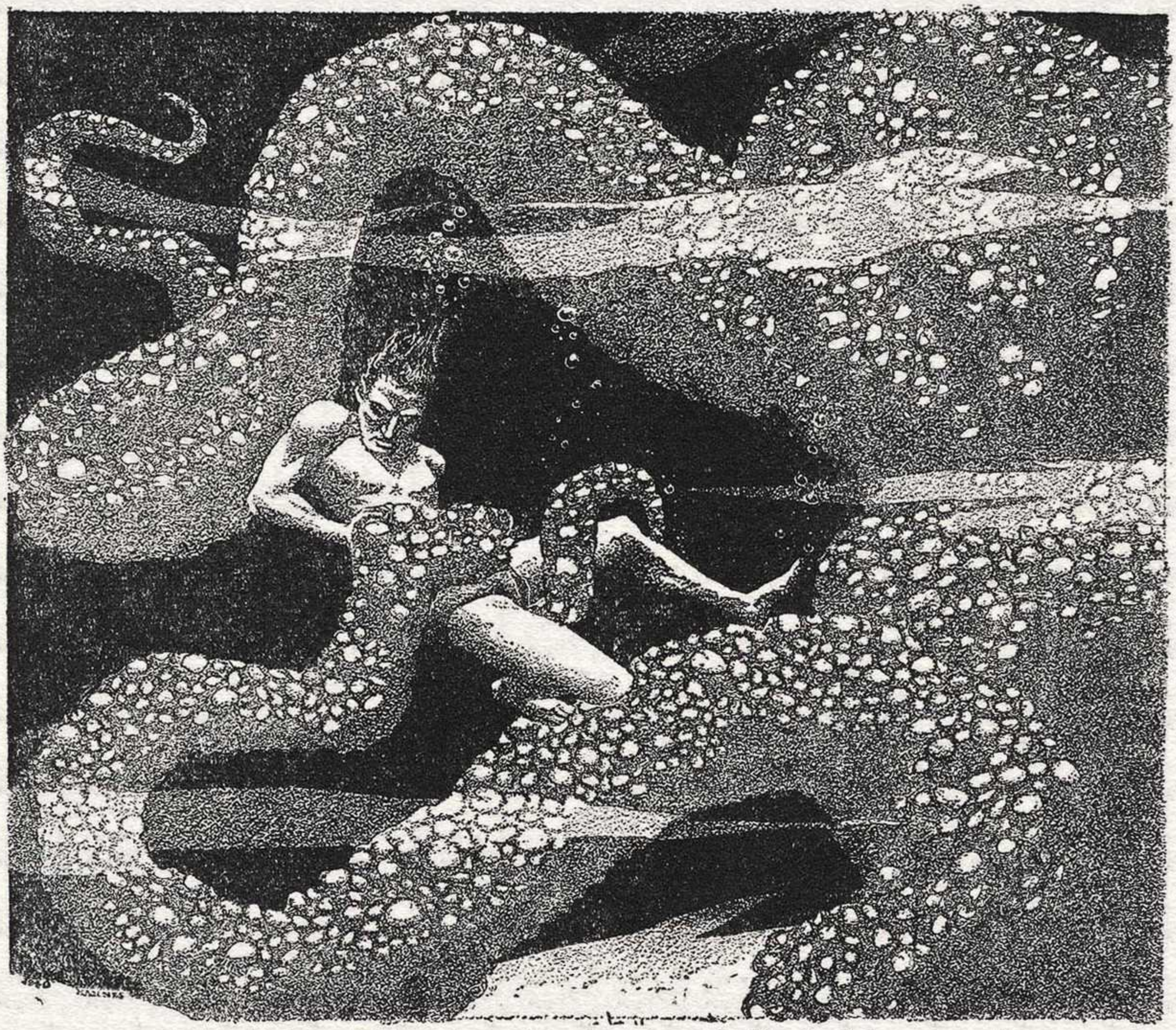
Sea Born

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Beneath the sea lie death and horror for human beings—but Eric Leigh found love and a new life.

EVEN now, I can't make up my mind about Eric Leigh. Was he just a deluded dreamer, and were those fantastic and incredible experiences of which he told me no more than stuff of dreams? Or was it all true? If it was, then this world holds mysteries and strange survivals of which we modern men suspect nothing, and there are those upon this earth who are forever hidden from us yet who are close kin.

Six years ago, Eric Leigh and I were



"Eric felt himself being drawn down into the wicked beak of the monster."

"She drove down through the water straight toward the hideous body."



sixteen-year-old youngsters in a small south Florida coastal town. It was on a hot summer morning, on one of the white coral beaches north of the little town, that I first touched the fringe of the mystery around Eric.

We had been lounging in the sand, looking out across the blue sheet of the Atlantic as we talked. The sea was like molten turquoise, slapping gently against the jagged coral shore, ruffled by the hot tropic breeze and with screaming pelicans flapping low above it.

Finally I stood up and took off my shirt. "I'm going in and cool off," I said. "Come on along, Eric."

A frown came into Eric's keen, dark face, and his black eyes looked greatly troubled.

"You know I can't, Frank," he said, rather miserably.

"Come on," I repeated impatiently. "Your father will never know the difference. Besides, what right has he got to forbid you swimming? What's the matter with him, anyway?"

Eric looked unhappy. "I suppose he's just afraid that I'll get drowned or something. Anyway, he made me promise him that I'd never go in the water."

I told him disgustedly, "You're the only fellow around here who's never been swimming even once. All the fellows around here think it queer that you never go in the water.

"I'd like to go, Frank," Eric said troubledly, looking out with yearning eyes at the rippling blue. "Somehow, I'd like

to swim more than anything in the world. But I promised——"

"Your father must be crazy to make you promise that," I grunted, untying my shoes. "No wonder everyone in town thinks he's a little queer."

It was true, too, that John Leigh was considered eccentric by everyone in Stockton. He was a thin, quiet man of fifty who had come here with his infant son years before, and had built a small cottage on a coral point north of town. He had no business, but spent most of his time just sitting and staring out at the sea.

He was always quiet and courteous, but you always got the feeling that he was not paying much attention to you but was thinking of something else. Naturally, people thought him strange, and Eric too was considered a little queer, and was rather left out of things by his schoolmates. I was about the only real companion he had.

And even I felt disgusted with Eric this morning, and my irritation made me impatient with him.

"Your father will never know you've been in," I repeated. "You've got to learn to swim sometime."

Eric shook his dark head unhappily. "Father says not," he told me. "He says I mustn't ever go into the sea, as long as I live."

"Why not?" I demanded. "Did he ever give any reason?"

"No," Eric admitted, "except that it would be bad, that something terrible might happen to me if I did."

By this time, I had my clothes off and was starting toward the coral shore, beyond which was a fairly deep tidal lagoon. Then I turned around, with a sudden mischievous inspiration.

"Come as far as the edge, anyway, and watch me dive in," I suggested with assumed innocence.

Eric came quite unsuspectingly to the edge of the coral. Beneath us lay the lagoon, which was seevral feet deep. You could look down and see the feathery, waving sea-fans and the round loggerhead sponges, and mullets swimming like streaks of light over the white sand bottom.

I WAITED until Eric was right beside me, pretending that I was getting set to dive. But when I moved, instead of diving I suddenly grasped Eric by the shoulders and shoved him off the coral edge.

"Now swim!" I shouted with a laugh, as he splashed down into the clear depths. "You've got to swim now, Eric!"

For a moment or two I stood there, shouting with laughter as I watched Eric floundering around beneath the surface. I knew he wasn't in any danger, for I could pull him out in a minute.

Then I saw him straighten out down there under the water and begin to swim. He instinctively used a queer stroke such as I had never seen, keeping his arms back along his sides and beating them with a rapid flutter. He shot through the water down there like a rocket, twisting and turning through the waving sea-fans with the ease of a fish.

A minute had passed and still Eric didn't come up. He was swimming along down there, shooting this way and that, without showing the slightest sign of distress.

"Eric!" I yelled in sudden panic. "Come up!"

He didn't hear me, of course, down there under the water. He swam swiftly on, darting and turning. I saw the flash of his white face and glimpsed his eyes blazing with excitement.

He had been down almost two minutes now! And he still was not making any effort to come up, or showing distress. It was so uncanny that my nerve broke. I dived in after him.

I got hold of his shoulder and pulled

him up to the surface by main force, and dragged him onto the shore.

"You might have been drowned, you crazy fool!" I sputtered. "How on earth did you hold your breath so long?"

"I wasn't holding my breath, Frank," Eric cried. "I was breathing the water."

I stared dumfoundedly at him. Eric's black eyes were still blazing with excitement, his breast heaving.

"Breathing water?" I exclaimed. "You're crazy! Nobody can do that."

"*I* can!" he declared. "Why, the water was easier for me to breathe than air is—I'd like to have stayed down there for hours."

His eyes flashed. "It's wonderful down there—cool and green and beautiful. I felt as though I were home, somehow."

"You're talking nonsense," I said shortly. "You may be able to hold your breath a little longer than most people, but that's all there is to it."

"It's not—I'll *show* you that I can breathe the water!" he declared. "You watch!"

He poised to dive into the green waters again. But then an exclamation from behind us made us both spin around.

"Eric, what are you doing?"

It was Eric's father. He had come along the beach behind us without our hearing him.

John Leigh's gray eyes were dilated with something like terror and his thin, aging face was pallid with emotion as he looked at his dripping son.

"You've been in the sea, Eric," he said in an accusing whisper, his eyes never leaving his son's face.

Eric dropped his head guiltily. "Yes, Dad. I didn't mean to break my promise, but Frank pushed me in."

Then Eric's head came up and the excited elation throbbed in his dark eyes again. "But Dad, listen—I found out something! I found out that I can breathe under water—that I can breathe water just like a fish!"

"He's just talking, Mister Leigh," I put in hastily. "He held his breath down there a long while, that's all."

"It's not—I breathed the water!" Eric repeated. "And Dad, it's beautiful down there, more than on the land!"

I expected John Leigh to get angry and reprimand Eric for this nonsense of his about breathing water. But he didn't. He just stood, looking at his son, with a queer misery in his eyes.

"So—it's come," he whispered, as though to himself. "I was afraid of it—I was always afraid—"

Eric looked at his pallid-faced father in some alarm. John Leigh seemed to get a grip on himself.

"Come along home with me, Eric," he said unsteadily. "I want to talk to you."

He started back down along the beach. Eric, with a troubled glance at me, followed.

I watched them go and I felt a little worried. I could see that John Leigh was badly upset by the fact that Eric had been in the sea, and by his crazy claim that he could breathe the water. I felt partly guilty, for having pushed Eric in.

IT WAS two days later before I saw Eric again.

"Did your dad punish you for having been in the water?" I asked him.

Eric shook his head. "No, he didn't. He just—told me something."

"Told you what?" I asked.

Eric said reluctantly, "I can't tell you, Frank. It's something Dad said I mustn't tell anyone else."

I looked at Eric more closely. Somehow, he'd changed since I had last seen him. There was something new and vibrant about him, a flicker of continuous excitement in his eyes.

I wondered what had changed him, and

what it was his father had told him. But I did not find out, for from that time on I saw Eric very seldom.

He never came any more to my home, as he had used to do very often. Nobody ever saw him in town, or anywhere else, and we supposed that for some reason he was staying close to his home. Yet when I went there looking for him, he wasn't there, ever.

Several times, in the next year or two, I thought I saw Eric going in swimming, and went up along the beach to join him. But when I got there, I always found that I had been mistaken, for he was not in sight anywhere in the water.

Thus in those next two years, I lost contact with him. And when I went away to college, I saw him but once or twice during summer vacations. He hadn't gone to school, or done anything else, but was simply staying at home yet with his father. Nobody seemed to know just how or where he did spend all his time.

When my graduation was over, and I came home to live with my family and work in my own father's office, I learned that Eric's father had been dead for several months and that Eric himself had been missing for the same length of time.

RIGHT after John Leigh's funeral, Eric had disappeared. No one had seen him leaving town, and no one seemed to know where he could have gone. The little cottage was closed up.

I shook my head, when I heard that. I had always known that Eric was a little queer somehow, and this queer disappearance was just like him.

Then, driving back home one night, I saw a light in the long-darkened Leigh cottage. I drove in there and went up on the little porch.

Through the window, I looked into the lamplit living-room. Eric Leigh was in there, sitting at the table with his head buried in his hands. He wore nothing but black swimming shorts.

When I knocked, he started up and came to the door quickly. He greeted me quietly.

"Hello, Frank. It's been a long time since I've seen you."

"Where have you been for all these months?" I demanded.

Eric's dark eyes seemed haunted, as he looked past me through the open door, out over the dark sea that we could hear washing against the shore.

"I've been—out there," he whispered. "And I want to go back, and I can't—I can't!"

"Out there?" I repeated. "You mean you've been to sea?"

"I've been out there *in* the sea," Eric said somberly. "Far out there with the sea-folk, whose blood is my blood. And I did wrong—and now I'm back here, an exile."

I looked at him narrowly. There was something wild and haggard about his face that accorded with his wild words.

He laughed mirthlessly. "You always did think I was a little crazy, didn't you, Frank—because I told you that day when I discovered I could breathe water?"

"I thought you'd forgotten all about that old nonsense of yours," I said uncomfortably.

"It wasn't nonsense, Frank," he said quietly. "That day when you threw me into the water was the turning-point of my life. For that day, I learned from my father who and what I was."

I had sunk into a chair. And now, as I stared at Eric, he began to speak slowly on. He wanted, he said, to tell me just what had happened to him, and how he had gone out to the sea-folk, and why he had had to come back.

Eric had, he said, felt mingled excitement and anxiety as he followed his father back to the cottage that morning.

He was excited and bewildered by his newly-discovered ability to breathe the water. He had always longed to go into the sea, it had seemed to call and coax him, and now he had found out that he could live and breathe beneath its surface.

But also he was anxious and disturbed by his father's strange emotion. When they reached the cottage, and John Leigh sagged down into a chair, he saw that his father's lined face was still gray, and that he looked very old as he gazed up at Eric.

"Why," he asked, "do you suppose that I have always forbidden you to go into the water?"

Eric frowned. "I suppose because you were afraid I would get drowned."

John Leigh shook his gray head somberly. "No, Eric. It's because I didn't want you to find out something about yourself, something that makes you different from other men, even from myself."

"You mean—my being able to breathe the water?" Eric asked quickly, excitedly. "You knew about that, Dad?"

The man nodded heavily. "Yes, I knew. Your lungs are not like ordinary human lungs, Eric. They can breathe air, but they are also supplied with auxiliary surfaces of gill-tissue like that of an aquatic animal, which makes it possible for you to breathe water also, since that tissue is able to extract oxygen from the water.

"Your whole body differs in other ways from the normal human body. Besides the gill-tissue in your lungs, your body is differently muscled, and is internally braced to make it more impervious to great pressures such as the pressures in deep water. Your eyes are larger-pupilled, more sensitive to light, than the average person's. Your whole body is partly designed to live under water, rather than in the air."

"Then," Eric asked, staggered, "I'm a sort of freak?"

"No," his father said slowly. "You inherited all those physical differences quite naturally, Eric."

The boy stared uncomprehendingly. "But you said I was different even from you——"

John Leigh nodded. "You didn't inherit those strangenesses from me, Eric. I am an entirely normal, average man. You inherited them from—your mother."

"My mother?" the boy repeated bewilderedly. "But you always said my mother was a Spanish girl you met and married down in the West Indies."

"I said that, but it was a lie," John Leigh told him. "I hoped you'd never find out the truth about yourself, Eric. I wanted you to go through life never knowing, never suspecting you were anything but an average man, for I thought you'd be happier so. But now—you've found out, and you must be told."

John Leigh paused, and his gray eyes looked hauntedly into space, not seeing his son at all as he spoke.

"It was down in a village in Martinique, fifteen years ago," he said. "That island is under French rule, and the people in the outland villages are mostly a superstitious class of creoles and blacks who live by fishing.

"I happened across one of those villages on a freighter cruise, and I liked it. I'd been ordered to take a vacation from business, for my health, and I thought it would be fun to settle down in that little seashore place for a year. The natives were friendly and made me welcome.

"I fixed up a bungalow on the shore, outside the village. A fat, brown, half-breed old woman named Mama Blois was cook and housekeeper for me. I had a little sailboat and the fishing was always good, and for the next few months I thoroughly enjoyed the life.

"Then came one of the fall hurricanes. It swept down from the northeast and pounded the island for two days. When

it was over, the villagers started to rebuild their huts and clear away the debris. And it was the morning after the storm died, that I encountered something queer.

"I was walking along the beach below my bungalow, looking at the flotsam that had washed up. There, lying on the beach half covered by the tide, I saw a human body. I ran to it and found that it was a girl.

"She was white—not pink-white, like myself, but a queer green-white. She had a great mass of flowing black hair, and her only garment was a sort of tight-fitting little tunic of woven green fibers. And her face was very beautiful

"SHE wasn't dead, for I could feel her heart beating slowly. I picked her up and carried her into the house, shouting for Mama Blois. But when my fat old housekeeper came and saw me bending over the girl, whom I had placed upon a couch, she uttered a yell of terror.

"'*C'est une du peuple de la mer!*' she cried. 'It's one of the sea-folk!'

"'Sea-folk? What are you talking about?' I demanded. 'I found this girl on the beach, and she's apparently half drowned.'

"'*She* drowned?' hissed the fearful old woman. 'No, no, *M'sieu*. The sea-folk cannot drown, any more than fish can drown. They live out all their lives far out beneath the ocean.'

"And as Mama Blois babbled fearfully on, I learned that many of these natives believed firmly in the existence of the sea-folk, believed that there were men and women in the sea who lived there as we live on land, and who were seldom seen by any person, and were counted bad luck to see at all.

"'This one—she has been washed ashore by the storm,' the old woman told me earnestly, crossing herself. 'Best throw her back in, and quickly, *M'sieu*.'

"I told her indignantly to take her superstitions out of there, and not to bother me. And I started to revive this strange girl.

"I tried artificial respiration on her, to get out the water I supposed was in her lungs. To my surprise, there was no water in her lungs at all. And in examining her, I found out a queer thing. Her body, I could tell even by that quick examination, was not quite normal in very many ways—her whole breathing apparatus appeared to be different.

"In a few moments, I thought to use stimulants. The girl revived. She opened dark eyes and looked up at me, bewildered. Then, as she looked wildly around, I noticed that she was gasping, panting for breath as though the air were too rarefied for her.

"She spoke to me, in a humming language I had never heard before. I tried to quiet her. But she continued to plead with me, and meanwhile she was gasping ever more distressedly. I could not understand why she seemed in such agony.

"She had struggled up from the couch. Through the window, she saw the blue sea a few hundred feet from my cottage. At once, she stumbled past me, through the door, past Mama Blois who fled from her with a shriek of panic, toward the sea.

"There was a big lagoon of calm water just below my bungalow. The girl plunged into that. Of course I thought she was out of her head, and I splashed out into the sea to save her.

"Then, out there in the clear, shallow water, I saw something stupefying. The girl was floating under the surface, and I could see that she was breathing the water, gulping it in and out of her lungs as though she were almost starved for lack of it.

"'The sea-folk!' I exclaimed incredulously, as I stood there looking at her. 'Good God, it's true, then!'

"There could be no other explanation.

Unbelievable as it seemed, this girl actually must be a member of a race who dwelt under the water as we dwell in the air.

"The girl seemed to regain some of her strength, under the water. She looked up at me, and there was a look of shy, half-fearful trust in her face.

"She stayed in the lagoon. She was badly bruised and hurt, and for the next days she seemed to be regaining her strength. And I spent all my waking hours beside that lagoon, watching her and talking with her.

"Yes, talking with her. She had a language of her own, one quite strange to me, and gradually she taught it to me. But she could remain out of the water for only a short time, not more than a quarter-hour. After breathing air for longer than that, she would begin to pant and gasp in distress and would have to plunge back beneath the surface.

"I learned from her that she was indeed of the sea-folk, that her home was with them far out in the Atlantic to the east. There her people, some hundreds of them, lived, avoiding the lands. She, who had wandered too far from them, had been caught by the hurricane and blown upon this island.

"Strange things she told me of her people and their life beneath the waves, things that reminded me that there had in past centuries been many legends of such a mer-folk who dwelt in ocean. Only a few believed those legends now—but I had proof of their truth before my eyes.

"Mama Blois had fled in terror, and had carried word to the villagers that a girl of the *peuple de la mer* was at my place. The superstitious villagers shunned my whole neighborhood like a plague. They avoided me even on the few occasions when I had to go into the village for supplies.

"Three weeks had passed, and the girl still stayed in the sea near my house. She had completely recovered strength by then, and could have left. But she stayed. For she had come to love me, as I had come to love her."

JOHN LEIGH'S thin face was white and strange, his eyes haunted with memory as he looked past his dazed son. He seemed speaking, not to Eric but to himself.

"Yes, I loved her, this strange girl of the sea-folk, this girl of a branch of the human race long separated from our own race. Even though she was of a different world, even though she could remain in the air only for short intervals, we two loved and knew it.

"We married. Not with the rites of my own people, for that was impossible. It was with the rites of her people, of the sea-folk, a simple mutual declaration.

"Strange marriage, that—and stranger, our life in the months that followed. For she could stay with me on land, in the air, only for short periods. Then her gasping distress would drive her back to her watery world. And she would swim out and disappear, and not come back to me again until the next night, for she feared to come out of the water by day.

"It was a dream-life, a dream-love, we shared, yet we were happy. No one came near us in those months, for the superstitious fear of the natives was unabated. I never worried about the future—I was satisfied and happy.

"But my sea-bride faded. I could see her strength slowly waning as the months passed. Those periods she spent with me in the air were deleterious to her health. And finally, she swam out one night as usual, and did not come back to me the next night, or the next, or the next. I was almost crazy with fear for her, and there was nothing I could do.

"Then, two weeks later, she came back to me for the last time. That night the full moon was over the water, and the sea

was like a great lake of molten silver as I stood there on shore, peering out over the moonlit, heaving ocean and hoping against hope. And then I saw her, swimming in beneath the long, silver waves and holding something tightly in her arms—a little, sea-born baby, that could breathe the water as well as she could. It was her son—our son.

"She was dying—it had taken the last of her strength to bring me the infant. She died there on the shore, with the great moon-silvered waves breaking on us. I could not bury her in the earth, for I knew she would not have wanted that. So that same night I wrapped her body and watched the waves take it back out into the deeps from which she had come to me.

"You, Eric, our son, lived. Son of a man of earth, and a girl of ocean! And I found that your infant body, a hybrid of our earthly and watery races, possessed characteristics of both peoples. Your lungs and body were such that you could live either on land or in the sea.

"I took you, and left that island. For I had determined to bring you up without ever letting you learn your own nature and inheritance. I thought you would be happier so. And so I came to this little Florida town to live, and I forbade you ever to go into the water, since I knew that once you did so, you would learn that you were a son of ocean. It would have been wiser, I know, for me to have taken you far inland. But—I could not leave the sea. It seemed to hold me closer to the memory of your mother."

The deep, yearning eyes of John Leigh clung to the white face of his son, as he concluded.

"But now you have learned the truth, Eric, and know how you differ from other men. You are, perhaps, the first man ever to descend from both the people of land and the hidden sea-folk whose existence is not even believed now by most land-men.

"But you must never let anyone know of your descent, your inheritance, Eric. If men knew that you could live and breathe beneath the water, they would consider you a mere half-human freak, a creature alien and a little abhorrent. They would never believe in the sea-folk, even if you told them. And so you must never tell them—you must never let them know about you."

Eric Leigh's brain was spinning from the astounding disclosure he had just heard. The boy stood, dark eyes wide.

"I—I won't tell anyone, Father," he said finally. "But can't I go into the water again, now that I know?" His face lit up. "You don't know how beautiful and wonderful it is down there beneath the surface, Father! So cool and green and lovely—you wouldn't keep me out of it altogether?"

John Leigh, looking at his son's wildly excited face, sighed heavily.

"I know how you feel, Eric. It's the blood of the sea-folk in you, that calls you to the sea. And I shall not try to keep you from the water now. But you must not let anyone see you or learn about you. Promise me that."

"I promise!" Eric cried, his eyes shining.

SO BEGAN a new existence for the boy. In the days and weeks that followed, he spent most of his time in the sea that washed so close to the secluded little cottage.

Eric learned that indeed there was no limit to the time he could spend beneath the surface. His hybrid lungs and other organs seemed to adjust themselves instantly to the watery environment, and for hour after hour he would swim to and fro under the water, exploring this new world so suddenly opened to him.

For it was a new world, and a strange one: a cool, green world of silence and

shadowy beauty, over which the surface stretched like a quivering silver ceiling that let down the light of sun and moon and stars; a world of enchantment and beauty to Eric Leigh, as he wandered through it enthralled.

Down there he would smoothly glide, between tall strange forests of green and golden sea-fans and weeds that waved silently to and fro in the currents, like wind-stirred faery glades. The shrimps and sea-horses floated by, and the schools of crazy, tumbling mullet broke through the elfin forest like shooting streaks of light.

And Eric swam down to grottoes of purple coral, set about with dainty gardens of antler-like polyp branches and bright sea-anemones that slowly closed and unclosed. Here crawled the crab and star-fish like wise, slow elders of the ocean, and here the scarlet squirrel-fish and the brilliant angel-fish cometed through the waters, while overhead a great, green turtle swam ponderously by.

Many times Eric Leigh would lie in the sunlit shallows through the long hours of an afternoon, bathed in a golden-green translucence and warmth, rocked by the currents into soothing semi-sleep, carried like a dreaming child by the soft, cradling tide. Or at night when dim milky phosphorescence lit the water, he would swim down through a strange world whose sky was the molten silver surface, and watch the glowing little shrimps and sea-worms float past like watery fireflies, and see the glimmering jelly-fish that drifted like pale ghosts, or the ripples of milky light that spread from the soundless passage of a great fish.

But not always was the sea a haven of peace and silence, he found. There were times when storm whipped the waters, and the breakers raved roaring into shore, to batter and smash at the coral in white smoke of exploding foam. And Eric Leigh found it wildly thrilling to fight against those raging combers, to struggle and swim until he was about to be flung against the rocks, and then to dive hastily back out into the safety of the calmer depths.

Eric tried to tell his father of all these things, of the beauty and wonder he found down there beneath the blue sheet of ocean. And John Leigh would nod, half sadly.

"I know, Eric. Your mother knew that world, and she too told me."

"I'd like to go out farther, to see more!" Eric cried. "The sea is so big—twice as big as the land. I'd like to see it all."

But John Leigh anxiously cautioned him. "You must not go far, Eric. You must stay close to shore."

But more and more as the months and years went past, and his strange, secret existence of which the world knew nothing went on, Eric felt the strong call of the outer ocean.

The roaring surge and swing of the great waves that rolled in from across half the world seemed to deride him for clinging so close to shore. They seemed to bring with them a breath of the far-off outer seas, of the great deeps.

And another emotion pulled Eric's thoughts to the vastness of the outer sea. As he grew older, as the slow months crept into years, he was feeling more and more lonely.

He had no friends on the land, for he spent almost all his time in the sea and was considered shy and half-wild and queer by the people of the near-by town. And he had no companions in the long hours he spent in the water.

It was well enough to chase the schools of mullet merrily, to torment the crawling crabs, to startle the drowsing, huge sea-bass by suddenly grasping its tail. But these were not companionship, and his loneliness grew ever greater.

When he was past seventeen he asked his father, "Do you think that any of *them* still live?"

John Leigh knew whom he meant. "The sea-folk? There must be still some of that hidden race, far out in the ocean."

"I'd like to meet them," Eric said hesitantly. "They'd be like—myself."

"No!" his father said alarmedly. "You have blood of the sea-folk in you but you are not one of them, Eric. You must not think that. You are a man of the land, as much as of the sea."

But that thought would not leave Eric's mind. His loneliness, the oppression of his solitude in the waters, grew always greater, and he dreamed more and more of what they might be like, those hidden sea people from whom his mother had come.

He did not again speak of them to his father, for he had seen the brooding pain on John Leigh's face, and he knew that the older man was growing ever more frail. But his nostalgia increased, month by month and year by year.

Then John Leigh died. He died in his sleep at night, after sitting all the previous day and looking out at the ocean. And after his first aching grief subsided a little, Eric felt his former loneliness a thousandfold increased, and could endure it no longer. So he resolved to seek out the sea-folk; for he dimly felt that only they could assuage the nostalgic loneliness that haunted him.

HE WENT in the early dawn, closing the little cottage and hastening down to the shore to plunge into the waters. He wore in the belt of his short trunks a long, keen knife, and that was his only equipment for the quest upon which he had started.

He swam straight outward to the east, keeping only a few yards beneath the surface, and steering by the sun. All that day he swam, and the land faded from sight behind him, and around him there was only the watery waste. But he did not feel lonely now, but glad and expectant.

Every hour he had to stop and rest, floating beneath the surface, letting his tired muscles relax. And twice during the day he caught small fish and ate them as he had learned to do—stripping the clean, raw, white flesh from them for food. He needed no drink—it was only when he was on shore that his water-nurtured body ever felt any sensation of thirst.

Eric slept that night, his body tightly curled up with head on knees, floating beneath the surface, rocked by the warm, soft currents, breathing the water gently. Twice during the night he was awakened.

Once it was by a tremor of the water that snapped his super-keen senses into instant wakefulness, to find two white-bellied sharks cutting through the water toward him. In an instant, Eric had drawn his dagger and was ready for them. He had killed sharks and barracuda before this, for he could swim as swiftly as any of them and his knife gave him the advantage. But these two, sensing his alertness, sheered away from him and were gone like evil ghosts.

The other time a tremor awakened him, it was to realization of a great, vibrating bulk passing nearby. He swam up to the surface and broke through his head to see, on black waters beneath a heavily starred sky, a long liner with rows of blazing portholes and gayly lighted decks, forging northwest. It was a cruiseship and the brassy din of dance music came across the water to him as he watched. But when it was gone, he sank back beneath the water and slept again.

When sunlight came down through the water to awake him the next morning, his whole body felt stiff and sore from his previous day's exertions. He swam for a time hunting small fish, and caught but

one. After this meager breakfast, he pushed on toward the east.

Eric knew there was but the vaguest basis for his quest in this direction. He had but the story of his father to go by, that his mother had come from a people of the sea-folk who dwelt in the northeast. And he knew that in these unfamiliar deeps over which he swam there must be monsters against whom he would be helpless. Yet blind desire for companionship of his kind drove him on.

Six days in all, Eric swam eastward into the empty sea, and his hope had begun slowly to die. He was far out in the tropical Atlantic by now, yet he had seen no sign of the sea-folk whom he sought. And discouragement was chilling his eager fervor now.

Then on the seventh morning, he had a dreadful awakening. He had been sleeping, curled up and floating beneath the surface, when his senses were aroused by the sensation of something approaching him, touching him.

He snapped into wakefulness—a moment too late. A cold, thick, rope-like tentacle was already tightening around his body, pinioning his arms to his sides. He thrashed frantically in that icy grip, and by the dawnlight filtering down through the green waters he saw the horrid nature of his attacker.

It was a giant white squid, of a size such as he had never seen before. A great, palpitating white mass, with two huge blank black eyes in a hideous parrot-face, it had reached up with its two longest tentacles for forty feet to grasp Eric.

The second tentacle was already tightening around him. Though he struggled madly, he could not free his arms to reach the knife at his belt. Wildly kicking the water to resist, Eric felt himself being drawn down toward the enormous, staring eyes and wicked parrot beak of the monster.

Then through the water there came to his ears a low-pitched, thrumming cry.

Eric glimpsed a slender white form shooting down toward himself and his attacker from above. It was a girl, he glimpsed—a girl whose dark eyes blazed with excitement in her white face, and in whose one hand was a long shell knife.

ERIC, even in that moment of appalling peril, felt a sudden wild throb of excitement at sight of her. This girl, he knew, was one of the sea-folk, the people he sought.

She reached him, and her knife hacked at one of the great tentacles holding him. But the tough, thick tentacle defied the shell knife.

"Get away!" Eric tried to cry to her as she clung to him, as he was drawn down toward the monster.

The girl suddenly darted clear. Her arms and legs fluttered—she drove down through the water straight toward the hideous body of the squid.

Eric glimpsed the knife plunged into the palpitating white mass, withdrawn and stabbed again, this time into an eye.

Next moment, Eric felt himself hurled blindly through the water by a terrific convulsion of the monster. In its pain and alarm it had released him, and was backing down swiftly into the darkness of the lower depths, emitting a cloud of inky black.

Out of that cloud of roiling blackness, the slim white figure of the girl darted up through the waters toward him, as he rolled and spun from the impetus of the convulsive thrust.

She gripped his arm, and her lips moved swiftly as she peered urgently into his face.

Eric heard her. Sound can be conducted by water better than by air. Her speech came to his ears as a low, modulated thrumming.

"I don't understand you," he tried to tell her.

But his words came forth as a meaningless blur of sound. He did not know the trick of the thrumming speech.

The girl was staring into his face with astonishment on her features. It was clear to Eric that she was amazed to discover that he was a stranger.

The sun had risen and the bright light that came down through thirty feet of water to these two who poised floating and facing each other, showed Eric all the details of the sea-girl's appearance.

Her skin was white, faintly greenish white. Her clothing was a single garment of woven fibers of dark green sea-grass, a scanty, close-fitting tunic. From the belt of it she had drawn the long knife, which had been shaped from a strong shell.

Her dark hair streamed back in the water in a floating black cloud. Her face was clear and youthful, and very human in its beauty except for the abnormally large and dark pupils of her eyes.

She touched him with a doubtful, exploratory finger, as they poised together. A smile came onto her face.

"Aana," she said, touching her own breast as her lips pronounced the thrumming word.

Eric understood. Aana — it was her name.

He tried to tell her his own name. But it was a long time before he could utter the sound he wanted.

"Eric," she finally repeated, smiling.

He was thrilling to a wild excitement. This girl—she was of the sea-folk, the people whence his mother had come, the folk whose blood ran in his own veins.

Aana turned in the water with a quick flirt of her body, and pointed eastward, and tugged at his hand. He understood, and when she swam away in that direction, he kept close beside her.

The girl kept a mere ten feet beneath the surface, her slim, smooth white body seeming to progress through the green water with only the slightest of impetus from her arms and legs.

Eric swam eagerly beside her. For nearly an hour, they moved eastward. Then he saw that they had come to a great shoal. The oozy bottom here was less than a hundred feet below the surface, and was covered by a forest of submarine pseudo-plants, great purple branches of coral towering up from glades of waving gorgonias and anemones and polyps.

Presently Aana, with a glance at Eric, bent her head and sped down through the water in a long, descending slant. As he followed her, he saw that ahead there rose from the brilliantly colored sea-forest a high ledge of pale coral. He glimpsed dark, round apertures in the ledge.

Then Eric realized in amazement that what he saw were the homes of the sea-folk. They had dug out small caves in the soft coral of the ledge, and beside each cavity entrance lay a big coral block with which the aperture could be closed.

In and out and above and around this weird little community of coral caves, he could see many scores of the sea-folk swimming; men, and girls like Aana, and little children, swimming to and fro through the sunlit green waters, or lounging in little groups among the waving green glades of the bottom.

From Aana's lips came a thrumming call, as she and Eric sped down from the upper waters into the sea-village.

"Nuun!"

Eric saw the sea-folk look up, and then up like shooting fish darted dozens of them, to cluster around the two.

They stared at Eric in excited wonder, as they swam back down on either side of him and the girl. He heard many thrumming questions, and heard Aana answering them.

The girl arrowed down with him into

the water and stopped, in front of the ledge, a score of feet from the bottom. As he poised floating with her there, Eric looked around in wonder at the crowd swimming excitedly about him.

These people were all a greenish white. The men were no larger than the women, all of them dark-haired and dark-eyed, their lithe bodies clad only in the woven grass tunics. All wore the shell knives, and some had also rude stone hatchets helved with bone.

Women swam with tiny, solemn-eyed sea-babies in their arms, and small children curved and darted and rocketed through the throng of their elders in ever wilder excitement.

THROUGH the floating throng pushed a man before whom the others gave way. Eric sensed that he was older than the others—his hair was unwhitened, but there was a massiveness and maturity and wisdom in his face.

"Nuun!" the crowd hailed this older man.

And to the side of Nuun, Aana swam swiftly, clinging to his arm and speaking rapidly, pointing to Eric.

Eric saw that Nuun was looking at him, the older man's dark, wise eyes keenly inspecting him. Finally, Nuun spoke a few words in his deep, thrumming voice.

Aana's face flashed brilliant with happiness. And a stir went through the whole crowd poised floating around Eric.

Eric sensed that he had been accepted by Nuun, as Aana clutched his wrist and spoke eagerly to him. Yet still he could not understand the rapid, humming speech.

Through the rest of that day, Aana tried to teach him. Floating in the sun-shot waters, above the ledge and the village of coral caves, she earnestly repeated words over and over, pointing to objects or making gestures to explain her meaning.

Slowly, Eric learned how to reproduce the thrumming water-sounds by a quick vibration of his lips and tongue. The words used by the sea-folk came awkwardly to him, yet he learned a few even that first day.

And the sea-folk all seemed eager to be friendly to him. They shared their food with him—white, raw flesh of fish, and pungent-tasting sea-snails, and tough green buds of certain of the pseudo-plants.

When evening came, and the waters began to grow dark, the sea-folk began to retire down into the coral caves, each family to its own. And Aana explained to him with signs and words that it was necessary for safety, since when the darkness claimed the upper waters there came questing up to them strange, monstrous creatures of prey from the eternally sunless depths beyond the shoal.

Eric was taken into the small coral cave in which Nuun, who he learned was Aana's father, and Chol, her lithe, smiling brother, lived with her. Chol rolled into place the big coral block that almost closed the entrance, and in the darkness they slept, floating and drifting gently in the water.

But for long, Eric could not sleep. As his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he looked out through the crack of the entrance still open. And he saw big, shadowy black shapes, formless and mysterious, slithering through the dark sea-glades below the ledge, prowling silently past the closed caves of the sleeping sea-folk. It made all seem strange and unearthly to him.

But the strangeness passed for Eric, in the days that followed. For rapidly he learned the speech of the sea-folk, and within a few days he was able to talk to Aana, and to Nuun and the others.

"You are not of our people here," Nuun told him. "Yet I did not know that there were any of the sea-folk left besides ourselves."

Eric explained eagerly. "My mother was of your people, Nuun, but my father was of the land."

It seemed to him that as he told them about himself, doubt came into the eyes of Nuun, and even of Aana, and that they looked at him differently when he had finished.

"So you are half of the land," Nuun said thoughtfully. "Had I known that, we might not have welcomed you among us. For the land-men have always been the enemies of our people."

"But *I'm* not a land-man!" Eric protested. "And I am no enemy of your people—I came here, seeking you."

Nuun still seemed doubtful. "Land-men are strange and cruel," he said. "Yes, even though they themselves came long ago from among us of the sea."

"You mean that you sea-folk existed before there were men on land?" Eric asked.

"Yes," said Nuun. "Our traditions tell us that man developed in the sea, not upon the land as the people there may think. Long ago, there were many millions of us sea-folk in the world's oceans, and there were no men on the savage land.

"But some of our folk were trapped in an inland sea by a shaking of earth that closed its outlet to ocean. And as that sea dried and shrank, so tradition says, they were forced to seek food on shore as well as in the water, and though at first they could only stay out of water a very little time, like us, they gradually accustomed themselves to longer and longer periods in the air, until at last after some generations they were able to live entirely in the air, and lost the ability to live in the water.

"They were the progenitors of the land-men, who soon spread over the continents. And these land-men did not look on us sea-folk as human like themselves, but as monsters of the sea whom they killed whenever they met them. So gradually we sea folk were forced to leave the coastal waters in which our home had always been, to retreat from the land-men into waters where they had not yet come.

"Yet the numbers of the land-men so increased and they so spread over all the continents that in time no coastal waters anywhere were safe for us. We had to flee farther, out into the vast oceans themselves. In the great deeps of the ocean, with their pressures and awful darkness, we could not live. And only here and there could we find hidden shoals like this one where it was possible for us to dwell.

"So, for very long, we diminishing survivors of the sea-folk have lived hidden in such secret shoals as this one, where there is no land near and where the ships of the land-men seldom come. When they do come, we hide always from them, since we know that they are our enemies from of old. But our numbers are so small now that we who dwell here on this shoal are the only sea-folk left in the ocean."

And Nuun asked, "Do the land-men still remember us, or have they forgotten that we ever existed?"

"They have not forgotten, completely," Eric told him. "They still have legends of the sea-folk, of mermen and mermaids as they call them, but the legends are not now believed."

"That is well," said Nuun thoughtfully. "If they do not know we exist, they will not come and hunt us."

But he added troubledly as he looked at Eric, "I wish that you had not land-blood in you. I fear that it will bring evil upon us."

"It won't!" Eric said earnestly. "I love your people, as much as you do. I would not harm them."

"Yes, Father, Eric is one of us," Aana said anxiously. "Our blood is stronger in him than that of the land-men, for did he not leave the land to seek us out?"

"That is so," Nuun admitted. "And I welcome him as one of us, despite his land-blood."

SO ERIC entered the sea-folk. And it seemed to him, as the slow days passed without count or sense of time, that among them he had found happiness for the first time in his life.

For he loved these shy and hidden people of ocean. And, with his own sea-blood throbbing strong in his veins, it seemed to him that their existence was the most beautiful in the world.

With Aana swimming hand in hand with him, he would drift idly through the warm green sunlit waters of these summer seas, for hour after dreamy hour. Or they would explore the submarine forests of the shoal, diving and arrowing through the solemn groves of endlessly waving, giant sea-fans, and tall trunks of branching purple coral like unearthly cacti, and over gardens of brilliant sea-anemones whose every petal was a tiny, color-tipped tentacle blindly vibrating.

And with Chol and Aana and the other sea-folk, Eric would chase the big fat food-fish, darting and twisting after them with their woven grass nets reaching, a whirl of curving white bodies and brilliant fish spinning chaotically in the translucent green gloom. And there were thrilling moments when an octopus or squid would be discovered creeping through the waving green groves below the coral caves, and would be attacked and dispatched.

In their simple, child-like fashion, the sea-folk loved play. If a school of porpoises crossed the quivering quicksilver ceiling of the surface, half the young men and boys in the village would be shooting gleefully up after them, to chase the unwieldy but swift creatures.

And over and around the village of coral caves constantly rushed the sea-children in wild flight and pursuit of each other. Whole lines of them would rocket crazily upward, until they broke clear from the surface itself, hung for a dazzling moment in the unfamiliar air and sunlight above the heaving watery waste, and then smacked down again into the green depths to continue their crazy chase. The elders would vainly reprimand them for this, since to break surface was to chance being seen by land-men whose ships might be passing.

Eric loved almost most of all the nights of full moon when the clear waters were so illuminated that there was no danger of the dark creatures of the deeps emerging, and the sea-folk did not need to retire to their coral caves. Then the waters became a black-and-silver world of magic, shimmering with mingled moonlight and phosphorescence, in which each swimming man or girl or child left a glimmering trail of light. Then those of the sea-folk who were lovers swam side by side through the silver silence, each couple apart from the others.

For there were love and lovers among these sea-folk, Eric found. They mated for life, in their simple, child-like way. And there was death among them too, as he soon learned. Twice within the few months following his joining them, one of the sea-folk met his end—once a man caught among shifting coral rocks, who had been crushed to death, and another a woman who one night was seized and carried off by one of the formless monsters from the deeps.

Weeks slipped by for Eric without count or sense of time. Then one day he noticed in a corner of the coral cave, a glimmering green jewel.

He picked it up. It was a blazing emerald, cut and polished and with its viridescent fire undimmed even here in the green waters.

"Where did it come from?" he asked wonderingly of the others.

"It is one of the precious stones of the land-men," Nuun told him. "Chol got it from one of their wrecked ships that lies in the deeps near this shoal."

"There are many more bright stones like that one there," Chol told Eric. "I saw them there, but I only brought this one back."

"But this one alone is worth a fortune!" Eric exclaimed. "Could you take me to that wreck, Chol?"

Before the young man could answer, old Nuun intervened, with a frown on his face.

"No," he said. "There is danger there—the pressures in those deeps are bad and the monsters from the lower abysses lurk there sometimes even in daytime."

And he added thoughtfully to Eric, "It is your land blood that makes you want such things. We of the sea know better than to seek beauty in such things, when beauty is all around us."

Eric saw the disapproval of himself on Nuun's face, and the distress in Aana's eyes, and so he said nothing more.

But later, Chol took him aside, and the sea-youth told him with a grin: "My father thinks too much of danger—he is old. I will take you down to that wreck, and we will say nothing to him of it."

"Can we go now?" Eric asked eagerly, and Chol nodded.

"Yes, but be sure you have your knife. You may need it."

THE two slipped unnoticed out of the community of the sea-folk, and Chol led the way eastward. They swam for several miles above the waving submarine forests of the shoal, and then came to the place where the shoal slanted down into the greater deeps.

"The wreck lies on a shelf far down this slope," Chol told Eric. "We cannot swim down into those depths without weight to carry us down."

The sea-youth had brought cords of woven fibers. With these he tied to the waists of Eric and himself two blocks of heavy coral, that would weight them down.

"See that you keep close beside me," Chol told him then. "And if the pressure begins to distress you too much, do not hesitate to rise."

Eric signed his understanding. And Chol dived downward and he followed, the two youths arrowing down in oblique descent above the descending slope. At first, they fell rather than swam, from the weight of their blocks. But as they penetrated deeper, their fall slowed and they must swim also.

The oozy slope dropped steadily back past Eric as he and his guide went deeper. Rapidly, the translucent green waters changed into a brilliant, radiant blue.

The blue darkened to purple. Still they swam ever deeper, down and down. Now there were different creatures in the water about them than in the upper waters: long siphonophores and pallid angler-fish and spider-crabs crawling amid the oozy pseudo-plants on the slope.

Eric's head began to ring from the pressure, and he found it harder to breathe the water. Even his body, with its inherited bracing against water pressures, was affected by the compression at these depths. He began a little to regret this expedition.

Chol swam deeper, with vigorous strokes. He turned every few moments to look back, his face a half-visible white blur in the deepening darkness. Eric looked down and saw below a broad shelf that was several hundred feet wide and that jutted out horizontally from the slant of the great slope.

In dim, eternal dusk lay this shelf, covered by ooze of ages in which crabs and squid crawled amid monstrous-looking bunched anemones and sea-slugs that crowded the space between slimy rocks.

Near the edge of this shelf lay the rotting hull of a ship.

Eric alighted with Chol on the shelf, the weight of their coral blocks bringing them gently to rest in the ooze. They struggled through the slime toward the wreck.

Eric's head was ringing more strongly from the pressure, and his voice was thick in the water.

"It's an old Spanish galleon," he tried to tell Chol, but the sea-youth did not understand.

"The bright stones are here," Chol said, leading the way onto the rotting deck.

There was a hole in the deck. Eric followed Chol toward it. A little squid shot startledly out of it as they approached and lowered themselves through the jagged aperture.

They found themselves in the oozy after-cabin. Two white skeletons were here, caught between rotted timbers, their bony limbs swaying gently back and forth in the currents as they had done for centuries.

Chol was stooping over a corroded coffer. Even in that darkness, there came a smothered blaze of light from the emeralds and rubies inside it, as he opened it.

Eric scooped up a handful. It thrilled him to think that he held in his hand gems that had lain here on the sea-floor for centuries. He stood for a moment, turning them over and over admiringly in his hand.

Then a wild, thrumming cry from Chol stabbed his ringing ears.

"Eric! Look out!"

Eric whirled around in the dark water. Then he froze. A hideous, reptilian head was questing down through the hole in the deck above them.

It was the head of such a creature as he had never seen before—a great white sea-snake from the depths, whose semi-phosphorescent body was more than a foot in thickness and seemed many yards long. The enormous eyes had a pale crimson glow in them as they peered down at the two petrified youths.

Then like a flash of dull white light, the sea-snake struck down through the hole at Eric. But Chol, his shell knife in his hand, leaped in the same moment at the striking head, and the creature missed Eric.

Eric drew his knife and leaped in to help Chol, who was clinging to the monster's neck as its coils looped down into the dark cabin. And as he leaped, Eric heard a horrible, thrumming cry of agony unutterable.

The monster had turned and had sunk its fangs into Chol's side. Eric sprang madly upon it and stabbed furiously just behind the hideous head, with his blade.

The sea-snake's coils flexed in a wild convulsion of recoiling motion. Eric was flung back against the rotting wall. He grabbed Chol and slashed loose the coral block tied to his waist, and then with another sweep of his knife cut loose his own weight.

Instantly he and Chol shot upward through the hole in the deck with terrific speed. Eric had a moment's sensation of nightmare rush up through the dark waters and then blackness came over his senses.

When he recovered, he was floating in sunlit green water only a few yards under the surface. Chol floated in the water nearby.

The sea-youth was dead. His body was hideously black and swollen, from the poison in the sea-snake's fangs.

"Chol!" Eric cried wildly, and tried frantically to revive him, but it was useless.

In wild remorse, he cursed the jewels whose lure had made him take Chol to his death. Then, after a time, he swam back with the body toward the village.

THE sea-folk came gathering quickly around when they saw the dead youth. Their wails arose. And when Aana and

Nuun appeared, the girl flung herself forward to her brother's body in an agony of sorrow.

Nuun looked at his dead son. And then he looked at Eric.

"How came Choi to be bitten by one of the great snakes of the depths?" he asked.

Slowly, Eric told him. And Nuun's heavy face grew dark as he heard.

"Your land blood has brought my son to death," he said accusingly. "Yes, because you coveted the shining stones that all land-men covet, you have ended the life of Chol."

Eric could not deny the bitter accusation. His own heart was torn with grief and guilt.

"The fault is mine," he said. "I would not blame you for taking vengeance on me."

"We of the sea have nothing to do with vengeance," Nuun told him. "But you cannot stay any longer among us. You have shown that you are of the land, not the sea. Go back then to the land."

"Not that!" Eric cried to him. "I'd rather suffer any punishment than to leave."

"He meant no wrong, Father," Aana pleaded. "Do not exile him thus."

"He is of the land," Nuun said heavily. "Let him go back, and never return to the sea-folk."

The others watched in solemn silence, and Eric perceived that Nuun's will was not to be changed.

Stunned, he started to swim away. Aana swam after him, and clung to him for a moment.

"Eric, I love you—I know you love me!" she cried to him. "If ever my father relents, as some day he may do, I shall come and tell you, so that you can come back to us. Tell me how I can find you."

Eric told her, as best he could, his mind still overwhelmed by what had happened.

"I shall be waiting," he told her. "I'll wait forever, Aana."

And so he left them. He was conscious of nothing but bitter sorrow, of a tearing grief, as he swam slowly westward in the next days.

He would almost have been glad had he fallen victim to some sea-creatures in those days. But he had not. And so at last, he had come safely to shore by night, and had found the little cottage just as he had left it months before.

THAT is the story that Eric Leigh told me. As he talked, he had been looking, not at me, but through the open door of the cottage, at the sea that surged and tumbled, silver beneath the moon. His eyes were dark and wide, his voice a slow, brooding whisper as he finished.

"That is all, Frank. I am back here on the land now, an exile from my own people. But some day maybe Nuun will relent and Aana will come. When she does, she will find me waiting."

I said nothing. And when Eric looked at my face he must have realized what I thought of his story.

"You don't believe, Frank?"

I stirred uneasily in my chair. "Well—"

"It's all right," he said heavily. "I could hardly expect anyone to believe. But it's all true—it's true."

I cleared my throat. "Eric, you always did have too much imagination. I don't know whether you're serious or not about this tale of yours. But if you are, I'd say that a good psychoanalyst——"

He smiled mirthfully. "I could prove the whole thing to you right now, Frank, by going out there into the water and staying under for an hour or so. That would convince you, wouldn't it?"

I told him hastily, "I'd stay out of the sea if I were you, Eric."

I was thinking that this queer delusion he had, this belief that he could live and

breathe under the water, might very well cause his death by drowning if he went into the water and tried it.

"I won't tell anyone this story, Eric," I said as I left him that night. "If I were you, I wouldn't repeat it to anyone else."

He smiled queerly again. "I won't, Frank. And thanks for listening."

I did not see Eric Leigh very often in the next few months. He almost never left the cottage, and I had not the time to look in on him very often.

Also, to tell the truth, I had not much inclination, for it made me uncomfortable to be near him.

He and his father had always been considered queer, and it seemed quite evident to me that his father's prohibition of his swimming had so worked on Eric's brooding, unstable mind that he had in unconscious compensation come to think of himself as descended from a sea people. And it was obvious that by now he thoroughly believed in his own dream.

I tried once to clear up the matter by finding out just where Eric had really been during those months of his absence. But no one seemed to know that. At least, nobody had seen him leave town or return.

When I did stop to see him, Eric was always sitting on the shore near his cottage, looking out across the water, and he always seemed to have a queerly intent and *listening* expression on his face. I knew that he was thinking of his delusion, and so I never felt like staying long with him.

The Cuban who had a house a little farther down the shore from Eric's cottage told me that he believed Eric spent every night out on the shore, sitting and sleeping or watching. I asked him if he had seen Eric in swimming, but he hadn't. I was glad of that, and began to have hopes that he might grow out of his delusion, in time.

But, almost a year after he told me that strange story, the end came. It came on a stormy spring night, when the winds were howling and the ocean raging in all along the coast, battering with big black waves whose hubbub of thunder was audible even on the highway.

AS I drove past Eric's cottage on the road late that night, a man ran out into my headlights and flagged me down. It was the Cuban, and he was badly excited. He told me that Eric had just drowned himself.

The Cuban told me what he knew, as I hurried with him to Eric's cottage. He said that he had heard a queer cry over the roar of the waves, and had gone out onto his porch to see whence it came. And, looking north along the shore, he had seen Eric Leigh standing there on the shore, where he had kept vigil so many days and nights.

He said that Eric seemed wildly excited, and was shouting out into the heaving black sea. Eric had rushed into his cottage, and in a few moments had come out again, wearing only swimming-trunks and with a knife at his belt.

The Cuban had seen Eric fling himself right out into the piling black breakers. He never came up at all, the man added. He must have drowned instantly.

"Crazee, he was!" the Cuban assured me as we hurried on to the cottage. "All these time, he just sit and sit and watch, and then tonight he plunge in the sea like he's in an awful hurry."

We reached the cottage, and I peered anxiously out across the dark, storm-driven rollers that were thundering up onto the shore and breaking with explosion of white foam that the howling wind flung into our faces.

I could not see the head of any swimmer out in those giant black waves, and indeed, it required but one glance to see that no swimmer could live a minute in

that sea. So we went into the lamplit cottage.

Eric's discarded clothing lay on the floor. On the table was a wisp of paper on which was a hasty scrawl. I recognized my name at the top, and picked the paper up.

"Frank, Aana has come," read the scrawl. *"She has just called—Nuun is dying and has relented, and I can return. I am going back with her——"*

Sadly, I folded the paper. "He thought he heard her," I said pityingly, to myself. "He thought he heard her calling him from out there in the sea, and he went in answer. Poor devil."

"The cry—the first cry I heard—*did* come from out there in the water," the Cuban told me.

I turned, incredulous. "You must be wrong. No boat or swimmer could have been out in that surf tonight."

"I heard it," he insisted stubbornly. "It's a queer kind of cry—kind of humming, yet speaking, too——"

I stood for a moment, a queer suspicion in my mind. But hastily I shrugged it aside.

"You just heard the humming of the wind out there," I told him. "That must have been what poor Eric heard, too. Well, we can't start any search for his body until morning."

A thorough search was made in the next few days, at my direction. But we never found Eric's body.

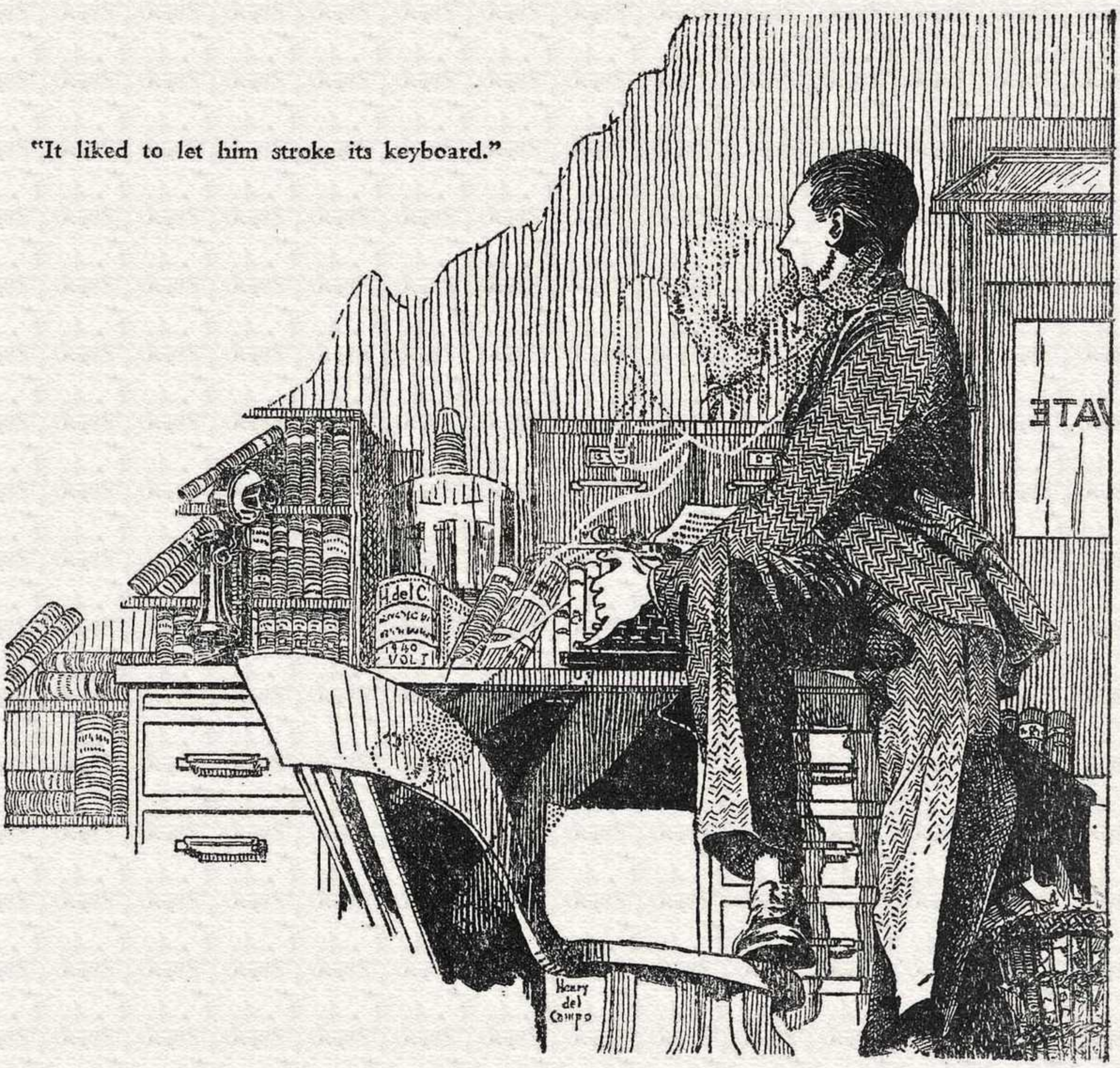
That fact, and the statement of the Cuban about the cry from out in the sea, bothered me a little. I tried to get him to admit he had been wrong, but he insisted that he had heard a long, thrumming cry from out in the waters, before Eric had leaped in.

I still think often about the thing. It seems quite obvious, of course, that Eric Leigh brooded over his strange delusion so long that he came finally to believe that his imagined sea-girl was calling him that stormy night, and that he forthwith plunged in and drowned. It is the only reasonable explanation.

Yet, we are not always reasonable. There are times when I like to think that Eric's incredible tale may have been ture, that it may not have been mere delusion that called to him from the waves that night, but his Aana, come from far to summon back the exile; and that, instead of perishing, he swam out and out with her, and far and far—the son of ocean, the sea born, going back to his own at last.



"It liked to let him stroke its keyboard."



The Unusual Romance of Ferdinand Pratt

By NELSON S. BOND

Even a well-intentioned djinn ought to know the difference between a typist and a typewriter.

THERE was a little man named Ferdinand Pratt, and he was an undistinguished writer of romance fiction for the heart-throb magazines. He was small and quiet and very shy, and he had no bad habits whatsoever.

His life was uneventful except that he had a Secret Passion. Her name was Mabel Smythe, and she was his secretary.

But he had never been able to summon up the nerve to tell her she was his you-know-what, so nothing had ever come of the affair.

Of course Mabel would have been a dope indeed had she not noticed by this time that Ferdinand's heroines were always blonde and petite and full-breasted, like herself, although the way Ferdinand always wrote it in his stories was "firm bosomed." But since he never said anything, neither did she, and you can't blame her.

WELL, this day Ferdinand was walking down Fifth Avenue when suddenly the wind blew extra hard, and the skirts of the girl in front of him blew up, revealing a sizeable acreage of very nice limb, indeed. As might be expected, Ferdinand blushed and looked away, but he was both shocked and surprised to hear a low whistle of approval from a spot just beside him.

He turned to chide the person who had voiced such admiration, but all he could see was a large, black fog leaning against a lamppost. At the base of this fog, he saw a silver stick. So he picked it up and said, "Excuse me, sir—but is this yours?"

For a moment there was silence, then a filmy appendage writhed out of the black fog and grabbed the stick from his hand. A thick, slightly muffled voice said, "Me wand! Geez, yeah! Gimme!"

The stick disappeared into the fog. Ferdinand was about to walk on when another black tendril twisted from the fog, twining about his wrist. It was dank and slimy and very disconcerting, as well as rather chilly.

"Wait a sec, bud!" said the voice. "How come you to see me? I'm invisible."

Ferdinand said politely, "Oh, I'm sorry. But you're not, really." And he explained that the black fog was *quite* visible. "Moreover," he added, "you're leaving a black stain on the sidewalk. If Mr. La-Guardia sees it, there's likely to be trouble."

The black fog bent to stare moodily at the mark. It said, in a disappointed voice, "Aw, geez! An' I t'ought dis time I had it down poifect. I guess me transreflex modifier musta got bawled up wid de supercoroner control!"

Ferdinand said, "That's too bad!" commiseratingly. "But I think I should be getting along—"

"Hold it," said the fog. "How come you wasn't surprised to see me, bud?"

Ferdinand explained that he was a writer of romantic fiction, and pointed out that in romantic fiction almost anything is more than likely to appear out on thin air, except maybe a pornographic phrase of Mr. Chamberlain's umbrella. The fog listened thoughtfully; meanwhile shifting from foot to foot as if worried about those inky stains it was leaving. Finally it said:

"Well, I guess it don't matter. I was kinda put out, on account of this time I t'ought I really had it. I been woikin' on invisibility for t'ree weeks, now, but I can't git to foist baste wid it. But seein' as how you done me a favor, I'll do *you* one. What would you like to have?"

Ferdinand looked mildly astonished. Thinking of Mable, he said, "Just anything at all, you mean?"

"You name it," said the fog proudly. "I'll do it." He sounded very pleased with himself. "You see, ever sinct I loined how to be a de-jinn—"

"Gin," corrected Ferdinand. "Like the drink."

"Yeah? Geez, I t'ought you said de 'd' foist. Well, like I was sayin', I found dis ol' bottle in a junk shop over in de Bronx, where I live. An' when I opened it, I found out how to be a—a *gin!* So—" said the black fog triumphantly, "I been studyin' up ever sinct. Oney I can't seem

to get de hang of his invisibility stuff. I'll loin, though."

"I'm sure you will," Ferdinand assured him. "But now about my wish—"

"Just name it, pal. A million bucks? A Rolls-Rerce?"

Ferdinand said, "If you don't mind, I'd like a girl to fall in love with me."

"A goil!" said the Bronx djinn. "Say, bud, I t'ink you got somethin' dere. Why didn't I t'ink of dat meself?"

There was a fleeting glint of silver in the jet cloud, and suddenly Ferdinand had a horrible vision of himself being pursued up Fifth Avenue by a rapacious horde of assorted showgirls, shopgirls and debutantes. He cried, swiftly, "Oh, wait! not just *any* girl. One girl in particular, I mean!"

The djinn said disappointedly, "Just *one?*"

"That's all," said Ferdinand meekly. "My secretary."

The djinn sighed. "Pal, you're bein' a sucker. But if dat's what you want—" He waved the silver wand; muttered something that sounded like a Federal bureau. "Abracadabra — palegratyzsch — effish — locarnxy—make de guy's typewriter fall in love wid him—"

Ferdinand, a purist in spite of all, suggested, "Pardon me. Don't you mean *typist?*"

But he was talking to space. The black fog had suddenly whisked upward, and was now hovering before the third floor window of the Little Garmente Shoppe, Sol Greenstein & Sons, Props., peeking in at the Young Ladies' & Misses Ready-to-Wear Fitting Room. The wand was describing ecstatic undulations.

Ferdinand tut-tutted; then shrugged. It probably didn't matter how the djinn had phrased the command. So, with a disapproving frown toward the black fog, which was now perched with obvious enjoyment on the very window-sill, chuckling coarsely, Ferdinand hurried back to his office.

IT WAS clear, however, that the command had not done anything to Miss Smythe so far. She was typing when Ferdinand entered, and she continued typing. Ferdinand searched her eyes hopefully for the love-light which should be glowing there, but found only a look of suspicious curiosity. So he blushed and hurried into his private office.

He sat down before his typewriter. He was disappointed. And he had learned, in the past, that work was the best salve for disappointment. So he inserted a clean sheet of bond into the machine and began pecking at a new story.

It was most annoying. He had written for perhaps two minutes, when he chanced to glance at the sheet. It said:

"I LOVE YOU"
by
Ferdinand M. Pratt

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I—"

Ferdinand said, "Oh, my!" annoyedly. His mind must be wool-gathering. The day's experience had upset him. He tore the sheet out of the machine swiftly. He ripped it into tiny shreds, and thrust them into his wastebasket. He was ashamed to think what Miss Smythe might think if she saw that stark revelation of his inner thoughts so clearly printed on that white sheet.

He reeled another sheet into the typewriter. This time he concentrated with extreme care. He was perfectly sure that his story started:

"She tripped lightly down the staircase; a vision of delight in a sapphire and gold evening gown. Her eyes—

But it didn't come out like that! Before Ferdinand's astonished gaze; plain,

unashamed, on the sheet were the words:

"I love you. When are you going to stop ignoring me? If you but realized the depths of my pass—"

Ferdinand gasped, "Oh, my goodness!" and swept a hand experimentally over his forehead. It was a trifle feverish, he thought. He poured a drink from his desk carafé; gulped it. He mopped his brow. He wiped a hand across his eyes. He sat quietly in his seat a moment, staring at the typewriter. Then he started fingering the keys again. Deliberately. Carefully. He spelt his own name. He hit the F key, the E key, the R—D—I—N—A—N—D—

It came out—

I LOVE YOU!

Ferdinand fell back in his chair. He felt weak. He thought of calling Miss Smythe—then hesitated. He knew how sick men often raved their innermost thoughts. And he feared what he might say to her under this strange spell.

He got up and looked at himself in the tiny washstand mirror. As he was standing there, he heard the "plip-plip" of typewriter keys striking the platen roll. He wheeled swiftly. Just in time to see the carriage slam itself back!

He raced to the side of the machine. There was a new sentence. It said, *"Don't be afraid, Ferdinand. I have always loved you."*

Ferdinand was terrified, but common sense told him it must be some horrible mistake. Some mechanical defect in the typewriter, maybe. He lifted the shield, peered curiously at the key-flanges. They looked all right. Everything seemed to be in order. But then, of course, he wasn't a mechanic—

He poked one of the inner parts experimentally. Then leaped back, startled. For the machine emitted a low, metallic giggle, and suddenly tapped out, *"Don't! You tickle!"*

For a moment, Ferdinand stood there, indecisive. He moved forward again; lifted the machine; looked under it. The clacking of the keys made him drop it to the desk. The thing had printed, in coy capitals, "NAUGHTY BOY!"

He lost his temper then. Actually! He gritted his teeth and up-ended the accursed machine, meaning to find once and for all the meaning of this incredible phenomenon. There was one spring that didn't look just right. He poked it—

"Ouch!" yelled Ferdinand. For the carriage, suddenly, had leaped back at his probing finger. The marks where the gears had nipped the flesh looked, for all the world, like wee *tooth*-marks! As he glared, the instrument started tapping. It pegged out, rebelliously.

"Really! What kind of a typewriter do you think I am?"

It was then that the truth of the whole terrible disaster dawned on Ferdinand. The djinn's command *had* come true! His typewriter had fallen in love with him!

IT IS best that we should draw a curtain of incurious charity over the strange romance of Ferdinand Pratt. Love is, at best, a dangerous toy. But love such as this—

During the next two weeks, things went from bad to worse. Ferdinand's typewriter, being an articulate creation, wanted to voice its affection. And did so, voluminously. Being a thing of low sensitivity, it lacked shame. It was, in short, a most persistently abandoned creature.

It wrote notes to Ferdinand. Wild notes. He tried to keep paper away from it, but it had a diabolic ingenuity at getting into desk drawers and cupboards. When Fredinand came to his office each morning, he would find reams of correspondence, faithfully and lovingly tapped out by the impassioned machine during the night, neatly stacked on his desk. And the text

of these notes was—well, uninhibited, to say the least. For Ferdinand had been a writer of romance fiction.

He *had* to get to the office first every morning. For if Miss Smythe should ever see one of those notes— He shuddered.

And the typewriter trustingly believed that his new habit of arriving early was a token of affection. As soon as he came in, it would tap a cheery, *"Good morning!"* Then like as not, it would hop off the desk onto his lap. It liked to sit on Ferdinand's lap and let him stroke its keyboard. It would tinkle its little bell, and tap out a slow, contented stream of little "mmmmmmmmm's."

To make matters worse, it was jealous of Miss Smythe. It wrote her notes; notes that Ferdinand carefully destroyed each morning when he came in. And the things it called her—well, Mable would have been outraged. Ferdinand was.

Ferdinand grew thin. He grew haggard. His nerves became as tense as a World's Fair mural. His eyes held a hunted look. His production diminished; finally stopped altogether.

Something had to be done. Finally, he thought of what he must do. Find the djinn. Make him repeal his command. So Ferdinand searched Fifth Avenue high and low. No djinn. He tried the Bronx. No djinn. And then, one day, inspiration came to him. One thing would bring the djinn. A girl show!

"I WANT it big, Miss Smythe," he said. "At least ten feet deep and thirty feet long. And make sure the advertisements are in all the papers."

Mable Smythe stared at her employer dubiously. He had been acting queerly, now, for almost three weeks. Quite unlike himself. He did not work. And she had several times seen letters around the office; letters obviously written to him by some woman. And such letters! Only a brazen hussy would dare to say the things that Mable had noticed—oh, just scanning, you understand!—on the last page.

And now, *this*—

She said, in what was intended to be a frigid tone, "I'm not certain, Mr. Pratt, that I should remain as your secretary. After all, I never expected to—"

"Oh, hush!" said Ferdinand petulantly. Which is an indication of the ragged condition of Ferdinand's nerves. He would never have dreamed of speaking to Mable in that tone a few weeks ago. "Just do as I say!" And he went out for a walk. The typewriter was waiting for him in the office. He didn't feel up to fondling its space bar for another single moment.

Miss Smythe got to her task thoughtfully. She was extremely disturbed. But she inserted the advertisement in the papers. She ordered the poster. It was a huge one, brightly lettered in red. It said, "SEE THE LIVING MODELS! COME ONE—COME ALL! 100 Beautiful Girls in Nothing Flat!"

IT COST Ferdinand plenty. More than he could afford. But it was the only way he could think of to lure the Bronx djinn out of retirement.

By two-thirty the next afternoon, his office and those on either side of it were jammed to the portals with feminine pulchritude; the models Ferdinand had employed. There were all sizes and types of girls. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. Tall and short; slim and chubby. They had but one thing in common. Curves.

Mable Smythe looked at this bevy of beauties, and was shocked. This, she told herself, was the last straw! Of all persons in the world to turn—to turn *lecher!*—Mr. Pratt! And he must be perfectly horrible, you know, to do a thing like this! She had never before seen him in his true light. And these girls— Thoughtfully she smoothed her dress down in the front. And

in the back; snugly over the hips. She sniffed. It was really rather insulting, in a way. That he should ignore her when planning such a—an *orgy* here in the office!

Ferdinand's typewriter was all aflutter. It tapped, over and over again, *"Why, Ferdinand, you perfect darling! And you're doing all this for poor little me!"*

The hours approached. Ferdinand walked to the window. The day was clear and warm. There was no sign of a cloud; not even a small, black one. He sighed. But he turned to his models.

"All right, girls," he said. "Get ready for the show. Try on the bathing suits given to you. And—take your time dressing."

One of the girls complained, "Mr. Pratt, there are no shades in the windows."

"You're on the fifth floor. It doesn't matter," said Ferdinand. But as he hurried out to the fire-escape he hoped it would matter. This whole thing, the huge canvas sign, the advertisements, the show, had been planned not for the gaping males gawking up from the streets below, but for the one person to whom height meant nothing. The djinn.

He sat down on the fire-escape and waited. For ten minutes. Fifteen. A half hour. Nothing happened. That is, nothing he was hoping for. Lots happened inside the offices. Girls undressed, leisurely; got into bathing suits and stood around talking.

They talked and laughed and posed. They compared suits audibly—and figures mentally.

But no black cloud appeared to perch on the window-sill. Another quarter hour passed. The girls inside were becoming restless. Ferdinand heard one of them say, "Well, this is the screwiest thing *I* ever did. If that funny little duck doesn't come back directly, and tell us what to do next, *I'm* going home."

And still no djinn. Ferdinand sighed. He started to rise. It was a failure. He might as well go back and pay the girls off; send them all home—

THEN suddenly he gasped and started! For there, at the window, was one girl who was not being paid to model! And what a girl! Slowly pirouetting before the window and before Ferdinand's astounded gaze in the briefest, most daring of all the swimsuits Ferdinand had rented. It was—Mable Smythe!

And—

"Whew! Now, dere's w'at *I* call a real babe!" said a hoarse, familiar voice.

Ferdinand wheeled frantically. He saw nothing. But he cried, "You! Where are you? Djinn—"

"Right here," said a complacent voice at his elbow. "Geez, I been right here all along. You don't t'ink I was goin' to miss dis do you?" And, irrelevantly, "I finally got de invisibility down pat, see?"

Ferdinand clutched feverishly at empty space. He cried:

"I see! I mean, I don't see, so I must see. Listen, Mr. Djinn—you've got to repeal that order you gave! You made a mistake! You made my *typewriter* fall in love with me instead of my typist. It's been driving me crazy!"

"Geez," said the djinn regretfully, "I'm sorry, pal. I never stopped to think—" There was the faintest glint, and a swishing sound. "Cherawoeksivle — glapoo! Dere you are, bud. All fixed now! Hey, what's de rush?"

But this time it was he who spoke to empty air. Ferdinand was scrambling madly into the building, through the hall, to his office. He burst in, disregarding the affronted screams of semi-clad femininity. He raced to his desk; looked down at his typewriter—

Nothing happened. He touched it. Still nothing happened. Boldly, he picked

it up; shook it. It was silent and immobile, as all good little typewriters should be. Ferdinand closed his eyes.

Angry hands plucked at his elbow. A shrill voice demanded, "Look here, what's this all about, wise guy? Do we get paid for this afternoon's work, or what?"

Ferdinand said nothing. Ferdinand had fainted!

Afterward, quite some time afterward, Ferdinand came to his senses to feel soft, caressing hands on his forehead, and smell sweet, familiar perfume unfamiliarly near him.

He opened his eyes and looked into those of Mable Smythe. Everything came back to him. He stammered:

"The—the girls?"

"I paid them off," said Mable, "and sent them home." And reprovingly, "It wasn't very *nice* of you, you know! You shouldn't do things like that!"

Ferdinand blushed guiltily. He began, "Miss Smythe, I think you should know—"

"Mable," corrected the girl gently, "to you—Ferdinand. That is, if you *want* poor little me. But, of course, you will have to stop this dreadful philandering. I wouldn't want to marry a man who didn't stay home with his wife and—and—"

FERDINAND rose weakly. As he did so, a low, coarse voice chuckled in his ear, "Sorry I mixed it up, pal. But it looks like it's gonna woik dis way, anyhow, don't it?"

"Did you say something, dear?" said Mable. But it was a rhetorical question. Womanlike, there were several things she wanted to know. Most important of all—"Did you like me in that perfectly shocking swimsuit? I wouldn't *dare* wear it, of course, but still—

Ferdinand, very wisely, said nothing.

Enduring

By MAISIE NELSON

She was the child of a rose and flame,
A creature with sloe-black eyes,
And a mad flame-soul in her white rose breast,
And a red mouth soft with sighs;
For she dreamed of the son of the old Frost King,
So beautiful, pale and chill;
And she longed for the touch of his icy lips,
Though she knew that one kiss would kill.

Oh, the years have fled, and the rose is dead,
And the flame is an ash of gray,
And the ermine cloak of the old Frost King
Is tattered and torn away;
But a dream may live through a thousand years,
And our love was a dream begun
When I was a child of a rose and flame
And you were the Frost King's son.

A misty thing across the room . . .a voice like the bell of doom. . . .



Past Tense

By HARRY SIVIA

Now you may know what Death is like . . . Vaguely, from across the room, the words came to her.

WHAT really happened to Jane Bradford was not at all what the newspapers would have you to believe. Their explanation—along with the coroner's routine verdict—was too obviously matter-of-fact, their stories too cheaply tabloid. And Jane herself, whatever else she might have been, was certainly not of a type to pass on from thrombotic reasons. Her death had something else behind it.

On that particular night, shortly after 8 P. M., Jane Bradford put aside the newspaper she had been reading, and walked to the window. She glanced up and down the street with a nervous impatience, looked at her wrist watch, then shook her dark head fretfully.

Returning to the chair in which she had been sitting, she smoothed out a cushion, sighed heavily and sat down. It was then that the shrill ringing of the doorbell broke the stillness of her room.

Eagerly Jane jumped to her feet and made for the door, forgetting her impatience in the thought that at last Paul had arrived. He was late again, as usual, meaning more trouble with the car. But at least he was here, and that was what mattered.

She unlatched the door, opened it wide and peered out into the darkness. There was no one on the porch; not the sign of a presence. That was odd. Jane was positive about the bell; it had surely rung. She stepped onto the porch, peered deeper into the shadows.

"Paul?" she said softly. "Is that you, Paul?"

From somewhere down the street came the raucous tooting of an automobile horn,

and that was her only answer. Puzzled, she turned to go back inside.

It was all very peculiar. She'd have an electrician examine that bell tomorrow. Something was funny somewhere, unless the neighborhood kids were playing pranks again.

At the door Jane paused momentarily for one last look into the darkness. As she did so, a gust of icy wind struck her body.

She shivered involuntarily and slipped the nightlatch into place.

Then, when she was back inside, in the dim light from her table lamp, she saw the—thing. Or rather, she thought she saw it—she could not be certain. In the shadows of her room it seemed nothing more than a vague, formless outline of something nebulous and cloud-like, familiar to her in another time.

She shrank back instinctively. At the same time she craned her neck forward in an effort to distinguish the hazy outline across the room. Jane Bradford considered herself a brave woman. Nothing like a shadow could frighten her.

She looked hard and long at the thing—the shadow. She was struck by the very familiar lines of a cloudy blur that could have been a face, and a premonitory chill coursed through her veins. At the same instant she noticed the faint stirring of a lace curtain by the window. She frowned, then started abruptly as a voice, grim yet filled with an almost-inaudible chuckle, broke on the stillness.

"So you're waiting for him. You pick them up fast, Janie."

Her slim body went rigid. Her arms stiffened at her sides. She wanted to cry out, to scream in mortal fear; but an awful paralysis caught at her throat. She could only whisper in a hoarse, unnatural tone:

"David! David!"

She threw up her arms, covered her ashen face. Her long black hair fell down in ebon waves across her wrists. "Oh, I'm going mad!"

"No, you aren't mad!" From across the room the deep, familiar voice seemed filled with a mocking triumph. "And you aren't having an hallucination. I'm really here. You can see me, can't you?"

Slowly Jane moved her hands from across her face. In the dimness, the pale amorphous outline of the shadow was like some portion of a Dali painting—surreal and awful!

"You're dead!" she protested shrilly. "You can't frighten me. You're dead! It's in the paper here."

She picked up the newspaper as if to prove her point. Her slender fingers touched the headlines that ran across the page.

"See? You're dead! 'David Bradford Dies in Chair'," she read tremblingly. "'Jealous Killer Dies Without Emotion. David Bradford, 29, convicted murderer of his wife's alleged lover, died in the electric chair at State Penitentiary at 11:59 last night'!"

Jane glanced fearfully up from the paper. She was breathing heavily now. Her painted mouth was twisted into an alien look of fear and horror.

ACROSS the room the faint shadow laughed softly, mockingly.

"They won't burn me this time," it said confidently. "They won't even mention me in the papers—except maybe in the past tense.

"Reporters don't believe in ghosts, you know; so when they find you dead, they won't consider me!

"They'll be writing about you, Janie; and they'll paint that tiny little soul of yours black, too, won't they? Like they did mine! But they won't link me with your death. Not with any of it! You see, I couldn't possibly commit a murder. I'm already—" The voice broke off, chuckled

grimly. "Sounds pleasant, doesn't it, Janie?"

Jane Bradford lowered her eyes, shrank back into the cushions of her chair. She rubbed her dark eyes in an effort to clear away the threatening thing before her. She was sure that it was only a bad vision. If she could clear her mind, it would go away.

But her mind spun in dizzy circles. Round and round like a child's top. And always it carried her back to the beginning.

As long as she could remember, Jane had been fascinated by men. And it was her nature, then, not to be true to one alone. She had never really cared for David after the first few weeks of their courtship, but somehow she had been swept into marriage. And although her husband was blindly in love with her, and offered her everything that a normal woman could desire, still deep inside her lay that old unfaithful beat of the heart.

David's first inkling of suspicion must have come when he discovered the typewritten note on her dressing table. She had been careless in leaving it about; but her glib explanation and her surface innocence had satisfied his naïve suspicions.

Later, however, there was another messy complication when David picked up the extension phone by mistake; and afterwards, the monogrammed cigarette butt near the fireplace—although Jane didn't smoke. Always her explanations seemed to convince David—until that afternoon when he had come home unexpectedly. That had been the finish.

VIVIDLY Jane remembered the dazed look of pain and unbelief on his homely face. How hurt he had seemed, and how suddenly his affection for her had changed to hate and menace! She remembered his pale hand clutching at the dresser drawer; the gun so out of place in his fingers. As in echo, she heard the bleaty shriek of fear, the nauseating plea for mercy; and then the flow of blood on her blond young man's shirt front. Afterwards, her husband's calm attitude of surrender; and the look on his face, mirroring, as it were, a certain loss of everything in which he had believed.

And then the farce that was his trial! The damning evidence of unreasonable jealousy on his part; the calculated effect she had exerted on the jury. Above all, too, she remembered David, calm and stoic, resigned to his trumped-up fate; never uttering a word in his own defense; never moving a lip that could have smeared her through the tabloids.

There had been something almost horrible about his silence; something deadly about the picture of resigned patience that was his face. It was as though he awaited a far more ghastly vengeance!

In retrospect she saw the returning file of the twelve good men; remembered the foreman reading his fatal verdict, catching her coy eye as he did so. The dash of reporters; the blinding glare of the flashbulbs! The papers had been with her all the way.

There had followed weeks of waiting, along with David's appeal and the governor's denial of clemency; while inside her lay a feeling that might have been remorse.

Last night had been the end of something. With the dimming of lights along death row, and later when the announcer on the newscast had said, "David Bradford died tonight!" she had felt an immense weight roll from her mind.

But now —Well, this was something else!

"So it's Paul Halliday this time." The voice of the shade was a mocking derision. "Paul, the weakling! Oh, you're slipping, Janie. Decidedly, you're slipping! Tell me now, won't you, how many others were there? You can tell me—now that I'm—"

Jane shivered uncontrollably, dropped the newspaper to the floor. She knew that for the first time in her life she was afraid, mortally afraid! Not of something human, but of this thing—this shadow—that was not to be pushed aside, or beaten down!

She was afraid because this thing before her was a ghost. It had to be. It spoke; it had a kind of intangible shape that was clear without being solid.

But Jane didn't believe in ghosts! Ghosts were for the foolish superstitious people!

Then what was that misty thing across the room? And what was the voice, like a bell of doom, saying:

"That gun I always kept in the drawer? It's still there?"

Jane started fearfully, blinked her eyes. She was surely going insane. Fancy a ghost shooting a person!

But then, in a sort of dim, far-off perspective, she saw one cloud-like hand reach into the drawer. Petrified, she called back that other time when the hand had been more of substance. She saw the misty fingers emerge, clutched fantastically about the butt of a tiny, snub-nosed automatic!

A STRANGE feeling of detachment came over her. She tried to move, couldn't. She wanted to scream, but her voice was gone. Dully, she wondered where Paul was. Paul Halliday, her latest whim. If only he would come, he could bring her out of this. He could chase away this ghastly vision, drown out this droning voice that threatened her.

"Now you may know what death is like." Vaguely, from across the room, the words came to her. "Realize that it is more than love. I killed because I loved you and wanted you only for myself. According to society, I was wrong and you were right. So I died for what I believed.

"But when the current in that damned chair was burning me to a crisp, I decided then you'd never trick another man. I knew, by the deep vow I made, that I would reach back to you from eternity!"

The hollow drone of the voice stopped. Jane struggled to control herself. In one supreme effort she rose to her feet, her legs bending like stems of rubber. Exhausted, she dropped back into the seat.

The furniture was spinning; the cloudy shadow was but a wisp of curling smoke that looked like a man.

But the hazy arm was coming up; the little automatic was raised and leveled at her heart. She saw the index finger grow taut about the tiny trigger!

At precisely that instant, Paul Halliday strode softly upon the porch. In the darkness, failing to see the doorbell, he knocked sharply three times.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Like the sharp, staccato reports of a tiny automatic pistol his fist rapped against the hollow board wall!

An hour or so later the police had made their investigation and were gone. The reporters and photographers had secured their stories. All of them came in answer to Paul Halliday's call; and they found him kneeling, grief-stricken, beside the lifeless body of Jane Bradford. There were no marks on Jane's body, no signs of violence—only an expression of utter fear and horror on her smooth, oval face.

In one corner of the room lay a tiny, snub-nosed automatic. It had not been fired, and there were no fingerprints on it. For a brief while the police considered this passing strange; but they grunted it away and filed the pistol under "Irrelevant Articles at Scene of Crime."

"Heart failure," was the coroner's laconic decision. "Fright, or a sudden shock of some sort. Perhaps she brooded too much over her husband's death. The scandal, you know, and the bad publicity."

What really happened to Jane Bradford was not at all what the newspapers would have you to believe. Their explanation——

"Hear the song of the strings, and the clangor of swords, and shout, for the wild harp of death!"



The Kings do Battle Again

By GORDON KEYNE

The Vikings fight again; what chance had battle axes against machine guns?

"GOOD thing we moved the trucks and wagons a half-mile distant, into those fields," said Muller. He was a young man, phlegmatic and casual in his manner, like many Swedes. "May fool them into wasting their bombs over there. Heading this way?"

Dahl lowered his glasses. "Not after us; not yet. The smoke is from Verdalsoren."

On this hill behind the village church of Stiklestad, Colonel Thorolf Dahl was watching the sky while his pitifully few men labored at the outflung trenches. Death was working its way through Norway this fine spring day—working out of Trondhjem toward the Swedish border, cutting Norway asunder. And Norway fought him back.

Dahl was no professional soldier. He was a lawyer, an amateur at arms. He re-

garded things in a matter-of-fact, judicial fashion, but he had a fund of fiery, blazing energy now at full tap. One could not be judicial with the world wracked and ruined.

Snow had come with the Nazis, a spring blizzard sweeping the land. Now it was past. Here in the pleasant Verdale, among the enormous firs and the budding silver birches, Dahl had gathered some hundreds of men, some soldiers, others not; refugees from the Nazis. Until today, he had dreamed of effecting great things with them. Until today he had inspired them with his own desperate and burning fervor against the Nazi hordes. Until today!

Here was an entire machine-gun company, guns intact but with no officers; besides these, close to a thousand men in all. Also, Muller had come in via the motor road from Jamtland, across the border. Captain Muller had brought his entire battery of Bofors anti-aircraft guns; he and others of the International Brigade in Finland had turned from fighting the Russ to fighting the Nazi. Muller stood beside him now, here on the hill by the stone column; and with them was Tuomiin, captain of the Finns—a hundred of them who had come into Norway to lend a hand.

But today, Dahl's dream had died, and he knew he was doomed with these others.

He flung a glance out at the far snowy peaks. He was a fair, heavy man with high-boned features and hard, glittering eyes, a practical and prosaic man of iron. In these frightful days, with the coast towns occupied by the Nazis, with treachery on all sides, with Norway lost and sundered, with help from the Allies as yet hardly visible, his world had gone reeling; but he kept his poise.

"Looks like your radio man coming," said Muller, passing cigarettes.

Dahl glanced at the man approaching up the path from below, then lifted his binoculars to the road that led from Faaren. A dot was there, slipping and sliding along in the snowy mud. A staff car! His heart leaped. Officers, staff officers, coming to lend a hand! Norway was still fighting!

He looked again at the thick, mighty firs and the silver birches down the vale. St. Olav had died here at Stiklestad a thousand years ago; on this hill stood the monument to his memory. With a wrench, Dahl turned and nodded to the radio man, who spoke despairingly.

"Everything's dead, the air's jammed with German. The last thing I got from our government station was suddenly cut off; and it was nothing pleasant."

"Let's have the worst," Dahl said crisply, with another glance at the approaching staff car. It was driving erratically, he noticed, as one almost sub-consciously notes details in times of stress.

"No help can be sent us. The German column is coming through from Trondhjem; the snow has bogged their few mechanized units. They've no heavy artillery; they're coming light and fast, with planes bombing everything ahead of them. We're ordered to hold them until tomorrow night if possible, to give our troops and artillery time to concentrate. The English are sending help, but it won't reach us today or tomorrow. That's all."

"Very well," said Dahl calmly. "Tell the men. It's their right to know."

The radio operator returned as he had come. Silence fell upon the three men beside the column; Norseman, phlegmatic Swede, dark thin Finn, were all one in grim intent. They were being sacrificed for the greater good. The sun was low; the night was not far away.

Muller broke silence, pointing to the staff car. "What's that?"

"Help, if such a thing's possible," replied Dahl. "Come along."

They descended the hill, passing the ancient church and the village beyond.

The houses were emptied of their fled folk and served the troops as quarters. Farther out in the fields lay the half-finished trenches, and the staff car had halted there, with men gathering around it.

Dahl quickened pace and broke into a run. At close view he saw that the car was riddled and torn by bullets. Dead forms were being lifted out. Shouts were summoning the one surgeon here, a refugee from Trondhjem; other shouts contradicted. No use. All dead in the car except one man, the driver. They lifted him out, bleeding.

He was a staff colonel, with death in his throat, but gulped hasty words at Dahl.

"Sorry, caught us before we knew it. Planes gunned us. Light column of Nazis on way—no tanks—following motor road —planes—planes—"

His head lolled, and he was at peace.

"Tuomiin," said Dahl, turning to the two other officers, "get some of your men out at once, as scouts, to contact the Nazis; they may have ski troops, too. Muller, I must get my own trenches finished before tomorrow. Can I do anything to help your outfit?"

The calm Swede looked out at the thick grove of birch, with a few firs, where his battery was digging in; the last flurry of snow had done much to conceal the position.

"Thanks, no. My sergeant's a good man; everything's going well."

DAHL ordered the dead officers buried and the riddled car taken to join the motorized units in the imitation camp half a mile distant. He and Muller and Toumiin were alone here; no other officers, no one to help. His dream of welding these scattered fragments into one solid fighting force was now dying fast. He would die with it, he knew, but not uselessly.

Silent, the three walked back to the houses, to the cottage that served as headquarters. The sentry there saluted and grinned, and spoke.

"Colonel! Three farmers are inside. They came asking questions; they seemed so queer that we held them—hello, here's one of them now!"

A man in shaggy, uncouth garments stepped out from the doorway. He was stocky, powerful, massively built, with shining red-gold hair and beard; his eyes were a very bright blue. He squinted up at the hill.

"What's that thing up there?" he asked. "Some sort of a monument?"

"Strange that you don't know of it," replied Dahl. "A monument to King Olav, who was killed hereabouts a long time ago. St. Olav."

"Oh, we're strangers around here." The man looked hard at Dahl. "That's my name, too; Olav. We came to help you fellows fight. Inside, you two ale-bibbers! Here's the commandant!"

The three officers smiled and lit fresh cigarettes, as two other men came from the cottage. They, too, were roughly clad, but seldom had Dahl seen such fine figures of men.

Olav turned to the taller, a man of fifty with a hard, grimly massive face, standing at least six and a half feet high and built in proportion.

"This is my half-brother Harald," said he, and pointed to the third. This was a remarkably handsome fellow, with a bushy beard and a physique magnificent in its perfect balance and poise. "Here is another Ole. I'm Olav Digre, Olav the Thick. He's just plain Ole Tryggvi's son; not a bad sort, if he can keep his temper down."

The smiles widened. Dahl, who had not laughed for many days, shook hands with the three, laughter in his stony eyes.

"So you want to fight, eh? You've picked a poor time and a worse place, friends."

"What suits you, suits us," said Olav Digre. "Eh, Harald?"

The giant nodded. Dahl turned to him in frank curiosity.

"Have you had any army training?"

"I was trained to give orders, not take them," said the giant, regarding him with a gaze so piercing and direct that Dahl bristled.

"Prove it," he retorted. "What orders would you give now, if you were in my place, with a German column coming tomorrow?"

The huge man, whose beard was sprinkled with gray, threw out a long arm.

"Put your Finnish riflemen and some machine guns at that deserted farmstead yonder, across the valley. First burn the house, so the enemy will think it abandoned. Wait until they advance all around it, then open on them close up. That's the way to kill."

"Ha!" Dahl grunted. "Upon my word, that's an idea! Toumiin, what d'ye think of it?"

"Splendid!" agreed the Finn. He was staring at the three countrymen. They stared back at him. His lean, swart face changed; muttering something to himself, he brushed past the three and went into the cottage. Olav Digre glanced after him.

"A strange man, that?"

"He's a Finn," said Dahl, puffing at his cigaret. "Captain Toumiin, of the Finns."

"A Finn! That explains it, kinsmen!" The giant Harald wakened into animation. All Finns are wizards and warlocks, fey men! We had one on our ship, off Sicily, who could whistle up a wind any time. And a good Christian man he was, too."

Dahl smiled in comprehension. Not farmers after all, but seamen who had wandered up from the fiords, perhaps fishermen. Uncouth, barbaric, splendidly simple fellows who deserved a better fate than death at the Nazi hands! His heart warmed to them.

"Join us for supper; we've plenty of food and drink. This time tomorrow, we'll need no more. After supper, take to the road and make for safety; better go back to your fiord. Three unarmed men can't give us much help, I fear."

The handsome Ole, Tryggvi's son, broke into a laugh. He had the quick eye and the magnificent build of an athlete, and an air of reckless whimsy.

"Well, colonel, I've seen the time when we were said to be right helpful in a scrimmage! And we have arms; we left them hidden among the trees. What say, Olav Digre? Shall we eat and drink, then run and jump into the sea before the Russ can catch us?"

The giant smiled grimly. Olav Digre put hands on broad hips, and shook with mirth.

"Well said, kinsman Ole!" he cried, laughing. "Still, this soldier knows his business. He's a good man, and takes advice when he gets it. Not like you, Harald, always turning up your nose at good counsel!"

The giant merely grunted. Dahl, a trifle nettled by their raillery, shrugged.

"I advised you for your own good, friends. We're soldiers; you're not. If you really want to help, go lend your muscle to building the trenches. Put in an hour's work, then join us, and we'll fill your skins full of food and drink."

The grim giant woke up suddenly. "Ha! That's a promise! Come along, you two!"

THE three went stalking away, the soldiers flocking around them in the gathering twilight. Captain Muller went to see about torches for his men to work by. Colonel Thorolf Dahl finished his cigarette, then turned into the cottage. Tuomiin had lighted a lamp and was shaving. Dahl got out his own kit and began to lather his lean jaw.

"Those men," jerked out the Finn,

scraping his swart cheek. "Something strange about them. I can feel it. Those three."

Dahl laughed a little. "Oh, we're some queer people up here in the north! They're fishermen from some little fiord; gloriously simple fellows! They've probably just heard about the war. But they're damned intelligent, in a way; regular viking type of a thousand years ago. No doubt, lineal descendants of vikings."

Tuomiin said, "I'm of the old Turanian blood, me; I can feel things of the other world. I say again, there's something strange about those three men."

"Oh, no doubt!" assented Dahl carelessly. "I must watch 'em; they're the type to grab an ax and walk out on the German guns. Still, that big fellow gave us a real idea. Suppose you take position at that farm, in the morning. I'll give you four machine guns."

"Right." Tuomiin nodded. "We'd better get drunk tonight."

"By all means." Dahl rubbed his cheek. "There! I've got that razor in fine shape at last! A trifle late, perhaps. Well, I'll take a turn around and be back later."

HE PASSED out into the darkness; the orderlies were setting the dinner board.

The radio man reported everything blank. Dahl strode hither and yon, consulting with the makeshift officers he had appointed, and with young Einar Ecksal, whom he had made his second in command. Running into Captain Muller, he paused for a cigarette.

"Dinner's about ready; bring over any of your men you like. How are things?"

"Quite all right," said the calm Swede. "Our guns will have some fun. I hear those three recruits of yours have been slaving at the trenches, doing incredible things!"

"They're good, simple fellows. No word from the scouts yet?"

"None. I suppose we'll all help you pay our debts tomorrow."

"What debts?" Dahl asked, evasive before anything like awkward sentiment.

"Oh, you know; the earth gave us life, we pay her back. Our earth, our country. Life's not so badly lost, if the debt's well paid."

Strange words to come from the phlegmatic Swede! "Hadn't thought of it that way," said Dahl slowly. "You may be right. Well, come along to supper! We can depend on the scouts; good men, those Finns."

The cottage was crowded to the doors—Dahl and his aides, Tuomiin and a brace of his men, Muller and half a dozen Swedes, and the three huge seamen. The entire camp was in a hum, feasting and drinking with utter disregard of the tomorrow. Dahl had kept nothing back from the men; they knew what was ahead, and cheered his name, and drank deep.

Dahl could not take his gaze from those three amazing figures. The giant Harald, the stocky Olav Digre, and the handsome, merry Ole were like figures of roaring legend. They ate and drank as they had labored, incredibly. They laughed, joked, bawled snatches of song; under the spell of their infectious gaiety, the morrow was forgotten. Aquavit and beer were plentiful. The giant Harald, losing his dour aspect as he expanded to the liquor, came and took a stool by Thorolf Dahl.

He asked about the war with many curious questions—why the Nazis were in, why the English were not coming through, and so forth. Dahl expounded at length, and the other nodded.

"I like you," he said abruptly, gazing at Dahl with biting eyes. "You're a man after my own heart. A man of iron, and that's the truth. So St. Olav was killed here, eh?"

"Long ago," said Dahl. "There'll be more than one Olav keeping him com-

pany tomorrow, in this little forgotten corner of the Norse uplands."

"A poor fame, scarce worth the winning?" quoted the giant, and with a laugh heaved up his huge frame. His voice blared. "Kinsmen! Come along, work to do, songs to sing! Pass among the men and tell them how men died of old, and what a little thing death really is!"

The three swaggered out. Dahl met the quizzical gaze of Muller, and shrugged.

"Queer characters! We have many people like that in the back country, people who still live in the age of the vikings, a thousand years behind the times."

"The world was happy then," said Muller, and the words carried deep meaning. Yes, the world had been happy then, when the measure of a man was his swordarm and his daring, and nations had a guidance of right or wrong, and such things as ideals existed.

Later, just before the scouts came in, Dahl was lost in wonder at his own men. The Swedes had come over to hear those three seamen sing and talk of olden days; the broken, weary, hopeless men were whipped into a blaze. Dahl, who knew little of ancient history and cared less, was amazed by the frenetic rapture with which his men reacted to the old legends.

Further, the handsome, cheery Ole performed feats of juggling and of sheer strength that brought gapes of awed wonder. Olav Digre, the stocky, shining-haired man, fell into a strain of mingled preaching and exhortation that held Dahl himself spellbound. The tremendous personalities of these men struck like a whirlwind. Best of all was the giant Harald, who twanged an old cracked harp lugged from one of the village houses, and sang to his own twanging.

Dahl found himself gulping. The man had a rousing, strident voice like a warhorn, and his simple song was gripped in that voice and lifted into a blaring warcry. Evidently it was some refrain handed down from the olden days; Harald put ringing life into it, and the harp lent it wings, and somehow it clutched at Dahl's heart until he knew why the men yelled and cheered, thundering out the swinging lilt of the chorus:

"Play loud the wild harp—
Let the bowstrings resound!
Play loud the wild harp—
Let the minstrels of death,
The arrows, go far!
Play loud the wild harp—
Pluck the bowstrings again!
Hear the song of the strings
And the clangor of swords,
And shout, for the wild harp of death!"

The singer, with a clash of the harpstrings, lifted his voice in a battle-cry that set Dahl's blood tingling. The men joined in wildly. Dahl spoke to one of them.

"What does it mean? *Ad Gisof!* What does that yell mean? What language is it?"

"I don't know, Colonel." The man was hoarse, for he had been yelling fiercely. "They tell me it means: Ho for God! Ho for God!" as though in frenzy, he sent the words pealing up anew, other men joining in the shout. The familiar "For Norge!" that Dahl knew so well had yielded to this older, fiercer yell. *Ad Gisof!* Ho for God!

Then the weary Finn scouts came in, and Dahl forgot all else in the heartleap of their news.

The Germans had halted a few miles down the Verdale; they were clearing the road as they went, so trucks might follow. They were in light formation; no tanks, no heavy guns, but some light artillery. The snow was thin on the ground hereabouts and would not hamper their attack. The first shots from the scouts had checked them for the night. They would camp, and come on with morning. Yes, fresh scouts had gone out to keep watch.

Dahl made no secret of the news. Before turning in, he sat alone with his memories; Muller's words about paying a debt lingered in his mind and made the thing simpler. His wife and two children, in Bergen under the Nazis. His friends, his clubs in Oslo, his possessions, his career—all so far away, so dim!

Strange, how every ambition of the civilized world had been smashed down. Strange, how science and art and learning were swept away, how honor and ideals were empty words and put to shame! Back to the very cave man and worse, for even the cave man must have had his God.

"And where is our God?" thought Dahl. "Ho for God ! It's a battlecry, yes, but—"

At a step, he looked up. It was Captain Tuomiin.

"Going to bed? Pleasant dreams," said Dahl bitterly. "Dreams of lost beliefs, of lost gods, of the wide world sinking into ruin, of light falling into darkness!"

"We thought so too, over in Finland." Tuomiin jerked his head toward the outside. "Some must die to uphold such things, Dahl. I've been listening to that fellow Olav Digre, as he calls himself. He's preaching faith and courage."

"Faith!" Dahl exploded in a terrible laugh. "Too late. Faith's gone, with all such dreams."

"Yes? But someone has faith in you, in us. We have orders to stop the Nazi column."

"Eh?" Dahl lifted his head, astonished by this thought. "Why, that's true, that's true! There is still faith, then! It hadn't occurred to me."

"Yes. It's worth a thought or two, maybe." The Fnn stripped off tunic and shirt, baring his wiry torso. "Olav Digre—wasn't that a nickname of one of your kings, the same one you call St. Olav, who died near here?"

"Perhaps. I don't know," said Dahl, lost in other thoughts.

"And that handsome fellow Ole—they said he was the son of Tryggvi. Odd name!"

"Oh, no! An old one, in these parts." Dahl stirred, got his boots off, slipped off belt and pistol. "One of the old kings was named that; the old names linger, you know. Well, ready for the light?"

Tuomiin grunted assent. Dahl turned out the lamp and reached for his blankets. He heard the Finn's voice in the darkness.

"And I believe there was another old king called Harald Hardrede, Harald Hard-to-counsel; buried in Trondhjem, isn't he? I tell you, Dahl, I think these three seamen are the spirits of your ancient kings!"

"Ghosts don't eat and drink," said Dahl curtly.

"Another thing; that warcry, *Ad Gisof!*" went on the Finn's voice, earnestly. "This Hardrede commanded the Goths and the Imperial guard in Byzantium, didn't he, before he became king here? One of the men said that *Gisof* is the Gothic word for God—*Ad Gisof!* To God, or Ho for God! Hardrede brought this battlecry back from Byzantium."

Dahl refused to argue. "Good night!" he said. "And dream of faith, friend!"

He smiled to himself in the darkness. This queer, dark man had singular fancies. Like Laplanders, the Finns believed in ghosts and trolls. The prosaic fact that old names persisted in the back districts for centuries, was enough to start Tuomiin off on the trail of wizardry.

GRAYING dawn found Thorolf Dahl up and about. A strangely wistful tug was in his brain, an incredulous wonder; his last day on earth, really? Then he went out and the men cheered him; it steeled him famously. He spoke to them, and the hard manly heart of his spoke in his words. The men cheered again, voicing the cry of last night.

"Dahl, Dahl! For Norge! *Ad Gisof! Ad Gisof!* Ho for God!"

Muller was gone to his battery amid the trees; the guns were beautifully hidden, not a trace of them visible. Tuomiin with his Finns was gone to the farmstead across the vale; they were burning the stead in a billow of smoke, but leaving the out-buildings for cover. Dahl sent them four machine guns. These, like the Finns, vanished completely from sight.

He breakfasted in the trenches with the men as the sun rose. He thought to ask about the three seamen; someone said they had left camp in search of their hidden weapons. Then everything else was swept away, and time stood still, as the first planes were sighted. Two of them came, swept briefly across the sky, and were gone. Whistles rang out.

"More planes! More planes!"

The time was at hand. Dahl caught up his steel helmet and was off on the run, with Einar Ecksal and his aides following. The village emptied. The trenches were manned. The surgeon, with a hastily assembled corps, was located behind the hill. Scouts were far out among the lower valley trees, with a few portable machine guns.

God, those planes! They came down the sky in waves, from somewhere under the southern horizon. Not a dozen nor a score, but fifty, eighty, filling the heavens. Distant shots rang out as the scouts contacted the German van. A shell burst far to the rear. But nothing now mattered except the roaring death above; the roar became a drone, a steadily drumming reverberation that drowned out the whole world.

The first files were diving; it was coming, now, coming! Pursuit planes swung down and machine guns stuttered. From the majestic big fellows, one could see the bombs falling; Molotov's breadbaskets, some of them, enormous things that split in mid-air and showered down thermite bombs. . . .

And then they were striking. The earth was shaking; the village was blown into wreckage, the earth shook and the air trembled with the explosions. Those thermite bombs became flaming pillars of hellfire. Most of the bombs, however, fell about the parked cars and trucks that simulated a camp, half a mile away; this had fooled them. The first ranks of planes roared upward and circled, while others came dropping down. To right and left, men were falling, parachutes opening like white blossoms against the sky. Huge planes, enormous transport ships, dropping men by the score—

Suddenly, Muller's guns opened at pointblank range. Bofors, the finest anti-aircraft guns on earth, one-twenty shells to the minute. The reports, sharp and crackling, spoke with wicked staccato through the engine-roar. At the signal, the machine guns in the trenches also poured bullets up at the closer planes.

For those invaders, it was terrible beyond thought; they were caught by surprise. The little shells were bursting everywhere. Rifle fire picked off the parachuting men. Dahl, watching in frightful fascination, could scarce believe what he saw, as plane after plane reeled and staggered.

Two of the huge transports collided and came down together, off amid the silver birches; from that spot a column of flame soared into the sky for a long while. Bombers, five or six of them, streamed down one after another and crashed. A third transport was vomiting flame and smoke as it wobbled. The pursuit ships caught the full blast of shells; they were crashing in all directions and their formations were shattered. One struck and burst into fire not a hundred yards from where Dahl crouched. The attack, intended to blow all resistance to nothing, passed in

reeling wreckage and the Swedish guns poured death after it as it fled away.

This was a matter, not of moments but of seconds. Now the first formations were returning, too late to swerve or change plan. They, too, plunged into the trap. The front planes checked the dive in frantic effort, the rear ones swung out and aside, but Muller's guns barked like mad things. One bomber blew asunder in mid-air.

THEY were gone all at once, whirling away in every direction like a covey of frightened birds. Tuomiin with his hidden force had not fired a shot; wisps of smoke still drifted idly from the burned stead.

The men landing by parachute were being shot on the wing; the cracking of rifles could be heard again. Cheers lifted and rang along the Verdale.

But the planes came swarming back, this time high and far. The Swede guns welcomed them; one and then another fluttered down, but the bombs were better aimed, now. A score of pursuit planes dived on a venture, far separated, sweeping with machine guns ablaze. Men were dying all along the line, bombs were striking and gushing high. Dahl's helmet was dented by a bullet, the man beside him slumped down. None the less, those planes were shattered and sent away in wild flight.

Their work had not been left undone; above the Swede guns lifted a mushroom of smoke. A bomb had struck full. One of the Swedes came running out of the trees, making his way to the trenches; he reached Dahl with a frantic cry.

"Captain Muller's dead! Only two guns are still working!"

Dahl gave no sign of his heart-wrench. "So much the more ammunition for them," he said calmly. "Tell your sergeant to carry on."

The Swede gawked at him, was jerked back to sanity, and with a salute went away again on the run.

By this time the enemy's light artillery was at work and shells were exploding everywhere. The planes were gone, leaving the Verdale strewn with their blazing spouts of wreckage; they had paid dear. Dahl, trying to forget Muller, focused his binoculars down the vale and groaned to himself for his lack of artillery.

He could see the Germans plainly. They had flooded forward, only to halt; his own outflung men were falling back, concentrating on the trenches and machine gun nests. Dahl strode out along his lines, ignoring screaming shells and whistling lead.

"Stretcher bearers to work!" he ordered. "Quick! They'll shell us before attacking. Cover up, everyone not engaged with the wounded!"

Lucky those Nazis had no heavy guns, thought Dahl; bad enough as it was. They must have been furious at the check, for their shell-fire was continuous. Wounded men were taken around to the far side of the hill, in shelter. The village was all ablaze, but the church still stood.

Time wore on, the incessant shelling never ceasing. The morning had begun brightly, but was gradually hazing over; the sunlight was becoming wan and thin. Dahl, seeing groups of men staring at the sky, realized why. This haze was working up from seaward, and yet there was a stiff breeze down the Verdale that shook the trees.

"Witchcraft!" said Einar Ecksal, the stalwart young fellow Dahl had selected as his lieutenant. "Witchcraft, Colonel! Who ever heard of fog coming up against the wind?"

"Or of guns not working when most needed," said Thorolf Dahl the prosaic. "As long as the witchcraft favors us, don't complain. I'll see why those Swedes aren't firing; remain here."

He strode off, alone, to the inactive Swedish battery. What he found there was frightful. Bits of flesh were everywhere. Barely twenty men were on their feet. The sergeant in command had gone insane and was stalking about, pistol in hand, shooting at anyone who moved. He shot twice at Dahl; of necessity, Dahl killed him. It was bitter work for lawyer hands, but Thorolf Dahl had ceased to be a lawyer now.

As the men emerged from hiding, Dahl came upon Captain Muller, who lay with blood trickling from lips and nostrils. Dahl knelt beside him, and saw the blood bubbling. He called out sharply. One of the Swedes came to help him; they found no wound. Muller was not dead, nor near it.

"Concussion," said Dahl. "Come, give me a hand with him. We'll take him to the surgeon. The rest of you, get to work with those guns."

He appointed one man to command, and the Swedes obeyed with a cheer. The magic of Dahl's presence, of his iron control, of his calm restraint, gripped them all.

He and the other man lifted Muller and carried him. Halfway to the trenches, a shell screamed and burst close by. Dahl went on alone, Muller's body slung over his shoulders, until his own men flocked out to aid him.

Muller in safety, Dahl returned to his post. The two Swedish guns were barking away by this time, answering the enemy's fire. The shells were small, of course, but they were shells and could do havoc, and did. The burned stead where the Finns were posted, remained silent.

It was close to noon when Dahl saw a shaggy peasant coming up from the rear, running without regard to the shell-bursts. He came panting up, a stolid fellow with a shock head. Dahl, who had thought all the local folk gone, was surprised at sight of him.

"I have a message," cried out the man, "from Olav Digre."

"Who?" Dahl frowned, then remembered and broke into a wan smile. "Oh, that fellow! Well, what is it?"

"He says have courage and faith. At worst need he will come. Put guns on the hill, for no foeman will get that far. Courage and faith!"

"I'd prefer artillery," said Dahl drily. "Ha! Listen to that!"

Dust was rising in clouds from where the church had been, as the three-inch Nazi shells blew it to stony flinders. A single airplane was hovering high and circling, to direct the enemy's fire. The Swede guns could not find it in the thickening haze.

NOON passed. Dahl moved about, Einar Ecksal with him, and half a dozen men he had picked for aides and runners. He took no shelter, and seemed to bear a charmed life, as he talked with the men, heartening them until they cheered him anew. The Nazi scouts were working forward; the advanced machine guns were speaking. Dahl saw the shock-headed peasant in the trenches, heard cheers go up as he passed. He turned to his aides, angrily.

"I see it now! Those fellows who were in camp last night have gathered some peasants together—poor fools! They'll be slaughtered like sheep. Faith and courage —a fine line of talk!"

"It does the men good, though," said Einar Ecksal soberly.

Faith and courage! Dahl laughed, in his hard-bitten way; yet the words hovered in his mind as shells burst and men died and wounded were taken out. Faith and courage! His binoculars told him the advance was beginning full force. The scouts were coming in, the machine guns were being carried in.

Guns on the hill? Well, why not? The

shelling was coming to an end. Dahl got six of those machine guns and helped emplace them in shallow holes on the hillside; there was no shelter, but this could not be helped.

"Faith and courage, comrades" he said to the sweating men. "If I'm killed, Einar Ecksal will take command. Hold your fire till the Nazis reach the trenches, then open on their rear ranks. Die hard; that's all."

"*Ad Gisof!*" yelped a gunner, and others echoed the shout. "Ho for God!"

Dahl came back to the ruins of the church and climbed on the stones, with his aides. He was just in time to see the last Nazi shells bursting, with incredible luck, amid what remained of the Swedish battery.

The Befors spoke no more. The shelling was ended; the German attack was coming on, drifting in like a green sea among the trees.

Faith and courage; Sorely needed now; hard to let the machine guns remain silent, as the waves of assault became visible. That the thin Norse line could stand before it was impossible. Dahl choked upon an oath and drew his automatic, laying the pistol ready for use. And yet, from his trenches, he could hear the yell ringing up.

"Ho for God! For Norge! Ho for God!"

He thrilled to the sound; those voices held a stubborn faith, a courage, that strengthened his failing spirit. Some of the men were turning, waving to him. He lifted his arm and his voice blared at them.

"*Ad Gisof!* For Norge!" He was suddenly aware of the shock-headed fellow at his side, and turned angrily. "Get out of here, you fool! You can do nothing!"

"I can help the wounded," said the peasant. His rugged features were calm, his eyes strangely serene. "Here comes Captain Tuomiin."

In surprise, Dahl swung around. It was true. Despite the whine and whistle of bullets overhead and around, the Finn was approaching on the run. He pounded up, unhurt.

"What's wrong?" demanded Dahl. Tuomiin stared at him in astonishment.

"Wrong? Nothing. You sent for me. A peasant brought me the message."

"A peasant? Devil take it, I sent no message!" Dahl responded hotly.

Tuomiin shrugged. "Never mind. My men know their business. I may be needed here."

He glanced at the shock-headed fellow, who still stood close; Dahl saw the swarthy features go white. Tuomiin demanded to know who the man was.

"Never saw him before. Some fool farmer who thinks he can help," Dahl said roughly. "Do you know him?"

"I never saw him before, either, but I shall again," responded Tuomiin. His face cleared and he smiled at the peasant, who shyly returned the smile. "The birds come where the fish are, eh?"

What was the meaning of those strange words? Dahl turned away, angered and impatient before the odd conduct of the Finn. Then his heart leaped; it was time, it was time! He flung up his arm and waved; it was the signal to his machine guns along the trenches.

THEIR voices crashed and stuttered. The front ranks of green-clad men plunged down; other ranks came on like waves, hiding the human wreckage, advancing and breaking up into new wreckage. The Germans brought into play their superb sub-machine rifles; the air was alive with whistling things. The misty, thinned sunlight glittered on bayonets.

"They're checked." Tuomiin touched Dahl's arm, and abruptly his voice rang out. "Look! At the farmstead! They were coming around to take you in flank—"

Across the vale, the burned farm's clearings were filling with Germans, in the open. Dahl saw rifles begin to spit from

the outbuildings, from the ruins. The Nazi ranks swirled in confusion as the officers went down under the bullets of those sharpshooters; they swirled and milled, and then the four machine guns opened.

All unsuspecting, those Germans had crowded before the very muzzles of those guns, which now dropped them in windrows of death. This column, which had been sweeping around to flank Dahl's position, writhed and twisted in terrible convulsions; but Dahl saw no more of it, for now the greenish torrent was bursting through the birch trees ahead.

Wave upon wave, like the lapping sea. Checked, staggered, they poured on again like waves flooding inward. The German faces, white, strained, desperate in shouting and effort, the bayonets glinting, broke in upon the trenches. Now it became a hand-to-hand battle.

The machine guns on the hillside opened fire upon the rear of those green ranks.

Dahl was on his feet; here and there, Nazis had burst through. His pistol was jumping in his fist. Tuomiin was yelling something, and Dahl caught the words.

"Look! Do you see them? The kings, the three kings!"

The Finn had gone stark staring mad, thought Dahl. Yet, something had happened to those green Nazi ranks; the foremost were melting, the rear lines were disordered, were breaking, were in wild confusion. Thank God for those machine guns on the hillside!

Dahl realized his pistol was empty. He reached for a fresh clip; then staggered at a wrenching blow. He felt a hand. The shock-headed peasant was supporting him, was speaking.

"Careful! Let me take care of your wound."

Blood—he was wounded! Yet he felt nothing at all! He looked around, wildly. He saw Einar Ecksal at his feet, dead. The others around him were dead. Captain Tuomiin was leaping for the trenches and had taken charge, his shrill voice crackling orders. The entire attack had given way. Seeing this, Dahl crumpled up, sagged, and knew no more.

He wakened, to find himself lying on the hillside, just back of the machine guns. The peasant was holding up his head; his chest was thickly bandaged. The man's hand touched his face, gently, tenderly.

"Look, Colonel Dahl! You can see, now; you can see clearly."

Dahl looked. He was seized by bewildered astonishment.

The Nazis were attacking again; their foremost wave was at the trenches, but they were not breaking through the savage Norse line. They were breaking up, for they were no longer supported.

Behind them, something incredible was taking place. The green masses were smashed, were in wild disorder, were being shattered and sundered—by what? Through the haze glittered a sheen of metal; the wan sunlight struck upon figures moving through the misty, swirling air. Three figures led that steel-clad array.

Olav Digre, the other Ole, and the giant Harald, crushing through the German ranks with swing of sword and axe. Behind them, mass upon mass, moved a host of men who slew and slew again, men in steel caps and steel shirts, cutting the German array in two and breaking it up into fragments of harried, terrorized men in full flight.

For one incredulous moment, Dahl strove to reason that this rout was caused by the machine guns; then all reason and prosaic logic collapsed within him, for the machine guns had fallen silent. From across the vale where the Finns fought came a steady crackle of gunfire; there was none here. The Germans at the trenches were broken and retreating; Dahl saw his own men out and after them.

The main column was in utter panic. From the flanks, that shining host of steel-clad shapes swept them along in a mob, bearing the whole rout down the vale and away, with the Norsemen in pursuit. And, echoing through the haze, voices swung up a mighty roaring shout that rolled like the surge of the sea in storm:

"*Ad Gisof! Ad Gisof!* Ho for God!"

The battle-cry of Hardrede, explained the peasant. Dahl scarcely heard the quiet words, nor noticed the touch of the strangely gentle hands. His eyes had closed and tears of joy furrowed his cheeks. Not only checked, but defeated! And now, against all reason, he knew why; he could no longer doubt.

A VOICE roused him and he looked up. The peasant was gone. Here was Captain Tuomiin, propping him up against a stone, putting a cigarette in his mouth, laughing and weeping with sheer excitement. Dahl sucked at the cigarette. Tuomiin's excitement died and he nodded at Dahl.

"One of the men just told me Muller is pulling around. "You'll be glad."

"Yes. I'm glad," muttered Dahl, speaking with effort. "He's not the one to pay his debt to Norway; I am. Where's that peasant gone?"

"I don't know." Tuomiin's dark eyes blazed queerly. "Don't ask me; it doesn't matter. Here comes Harald; can you see him?"

"Yes." Dahl looked up, and smiled.

It was the giant Harald, face aglow and alight with battle. Behind him came Olav Digre and Ole Tryggvison, lustily roaring out a champing war-song; they seemed drunk with fight. But Harald came to Dahl, and laughed eagerly, and put out his hand.

"Comrade!" rang his harsh, blaring voice. "Comrade, worthy comrade! Skoal and welcome to our company, Thorolf Dahl! Norway will be sundered and stricken and bleeding, but never lost while there are men like you. A man after my own heart, Thorolf Dahl! Now come along, come along!"

Dahl caught the extended hand. He stood up, and Harald put an arm about his shoulders. He went away with the three of them, in among the silver birches and the swirling haze, and so departed.

Thus, at least, Captain Tuomiin reported in a letter to the Widow Dahl. His words spread through the land and were believed; for all Finns, they say, are fey men.

Calling Ken Gary

SOME months ago a true experience was submitted to this office by a certain Ken Gary. This story—titled a "A WEIRD PROPHECY"—was so interesting, and possessed, moreover, such a ring of truth, that we published it in the May issue. In due course a check in payment was sent to the author—but this was returned, as was our second communication.

I expect that you will remember how Mr. Gary told of seeing, seven years ago, a man shot down by policemen, and how that night he dreamed the scene over again, with the grisly addition of the victim pointing a thin finger at him, and prophesying that he too would die from a bullet wound.

Two years later he wakened from the same dream—and in going to a cupboard for a blanket accidentally discharged a shotgun which wounded him in the stomach.

Another three years passed before he was again visited by the dream.

This time he was soon afterwards shot through the thigh by a stray bullet on a golf course.

In view of his prophesy, we are very anxious to know what has become of him and we would appreciate it if anyone possessing information concerning him would get in touch with us.

His recent addresses were c/o General Delivery, in Bradenton, and Tampa, Florida.

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WEIRD TALES will pay ten dollars apiece for true psychic experiences. Have you ever slept in a haunted house, or been chased by a ghost? Have you ever dreamed a dream that came true? Has your life been saved by a vision? Let the other readers of WEIRD TALES know about your weird experience. Your story must be briefly told, in not more than a thousand words; the shorter the better. It must be true, interesting, and must deal with the supernatural. Write it down today and send it to WEIRD TALES, "It Happened to Me" department, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. We will pay ten dollars for every one used.

THEY LYNCHED HIM, AND THEN—

By JACK KYTLE

THE day had been damply, sullenly hot. New, low-hanging thunder clouds were billowing out of the west. The wizened old man, whose face was like a patch of crinkled leather, squinted at the sky and laughed hollowly. "It's gonna be a good night fer it," he wheezed. "It was on jes' sech a night, with th' mob howlin' in Sipsey swamp, that it happened. They hung him, an' then—"

I followed the slow sweep of his eyes from the woolly skies to the garret window. Darkness, sultrily depressing, was falling swiftly. A jagged streak of lightning caused me to recoil sharply.

My companion grinned. "Skeered a'-ready?" he questioned, and then his voice rose to shrillness. "You jes' wait'll you git up in th' garret—you jes' wait!"

But I was not afraid of what they said I would find in the garret. I say this to show that my mind was not clouded by fear-fantasy. I had ridiculed their ominous whisperings. The city editor of the newspaper on which I worked had told me, "You don't believe this nonsense, so I'm sending you to disprove it for good."

The town of Carrollton, Alabama—aged and drowsy and darkly shaded—lies in a sparsely settled farming region near the Mississippi line. In its center is a gaunt courthouse of weathered red brick, and on top of the courthouse is the garret and its awesome window pane.

For sixty-four years, that square of glass has framed the clear outline of a man's face, twisted in terror and agony. To aged natives, it is a familiar face. It is the likeness of Henry Wells—modest, unobtrusive Henry—who was dragged from the garret by a mob one stormy night of 1876 and hanged for a crime of which he was innocent.

The sheriff had placed him up there for safe-keeping, but the mobsmen reached him. They hauled and prodded him into the nearby river bottoms, hurrying their gruesome task because of the tearing wind and the lashing rain. Quickly, they threw the rope over a limb, and as they tightened it about their victim's throat, the dense woods were illuminated by a bolt of deep-blue lightning.

At dawn next day, a passerby glanced toward the courthouse roof; then he paused to gaze in awe. The face of the hanged man—the "ghost face"—was there. Thousands have looked upon it during the years. Some of them have climbed

up to the garret and come out quickly with faces deathly white. They could feel a strange presence there, they said. So the city editor ordered, "Spend the night in that room—let's ruin their ghost."

The walls of the damp corridors were splashed a sickly yellow by the feeble light of my kerosene lantern, and the old building had the musty odor of a tomb. At good dark, I had left the wizened old man downstairs, laughing at his suddenly sobered countenance. I had said, "You look as if you never expected to see me again," and he had replied, "I know it's up thar, that's all."

When he had gone, and had closed the heavy oak door upon me, I climbed the creeky stairway to the second floor. From there, a makeshift ladder gave me access to the garret.

It was a small, box-like room, with a ceiling so low that I could hardly stand upright. Feeble as they were, the rays of my lantern penetrated every corner, assuring me that no living thing was hidden here. I went to the window, and somehow, I was not greatly surprised to discover that the "ghost face" was not visible at close range. After looking for awhile at the deserted streets below, I made myself as comfortable as possible upon the floor.

The wind had risen, so that it soughed through the boughs of the giant water oaks outside. A steady rain beat with drowsy monotony upon the low roof. But not for one moment did I doze. I know this is true, because I made a point of looking at my watch every quarter hour; and in the minutes between, I read from a magazine.

IT WAS shortly after ten o'clock that I noticed the change. When I had entered, the garret was as hot as an oven, but now I noticed that the room had become suddenly chill. In the next moment, I felt what seemed to be a puff of wind brush past my face. But I did not become alarmed quickly. It was more of a feeling of wonder, because there was no opening through which wind could enter.

I picked up my magazine again, and as suddenly threw it back upon the floor. I sat rigidly still, fascinated by what I knew was happening. The sound of footsteps, measured and deliberate, broke the stillness. They passed close beside me—there was no mistaking the fact—then the gust of wind whipped past me a second time.

Thoroughly startled now, I bolted to my feet, lifting the lantern above my head to reassure myself of what I already knew. I was the only living thing in this room. But I was not alone—I could feel another presence—and I will swear all my life that it was there.

The moments that followed are terrible in my memory—like a tortured dream from which there seems no escape. I rushed to the window, and then reeled back as if I had been struck by a giant fist. The "ghost face" was back in the pane! It had not been there a few minutes before, but now it glowed luminously, and it was facing inside instead of out. The eyes, filled with agonized terror, looked fully into mine. I backed away from it, and as I did so, indescribable sounds began—like a mingling of sighs and sobs.

I shall never know exactly how I reached the street, but I must have fallen down the ladder and stairway, for my body was bruised and aching. When my senses returned, I was standing outside the courthouse, the rain beating into my upturned face as I gazed toward the inkblack window.

And it doesn't matter now when I am told that I was a victim of imagination. I think that I know better. I think that the spirit of an innocent man, eternally strangling at the end of a rope, is in that room.

THE EYRIE



Fantasy the Father of Fact

THE fantasies of today are the common-places of tomorrow — the impossibilities of one age the possibilities of the next. In this issue Robert H. Leitfred has written a tale of the world sixty-one years in the future—so this letter from him is of special interest. From Laguna Beach, California, he writes us:

"There is an old saying that you can't have your cake and eat it, too. But writing mystery and detective stories and books brings in my bread and butter. When I want cake, I turn to a type of story that I like to write—a type that always intrigues me with its limitless possibilities. This type of story is the imaginary fiction of the future, and every scientific invention that goes with it. Yet these stories, while being fiction as far as reading is concerned, are not without a sound basis of fact.

"Letters come to my desk from various towns all over the country asking how such stories can be written. Where does the material come from? How do you go about writing such weird, fantastic yarns? Sometimes I wonder myself.

"To go into the details of answering such questions would require more space in WEIRD TALES than the editor can reasonably allow me. But the development of everything from metals to plants seems to form a logical order of progression. One has only to project himself forward in time and space, and the answer is waiting for him.

"Take radio for example. Years ago I had a tremendous superheterodyne set that was the last word in wireless engineering. It was a honey. It was tuned with three dials which adjusted the wave-length; it was also equipped with a primary and secondary condenser, and a detector knob as I recall its panel. It also had a tricky antenna. But these things were not all.

"Besides a car battery it had a secondary source of power from what used to be known as a B-battery. And aiding both these sources of power, it had a battery charger, and a couple dry cells thrown in for good measure. The speaker was separate and was half the size of an ordinary desk. And there was enough copper wire in the hook-up to wire a modern house. When it worked, I could get stations at least a hundred miles away on a clear night.

"Today I have a small radio with a built-in antenna. You merely plug it into an electric outlet. It is less than a foot square, and weighs but a few pounds. And it is superior in every way to the first cumbersome receiver. Radio has advanced technically at a surprising pace. And will continue to advance.

"Doctor Lawrence of the University of California, working on an atom-smashing machine called a Cyclotron, has had such astonishing success that the time is close at hand when he will make discoveries that will startle the world.

"Getting back to scientific yarns again. To me they are vanguard of inventions that will become practical and useful in the world of tomorrow. Space machines, super-rockets, planet exploration, gravity destroyers, and invisibility may appear unreal and unobtainable

to us who live in the present age. Yet someday, any or all of them might come under our control.

"Who knows, but even the human mind may reach a point where it will be free from jealousy, greed and hatred. When this state of perfectionism has been reached, there will be no more wars, and we humans will have arrived at the ultimate peak of civilization."

A Hope and a Promise

WE ARE very glad to print here several letters to the Eyrie, and there is one general answer which we feel we ought to make to questions and comments in many of them. This has to do with the publication date of WEIRD TALES. The editors were just as sorry as the readers when the magazine had to become a bi-monthly, but we can promise you one thing—the publication date is going to be consistent. It will be the first of every other month. Also, we can promise you, that when times seem to warrant it, we shall be only too delighted to resume publication of the magazine as a monthly. It's going to need the loyal support of all our readers to do this, and that is something we are striving very hard to keep.

From Chicago, Illinois, Phyllis McDonald writes: "Will you kindly tell me where I can find copies of anything else written by Frank Owen whose *On Pell Street* was in the last issue. If *On Pell Street* is an example of the rest of his work, I've found the sort of weird thing I like to read.

"What set Poe's tales above other weird fiction was their exquisite beauty of expression. This Owen person has managed to attain something of that. When Europe seethes with ugliness; when the U. S. A. trembles in its boots; what line could be more fit than the one on page 73 of your July issue.

" 'So much time is devoted to an effort to banish crime from the world, when to purge the world of sin it would only be necessary to banish ugliness.'

"There's an old saying — something like this, not exact for the words at this moment elude, but 'Man was given an imagination to escape what he is. He was given a sense of humor to be able to bear what he is.'

"Anyway—the imagination part. I like it. Lovely. Beautiful. I like *On Pell Street.*

"More with that certain quality, please."

[Frank Owen has contributed many grand stories to WEIRD TALES, and we hope that you will see more of him in the future.]

A Fan and Friend, Francis X. Moriarity writes from Camden, N. J.: "This being my first fan letter to WT, I am sorry I have to lead off with a complaint—that one never knows just when WT will appear on the newsstands. First it's every month, then it changes, and we ask for it at the stands, only to be told, 'It ain't out this month.' It keeps us jittery!

"I thought Quinn's yarns in the July issue was one of his best. He sure does know his Frenchman of the Middle-Ages! The rabbit story by Field was an odd number and interesting.

"Is greeting a rabbit some real superstition somewhere, say in the Catskills? From now on I can see where I'll be tipping my hat every time one crosses my path. Which doesn't seem likely! Bloch's story was a wow. *The Golden Chalice* by Gruber was also unusual. All the stories this month were good, as were the illustrations. Weird without being horrible. The poems were good, but what has become of Leah Bodine Drake? I thought her poems different from the usual weird verse, more musical and poetic. She seems able to create an uncanny atmosphere, and without the use of the stock horror-words.

"And welcome home to Margaret Brundage! At last she is back on the cover, and let's hope to stay."

From New York, Charles Hedley writes: "Although the Eyrie seems to be now extinct, * still I must write my usual note to you and my fellow readers.

"First, another plea to return to a monthly publication basis, and try to make as few departures from the old WEIRD TALES as is reasonably possible. One fact in your favor is the continued excellence of the stories and

---

* Of course not.—Editor.

also the return, after twenty long months, of Mrs. Brundage on the cover.

"Of course, the cover was excellent. The first of the series it illustrates is an extremely fascinating tale, and proves to make the following equally interesting. *The Golden Chalice* had a lovely quality about it to counteract the evil forces emanating from Bloch's devil yarn. The latter is fast becoming my favorite author. A re-appearance of Judge Pursuivant was especially welcomed, and the references to de Grandin were almost too nostalgic. Field, I think, is doing much better writing than a few years back. This was an exceptionally horrible theme, and well brought out. Kelley's serial ended nicely but there was nothing epic-all about it. Owen's short is the most beautiful since *The Purple Sea* by this charm-builder. Quinn, Quinn, how I love him. This estatic phrase from one who believes he has taken the empty chair of the master—Lovecraft. Though none could equal him, my favorite comes closest. Walton's story was definitely science. No more. *Beyond the Frame*, charming. The new department is good, the poems were, too, and the Finley poem missed."

WEIRD TALES OF WAR

GORDON KEYNE'S *The Kings Do Battle Again* brings to mind some of those countless battle phenomena with which practically every campaign and war in history is thick. Most famous, perhaps, is the tale of Drake's drum, which, as a warning in times of England's peril, is reputed to beat off Plymouth Sound.

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There are thousands of other such instances.

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By A. G. BIRCH

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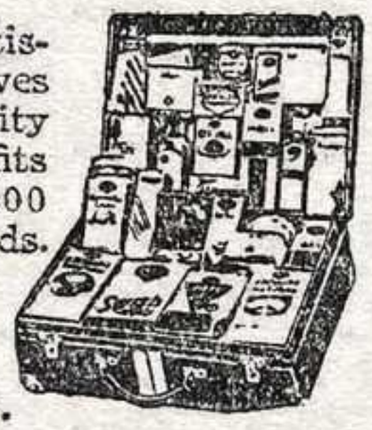
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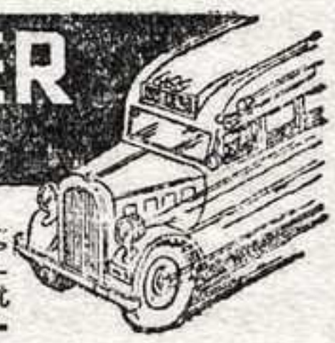


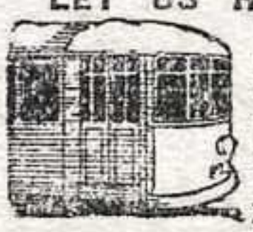
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After all, it is hardly surprising that war—ghost maker in excelsis—should not possess a pretty extensive repertoire of Weird Tales.

WEIRD TALES CLUB

9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

FOR some considerable time past our readers have written in with requests that we form a WEIRD TALES CLUB. In the last issue, therefore, we set aside a special space for the WEIRD TALES CLUB, and explained how things would work. The W.T.C. is a correspondence club — names and addresses of members being published in the magazine, so that readers may discover mutually interesting pen friends, and those living in the same neighborhood to form their own branches of the club. Already we have had a creditable response to this idea, so that we feel it is one which will grow in popularity. To keep the WEIRD TALES CLUB rolling, why not drop us a line, so that we can enroll you on the club roster, and publish your name and address in the magazine?

WEIRD TALES CLUB
9 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, N. Y.

I am very much interested in your idea of a WEIRD TALES CLUB, if it permits mental contact with those mutually interested persons we so seldom have the opportunity to meet: I mean those persons who are sincerely interested in psychic phenomena as an indication of the real truth underlying all our own lives, and of all Nature around us. That there are hidden laws of Nature known to but few, but which, once known, help us to guide and direct our lives aright, plenty of us believe; and that certain psychic phenomena do indicate where we came from, whither we go, how we should guide our actions, many more of us believe. I should be very glad to belong to a Club where I might meet pen friends similarly interested.

I was particularly interested to note in your list of new members this month a gentleman who signs his address "The Bhuddist Brotherhood of America." I didn't know there was such a brotherhood, though I am familiar

with the interest in Bhuddism in England. I wonder how many of our WEIRD TALES readers are interested in the study of comparative religions—and how many have found the common meeting point of all religions and philosophies together with the psychic?

I should like to be very much a member of this club.

Embe True.

c/o Wertz
151 W. Cliff St., Somerville, N. J.

WEIRD TALES CLUB
9 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, N. Y.

Now that the dream of a WEIRD TALES CLUB has materialized, I would like to become a member of the proposed club. Being a student of the Occult and interested in Oriental Philosophy, I enjoyed the little article by Mr. Brenton MacDonald very much.

I also enjoyed *The Black Art* (from its Birth to Blackout) both articles were very true. I believe The Eyrie could be made as interesting as the stories by giving it a little more space and publishing fact articles along with the fiction.

The last three issues were the best I have read in quite a while, and more like the W.T. of yesterday.

Al MacDowell.

Box 46, Walden, N. Y.

New Members

Robert Berry, 1721 Sycamore St., Cincinatti, Ohio.

Jon E. Sale, Dillsboro, Indiana.

Harry S. Weatherby, 10 West 20th St., Baltimore, Md.

Gertrude M. Breazeale, Prospect, Oregon.

Eleanor Teklinski, 93 Oak Alley, Natrona, Penna.

Al MacDowell, Box 46, Walden, N. Y.

Mrs. Edna M. Kenner, 530½ Hickborn St., Vallejo, California.

Embe True, c/o Wertz, 151 West Cliff St., Somerville, N. J.

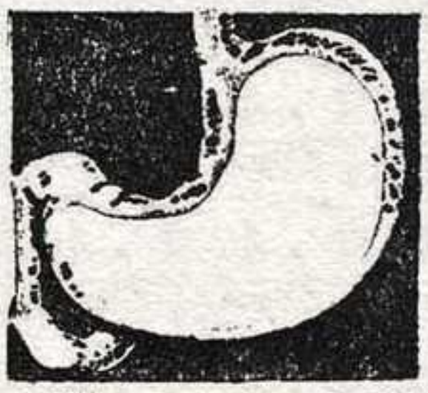
Avis K. White, R. F. D. 2, Center Ossipee, New Hampshire.

Aleta Dore, 50 Central Park West, New York City.

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WE often have requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES. We list below such numbers as are available. If you would like to obtain any of these issues write us—WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. The price is 25c a copy up to and including August, 1939. All after that date, 15c a copy.

1932—February
1933—July, November and December
1934—All but January and February
1935—All twelve
1936—All eleven (August-September combined)
1937—All but January
1938 to date—Complete



THE SHAPE OF THRILLS TO COME

Peer into the future with us for a few minutes—and take a look at what is coming in the next

WEIRD TALES

FIRST comes the good news that there will be "THE LAST WALTZ," a ghostly tale by SEABURY QUINN, recognized grand maestro in our field. We hope that this story will mark the start of a new era of Quinn masterpieces in WEIRD TALES. Then, as you remember, that well-known author of mystery and detective yarns, such as "THE FRENCH KEY" and "THE LAUGHING FOX," Frank Gruber, wrote a fantasy for our last issue. "THE GOLDEN CHALICE" was received with enthusiasm by our readers, so we are glad to announce Gruber's "BOOK OF THE DEAD" for the next number. "THE WIFE OF THE HUMOROUS GANGSTER," number three in the Bedford-Jones' "ADVENTURES OF A PROFESSIONAL CORPSE" series, is another ultra-exciting episode from the life of a man whose career is a constant see-saw of death and dollars.

We must apologize that Dorothy Quick's "TURN OVER," announced for this issue, has been scheduled instead for the next. You'll like this grimly humorous tale of an old man, who, by turning in his grave, forces his family to turn over a new leaf!

This next issue tops WEIRD TALES' usual lofty high of really first-rate weird and fantastic fiction — so don't risk missing it. Play safe by reserving your copy well in advance.

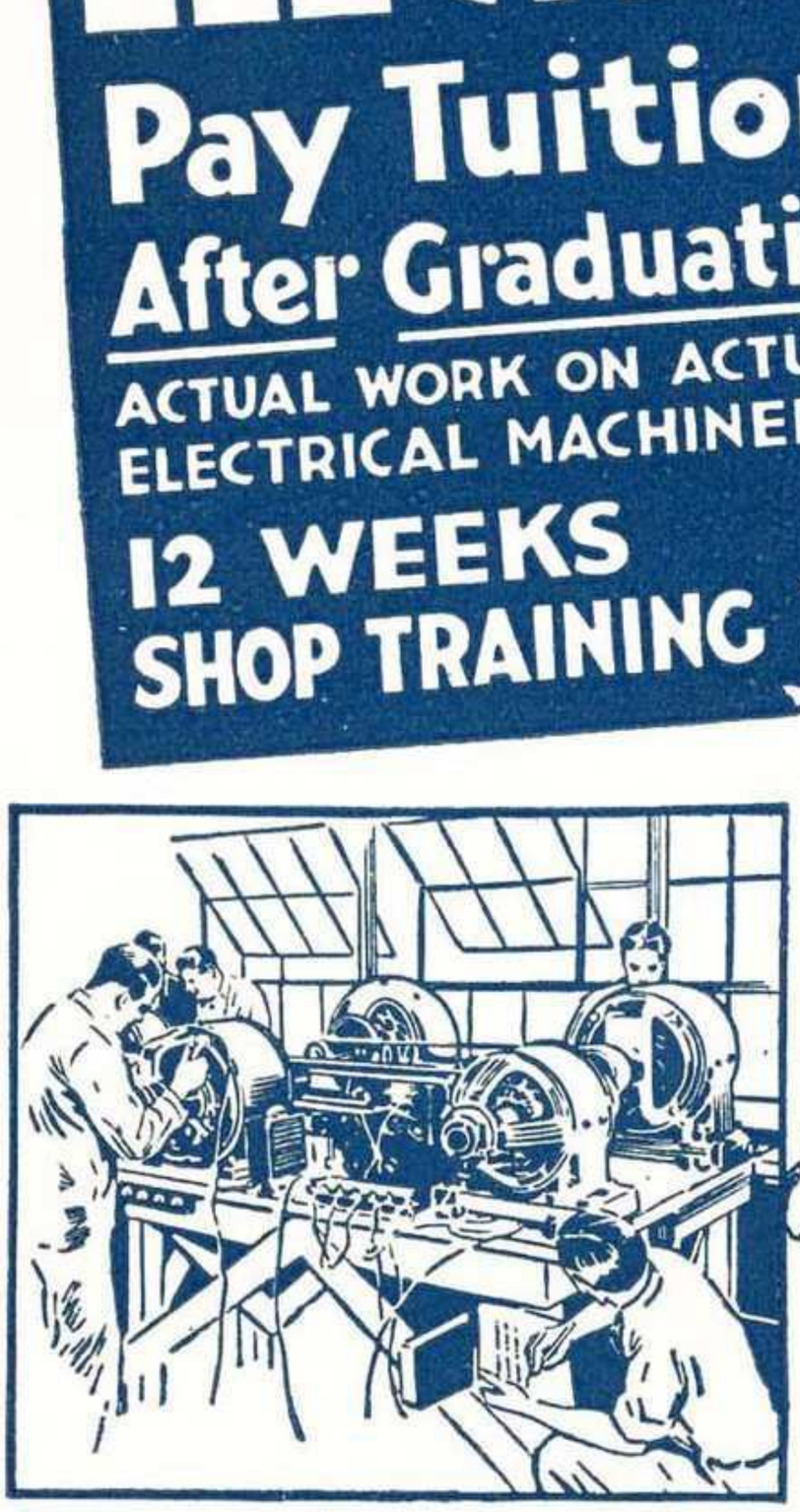
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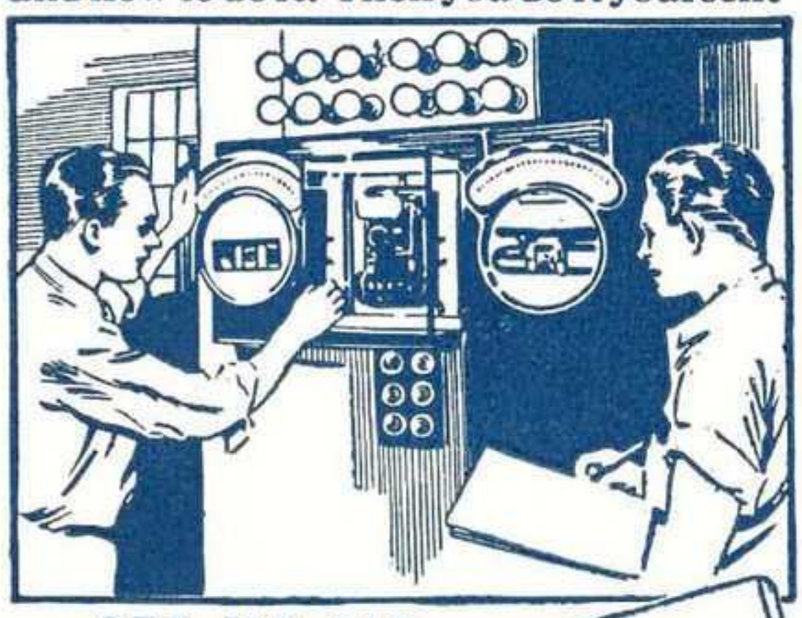
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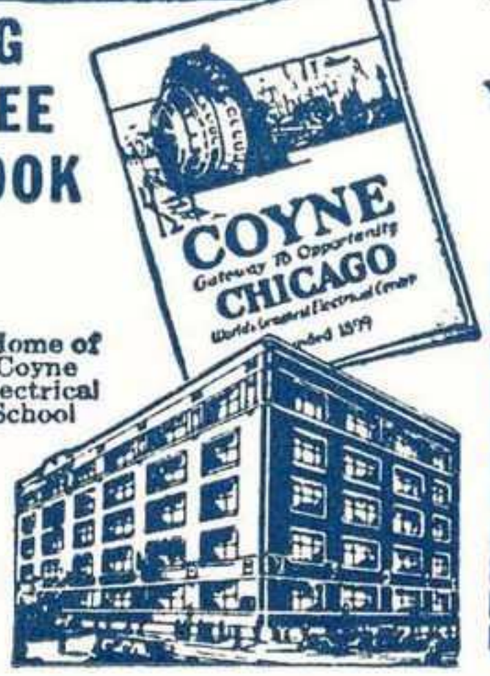


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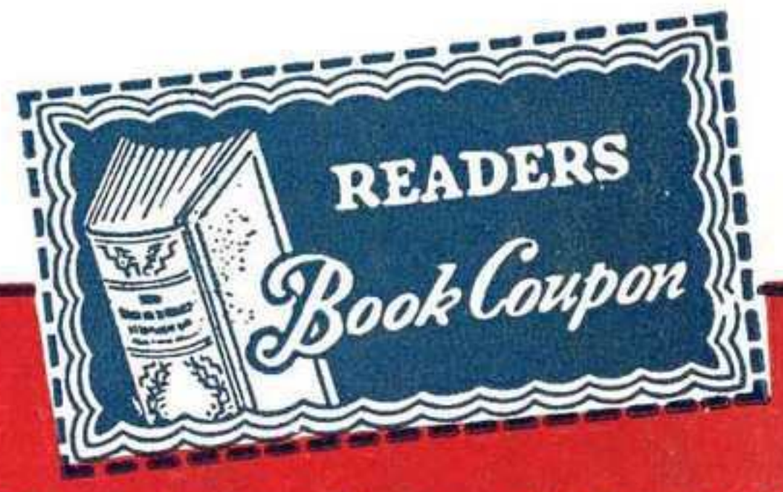
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