ROBERT BLOCH SEABURY QUINN

Weird Tales

MARCH

15¢

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A haunted life . . . "MR. GEORGE" by AUGUST DERLETH

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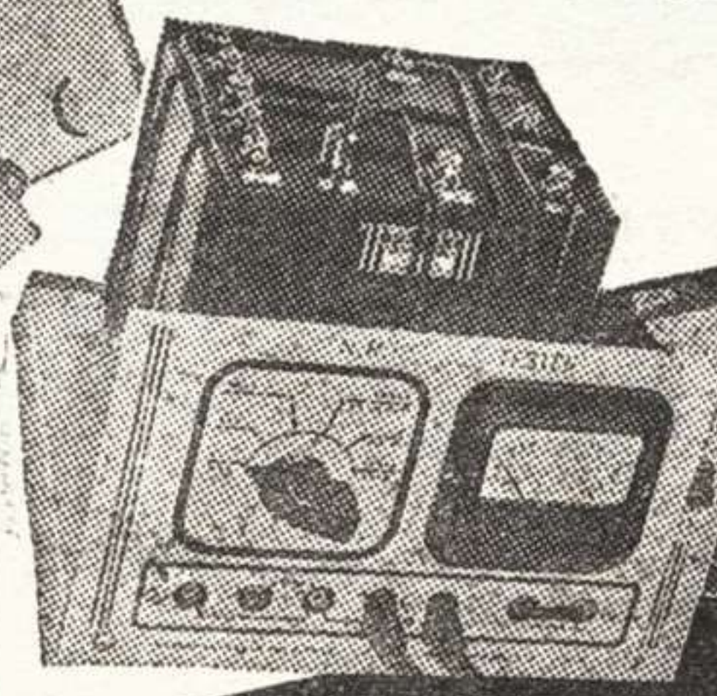

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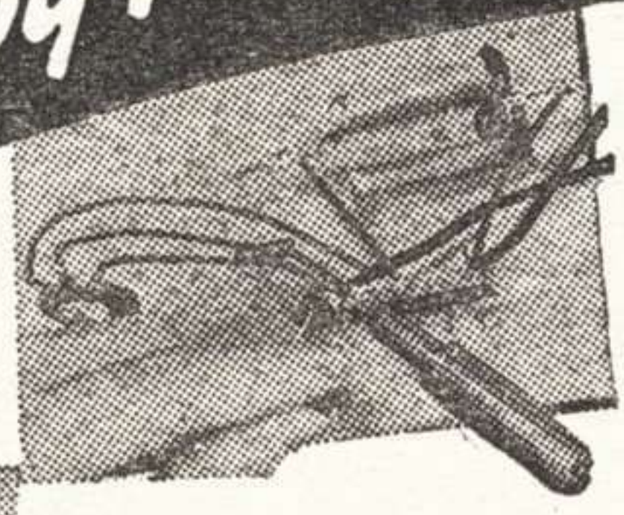

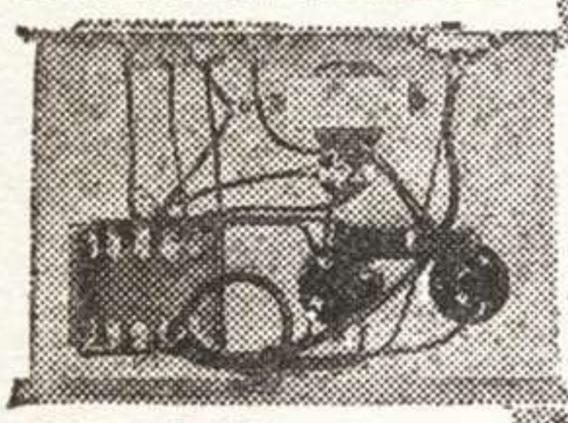

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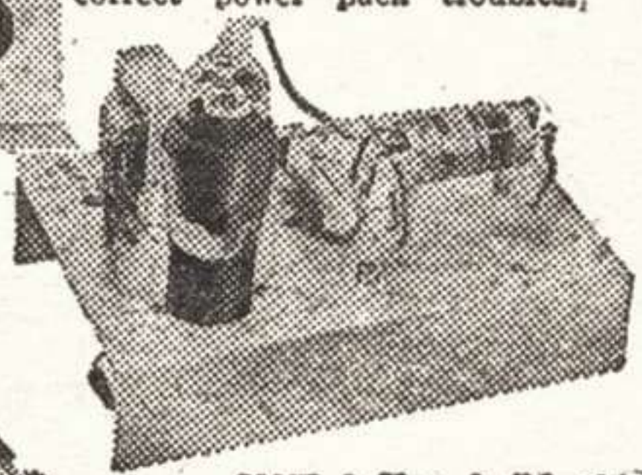

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MARCH, 1947

Cover by Boris Dolgov

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

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Vol. 39, No. 10

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Mr. George

BY STEPHEN GRENDON*

Some said the house was haunted but was it not, rather, the lives *in that dwelling that were haunted?*

NOW that the sunlight of late afternoon slanted across the lawn, Priscilla took the flowers she had gathered and tied a little blue ribbon around them. She attached the note she had written, clutched the bouquet tightly to her, and tiptoed to the door of her room. She opened it. Voices came up the stairs. But *they* were out in back, and would not hear her leaving the house. If they saw her come back, that would make no difference. She closed the door behind her and marched her sturdy five-year-old self down the carpeted stairs to the front door and outside.

The street-car conductor recognized her. He bent his mustached face above her and asked, "All alone, Miss Priscilla?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's going on for dark, too. Are you off far?"

"Oh, no. I'm going to see Mr. George."

He looked unhappy. His smile was pale, thin. He said no more.

The street car clanged on its way. Priscilla knew that the conductor would tell her just where to get off, but just the same she counted the blocks—the next but one, where Renshaws lived; the one after that, which was Burtons'; the one of vacant lots; and then at last, after three blocks in which no one she knew lived—seven of them in all—the conductor called in that this was her stop.

"Yes, sir. I know. Thank you," she said. She smiled at him and got off.

He looked after her, troubled; he shook his head. "And what's to become of her with all those vultures around her?" he asked of the mote-ridden air.

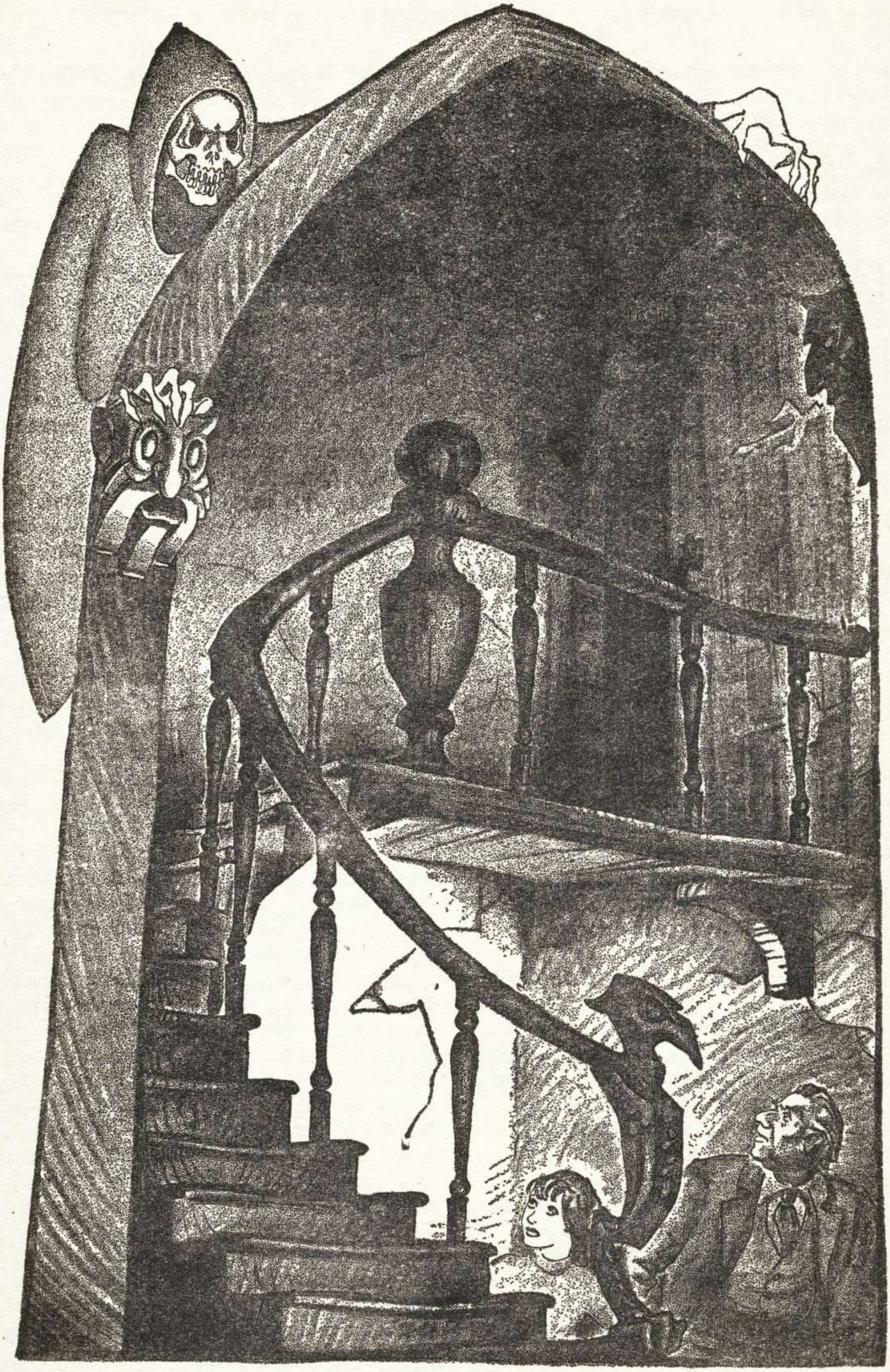
All along the way, Priscilla had been a little apprehensive about the big iron gate; but, since it was not yet six o'clock, it stood open. She passed through the open gate and went directly to Mr. George's place. There was nothing to put the flowers in; so she left them there, right where Mr. George would be sure to see them. She was not quite sure about Mr. George. Of late, many things had puzzled her. She did not understand about Mr. George, nor why he had gone away and left her alone with her mother's cousins, who, she knew with the unerring instinct of a child, did not love her the way Mr. George had loved her, or her mother before him, gone too.

She pulled out the note and fixed it in such a way that he would be sure to see it. Going away, she looked back several times to see whether he had come; but the flowers lay there undisturbed with the whiteness of the note-paper standing out. The flowers were sweet rocket, forget-me-nots, and roses—old-fashioned flowers, the kind Mr. George liked. But Mr. George did not come; he was not in sight when she got to the gate; so, with one last, lingering look, she went out into the street and down to the corner to wait for the street-car, already beginning to wonder whether *they* had missed her.

But, no, they had not. They were still talking when she slipped into the house, though one of them was in the dining-room now, and they were all raising their voices

---

**Through a regrettable error, this story is announced on our cover as by August Derleth. Mr. Derleth acted as agent for Mr. Grendon's story, and someone in our office confused the agent's name for the author's. The error was discovered too late to stop printing of the cover.*



Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

a little—not enough to be audible much beyond the front hall. She stood soundless, listening. Though the two women and the man, their brother, were her mother's cousins, Priscilla thought of them as her aunts and uncle. The women were in the kitchen, and Uncle Laban in the dining-room.

UNCLE LABAN was saying, "The trouble with you, Virginia, is that you have no sense of refinement, no tact. It's just the money you want, and you don't care how you get it."

"It's just her who stands between us. You know it as well as I."

"Now that George is gone," said Laban.

"Yes," said Virginia.

There was a nervous titter from Adelaide.

"I often wonder just what was the relation between them?" resumed Virginia. "Were they lovers?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh, it does," put in Addie. "If we could prove perhaps that *she* is his child—"

Laban made an impatient, clucking sound. "Irrelevant and immaterial. Cissie's will is clear, and it makes no difference whether Priscilla is George's or Henry's or even whether she wasn't Cissie's. The will set forth that George was to stay here in Cissie's house until he wished to go—"

"Or died," interposed Virginia.

"Don't be unpleasant," said Laban shortly. "And the house, the grounds, and all the money—"

"Three hundred thousand dollars!" sighed Adelaide.

"—belongs to Priscilla."

"You leave out the most important part," said Virginia. "After Priscilla, we come."

"Say rather, we are here."

"Oh, yes," said Adelaide bitterly, "as we have always been here. On someone's bounty."

"What do you care about that?" asked Laban pettishly. "We have the run of the house—and almost of her bank account."

"I want it openly, above-board," said Virginia.

"Oh, you are descending to comedy," said Laban. "But I know you're up to something—letting the servants go one by one."

"They were Cissie's—not mine."

"You haven't replaced any of them."

"No. I'll think about that. Have you got that table done?"

"Yes."

"Go and call her."

Priscilla fled noiselessly up the stairs, so that she would be ready when Uncle Laban called.

On the night side of dusk, Canby, who was on his beat, saw something white fluttering beyond the gate. In the course of routine duty he went in to see what it was. He detached the note, flashed his light around to get such details as might be necessary, and in due course turned the note in at precinct headquarters.

The captain read it.

"Dear Mr. George, please come back. We want you to live with us again. We have plenty of room. You just take the street car and go straight east. The house is just like you left it, only now more roses are in bloom."

"No signature?"

"None. It was just there on the grave, with some flowers. I left the flowers. Grave of a man named George Newell. Died about a month ago. Fifty-one years old."

"Looks like a kid's handwriting. Give it to Orlo Ward—that's the kind of thing he wants for *The New Yorker*."

THE old clock in the hall, which had been grandfather Dedman's, talked all night. Mr. George said that her mother remembered how it talked.

It used to say "Cis-sie, Cis-sie, Cis-sie, Go-to-sleep-now, Cis-sie!" over and over until she went to sleep. Now Priscilla thought it talked to her in the same way. But Priscilla was not sleepy. She lay listening to all the sounds the old house made. She lay mourning her lot, now that the cook—the last one she liked—had been sent away, and the rest of them in the house disliking her. She could tell by the way they looked at her, by the way they talked to her; and there was the feeling she had. If only Mr. George would come back! Nothing had been the way it had always been after her mother went away since the day Mr. George complained he wasn't feeling well and later called her to his bed and said, "Be a good girl now, Priscilla. And remember, if any-

thing goes wrong, go to Laura."—Laura being something to Mr. George as she had been to her mother. But not, like the Leckettes, blood-relative.

The murmur of voices whispered down the hall.

Virginia Leckett was braiding her hair in her brother's room. Laban was already abed.

"And if something did happen to her, there couldn't be any question about our inheriting, could there?" she was asking.

"That's the tenth time you've asked that, I'll swear," he said.

"Could there?" she insisted.

"How? There aren't any other relatives."

"That's what I thought."

"Anyway, she's as healthy as a cow."

"Oh, things could happen."

"What things?"

"You never can tell, Laban."

"You give me the creeps, Virginia."

"Look at the way George went."

"Well, you can't expect Priscilla to develop heart trouble."

"That's what the doctor *said*."

"That's what he believed, also."

"That could be seen to. There are things that bring on heart attacks."

"You'd better not talk that way, Virginia."

"No?"

"No!"

"Just the same," she went on, talking more rapidly, "if something happened to Priscilla—just think, three hundred thousand dollars! Laban—think what you could do with your share! And I! Why, I could go to Europe."

"But you never would. Why don't you stop torturing yourself about that money? It's out of your reach."

"Is it?"

"You'd better go to your room."

Virginia's footsteps went down the hall, pausing at the door of Priscilla's room. Don't let her come in, God, asked Priscilla with supreme confidence. Virginia went on down the hall, and the hum of voices came distantly from Adelaide's room. It had been this way many nights since Mr. George went away. Sometimes Priscilla would think that she hated Aunt Virginia the most; but then she would remember mama telling her never to hate anyone because hate hurts the hater more than the hated—or something like that. Just the same, Priscilla did not trust Aunt Virginia. She did not trust Aunt Adelaide or Uncle Laban, either, but she mistrusted Aunt Virginia the most. She could not understand what mama meant when she used to say to Mr. George, "I pity them. They are so narrow, so provincial. When they had money they could have gone to Paris, to Vienna—but no, they had to invest it in shaky stock just to get more, and lost it all. Poor things!"

The clock said, "Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Go-to-sleep-now, Prissie."

"I'm not sleepy," said Priscilla into the darkness.

The house settled, groaning and creaking. A faucet dripped somewhere, and in the wind outside a limb of the cedar at the northwest corner of the house rapped from time to time against the wall. The clock went on talking, with its loud *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock*. And outside the streetcars clanged past, ever fewer and fewer of them, as the night deepened. Priscilla lay thinking, dreaming almost, of mama and Mr. George, and of how it had been only a year ago, when they had been where the ocean was, and she had played all day long in the sand, while mama's cough got worse and worse, and Mr. George grew sad and quiet, and the wind blew, it seemed, colder and colder and blew them at last right back here to the house on Elm Street where mama had been born. It seemed a long, long time ago, ever so long. Time seemed to stretch out into endless dimensions on every side of her, and she felt lost, lost from mama and Mr. George, and the sandy beach and all the trains, the strange little coaches of those places far over the ocean, and the ships, and. . . .

But now she grew drowsy, and someone came in through the door and bent over her and whispered, "Go to sleep now, Priscilla."

"All right, Mr. George," she said.

IN THE morning Priscilla, who was up with the sun, took Celine—the oldest of her dolls, and her favorite, for it had come from Arles, bought by mama and Mr. George on a lovely holiday from Paris—and went to play in the tea house at the end

of the garden, sitting in the cool shade of the birch trees leaning over. Long before anyone else in the house was out of bed, Priscilla reached her haven with Celine. She was in the habit of carrying on long conversations with Celine, who was pert and quaint at the same time, looking foreign and strange, and, in the circumstances, not too voluble, always saying just the right things.

This morning she was set up in her usual place across from Priscilla, and Priscilla arranged the tea-things as she talked. Did Celine have a good night's rest, or were her legs crossed under her again? Would Celine like sugar or lemon or both in her tea, or did Celine prefer to drink it in the proper manner, without anything? The birds sang, for the three-girt garden was a haven in the midst of the city, and seven blocks was a good flying distance to the trees of the cemetery; so they flew back and forth all day long, and made intimate noises in the shrubbery around the tea house.

Celine made the appropriate answers.

But there was something strange about her this morning, and presently Priscilla began to look at her as if with new eyes. It seemed to her that Celine was trying very hard to say something to her—something really original, that did not come from Priscilla first. "Take care," she seemed to say. "Watch out."

Priscilla looked around her in momentary alarm, so real did Celine's voice seem. But there was no one there.

"Watch out for whom?" she asked in a whisper.

"For *them!*" said Celine. But what an odd voice for a doll's: thought Priscilla.

Then she looked very covertly around her on all sides of the tea house. She knew that voice!

She did, indeed. It was Mr. George's —and it was just like him to pretend it was Celine's.

She clapped her hands and cried out gaily, "Come out, come out, wherever you are, Mr. George."

No one came.

"*Please,* Mr. George."

A mourning dove cooed.

"Don't tease me."

No answer.

She looked at Celine, but the doll was as bland as ever. She looked away, over her shoulder.

"Watch out," said Celine in Mr. George's voice.

She whirled, looking this way and that. "I'll find you," she cried out. "I will, I will!" She darted into the bushes, peering this way and that, with such violence that the birds were still, save for a bluejay who sent out warning cries about her intrusion to every part of the garden.

"WHATEVER is that child doing?" inquired Adelaide from the window.

"What?" asked Virginia, hooking herself into her old-fashioned dress before the mirror.

"Why, running around and around the tea house. She seems to be looking for something. Or someone."

"Children have imaginary playmates."

"It's crazy, Ginny. Now, I wonder!"

Virginia looked at her. Sometimes that too-large head on that short, thin body produced an idea of merit, from Virginia's point of view. "What is it now, Addie?"

Adelaide looked at her out of narrowed eyes.

"Do you suppose it might be possible to have her declared—well, not insane, exactly—but . . . "

"Oh, no, that would never do. There are so many other ways. A slow poison, for instance."

"Don't be crude, Virginia," said Laban from the threshold. "For God's sake, are we going to have breakfast? If you insist on firing the cook, somebody in this household ought to be ready to assume kitchen responsibilities."

"We're coming," said Virginia. "Do see what Priscilla's doing."

Laban crossed to the window and looked out.

After a while he said, "She appears to be holding a conversation."

"Oh, yes, with the doll. I've noticed that," said Virginia.

"No, not with the doll."

"Not? Is she alone?"

"Yes. Her back's to the doll; she's not even looking at it."

Virginia turned. "Adelaide, will you go out and call her in for breakfast." And,

when Adelaide had gone, she said to Laban, "I don't like to be called 'crude,' Laban."

He shrugged. He had been thinking about what he might inherit if anything did happen to Priscilla; Virginia had planted seed in fertile ground. "Don't be, then," he said. "What do you suppose people would think if she died like that? After all, the terms of Cissie's will aren't a dead secret. There would be questions. Finally, poison can be traced—even the most obscure poison, which you wouldn't get hold of, anyway."

"If you can think of anything better, why don't you?"

"It would have to be an accident or some kind—or at least, look like one. Only the other day I read something in the *Sun* about an accident which took the lives of two children. Playing in the attic, locking themselves into a trunk. They were suffocated. That could so easily happen, you know. How could anyone prove differently? But poison involves certain chemical and physiological factors which are incapable of being made to tell a story different from the facts."

Adelaide came back, a little breathless. "Imaginary playmates, is it? She says George is out there somewhere, hiding from her. She says he talked to her."

Virginia smiled. "That is putting her innermost wish into a fantasy she can live. It's the height of imagination. What did he say?"

"She didn't tell me."

"Is she in?"

"She's coming."

"We shall see."

PRISCILLA came in and sat down at the table. It was not set. She waited, looking at the three of them—Uncle Laban, fat, jolly-looking except for his soft, full mouth and his small dark eyes; Aunt Adelaide with her grotesquely fat head, so heavy that it always lolled a little; Aunt Virginia with her thin line of mouth and her hard blue eyes. All were dressed in black—Adelaide in taffeta, Virginia in brocade, Laban in broadcloth. All were now busy in some fashion or other—Laban with the morning paper, Adelaide scurrying about to set the table, Virginia at getting breakfast.

It was hard for Priscilla to sit still, because she was convinced that Mr. George had slipped into the house with her, and was even now concealed somewhere in the room. Her eyes darted inquisitively this way and that; momentarily she expected him to reveal himself. But nothing happened, and meanwhile Adelaide had brought all the dishes and then at last came with Virginia bearing eggs and bacon and toast, and a glass of milk for Priscilla. All sat down, Laban putting his paper aside.

"With whom were you talking in the tea house, Priscilla?" asked Virginia.

"With Celine," answered Priscilla around her glass of milk, which she had begun to drink.

"Who else?" asked Laban.

No answer.

"I asked you, who else?"

Priscilla shook her head.

"You told *me*," said Adelaide.

"Mr. George," said Priscilla.

"Indeed! And what did he say?" asked Virginia.

Priscilla shook her head again.

"Answer me."

Priscilla remained silent.

Virginia turned to the others. "You see, it's imagination."

"He came back last night. I asked him to," said Priscilla.

Adelaide tittered. Virginia flashed her a quick, angry glance. Laban hawked and bent to his bacon and eggs.

THERE were no more questions. Each of them was thinking his own thoughts. Priscilla still hoped secretly for Mr. George to pop up and surprise them all. Adelaide thought of the way in which children played by themselves. Virginia contemplated the three of them alone in the house—*their* house—without Priscilla. Laban thought there was no good in delaying matters; accidents did not wait upon auspicious moments. Besides, the concept of a hundred thousand dollars which might be his to do with as he liked had grown immeasurably and now loomed directly before his mind's eye as a vast mountain of epitomized freedom, opening the world to him as it had never been open before.

Finishing his breakfast, he gazed at Pris-

cella, who had also finished, and smiled. "Where did George go?" he asked.

She was disarmed. "I think he's hiding."

"I'll bet I know where he's hiding," continued Laban. "Should we go and look?"

"Oh, yes, let's."

Laban pushed his chair away and got up. "Come along, then."

"Excuse me," said Priscilla to the two women.

They went out into the hall, Priscilla clinging to his hand.

"I know just where he would be," said Laban, leading the way to the stairs.

"Upstairs?"

"In the attic. It's dark there."

THE dimness of the attic resolved itself for Laban into a giant funnel at the end of which loomed the partly filled steamer trunk not far from the top of the attic stairs. He began to circle the outer edge of the funnel, moving things and looking behind them. Priscilla darted here and there, but every few moments she stood quite still and asked questioningly of the musty twilight, "Mr. George?"

"We'll find him," said Laban each time, with a nervous heartiness. His hands were clammy, and cold sweat started to his forehead as he drew nearer and nearer to the trunk.

The trunk was large and very heavy; once inside, it would be quite impossible for Priscilla to lift the lid, even if the hasp were not caught. All the darkness of the attic, which was large and reached into the gables of the old house, seemed to converge upon the trunk. Twice Priscilla stopped almost beside it.

"He isn't here," said Priscilla at last.

"I'll bet he is," said Laban. "There's one more place just big enough to hide him. Right there."

He bent and lifted the heavy lid. The trunk was almost as deep as Priscilla was tall, though the things still packed in it diminished its depth a little. He looked at the child from the corners of his eyes; she seemed entranced, standing almost on tiptoe to peer toward the dark maw of the trunk.

"That's too dark for me to see him even if he is there," said Laban. "Maybe he's hidden under the clothes. Crawl in and find him, Pris."

Priscilla took two steps forward and heard someone say, "No, Priscilla."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "It's Mr. George!"

"What?" Laban was startled.

"He's here somewhere. I heard him."

Laban gazed at her with amazed wonder at the vividness of her imagination. Then he said, "I'll bet he's hidden under this clothing. Just crawl in and surprise him, Pris."

She shook her head. "Mr. George says not to."

A kind of exasperation was growing in him. He came down to his knees beside the trunk. "See," he said, "I'll prop up the lid." He pushed a heavy book upright between the lid and the trunk. "I'll be right here in case he comes out."

Priscilla shook her head. "You look," she said.

He thought quickly. If she could be persuaded to stand beside him, it would be simple to tip her into the trunk without any kind of rough handling which might later show a bruise on the delicate flesh.

"Come and help me," he said, bending to peer into the darkness.

Priscilla came forward.

Just short of him something stopped her, something like an invisible hand pressing her back.

Something tall and dark took shadowy shape beside Laban where he knelt, waiting for her, something that reached down and tore the sustaining book from beneath the trunk-lid, something that pushed the trunk-lid down with weighty impact upon Laban Leckett's neck.

He gave a choking cry, humped up horrible, and collapsed, kicking a little.

"Go away, Priscilla. Go downtairs now."

"Yes, Mr. George."

Priscilla went obediently out of the attic, down the stairs, and back to the tea-house, where she sat and told Celine all about it. very animated.

At the window stood Virginia, looking out with narrowed eyes and a derisive smile on her face. "I knew it," she said over her shoulder to Adelaide. "There never was much man about Laban. He lost his nerve."

ON THE day after the funeral, Laura Craig came to call. Like the Leckett women, Laura Craig was in her fifties, but she looked considerably younger. She dressed well, having money and knowing how to use it; knowing it was only a means to an end, not an end in itself. She had been a beautiful woman, and was still a strikingly handsome one; in appearance there was the difference of day and night between her and her hostesses, Laura being colorful and jeweled as against their almost offensive plainness.

"I was shocked to read about Laban," she said without preamble. "I read it only this morning. I've been up in Connecticut, and I am sorry to have missed the services. However did such a thing happen?"

"The lid of the trunk was very heavy," said Virginia, quick to speak before Adelaide could say anything. "I suppose Labon was careless."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Laura. "But what was he looking for?"

Virginia shrugged, and raised her eyebrows.

"Something of father's, we think," said Adelaide. "That was father's trunk, you know. The last time it was used was when father went to the Exposition in St. Louis."

"It was only by accident that we found him," added Virginia. "We just missed him finally, and went to look for him. He had been dead quite a while. It was awful—the trunk-lid came down with such force that it almost severed his head. We have destroyed the trunk, naturally."

"I should think so," said Laura.

THE talk drifted politely toward Priscilla, and presently Priscilla herself was walking down to the front gate with Laura Craig, whom she also called "Aunt." The sisters Leckett stood behind the curtains at the windows to make sure that Priscilla did not linger too long with this woman, whom they knew had come primarily to assure herself that the child was all right.

"Let us hope she says nothing of her absurd fancies to *her*," said Virginia bitterly.

"You forbade her to speak of them again."

"Oh, I know—but children recognize no restrictions. Will she ever forget George Newell? I wonder."

"It won't make any difference, will it?" Adelaide tittered.

"Be still, Adelaide." She sighed. "What *could* have happened up there? Laban was never careless!"

"You know what she said."

"Oh, Addie! A farrago of shadows and George and nonsense! Are you thinking the house is haunted by George? How laughable!"

Adelaide sniffed a little and left the window.

"It can't be denied, however, that Laban's death leaves each of us richer by fifty thousand dollars—after Priscilla, that is."

"How can you say such a thing, Addie!" said Virginia sharply.

Adelaide turned. "How can I say what?"

"What you just said about Laban's death."

"I didn't say anything about Laban's death."

Virginia turned angrily. "Why, Addie! I heard you. Don't try to deny it."

"Are you out of your mind, Ginny? I haven't opened my mouth. What did you imagine you heard now?"

"You said we would each be richer by fifty thousand dollars as a result of Laban's death."

"Why, I never!"

"You did!"

"I did not! That, if anything, is a thought which would occur to you a long time before I would think of it." Thoughtfully, she added, "It's true, though, isn't it?"

Virginia said nothing. Something gnawed persistently at her consciousness; it was the knowledge that if something were to happen to Adelaide before Priscilla died, she, Virginia, would come into three hundred thousand dollars, without the need of sharing it with anyone at all. A little shaken, she forgot about Priscilla and Laura Craig out in the afternoon sun at the gate and came away from the window. She was caught in a mesh of greed and conflicting desires.

THE cedar limb tapped against the house once every five times the old clock in the hall said *tick-tock*. Priscilla counted in the dark, and communicated her findings to

Celine, whom she had permitted to share her bed that night. She set herself next to counting the times the faucet dripped. But this, she found, was next to impossible, for the drippings were never certain or clear. And there were other sounds alive in the dark in the old house. The attic shutter was loose; it creaked and banged in the wind. Something rustled down the hall, and Priscilla knew it was Aunt Adelaide again; in a few moments their voices made a murmuring sound which joined the voices of the night.

In her sister's room, Adelaide walked nervously beside the bed. "It's no use your telling me it's my imagination, Virginia. I know I saw something. This is the third time, and I never heard that hallucinations come in threes."

"And what was it this time? Try to be coherent, Addie."

"A shadow in the hall, at the head of the stairs."

"If you weren't so vain about your eyes, I think an occulist and a pair of spectacles would lay your shadow."

"I stood still. The shadow moved. It was a man." Her words came faster. "Do you think I *wanted* to see him? Do you? Because if you do, you're crazy! I want to get out of this house. I hate it! I've hated it all my life—since we had to come and live here as Cissie's 'guests.'"

"So do I. Just be patient, Addie. It takes time."

"Yes, always waiting!" She turned and bent over Virginia, instinctively lowering her voice. "I've thought of something. You know what Laban said about accidents. I've watched her swing. That is an awfully heavy swing, and when George made it for her he reinforced the oak seat with iron. If she should jump too soon and not get out of the way quickly enough—and if it should catch her somehow . . . I think it could happen."

"Or be made to happen," added Virginia softly. "Think of that now, Addie, instead of absurd hallucinations. And for heaven's sake, don't tell anyone you think you see men on the stairs—you know what people would think!"

Grandfather Dedman's clock said, "Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Go-to-sleep-now, Pris-sie." This time the cedar limb tapped on "sleep." Priscilla snuggled deeper into her bed and turned to Celine.

"Are you sleepy, Celine?" she asked.

Celine obligingly indicated that she was not.

Aunt Adelaide rustled back down the hall to her own room. Priscilla knew that her aunts had things to say to each other they did not want her to hear. She wondered sometimes what it might be they talked about, but she did not mind their ignoring her. No more did she care to have them listen to her conversations with Celine. Or with Mr. George.

She raised up on her elbows and peered into the darkness of the room. Little light came in from outside; the close-pressing trees shut away all but two small rays of the street lights; one of these struck the opposite wall near the door, the other hit the mirror, where it reflected like a dim opening to a remote world of day.

"Mr. George, are you there?" she whispered into the darkness.

"Yes, Priscilla."

The answer came, it seemed, from all around her and from inside her at the same time. She did not question it.

"Please come where I can see you."

A part of the darkness near the door detached itself and drifted toward her bed; it crossed the light but did not shut it away from the mirror or the door; it left no shadow because it was itself a shadow. It hovered over the bed, and settled down to one side of it, sitting there. It was not strange to Priscilla. She was comforted.

"Say good night to Mr. George, Celine," she said.

CLAD in her negligee, Laura Craig wrote to George Newell's brother in London, the hour being late and everything still, save for the hum of life in the city, the vast subterrane roar, muted by night, the susurration of millions of creatures moving inexorably from birth to death like the sound of earth's turning. She wrote swiftly. The words came easily, for they had been pent up so long.

. . . I think there is no question but that Priscilla is George's child. She has his look about her eyes; that was not so noticeable a short time ago, but now it is coming out.

And she is constantly obsessed with him. I do not know that that is good. Surely George would not think so if he were still alive, though he was absolutely devoted to her, as you know; so many of us thought that was because of Cissie and her slow dying. What is important, I think, is that some way ought to be found to take Priscilla away from the Lecketts. They are definitely nineteenth-century, and they have that kind of repressive way of life which is acutely more wicked and evil than sheer wantonness. I mean that they certainly always resented being pitied by Cissie and even her goodness, which they never deserved. They are *not* good for Priscilla, though I found her remarkably self-contained, which is probably because she is left alone so very much. That is not good, either, I think you will agree. She has found time to think up the strangest fancies. For instance, she believes that George is still in the house. She says that George pushed the trunk-lid down on Laban's neck. That is absurd, of course; it is the wildest of fancies—but from all I have heard, the lid did more damage to Laban's neck than it ought to have done, if it fell under its own power. There is something very strange about all this, and it will come as no surprise to you to learn that I have begun to wonder a little about George's death, too. After all, his heart wasn't *that* bad. I saw him only three days before he died, and he said then that his condition seemed somewhat improved by sedentary living. I have to admit that my impression of the Lecketts is of the worst—I think they are selfish, greedy, lazy, and evil people, who behind their old-fashioned respectability, are capable of absolutely anything. . . ."

THE summer deepened, and as it grew more sultry, Priscilla spent still more of her time in the yard. Her routine in the morning was unvaried. She went to the tea-house before breakfast, and returned to it afterward. Sometimes she received little notes and presents from Laura Craig, after which she was plagued by questions from Aunt Virginia and Aunt Adelaide. Priscilla could not know that the women were anxious to learn whether she had told Laura Craig anything; Priscilla, failing to understand the real goals of their innocuous questions, did not say. She fenced with them unconsciously, thwarting them. Though she did not understand, she was conscious of a feeling of dislike for her in them; but this did not trouble her; as long as they inflicted no punishment beyond the meanness of their words or actions upon her.

In the afternoon she worked in her own little garden, which the women had allowed her to keep in one corner. And later, she retreated to the heavily shaded portion of the walled lawn where the swing hung from the limb of an ancient oak tree. She could swing for hours; from the top of the arc she made, she could look out into the street and once in a while she could see the street-car going by. Swinging gave her a sense of wild freedom; swinging made her feel that she had escaped the house and the women, that she was back in a world of green trees and sun and sky and birds, like that lovely lost time in Paris and Sorrento and on the beaches of Florida, when they had all three still been together—mama and Mr. George and she. She never tired of pumping with her sturdy little legs until she was high enough to see, and she was glad that no one ever told her to stop. Once in a while, too, Aunt Adelaide had come out to push her, which was even better.

That August afternoon Aunt Adelaide came out again.

"Today I will jump from higher yet," said Priscilla.

She had learned, under Aunt Adelaide's urging, how much fun it was to leap from the careening swing, to fly through the air, as it were, under her own power.

Aunt Adelaide smiled.

It was a day of clouds, with rain impending. The birds were still, and Celine sat sedately forgotten in the tea-house. There was no wind, and the oak leaves drooped with wonderful pungence over that corner of the lawn, shutting out most of the sky, protecting them from the curious eyes of neighbors.

"I will jump from so high," said Priscilla.

"No, that's too high."

"I can do it, Aunt Adelaide."

"No, Priscilla, that is too high. You might break a leg or something. Just think, six feet."

Priscilla was insistent. "I can so jump from that high."

"No," said Aunt Adelaide shortly. "You may jump only from so high."

"But I jumped from that high the last time."

"Just the same, that's high enough."

ADELAIDE had calculated very carefully. Priscilla jumped in a kind of crouch; then she straightened up and began to run back to get into the swing again. If she were halted at just the right place in that run back, and her attention distracted, the swing would catch her on the back of the head with deadly force. Because Priscilla reminded her of Cissie, whom she had always envied as a girl because of her beauty, so much in contrast to Adelaide's over-sized head, Adelaide hated Priscilla. It seemed to her the most important thing in the world to do something to that lovely little head, because somehow she would be doing something to that even lovelier head which had been Cissie's, obscurely she would achieve a kind of compensation for the abnormality of her own. It was far more important than the money which meant so much to Virginia.

"At least, to begin with, that's high enough," amended Aunt Adelaide.

"I will jump later, then."

"We shall see. Come, get in."

Priscilla climbed into the swing and Adelaide began to push her slowly, steadily. The swing's arc increased. Now Priscilla could see level with the top of the wall; now she could see over; now she was well up in the hot August air, almost brushing the leaves, taking deep breaths of the oak's perfume each time she came up under the leaves. And the street-car was coming, *clang-clang* at the corner, and up toward the house; she would see it from both ends of the arc. She always hoped that the conductor would see her, so that she could wave to him; but he never did. The limbs and the leaves were too thick, and he never looked up much from the tracks.

Adelaide stopped pushing her and stepped back a little.

"Stay sitting now," she said.

"I am," said Priscilla.

The swing began to slow down, the arc to diminish. She came down from the leafy sky, she came down out of heaven each time a little more. She came away from a pewee singing up in the oak tree, back toward Aunt Adelaide waiting to catch the swing as soon as she had jumped.

"I'm going to jump now."

"Not yet."

She waited a moment.

"Now, then."

"Not yet."

She waited another of the diminishing arcs.

"Now," she said, and jumped, throwing up her arms like a bird, and like a white bird flying to the ground, coming down in a supple crouch and bounding to her feet.

"Oh, fun!" she cried and turned to run to Aunt Adelaide, who stood with the swing held high over her head.

"Oh, look—a redbird!" cried Aunt Adelaide, pointing toward the wall.

Priscilla stopped and turned quickly.

With all her strength, Adelaide pushed the heavy swing. The curve was right; it would catch Priscilla on the back of the head just past the lowest point of the arc; it would crush and mangle forever that lovely head which was so like Cissie's, that head so lovely in contrast to her own. She took three steps forward, the simulated cry of horror already rising in her throat . . . and faltered.

The swing stopped short of Priscilla's head.

Caught in a dark, gangling shadow that seemed to depend from the tree, the swing went swiftly up and vanished into the oak. Then it came hurtling down with incredible force, clear of Priscilla, straight at Adelaide. Fear rooted her there directly in its path. The heavy, iron-reinforced board struck her across the temple; she dropped without a sound, while the child still looked in vain for the bird.

Priscilla turned and saw the woman crumpled there.

"Aunt Adelaide!" she cried.

Aunt Virginia came running from the house, crying, "Addie! Addie!"

"Go to your room, Priscilla."

THE voice came in the whisper of the oak leaves, where a wind was starting up; it rose out of the shadowed heart of the

tree and descended all about her like a cloak, as if to shut away the mangled head and the blood there, and the sight of Aunt Virginia like a mad woman coming to her knees beside Adelaide's body.

"All right, Mr. George," said Priscilla.

After Priscilla was in bed, Aunt Virginia came into the room. She came over and sat down beside her in the bed. The undertaker had come and gone a long time ago, and some men from a newspaper had been and gone, too.

"Tell me how it happened now, Priscilla."

"I don't know."

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"I don't know. She said to look at the redbird. I tried to see it. I couldn't. When I turned around, she was on the ground."

"What else?"

"Nothing, except that Mr. George told me to go to my room."

"George?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, Aunt Virginia."

"How do you know it was George?"

"I know."

"How?"

"I heard him." She spoke resentfully, not understanding why Aunt Virginia pressed her so. "Besides, Mr. George talks to me every night before I go to sleep."

Aunt Virginia looked grim and pale. Her lips were twitching a little at one corner and her eyes were narrowed. Her hands were clenched on her knees. Deep within her there was a trembling of fear, an insistent awareness which she pushed back with fierce determination.

"You are a wicked little girl," said Aunt Virginia. "What does he say?"

Priscilla, hurt, shook her head.

"Answer me."

Priscilla said nothing.

"Priscilla!"

No answer.

Baffled and angry, Virginia got up and walked out of the room, turning the light switch at the door.

Priscilla waited until she was sure the woman had gone; then she got up in the darkness and found her doll. She returned to bed with it, and tucked Celine in. Then she tiptoed to the door and opened it a little. Aunt Virginia had gone downstairs; a faint scratching sound rose to Priscilla's listening ears. Aunt Virginia was writing something; but of course, she would be writing all about Adelaide. Priscilla closed the door soundlessly and tiptoed back to her bed, crawling in and snuggling close to Celine.

ALL the intimate sounds of the old house crept into the room, bringing their tranquility. Swinging always made Priscilla tired, and even though she had not been swung as much as usual that afternoon, she was still tired. She drowsed, but she did not sleep. She waited confidently for Mr. George to come.

Having finished her letter, Virginia Leckett put out the lamp and stood for a moment to accustom herself to the darkness. Then she went up the stairs without light. She paused at Priscilla's door.

What was it within? Voices or a voice? She listened.

"Why don't you ever come where I can see you plainer, Mr. George?"

Virginia heard no answer.

"Do you sleep there by the door, Mr. George?"

No sound.

"All right, Mr. George."

Thereafter, silence.

Noiselessly, Virginia opened the door and looked into the room. The bed was spectral over near the window, and the child dark in it. Darkness filled the room—and yet more dark. Was it an accident of sight that she seemed to see a dark shadow hulking there beside the bed? Yes? Or no? Virginia stared. The intensity of her gaze tricked her; the rays of light from the street seemed to dance; they shone through the shadow beside the bed. Virginia closed her eyes and held her lids down; then she flashed them open. Nothing had changed.

She withdrew, closing the door and standing with her back against it.

In a moment she was sharply, frighteningly aware of menace beyond the door, a potent danger threatening her. It was intangible, but all the more frightening for that intangibility. She started away from

the door to stand in the middle of the hall. She took hold of herself, grimly. She was too close to her goal now to be frightened by her imagination. She came back to the door once again, pressing against it with the length of her body. There was something beyond it, something lurking there, waiting. She clenched her hands in a gesture of defiance and moved away to her own room.

There she sat for a long time trying to think what it was that had seized hold of her imagination so vividly, trying to piece together the events of Priscilla's world, thinking always of the insistent fact that now that Adelaide was gone, she alone would inherit three hundred thousand dollars as soon as Priscilla was gone. That was the world, that was independence, security, freedom for life.

IT WAS late when they came back from the funeral. Virginia had thriftily engaged a car to take them to the cemetery, but not to bring them back. They came back on the streetcar. Laura Craig's presence at the services had vexed Virginia, so that she was unusually short with Priscilla. She recognized that Laura would have liked control over Priscilla; she knew that Laura was genuinely fond of the child, and she resented this—not because of any feeling of possession, but simply because she knew that when something happened to Priscilla, Laura Craig would put people up to asking questions. It was a wonder she had not done so about George Newell.

As she stepped into the hall in the late afternoon, Virginia thought she saw someone standing at the foot of the stairs; but at that moment Priscilla darted forward with a little cry, and she followed her with her eyes where she ran for the stairs and up. When she looked back, there was nothing there.

Nevertheless, she was troubled by the increasing frequency of what could only be illusions.

She put away her good coat and hat, and went out into the kitchen to put together something for the supper table. In the routine of getting a meal, she forgot about her illusions, and thought only about how long she must wait before she could take care of Priscilla and enter upon that new world of her dreams.

Priscilla came in, divested of her good clothes and plainly attired in a print dress.

"Didn't you see him, Aunt Virginia?" she cried.

"See whom?"

"Mr. George. He was really and truly standing there when we came in."

Virginia prevented herself from striking the child just in time. She stood looking at her coldly for a long time before she could bring herself to speak. "I never want to hear his name again, do you understand?"

"Yes, Aunt Virginia."

"I never want it mentioned in this house again, do you hear?"

"Yes, Aunt Virginia. You don't have to scream."

"I'm not screaming!"

Her voice screamed back at her from the walls, shrill, raucous, unpleasant, until the sound diminished and faded into the kitchen's silence, which lay like a mountain between the child with her curious bright eyes, and the angry, frightened woman.

THE summer passed, and autumn came with rain.

In October, Virginia Leckett could contain herself no longer. Her patience had worn thin. Even the need of showing some superficial concern for Priscilla was becoming increasingly difficult, especially when she thought of how only this child stood between her and the fortune which, by now, she had convinced herself should have been hers all along.

She had evolved a plan for which must be Priscilla's fatal accident. It was not original. She had observed that the child was in the habit of running along the upper hall and down the stairs, despite their steepness.

It should be a very simple matter to fix a thin wire across the head of the stairs, half a foot or so from the floor; Priscilla could not possibly avoid tripping over it. The tumble down the stairs might not kill her, but the chances were good that it would.

She waited one night until Priscilla had gone to her room. Then she went quickly to the head of the stairs and fixed the wire

around the posts there, and, stepping over it, hastened to the foot of the stairs.

"Priscilla!" she called. "Come down here —quick!"

From where she stood, she could make out the thin wire because a little light struck up toward it from below. It would be invisible to Priscilla.

The door of Priscilla's room opened. "Did you call me, Aunt Virginia?"

"Yes. Come down, quick."

She came running down the hall.

Virginia stood open-mouthed, watching, a kind of bestial eagerness stirring within her.

But at the head of the stairs Priscilla stopped. A kind of shuddering horror chilled Virginia, for she saw a familiar dark shadow holding the child back with one tenuous arm, while with the other it unwound the wire from the posts. Only when it had been pulled away from Priscilla's path was she permitted to go on.

Down she came.

"What's the matter, Aunt Virginia?"

Virginia's tongue was thick. I told you—to come—quick. What kept you?"

"*He* did."

"Who?"

"You know who. You said not to mention his name again."

A harsh burst of laughter broke from Virginia's dry lips. She reached down and took the child by the hand.

"Come along," she said. "We'll see."

SHE went up the stairs, forcing herself, driving herself every step of the way, so that Priscilla walked always a little ahead of her.

They went directly to Priscilla's room. Virginia stopped at the threshold.

"There is nobody here but us," she said. "Do you see?"

Priscilla looked around. "He can hide anywhere," she said.

Virginia shook her head. "Do you hear me? There is nobody here but us. Say that after me."

"You're hurting me."

"Say it!" said Virginia in a furious voice.

"There is nobody here but us," repeated Priscilla, frightened now.

"There is nobody in this house but us," Virginia went on, her voice rising. Say it. Go on—say it."

"There is nobody in this house but us," said Priscilla. She took a deep breath and added courageously, "And Mr. George."

In an access of thwarted rage, Virginia beat Priscilla unmercifully until the child escaped her and ran to hide under the bed. Breathing heavily, Virginia left the room, slamming the door, and leaning against it to listen. Only the child's sobbing came into the darkness of the hall.

"Are you ready, Virginia?"

She whirled.

Standing almost near enough to touch her was a dark something that spoke to her in George Newell's voice—a horrible sentient darkness without substance but exuding a malignance great enough to send her pulse high in terror. The malign shadow reached toward her.

She screamed and burst away.

She ran faster than she had ever run before toward the stairs.

Too late, she saw that the wire was back in place. She tripped and hurtled down the stairs like a rag doll, while the shadow paused to unwind the wire once again.

Priscilla, after a few moments of uncertainty, came to the threshold of her room and stood in the open doorway.

"Aunt Virginia?" she asked of the darkness.

"Priscilla."

"Yes, Mr. George."

"Priscilla, go to Laura. Tell her Aunt Virginia fell downstairs and broke her neck. You are going to stay with Laura now."

"Yes, Mr. George. Are you coming, too?"

"No. I'm going away, and this time I'll stay. Unless you need me."

"Oh, don't go, Mr. George!"

"Get your things and go to Laura, Priscilla."

OBEDIENTLY she went back to her room and got Celine out of bed. She put on Celine's hat and then her own. Grandfather Dedman's clock said, "Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Go-to sleep-now, Pris-sie," and then struck ten sombre bongs which rang through the house like a tocsin.

Priscilla went out of the room and down the stairs, walking carefully around Aunt

Virginia, expecting that any moment that horrible inert mass might spring up and strike her again. At the front door she turned and looked bravely back into the darkness.

"Good-bye, Mr. George," she said.

She thought there was an answer, but she could not be sure. Perhaps it was just Grandfather Dedman's clock with a last, reproachful "Pris-sie."

She got on the street-car at the corner.

"Are you alone, Miss Priscilla?" asked the conductor. "At this time of night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you run away?"

'Oh, no. I've got to go somewhere else." Gravely, she told him the address.

"Why, that's way over on the other side of the city! What can she be thinking of to let you go alone!"

Irate, he clanged a passing taxi to a stop, got out with Priscilla and put her into it, giving the driver explicit directions.

Laura Craig, white-faced, listened to Priscilla, and, having heard, went directly to the telephone. She called the Leckett house.

Priscilla heard the ringing for a long time. But, of course, there was no answer. So she knew that Mr. George was gone, too, like all the rest of them.

On a Weird Planet

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

They said Inferno was the planet's name,—
A waste of sprouting crimson barred with black,
Where towers and palisades were sucked by flame,
And fields erupted in the red attack.

There, in the rocket-vomiting sooty gloom,
Bewildered thousands, frail as ants upturned,
Staggered, and ran, and staggered; pitched to doom,
Or prayed and muttered while their homesteads burned.

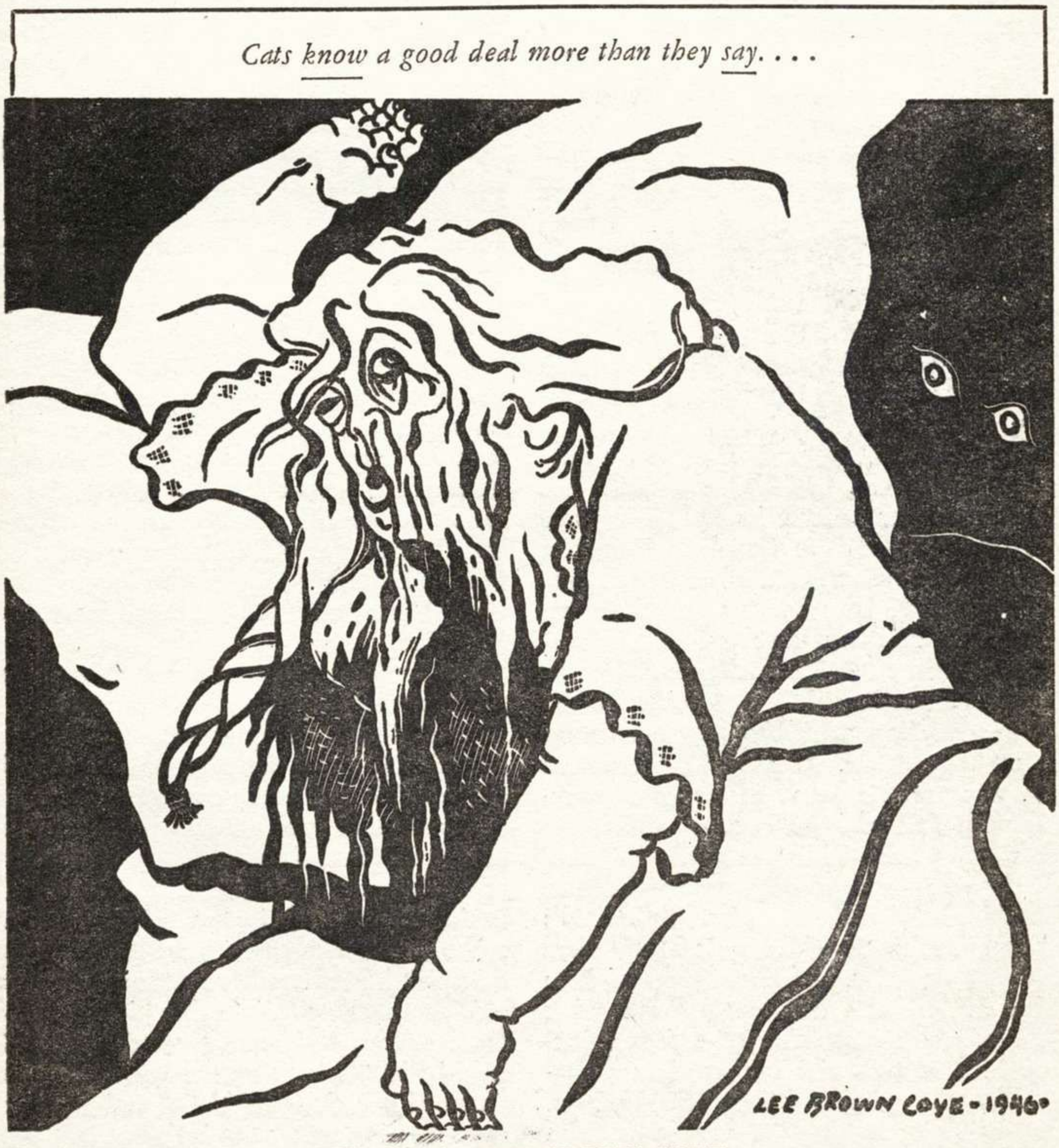
And roar of bombs and mortars jarred the ears,
And drone of flying dragons; screams of pain;
While fiery whirlwinds tore at all frontiers,
And sane men grappled with the clawed insane.

Inferno was the planet's name, they said.
Then weird this tale: that under warm blue skies
Once children laughed, and lovers merrily wed,
And poets, moonstruck, sang of paradise.

Fluffy

BY THEODORE STURGEON

RANSOME lay in the dark and smiled to himself, thinking about his hostess. Ransome was always in demand as a house-guest, purely because of his phenomenal abilities as a raconteur. Said abilities were entirely due to his being so often a house-guest, for it was the terse beauty of his word-pictures of people and their opinions of people that made him the figure he was. And all those clipped ironies had to do with the people he had met last week-end. Staying a while at the Joneses, he could quietly insinuate the most scandalously hilarious things about the Joneses



Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

when he week-ended with the Browns the following fortnight. You think Mr. and Mrs. Jones resented that? Ah, no. You should hear the dirt on the Browns! And so it went, a two-dimensional spiral on the social plane.

This wasn't the Joneses or the Brown's, though. This was Mrs. Benedetto's ménage; and to Ransome's somewhat jaded sense of humor, the widow Benedetto was a god-send. She lived in a world of her own, which was apparently set about with quasi-important ancestors and relatives exactly as her living-room was cluttered up with perfectly unmentionable examples of Victorian rococo.

Mrs. Benedetto did not live alone. Far from it. Her very life, to paraphrase the lady herself, was wound about, was caught up in, was owned by and dedicated to her baby. Her baby was her beloved, her little beauty, her too darling my dear, and—so help me—her boobly wutsi-wutsikins. In himself he was quite a character. He answered to the name of Bubbles, which was inaccurate and offended his dignity. He had been christened Fluffy, but you know how it is with nicknames. He was large and he was sleek, that paragon among animals, a chastened alley-rabbit.

Wonderful things, cats. A cat is the only animal which can live like a parasite and maintain to the utmost its ability to take care of itself. You've heard of little lost dogs, but you never heard of a lost cat. Cats don't get lost, because cats don't belong anywhere. You wouldn't get Mrs. Benedetto to believe that. Mrs. Benedetto never thought of putting Fluffy's devotion to the test by declaring a ten-day moratorium on the canned salmon. If she had, she would have uncovered a sense of honor comparable with that of a bedbug.

Knowing this—Ransome pardoned himself the pun—categorically, Ransome found himself vastly amused. Mrs. Benedetto's ministrations to the phlegmatic Fluffy were positively orgiastic. As he thought of it in detail, he began to feel that perhaps, after all, Fluffy was something of a feline phenomenon. A cat's ears are sensitive organisms; any living being that could abide Mrs. Benedetto's constant flow of conversation from dawn till dark, and then hear it subside in sleep only to be replaced by a night-shift of resounding snores; well, that *was* phenomenal. And Fluffy had stood it for four years. Cats are not renowned for their patience. They have, however, a very fine sense of values. Fluffy was getting something out of it—worth considerably more to him than the discomforts he endured, too, for no cat likes to break even.

HE LAY still, marvelling at the carrying power of the widow's snores. He knew little of the late Mr. Benedetto, but he gathered now that he had been either a man of saintly patience, a masochist or a deaf-mute. A noise like that from just one stringy throat must be an impossibility, and yet, there it was. Ransome liked to imagine that the woman had callouses on her palate and tonsils, grown there from her conversation, and it was these rasping together that produced the curious dry-leather quality of her snores. He tucked the idea away for future reference. He might use it next week-end. The snores were hardly the gentlest of lullabys, but any sound is soothing if it is repeated often enough.

There is an old story about a lighthouse tender whose lighthouse was equipped with an automatic cannon which fired every fifteen minutes, day and night. One night, when the old man was fast asleep, the gun failed to go off. Three seconds after its stated time, the old fellow was out of his bed and flailing around the room, shouting, "What was that?" And so it was with Ransome.

He couldn't tell whether it was an hour after he had fallen asleep, or whether he had not fallen asleep at all. But he found himself sitting on the edge of the bed, wide awake, straining every nerve for the source of the—what was it?—sound?—that had awakened him. The old house was as quiet as a city morgue after closing time, and he could see nothing in the tall, dark guest-room but the moon-silvered windows and the thick blacknesses that were drapes. Any old damn thing might be hiding behind those drapes, he thought comfortingly. He edged himself back on the bed and quickly snatched his feet off the floor. Not that anything was under the bed, but still—

A white object puffed along the floor,

through the moonbeams, toward him. He made no sound, but tensed himself, ready to attack or defend, dodge or retreat. Ransome was by no means an admirable character, but he owed his reputation and therefore his existence to this particular trait, the ability to poise himself, invulnerable to surprise. Try arguing with a man like that sometime.

The white object paused to stare at him out of its yellow-green eyes. It was only Fluffy—Fluffy looking casual and easy-going and not at all in a mood to frighten people. In fact he looked up at Ransome's gradually relaxing bulk and raised a long-haired, quizzical eyebrow, as if he rather enjoyed the man's discomfiture.

Ransome withstood the cat's gaze with suavity, and stretched himself out on the bed with every bit of Fluffy's own easy grace. "Well," he said amusedly, "You gave me a jolt! Weren't you taught to knock before you entered a gentlemen's boudoir?"

Fluffy raised a velvet paw and touched it pinkly with his tongue. "Do you take me for a barbarian?" he asked.

Ransome's lids seemed to get heavy, the only sign he ever gave of being taken aback. He didn't believe for a moment that the cat had really spoken, but there was something about the voice he had heard that was more than a little familiar. This was, of course, someone's idea of a joke.

Good God—it had to be a joke!

Well, he had to hear that voice again before he could place it. "You didn't say anything, of course," he told the cat, "but if you did, what was it?"

"You heard me the first time," said the cat, and jumped up on the foot of his bed. Ransome inched back from the animal. "Yes," he said, "I—thought I did." Where on earth had he heard that voice before? "You know," he said, with an attempt at jocularity, "You should, under these circumstances, have written me a note before you knocked."

"I refuse to be burdened with the so-called social amenities," said Fluffy. His coat was spotlessly clean, and he looked like an advertising photograph for eider-down, but he began to wash carefully. "I don't like you, Ransome."

"Thanks," chuckled Ransome, surprised. "I don't like you either."

"Why?" asked Fluffy.

RANSOME told himself silently that he was damned. He had recognized the cat's voice, and it was a credit to his powers of observation that he had. It was his own voice. He held tight to a mind that would begin to reel on slight provocation, and, as usual when bemused, he flung out a smoke-screen of his own variety of glib chatter.

"Reasons for not liking you," he said, "Are legion. They are all included in the one phrase—'You are a cat.'"

"I have heard you say that at least twice before," said Fluffy, "Except that you have now substituted 'cat' for 'woman.'"

"Your attitude is offensive. Is any given truth any the less true for having been uttered more than once?"

"No," said the cat with equanimity. "But it is just that more clichéd."

Ransome laughed. "Quite aside from the fact that you can talk, I find you most refreshing. No one has ever criticized my particular variety of repartee before."

"No one was ever wise to you before," said the cat. "Why don't you like cats?"

A question like that was, to Ransome, the pressing of a button which released ordered phrases. "Cats," he said oratorically, "are without doubt the most self-centered, ungrateful, hypocritical creatures on this or any other earth. Spawned from a mésalliance between Lilith and Satan—"

Fluffy's eyes widened. "Ah! An antiquarian!" he whispered.

"—they have the worst traits of both. Their best qualities are their beauty of form and of motion, and even these breathe evil. Women are the ficklest of bipeds, but few women are as fickle as, by nature, any cat is. Cats are not true. They are impossibilities, as perfection is impossible. No other living creature moves with utterly perfect grace. Only the dead can so perfectly relax. And nothing—simply nothing at all—transcends a cat's incomparable insincerity."

Fluffy purred.

"Pussy! Sit-by-the-fire-and sing!" spat Ransome. "Smiling up all toadying and yellow-eyed at the bearers of liver and sal-

mon and catnip! Soft little puffball, bundle of joy, playing with a ball on a string; making children clap their soft hands to see you, while your mean little brain is viciously alight with the pictures your play calls up for you. Bite it to make it bleed; hold it till it all but throttles; lay it down and step about it daintily; prod it with a gentle silken paw until it moves again, and then pounce. Clasp it in your talons then, lift it, roll over with it, sink your cruel teeth into it while you pump out its guts with your hind feet. Ball on a string! Play-actor!"

FLUFFY fawned. "To quote you, that is the prettiest piece of emotional claptrap that these old ears have ever heard. A triumph in studied spontaneity. A symphony in cynicism. A poem in perception. The unqualified—"

Ransome grunted.

He deeply resented this flamboyant theft of all his pet phrases, but his lip twitched nevertheless. The cat was indeed an observant animal.

"—epitome of understatement," Fluffy finished smoothly. "To listen to you, one would think that you would like to slaughter earth's felinity."

"I would," gritted Ransome.

"It would be a favor to us," said the cat. "We would keep ourselves vastly amused, eluding you and laughing at the effort it cost you. Humans lack imagination."

"Superior creature," said Ransome ironically, "Why don't you do away with the human race, if you find us a bore?"

"You think we couldn't?" responded Fluffy. "We can outthink, outrun and outbreed your kind. But why should we? As long as you act as you have for these last few thousand years, feeding us, sheltering us and asking nothing from us but our presence for purposes of admiration—why then, you may remain here."

Ransome guffawed. "Nice of you! But listen—stop your bland discussion of the abstract and tell me some things I want to know. How can you talk, and why did you pick me to talk to?"

Fluffy settled himself. "I shall answer the question socratically. Socrates was a Greek, and so I shall begin with your last question. What do you do for a living?"

"Why I—I have some investments and a small capital, and the interest—" Ransome stopped, for the first time fumbling for words. Fluffy was nodding knowingly.

"All right, all right. Come clean. You can speak freely."

Ransome grinned. "Well, if you must know—and you seem to—I am a practically permanent house-guest. I have a considerable fund of stories and a flair for telling them; I look presentable and act as if I were a gentleman. I negotiate, at times, small loans—"

"A loan," said Fluffy authoritatively, "is something one intends to repay."

"We'll call them loans," said Ransome airily. "Also, at one time and another, I exact a reasonable fee for certain services rendered—"

"Blackmail," said the cat.

"Don't be crude. All in all, I find life a comfortable and engrossing thing."

"Q. E. D.," said Fluffy triumphantly. "You make your living being scintillant, beautiful to look at. So do I. You help nobody but yourself; you help yourself to anything you want. So do I. No one likes you except those you bleed; everyone admires and envys you. So with me. Get the point?"

"I think so. Cat, you draw a mean parallel. In other words, you consider my behavior catlike."

"Precisely," said Fluffy through his whiskers. "And that is both why and how I can talk with you. You're so close to the feline in everything you do and think; your whole basic philosophy is that of a cat. You have a feline aura about you so intense that it contacts mine; hence we find each other intelligible."

"I don't understand that," said Ransome.

"Neither do I," returned Fluffy. "But there it is. Do you like Mrs. Benedetto?"

"No!" said Ransome immediately and with considerable emphasis. "She is absolutely insufferable. She bores me. She irritates me. She is the only woman in the world who can do both those things to me at the same time. She talks too much. She reads too little. She thinks not at all. Her mind is hysterically hidebound. She has a

face like the cover of a book that no one has ever wanted to read. She is built like a pinch-type whiskey bottle that never had any whiskey in it. Her voice is monotonous and unmusical. Her education was insufficient. Her family background is mediocre, she can't cook, and she doesn't brush her teeth often enough."

"MY MY," said the cat, raising both paws in surprise. "I detect a ring of sincerity in all that. It pleases me. That is exactly the way I have felt for some years. I have never found fault with her cooking, though; she buys special food for me. I am tired of it. I am tired of her. I am tired of her to an almost unbelievable extent. Almost as much as I hate you."

"Me?"

"Of course. You're an imitation. You're a phony. Your birth is against you, Ransome. No animal that sweats and shaves, that opens doors for women, that dresses itself in equally phony imitations of the skins of animals, can achieve the status of a cat. You are presumptuous."

"You're not?"

"I am different. I am a cat, and have a right to do as I please. I disliked you so intensely when I saw you this evening that I made up my mind to kill you."

"Why didn't you? Why—don't you?"

"I couldn't," said the cat coolly. "Not when you sleep like a cat . . . no, I thought of something far more amusing."

"Oh?"

"Oh yes." Fluffy stretched out a foreleg, extended his claws. Ransome noticed subconsciously how long and strong they seemed. The moon had gone its way, and the room was filling with slate-gray light.

"What woke you," said the cat, leaping to the window-sill, "just before I came in?"

"I don't know," said Ransome. "Some little noise, I imagine."

"No indeed," said Fluffy, curling his tail and grinning through his whiskers. "It was the stopping of a noise. Notice how quiet it is?"

It was indeed. There wasn't a sound in the house—oh yes, now he could hear the plodding footsteps of the maid on her way from the kitchen to Mrs. Benedetto's bedroom, and the soft clink of a teacup. But otherwise—suddenly he had it. "The old horse stopped snoring!"

"She did," said the cat. The door across the hall opened, there was the murmur of the maid's voice, a loud crash, the most horrible scream Ransome had ever heard, pounding footsteps rushing down the hall, a more distant scream, silence. Ransome bounced out of bed. "What the hell—"

"Just the maid," said Fluffy, washing between his toes, but keeping the corners of his eyes on Ransome. "She just found Mrs. Benedetto."

"Found—"

"Yes. I tore her throat out."

"Good—God! Why?"

Fluffy poised himself on the windowsill. "So you'd be blamed for it," he said, and laughing nastily, he leaped out and disappeared in the gray morning.

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Hoodooed

BY SEABURY QUINN

. . . and revenge comes on both sides of the grave

DERRICOTE flattened on the sopping leaf mould as the cavalry patrol splashed by. It was at least the thousandth time that he had taken similar cover in the past four days, and creeping like a snake among the underbrush or lying quiet as a rabbit in a briar patch had become automatic with him every time he heard the pound of horseshoes or the scuff of marching feet. Fatigue was now so deep that it was almost anesthesia, his uniform was ripped to tatters by the brambles, his eyes were gritty with sleep and hunger gnawed at his midriff like a starved rat. But he could still smile. "I'm surely gettin' an elegant worm's eye view of O' Virginny," he grinned as the last of the rain-slicked blue backs disappeared around the bend of the woods road.

Orders to abandon Petersburg had come early on the morning of the second, and he had gone out with his squadron to cover the retreat of Greenleaf's infantry. They knew the Yanks were pressing on the earthworks, for beyond the leaf-screen of the April woods they heard the rattle of musketry and the dull, almost continuous roar of cannon. It would not be long before the last desperate rear guard fell back, then. . . .

At noon they paused for a meal of corn pone and the parched rye and acorn that did duty for coffee. The fire had hardly begun crackling underneath the pot when the bluebellies came galloping over the rise, sturdy, well-fed veterans of Phil Sheridan's command, riding hell-for-leather and yelling like Comanches.

"Mount!" Derricote spat out a mouthful of seasonless corn bread. "Draw sabers! Forward—trot—gallop—*charge!*" He drove the spurs in Caesar's flanks and the tired horse snorted furiously as he strained against the bridle. Behind him his men rode stirrup to stirrup in a long wedge whose point was the tip of his saber thrusting like a unicorn's horn from beyond Caesar's starting eyes.

They raised the Rebel Yell as they dashed at the blue-clad rank, but the Yankees did not meet them. Instead, they fanned out in a deep V, then closed in like the jaws of a steel trap, battering his men with sabers, shooting them from the saddle—he drove a vicious thrust at a burly trooper in blue and yellow, leaned down to dash his hilt into a grinning red-faced corporal's mouth, evaded the slash of a broad-bladed saber, then with a sudden, vast, outrageous crash, the world had come to an end.

How long he lay senseless he had no idea. The patter of the gentle April rain on his face wakened him, and when he sat up dizzily he saw the dark had come and, save for some grotesque gray-garbed forms that sprawled unnaturally on the fresh grass and one or two stiff-legged horses lying motionless as uprooted tree stumps, he had the field to himself. His horse, his men, even the enemy had disappeared.

He felt for his watch. Gone. So were his gold cuff links and cameo. They'd taken time to go through him, apparently, before they rode back to report their victory—or maybe it had been his own men who rifled his pockets. He noted with a grin that had no humor in it that they'd left his wallet stuffed with fifty-dollar bills; Confederate money had small buying power, even south of Mason-Dixon's Line, but gold was gold

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

Lee Brown Coye 1946-

the world over. That watch or those cuff links or scarf pin would be legal tender at any sutler's, enough to buy a slab or side of meat or even a pound of coffee—real coffee, not the parched and pounded rye and acorn the South had used until the taste of mocha had become no more than a vague memory.

By degrees he regained control of his legs. The blow that knocked him out must have turned on the brass button on his kepi, so that only the flat of the blade hit him. There was a lump almost as big as a pigeon's egg just above his right ear, but there was no blood on his hand when he brought it down from his head, and the soft spring rain was cool and soothing on his upturned face. Unsteadily, but gaining fresh stability with each step, he walked across the field, then halted fifty yards or so from the highway. There was no sign or sound of life anywhere. Greenleaf's men, together with the remnants of his squadron would have gone long since, either making for the rendezvous on the Appomattox or striking overland toward Lynchburg and the mountains. Grant and Weitzel would be on their flanks like gadflies, Union troopers would be between him and them—the drumming of shod hoofs and clatter of accoutrement came to him even as he halted, and he dropped face-downward to the sod, arms clasped above his head.

THE patrol galloped by so close that water from the horses' pounding hoofs splashed on him. "There's another of 'em, Bill," he heard a trooper call to the man next him as they clattered past. "Ol' Simpson must a cut them Johnnie up in style this mornin'."

"Yeah, an' we'll have the rest of 'em by tomorrer if things keep up this-a-way. Jeez, how them Rebs can fight with nothin' in their bellies sure beats hell, don't it?"

"Wal," the voice of a third trooper had a Middle-Western twang to it, "I reckon that's because they're Amurricans, too. Any other army would of chucked the towel in long ago, but these fellers will fight till they've shot their last ca'tridge, then ten to one they'll fight us with the bay'-nit till we've killed the whole damn kit-kaboodle of 'em."

The patrol trotted out of sight and Derricote rose cautiously, staggering across the sodden meadow till he reached a patch of woodland and found friendly shelter in the undergrowth.

Since then he'd played a desperate game of hide and seek with bands of Yankee cavalry and infantry detachments, hiding, creeping into bramble patches and small thickets when a Northern patrol hove in view, trudging furtively along the road, or running across fields when no enemy was in sight, getting handouts from farmers' wives, but always working steadily toward Laurelwood and sanctuary—Laurelwood, where they would bathe and feed him, let him sleep between clean sheets and recruit strength to rejoin Lee's army and fight, as the Yankee trooper put it, "till the last ca'tridge had been fired."

He lay listening a few moments when the cavalry detail had passed, making sure no more were following, then got to his feet once more and crept through the woods until he came out at the hilltop overlooking the plantation. The rain had stopped, and in the light of a low moon he looked across the gently rolling land while a lump rose in his throat and a sob formed in his chest. The breeze that blew across the fields was redolent with memories, for this had been his second home, more dear to him than any place on earth except his father's farmstead, since he had been a little lad. Here he had a riddle on his first fox hunt, here he had danced his first quadrille and polka, here he had shared life with Jessica since childhood. From that wide, white-pillared porch he had ridden to join his troop in '62, brave in his spotless new gray uniform, with a red rose from her knotted in the gold cord of his aiguilette and the remembrance of her kiss upon his lips. "I'll be waitin' for you, Howard," she had promised as she tightened soft bare arms about his neck, "waitin' for my brave, victorious lover—"

"Maybe he won't be victorious," he had interrupted. "Mr. Lincoln's raised three hundred thousand volunteers, and they're already almost two to one—"

"Howard Derricote, how you talk! To hear you anyone would think one Southerner couldn't whip ten Yankees with one hand tied behind him. Of course you'll win this war, an' take ol' Lincoln prisoner, too!"

"But if we should lose, Jessica—"

The somberness in his voice sobered her.

"Win or lose, my lover-man, there'll never be another for me. I've loved you since I was a little girl, an' all my life I'll keep on lovin' you. It's not as if we were just ordinary people; we've been together so much that we've grown to be part of each other. You're like my heart—I just couldn't go on livin' without you, honey-lamb." Then she had drawn his face down to hers as he leaned from the saddle, kissed him on both cheeks and on the mouth, and after that . . . the clatter of the gravel under Caesar's hoofs, the long, hot, dusty road to camp Fair Oaks, Gains Mill and Mechanicsville, three years of almost constant fighting while victory after victory cheered the gray-clad soldiers of the South. But Nashville, Chicamauga and Chattanooga were another story; Gettysburg and Cold Harbor were blows that sent the once-victorious army reeling from the field to take shelter behind hastily constructed earthworks. Now Petersburg had been abandoned, and Richmond, capital of the Confederacy. The end was in sight, inevitable. . . .

A small, irresolute breeze played hesitantly among the leafage, and a sigh that was half gratitude at homecoming, half sorrow, escaped him. The oak and maple trees that grew around the big house tossed their leaf-laced branches till they seemed to ripple like green spray; beyond the rolling fields there stood the unforgotten circle of blue hills, and everywhere the mountain laurel from which the plantation took its name was bursting into bud.

A SQUARE of luminance attracted his attention. That would be the cabin of old Mammy Cicely, the aged manumitted Negress at whose black breast two generations of Skipwell children had nursed. Mammy Ciss possessed a widespread reputation as a "conjur 'oman," her boss-fix powders were famous, as were the love charms she concocted, the stay-home potions which kept errant wives' and husbands' eyes—and affections—from roving were known as sovereign remedies in domestic crises, and her git-away charms had more than once sent a strayed man back to his fireside. It was rumored and believed that she possessed more sinister powers. Madness was a thing almost unknown among the Negroes, yet there had been instances of it. Field hands and house servants alike shook their heads and whispered—but not in hearing of the white folks—that Mammy Ciss had "spelled" the lunatics, and more than one mysterious illness and unexplained death had been laid to her door. Those who approached her cabin seeking favors walked charily as Saul when he sought out the Witch of Endor. But Mammy Ciss had always been his friend. Her hut would offer sanctuary. He could get water there to wash away the grime of flight and battle before he went to the big house—make himself at least halfway presentable.

He hurried down the grassy slope, climbed the stone fence that marked the boundary of the cabin's plot of land, and knocked on the rough puncheons of the door.

The light behind the window was obscured a moment as a figure passed before the fire, and a deep musical voice challenged, "Who dar?"

"Mammy Ciss," he answered in a whisper, for caution had become a habit with him, "it's I—Marse Howard."

"Who?"

"Howard Derricote. You know, Marse Howard—"

"Bress de Lawd!" The door flung open and a pair of calico-clad arms enfolded him, straining him against a deep, capacious bosom. "Hit's sho'-nuff Marse Howard hisself! Mah other baby's done come back ter me!" He had been nurtured at a black breast, brought up, corrected—sometimes soundly spanked—by colored mammies, and the warm affection he had for this woman's kind was unaffected as it was natural. He kissed the gleaming chocolate-colored cheeks and put his arms about the massive shoulders, returning the old woman's embrace fervently as it was given. Then, as she drew him into the neat single room of the cabin, "Got any hot water around—and something to eat?" he demanded. "Lord, but I'm hungry—and dirty!"

"Yuh jes' set dar an' res' yo'sef, honey," the Negress answered. "Pull off yo' boots an' favor yo' feets. Ah'll git some vittles fo' yuh in two shakes an' set de kittle b'ilin' fo' yo' baff in half a minit."

Hoe-cake—not the crumbly, almost un-

seasoned corn bread of the impoverished farm folk, but the crisp, golden-brown confection that defies comparison—appeared on the table almost as if by magic, and with it came a plate of snapping-hot fried chitterlings and a lump of fresh-churned pale gold butter almost large as a man's fist. Last of all a pot of steaming coffee with cream to cut its bitterness and sorghum syrup for "long sweetening."

"Lawdy, but yuh's beat-out lookin', Marse Howard," the old woman sympathized as she refilled his plate. "Whut dey bin doin' ter mah baby?"

"Chasin' him, I reckon you'd call it," he responded with a grin. "Chasin' him up hill and down dale. How's Miss Jessica?"

She busied herself with the coffee pot a moment, refilling his cup and adding cream and syrup. Two horizontal wrinkles furrowed themselves across her forehead and her eyes did not meet his.

"I said, 'How's Miss Jessica?' " an edge of sudden sharpness came to his voice. He knew the symptoms. She had heard his question perfectly, but after the immemorial manner of her kind she had to mull it over before bringing out a suitably noncommittal reply.

"She's tol'able, Ah reckon, suh."

"What d'ye mean? She isn't ill, is she?"

"Naw, suh. Ain't nothin' happen to her, exzacly—" Her eyes sought the square of the window, seemed to search among the glowing embers on the hearth, finally came back to his, but showed hardly any expression.

"See here, Mammy," a sudden feeling of apprehension made his voice tremble, "you know Miss Jessica and I are to be married—"

"Yas, suh. Ah knows hit."

"Very well, then. If anything's gone wrong for her I have a right to know it. I must know if I'm to help her."

"She don' need no he'pin, Marse Howard."

"Well, then, what is it?" Exasperation made his words brittle.

"Well, suh, Marse Howard—" she was plainly embarrassed and just as plainly eager to avoid hurting him—"hit's dis yere way. Yuh know de Yankees come an' tuck de big house fo' dey haidquarters—"

"Took Laurelwood? No! When?"

"Erbout six months ergo, suh. Dey's still yere—"

"Good Lord!" He started up from the table, oversetting his chair. "Poor Jessie—if they've harmed her—"

"Dey ain't done *her* no hurt, suh. But—"

"Yes? But—" He could have shaken her in his impatience.

"Well, suh, Marse Howard, hit 'pears ter me lak she's bin mighty civil ter dem Yankee ossifers—"

"Good heavens, Mammy Ciss, how you scared me!" He set his chair upright and collapsed into it weakly. "Of course, she's civil to them. Miss Jessica is a lady and whatever they may tell you otherwise, there are Yankee gentlemen. You know I lived among 'em while I went to Harvard College."

"Yassuh?" She seemed unconvinced.

"Of course. But this is serious, this business of Laurelwood's being used for their headquarters. If they catch me they'll put me in prison, and—"

"Dey ain't gwine ter ketch yuh, honey chile. Yuh jes' res' easy. Mammy Ciss'll see yuh gits erway."

"But Miss Jessica—I've come all the way from Petersburg to see her—"

"Dat'll be a'right, too, sugar. Ah'll run up to de big house an' tell her yuh's come home. She'll come a-runnin' when she hears dat. Den when yuh's through yo' co'tin' yuh kin steal erway—"

"You think of everything, don't you?" he laughed. "But it's too early in the mornin' to wake her. Let her sleep a while, and" —he stifled a prodigious yawn—"let me get some sleep, too. I haven't had a peaceful nap in almost a week."

HE HAD been more exhausted than he realized, for when he woke with a start and glanced toward the window he saw the air was stained a lilac purple and the sky was a deep turquoise with a vein of tender amethyst run through it. Outside he heard the rhythmic rub of knuckles on a washboard, the splashing of soap suds and Mammy Ciss as she sang at her work:

Ah's gwine ter glory, gwine ter glory,
Ah's gwine ter glory,
Yas, mah Lawd!

"Mammy Ciss?"

"Yassuh, Marse Howard, honey?"

"What're you doin'?"

"Washin' out yo' clo'se, sugar. Ah 'clare ter glory, dey wuz filthy as er polecat!"

"Bring my uniform at once, please."

"Cain't, honey-lamb. Hit's in de tub dis minit, an' presen'ly Ah aims ter gib hit er good goin'-ober wif de sad-iron. Ah's mended hit an' fixed hit, but *phew!* hit cer-'ainly wuz dirty. 'Pears ter me hit wuz so stiff hit would 'a' held yuh up if you'd fell down!"

Consternation seized him. "D'ye mean you've got all my clothes in the tub?"

"Nawsuh, Marse Howard, honey. Yo' shirt an' underclo'se is on de line now dryin', an' I snuck up to de big house an' got yuh er fresh change o' raiment. Marse Willie won't be needin' 'em no mo' since dey kilt him daid at Cedar Crick. Yuh jes' lay quiet er spell. Ah'll bring a tubful o' hot water fo' yuh presen'ly, an' yuh can wash yo'sef all nice an 'pritty fo' Miss Jessica when she comes ober from de big house."

"She's comin' here?"

"Yahhuh, soon's de sun hides her face. She cain't go gallivantin' off ter see yuh right under dem Yankee gen'lemen's noses in broad daylight."

It was pleasant to lie there between the coarse, clean sheets and watch the night come gently down as if a curtain of soft lavender were drawn across the sky, and in a little while a star or two peeked out from the dim vault of the heavens, and behind the purple-shadowed hills the moon rose, laying silver plating over everything.

Mammy Ciss lugged in a washtub with two pails of steaming water, with a plate of soft soap and a dishrag gourd for wash-cloth.

"Now yuh jes' make yo'sef all sweet an' clean," she admonished, "an' bime-by Miss Jessica'll be yere."

Half an hour later, rested, bathed and dressed in a fresh suit of homespun, he lounged outside the cabin door while Mammy busied herself with the intricate process of frying chicken in the spider. Instinctively he cast a planter's weatherwise eye at the sky. The rain had softened the ground well, and there would be a spell of fair, warm days if he were any judge. Ideal for getting in the seed. If only they could find the labor and stave Grant off until the crops were gathered they might retreat to the mountains and carry on guerrilla warfare till—

"Howard!" The hail came in the well-remembered, loved voice, and with a patter of small feet on the flagstones she came running to him through the scented darkness. Both her hands were lifted to him, and both of his reached out to hers.

"Oh, Jess, my dear—my dear!" he almost sobbed as his arms closed about her and he held her to him a long, trembling moment. He had borne the memory of her in his heart three years, half the time not realizing she was there, as much a part of him as the blood coursing in his veins, but even the precious memory had not done justice to this graceful, fragile woman with hair the color of ripe corn and eyes as blue as July skies.

She leant against him for a moment with her face upturned and eyes closed, and a sudden chill, like that which comes into the air when wind-blown clouds obscure the sun, seemed spreading over his heart, for though she made no move to free herself her lips were passive under his, and he might almost as well have held a lovely, lifeless statue in his arms.

HE PUT her from him gently, holding her by both shoulders and looking at her with hurt, puzzled eyes. "Jess, dear, what is it? You seem so strange, so cold. Don't you—" He could not complete the question, but continued gazing at her as a starving man might gaze at food. For the first time he noticed that the long dark cape above her white gown was blue lined with light yellow—a Yankee cavalry officer's cloak.

Once more her hands sought his, and when she looked at him it seemed that all feeling had gone from her eyes. "You mustn't stay here, Howard," she whispered.

"Of course not, dear. Mammy Ciss has told me how they've quartered troops on you. If I were caught it would mean one less officer for Marse Robert, and he's needin' every able-bodied man. We're not through yet, Jess darling. The crops will be in presently, and if we can hold out till winter—"

"No, Howard; no!" There was a dead finality in her tone. "It's no use; none whatever. Remember what you said the night you went away—that Lincoln had two men for every one of ours? That isn't half, or a third of it. He has three, five, a dozen soldiers to our one, and fresh recruits are coming in each day. The Southern cause is doomed, Howard, and when we've lost the war we'll be a crushed and ruined people. Even if they let us keep our land it will be worthless without slave labor; there'll be no wealth, no happiness, no gracious living anywhere but in the North, and"—her voice faltered, stopped altogether. then went on tonelessly as that of an old woman—"and I am going there to live, Howard."

"But, Jess dear, this is our home, our country. Our fathers held it under Royal grant, defended it from red-skinned men of the woods, then from red-coated men of the King. Its very clay is stained with our best blood. We're part and parcel of this land, dearest. We can't leave it to founder, as they say the rats desert the sinking ship—"

"I didn't say that we were going, Howard. I said I am. There is a Yan—a Union officer, a Captain Amesbury—"

"Oha?" The exclamation came grittily from his throat.

"I know what you'd say, Howard, but it isn't so. He is a gentleman, as finely bred as you or I. His family helped to found Connecticut; they have amorial bearings old and honorable as ours—"

"Do you love him, Jessica?"

She ignored the question, hurried her defense. "They're wealthy, too. They've had everything that money buys for generations, and all that's come to them has had a chance to grow. They're rich and cultured—and secure."

"Do you love him, Jessica?" His low voice was insistent as accusing conscience.

"Oh, what *difference* does it make? I have my life to live, my future to consider. I've not been used to poverty. I couldn't scrimp and sew and bake and scrub like white trash. Won't you *try to* understand?"

"I think that I can understand without half trying," he answered levelly, but in his heart there was a dreadful, soundless cry, "Dear God, to think that I have worshipped such a poor thing all these years of bloody war!"

Her lips moved soundlessly, groping desperately for words. "You hate me, don't you, Howard?"

"Hate you? No. One can't hate what he's loved so long, so dearly—" His voice did not quite break, but it came out of his throat without any tone.

"Oh, please, *please* try not to be so bitter! Some day, perhaps, you'll understand, and—*Oh!*" The exclamation was half sob of dismay, half involuntary cry of terror, and she turned from him with a swirl of drapery, running up the path that led to the big house.

She vanished in the shrouding shrubbery, running soundlessly as a pursued cat, and involuntarily he followed. "Jessica!" he had to make one last effort, have one final word. "Jessica—"

"Who goes there? Halt, or I'll fire!" Moonlight glinting on a carbine barrel and the buttons of a cavalryman's blouse. Heart-sickening realization came to Howard as he raised his hands. She must have seen the soldier coming as she looked across his shoulder, seen and run away without warning him.

THE Yankee colonel cleared his throat. He was a chunky, short man with iron-gray hair, thick-fingered, heavy-shouldered, a little puffy at the waist, a little tired-looking about the eyes, with a square-cut, stolid face that seemed woven, vaguely unhuman, yet instinct with power and ruthlessness. "Captain Derricote, the court finds you guilty of the specification of being out of uniform and in our lines. Therefore, under the articles of war and rules of military law, you are adjudged a spy. Have you anything to say why sentence should not be passed on you?"

"Speak up, man, this is your last chance. It's suicide to keep silent!" his counsel urged in a fierce whisper, but Howard looked at him with a bleak smile and stared back levelly at the colonel.

"Nothing, sir."

"Then it is the sentence of this court-martial that at sunrise tomorrow, April 7, 1865, you be shot to death by musketry, and may God have mercy on your soul."

That had been at ten o'clock last night, and even though he had no watch he had been able to keep track of time by changes of the guard. The sentry standing before the springhouse where they had confined him had been changed three times, that would mean six hours gone; he had at most two more before they— He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. Why didn't they get it over?

His world had gone to pieces under him, despair engulfed him like a choking, strangling cloud of poison vapor. Anticipating his defense they had put Jessica upon the witness stand, and, "Miss Skipwell, do you recognize the prisoner?" asked the judge advocate.

Her face had the smooth, even tone of ivory in the glow of the astral lamps as she looked at him with eyes that were the eyes of a stranger. "I never saw him before."

When his counsel would have cross-examined he forbade it. What was the use? If she could swear his life away so heartlessly, what was the use? Misery of flesh and spirit flooded through him, and the eyes he turned on her were terrible in their fixed stare, but she would not meet his gaze.

Old Mammy Ciss had told a true, straightforward story, but when her testimony was completed the judge advocate advanced on her, Howard's wallet in his hand. "This was found in your house. Do you recognize it?"

"'Course, Ah does. Hit's Marse Howard's pocketbook."

He opened the wallet, counted out a dozen fifty-dollar bills of the Confederacy. "I invite the court's attention to this currency," he laid the bills on the table, spreading them out fanwise. "The witness could not be expected to know that it is worthless; it must have seemed a fortune to her, and I submit that for a much less sum she could have been induced to swear to anything."

"The court takes notice of the currency and of the circumstances in which it was found," the colonel ruled.

Between the prejudice of the court-martial and Jessica's perjury his defense had been crushed to dust.

A KEY grated in the lock, and "May I come in?" the pleasant, cultured voice of his counsel asked.

"Of course," Howard rose from the cot on which he had not slept and took the Yankee's proffered hand. "But please don't ask me to make a plea for clemency—"

"To old Dutcher? No fear! Persephone would have a better chance of wheedling Pluto into giving her a latchkey. I've brought you some segars and whiskey to help pass the time. We haven't a chaplain on the post, but"—his face flushed with embarrassment as he tugged at the pocket of his military frock coat—"I've brought along a Prayer Book. Thought you might like to read it while you're waiting—"

"Thanks." Howard took the proffered gifts and laid them on the table. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Captain." By the irony of fate they had assigned him this young man for counsel, Captain Prescott Amesbury, the man Jessica was to marry, and despite everything he had liked him instantly. Fair and tall, lean, long-jawed, he was; true Norman-English ancestry was marked in his features, his gray eyes had a look of frank candor and his cheeks the high color of one bred in a land of cold mists and snows. The unaffected gentility of his voice and manner proclaimed him as much a product of the best the North could offer as Howard was of Southern aristocracy. In happier circumstances these men could have been firm friends.

His voice was casual and friendly, not demanding an answer, merely inviting one. "You were born near here, Captain?"

"Not far away?"

"Know the country round about quite intimately?"

"Fairly."

"It's odd you didn't know the Skipwell family. I should have thought that neighbors would have been friends."

Howard shook his head. "You heard the testimony, Captain. The court-martial believed it; you might as well."

The other gave a relieved sigh. "Thanks, Captain. The young lady of the house, Miss Skipwell, might be gravely embarrassed if the old colored woman's testimony were accepted. I don't think Colonel Dutcher would hesitate a moment to have her shot merely because she happens to be a woman."

"If you don't mind, Captain"—how Howard kept his voice steady he had no

idea, but somehow he contrived it—"I'd like to be alone until—"

"Of course," the other rose, held out his hand. "I'm sorry, Captain Derricote, genuinely sorry. Our country will have need of men like you when the war's over. It's a pity, a great pity, but—*c'est la guerre,* as the French say."

HOWARD picked the Prayer Book up and thumbed through it. *". . . for I have eaten ashes as it were bread and mingled my drink with weeping. . . ."* Amen to that. Bread turned to ashes, everything that he had loved and trusted proven false, his country on the verge of defeat, the woman he had worshipped a traitress and jill-flirt ready to deny her country and contract a loveless marriage that her way of life might be continued, ready to deny she'd ever known him lest she be involved. . . .

Once more the key grated in the lock and the door swung open to reveal a young man in the uniform of a lieutenant of cavalry. He was little more than a boy and his cheeks were almost gray in the light of the lantern held by the sentry. For a moment he stood irresolute, then brought his hand up to the brim of his slouch hat. "Are you ready, Captain Derricote?" he asked, and it seemed to Howard that his lips fumbled for the words.

"Quite ready, Lieutenant," Howard laid the Prayer Book down. Somehow, he felt a boundless pity for this youngster. For him it would be over in a little while, the other had to live with it as long as he breathed.

The sky was still dark, but the beginning light gave promise of an immaculate dawn as they marched toward the stone fence bordering the barnyard.

Two squads of cavalrymen were drawn up facing each other, leaving a narrow lane between. At the far end of this aisle there showed an ominous square of blank stone wall, and as Howard and his escort marched between the double ranks an order came sharply: "Present arms!" and the troopers' carbines snapped to salute.

"No blindfold, if you please, Lieutenant," Howard asked. "I've looked into gun muzzles too often to be frightened of 'em—"

"Just as you please, Captain," the young man agreed. His teeth were almost chattering and he could hardly control his voice. "Excuse me, this is necessary." From his pocket he drew out a square of paper about the size of a playing card and fastened it with a pin to Howard's coat over the left breast.

Howard leaned against the stone wall and closed his eyes more in weariness than to shut out the sight of the eight men standing at attention ten paces away. Two years—even two days—ago he would have rebelled. Now nothing seemed to matter. Defeat was bad enough, but Jessica—his jaw hardened and his muscles tightened. Might she know the misery that was his, might she see her world—the world for which she'd betrayed love and loyalty—break in pieces as his had—

The volley struck him with the impact of a knotted fist. The bullets didn't hurt. They knocked the wind out of him, made him feel dizzy—numb.

He trembled for a moment like a man beset with chill, leaned slightly forward, then sank slowly as the stiffening went from his knees. He fell face-forward on the ground and lay there quivering, not with pain, but in the final reflex of the body as the soul takes its departure. The young lieutenant who commanded the firing squad ran forward, cocked revolver in hand. He checked his step before the pool of blood that widened on the ground, pressing his lips together and averting his eyes. The prisoner was still breathing and his body twitched spasmodically. The youngster pressed the muzzle of his Colt against the prone man's temple, pulled the trigger. The head lifted to the shock of the bullet, then fell back. The body contracted with a final shudder and lay still.

JESSICA knelt by her window watching the light pale in the east. She had not slept. All night she'd paced her bedroom floor, knelt by the window when tired muscles screamed for rest, then risen to resume her pacing. In her nightrobe of sheer linen she was like a sheeted specter, for her face was almost pale as the white garment and the blood seemed to have retreated from her lips, leaving them without a trace of color. Flesh and spirit, faith and unfaith, wrestled in her, and the flesh and unfaith won. A

dozen times she went as far as the door, intent on going to the colonel and telling him the truth. Each time she paused with her hand on the knob. Suppose the colonel refused to believe her? Suppose he should decide that she too was a spy? They'd put her in prison—maybe shoot her as they were going to shoot Howard— She shrank from the thought as from a hot iron thrust at her face. She could not—dared not—take the risk. Howard was a soldier. Soldiers ran the risk of death as part of their duty, but she . . .

A dawn breeze came across the fields like a spirit walking, and in the east the first rays of the sun came over the hills like a battalion of slim gilded lances. From the barnyard she heard a voice, brittle as an icicle: "Squad forward—front rank kneel—ready—aim—fire!"

The silence was split by a shot, then like the crackling of a clap of summer thunder came a ragged volley that ripped the air as if it had been dry paper, and a moment later the dull report of a pistol like the popping of a champagne cork.

Her hands clutched at the sill, but there was no strength in her fingers and she slipped down to the floor and lay there quietly as that which had been Howard Dericote lay in the barnyard. A blue jay, startled by the shooting, gave a raucous caw: *ka-a-a-a-t! ka-a-a-a-a-t!* and in the pine copse beyond the meadow a mocking bird mimicked the cry, then burst into a flood of song.

NO ONE paid attention to the aged Negress hobbling round the place of execution later in the morning—no one but Jack-Ambrose, butler and factotum of the big house, who had chosen to remain and wait upon the Yankee officers. As he saw Mammy Ciss delve in the soft mortar of the barn wall and extract a flattened carbine bullet, then scrape a little blood-stained earth from the barnyard, Jack-Ambrose thrust his knuckles hard against his mouth, and his *café noir* complexion paled to a *café au lait*. "Lawdy-Gawdy!" he murmured. "Ol' Mammy Ciss sure fixin' to wuck hoodoo on sumbuddy! Pow'ful strong hoodoo; too; bullet dat done kilt er man an' dirt all wet wif daid man's blood. Oh, Lawd, Ah hopes t'ain't me she's fixin' ter hoodoo!"

Jack-Ambrose might have spared himself incipient nervous prostration, for Mammy Ciss had no thought of him. All afternoon she pottered round her herb garden, toward evening she made a trip to the woods. That night, although the April air was balmy, a great fire blazed on her "herth" and candlelight came from her windows till the stars paled with the coming of the new day.

She had killed a "toad-frawg," smeared its little corpse with syrup and laid it on an ant hill. When the little skeleton, looking gruesomely human, had been quite denuded of its flesh she dried it on the hearth until it was as brittle as a bit of chalk, then pounded it to powder in a mortar, mixing ashes of henbane, the scorched leaves of pipsissewa and dried root of the dragon's-blood plant with the bones. When all had been reduced to a fine powder she took the cover from a Dutch oven in which the body of a water moccasin had been baking to a state of brittleness and added the snake ashes to the mixture. Last of all she dropped in dried sweet lavender, desiccated rose petals and the leaves of clove-pinks and added oil of lemon grass and powdered orris root. When scrapings from the bullet she had salvaged from the barn wall and a pinch of blood-soaked earth from the barnyard had been added the compound was complete.

It had a pleasant, rather spicy odor and looked a bit like white corn meal as she measured it into four little pyramids and wrapped each small cone in a heart-shaped bag of clean white cotton.

"One," she pronounced as she touched the first sack, "is fo' rememberin', an' two's fo' wishin' yuh could change hit; three's fo' knowin' dat yuh cain't, and' fo's fo' knowin' dat hit t'ain't no use." She tucked the little bags into the pocket of her apron and set out for the big house.

Jessica lay in the big tester bed, her head pillowed on one arm. About her face her bronze hair, loosened, lay in a warm, sensuous cloud, her lips were lightly parted and on the crescents of dark lashes that curved against her cheeks there glistened little jewel-like drops of tears. She stirred a little, whimpering like a child who suffers a bad dream, as Mammy Ciss crept into the bedroom, but in a moment she lay quiet and the old woman moved forward from the door.

A draft of air would have made more noise on the polished floor than she as she crossed to the linen press and drew its drawers open. One by one she laid the little bags of hoodoo powder on the dainty, fragile lingerie that had been made in French convents in days before the war, drawing folds of linen and soft cotton over them.

There was no telltale click as she let herself from the chamber, no board creaked under her as she crept down the stairs; no one saw her as she crossed the fields to her cabin. No one but Jack-Ambrose, who, rising early from dream-troubled sleep, looked from the dormer window of his attic room. "Oh, Lawdy," he whispered fearfully, "Ol' Mammy Ciss done bin in de big house. Ah sho'-nuff hopes she ain't bin fixin' ter put no hoodoo on me!"

FOR almost an hour carriages had been coming to St. John's-in-the-Fields. Varick Place was lined with elegant equipages from fashionable Second Avenue, Bleecher Street and Lafayette Place, the lovely little church that faced on St. John's Park was full almost to overflowing, and still the guests kept coming.

"Who is the bride? Do you know her?" asked Mrs. Schuyler Van Riper behind a discreetly raised fan. "I've heard she was a school ma'am—"

"She taught French in Miss Holdrup's Academy in East Broadway," corrected Mrs. Tandy Nostrand. "I've met her. She's quite charming. Member of an old Virginia family that lost everything in the war, you know. Of course, she isn't wealthy, but she has blood and breeding, and goodness knows Pres Amesbury has plenty for them both with his fine law practice and his father's money—"

"S-s-sh!" interrupted Mrs. Van Riper, for the organ had begun to play and the choir was singing.

> The voice that breathed o'er Eden
> That earliest wedding day,
> The primal marriage blessing,
> It hath not passed away. . . .

Jessica came up the aisle slowly, her eyes demurely downcast underneath her veil, a little smile upon her lips, a light flush on her cheeks as she heard whispered comments of the women in the pews: "What a lovely gown! . . . Such exquisite taste!" and the frankly spoken verdict of a major of artillery who viewed her through his eyeglass as if she were a filly on display at the Horse Show. "By George, she's captivatin'!"

Prescott met her at the chancel steps, and with her white-gloved fingers resting lightly in the crook of his left elbow they went up into the choir where the rector waited for them. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God and in the face of this company. . . ." In a few minutes she would be Mrs. Prescott Amesbury, all her poverty and insecurity behind her, safe, sure of the future. . . .

Prescott had made his vows, now the rector prompted her: "I, Jessica, take thee, Prescott . . . from this day forward. . . . ." Something seemed the matter with her throat, she couldn't make the words come out.

"From this day forward," repeated the rector, a tolerant little smile on his smooth face. He had seen more than one bride become dumb at the crucial moment. "From this day forward. . . ."

The words seemed echoing and reverberating, like a shout in a tunnel. "Forward—forward—*forward. . . .*"

The candles on the altar swayed and reeled. There were eight of them, three each side of the cross, one at each end of the table. Now they seemed to lean to the right, slanting precisely, like muskets on the shoulders of a squad of marching men. Dimly, confusedly, she heard the clergyman: "From this day forward. . . ."

But the phrase did not ring true. What had he said? Not "From this day forward," but, "Squad forward!"

The candles seemed to wheel and swing in line, to incline till they pointed straight at her.

Candles? Dear God, no! She faced a double row of leveled carbines, and their muzzles converged on her heart.

"No—*no!*" she screamed and tried to hide behind the startled man who stood at her side. "Oh, *no!*"

Implacably the order came, "Aim—*fire!*"

A dreadful pain ripped through her

bosom, and she felt herself go stiff in a swift spasm, then suddenly an awful weakness flooded through her. Her bouquet of white roses and lilies-of-the-valley fell with a little thud to the red carpet of the chancel. She was still on her feet, but she had no idea how she kept on them. The floor seemed very far away, as if she looked at it from the top of a tall tower, and she knew that in a moment she would crash down to it, falling, falling from a dizzy height. But she would not feel it when she struck. She would never feel anything again. . . ."

DR. THIEBAULT downed his mug of porter and stared combatively at Drs. Swan and Essary. "I know it's utterly impossible," he agreed, "but just the same, it's so. I saw it myself, and all my class will back me up. I tell you—"

"What's the argument?" demanded Dr. Matsell as he came through the swinging doors, dropped into the vacant seat beside Essary and pounded on the marble table-top with a quarter to attract the watier's attention. "Old Thiebault tellin' one of his fairy tales?"

"It's so!" Thiebault shot back hotly. "Damndest thing I ever saw—"

"What was it?" Matsell blew the foam from his schooner and took a Brobdingnagian draught of porter. "Don't keep me waitin', man! the suspense is killin' me."

Thiebault leant forward, tapping him upon the arm for emphasis. "I had to dissect the heart for my boys at the college today. The stiff was a lovely one, not a blemish on it. Young female, 'bout twenty-two or -three, I'd judge, and fresh as a daisy. They must have stolen her from the graveyard the night after her burial. Isaacson had opened up the thorax for his class, so all I had to do was lift the heart out.

"It seemed to me it weighed more than it should, for there was no sign of enlargement, but when I'd laid the pericardium aside and made a section of the organ I saw the reason. There were four bullets in it, one in each ventricle and auricle."

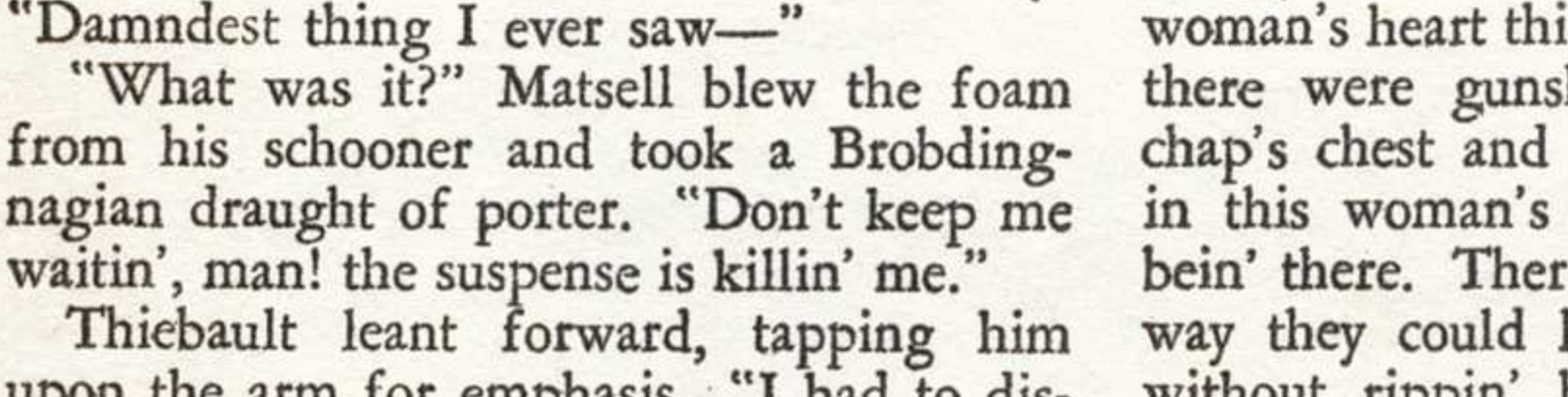
"And no wound in the pericardium?"

"Not so much as a scratch. That's the uncanny part of it. Last year when I was servin' as surgeon of the 18th, they shot a feller for a spy down in Virginia. Only execution I ever witnessed. It took place on a plantation known as Laurelwood, just two days before Lee's surrender. Poor feller, if they'd caught him forty-eight hours later he'd 'a' gone Scot-free. Pres Amesbury acted as his counsel, and did all he could to get him off, but—"

"Never mind the history," Dr. Matsell interrupted. "You were tellin' us about this cadaver you worked on today—"

"Precisely. They let me make an autopsy of the executed spy that day. The position of the bullets I found in him was almost exactly like that of those I found in that woman's heart this morning. But, of course, there were gunshot wounds in the poor chap's chest and pericardium. The bullets in this woman's heart had no excuse for bein' there. There was no possible physical way they could have lodged in her heart without rippin' her chest to ribbons and puncturin' the heart-sac, but—make anything you want to of it!—there they were. I haven't any more idea than you how they got there, but one thing I'm sure of. Death must have been instantaneous.

BOYS! GIRLS! MEN!



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Venturer of the Martian Mimics

I

THE only certain feature was that the vessel in which he came resembled a huge opalescent egg. Even the egg was of indeterminate hue; its surface was a weird, shifting mixture of lights and shadows, gleams and evasions and fleeting darknesses that danced and blended and swirled into oneness with the sooty clouds, the lowering sky, and the eternal void that had belched this cursed thing forth. But, in shape, it was an egg.

From this mystic ovoid crept a thing that might have been an iridescent python, if for the space of a single minute it had been content to remain an iridescent python. It was not so simple to identify. Fixation of contours or permanency of form was no characteristic of this alien newcomer which may have been made of the very stuff of thought. Its changes had the sharpness and rapidity of a purely mental process.

It spurted from the egg in a long, writhing column wrought from the flames of hell. Then it looped upon itself with the disgusting sinuosity of a mutilated worm, turned from a fiery red to a deep, morbid blue, became a relatively tranquil but still ominous ring of azure. Came a moment of quiescence during which strange, extramundane senses probed the surroundings with what might have been surprise, interest, or cold speculation.

Is there life on Mars and if so what outre form—or forms—might it take?

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

That condition lasted exactly twenty seconds and not one instant more. The ghastly, glowing ring shrank in its horizontal plane, swelled in the vertical, bloomed to a ball of pale yellow moonshine practically invisible in the strong light of day. Then, with shocking vim, it popped into nothingness, leaving a blasphemous vacancy in the maw of the cosmos. But below its former place stood a small flowering shrub—a shrub that had not been there before.

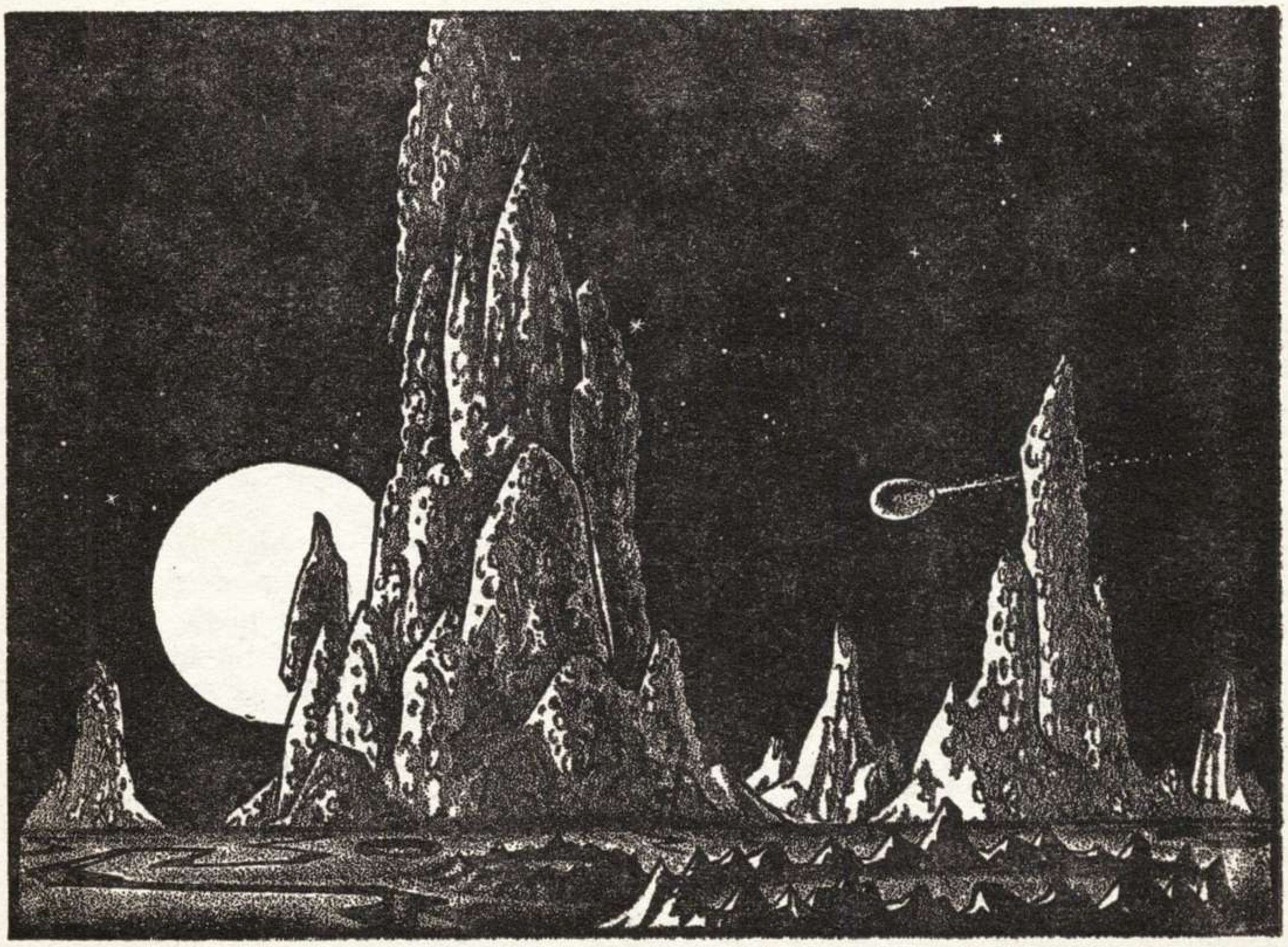
To one side a fascinated rabbit, sole witness of the whole amazing performance, crouched stiff and still in thrall of intense fear. As if deliberately to boost its terror to the very verge of death, the shrub squirmed grotesquely, sucked its leaves and branches into itself, reduced and lumped itself until it had assumed the shape, form and all the fine details of another rabbit. It bounced across to the terrified watcher, nosed its paralyzed body contemptuously, then shot into the shadow of the egg.

Like the instrument of some unearthly super-magician, the imitation rabbit changed again. First it was there, sitting upright, front paws dangling, long ears erect. Next it had flashed back to the shape of the fiery invader which originally had dominated the scene.

Disregarding the world around him, Spiro the Spy, chosen venturer of the Martian Mimics, made a sinuous motion, thrust a fine, scintillating fiber into the egg, felt delicately around, then withdrew. He waited a moment. The egg trembled. Weird shadows on its surface rioted fantastically. Then the alien vessel boosted itself skyward at tremendous speed and in complete silence. A tall, gyrating pillar of leaves and dust climbed in its wake, was easily out-distanced, collapsed back to earth as the egg smacked a hole through the clouds.

The hellish passenger it had borne twisted upon himself a couple of times, glowed and sparkled with feral luster, then writhed away. Twenty minutes after he had

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL



gone, the fascinated rabbit shuddered from nose to tail, patted the ground with a weak, still-numb paw. A little later it managed a clumsy hop.

OLD JOSH HAWKINS rumbled, "Hey! C'm here, Soldier!" Soldier promptly abandoned his quest for beautiful smells, trotted the correct one yard behind Old Josh's worn and dirty pants. The pair went through the gate and into the field.

Wrinkling his aged, watery eyes, Old Josh looked at the sheep. He fumbled in a pocket, drew out a large, crimson handkerchief ornamented with white polka dots, wiped his eyes, blew his nose loudly. Soldier sat down, lolled his tongue, stared upward with questioning gaze. Old Josh had another and clearer look at the sheep.

"Something wrong with them woollies," he asserted.

"Yuff!" commented Soldier, moderating his voice in manner becoming to his station.

To the eye of anyone who wouldn't know a tup lamb from any other kind of lamb, there was nothing the matter with the sheep. It was merely that the flock had clustered tightly and fearfully into the farther angle of the field, the biggest and strongest animals on the outside, the lambs and bearing ewes penned between them and the two lines of fence forming the corner. It was an old technique developed when flocks were circled in the night by things that slavered.

One sheep, either abnormally stupid or unusually individualistic, stood apart from the flock. It was halfway up the field, watching the arrivals. Down in that distant corner the huddled mass also watched with idiotic but anxious eyes. There came to the ears of Old Josh a chorus of appealing bleats ranging from adult basses to the weak, faltering mewings of the lambs. He knew sheep with the thoroughness of one who has stank of them these sixty years come Thanksgiving—but he didn't know that these bleaters, in their sheeplike way, were praying.

All the same, that one, lone animal irritated him. Its very aloofness plucked at his sheep-sensitive nerves. Perhaps deep within his wool-coated mind stirred the ancient quake of his animal-mastering ancestors: the fear that some day their mastery might prove incomplete, might be challenged. Or maybe he sensed in that solitary animal's independent stance a sudden defiance of the age-old herd instinct, of human overlordship, of Soldier, and of himself. So he pointed a knotty but still adept finger at the sheep that chose to stand alone. He chirruped between his teeth.

Soldier responded with the swiftness of a perfectly controlled automaton. Muzzle forward, ears back, eyes fixed on the object of his attention with almost hypnotic intensity, he slid forward belly-low in the grass. The dog was far too old a hand to rush forward barking. The proper way is to slide wolfishly around and intimidate. Soldier proceeded to hand out some suitable intimidation.

The sheep said, "Bah!"

Soldier stopped his forward snaking. His ruff stood up as a furry collar. He stared straight into eyes that were not like the inane eyes of the flock and saw therein a certain something that had been seen by nothing on Earth excepting one helpless rabbit. He commenced to back away, his beseeching whine reaching Old Josh in canine protest.

"Dang it!" swore Old Josh. "Everything's just plain cussed this day! Thrusting two fingers into his mouth, he tried to drive the dog into action by sheer power of his commanding whistle.

The shrill, authoritative sound screamed across the hill and wailed away down the valley. Soldier half yelped, half whined. His body hunched curiously as his rear portion obediently tried to slink forward while his front insisted on going back. The distant flock bawled and mewed and shuffled agitatedly. The single sheep stood its ground and glared.

Old Josh took one impatient step forward. The lone sheep took three. Then Old Josh decided he really did need those glasses he'd been thinking of getting for the last ten years. The danged animal wasn't a sheep at all. It was a dog, a strange dog, and the very twin of Soldier. No wonder the latter had behaved so queerly.

But Soldier's sharp mind worked differently. He'd been about to discipline something posing as a sheep when the thing had

changed into the likeness of another dog—and both had eyes of fire drawn from a source unthinkable. Soldier waited not upon the order of his going. He departed with extreme alacrity, his frantic feet touching the ground at three-yard intervals. A hole in the fence marked his exit.

Old Josh gaped at the hole. The hole gaped back at Old Josh. Then he did something he'd never done these sixty years, whether Thanksgiving were coming or not—he deserted his jittery sheep. Taking one horrified look at the dreadful eyes, he turned and ran.

The thing followed him. He looked back, saw it loping out through the gate and along the road. Cold perspiration ran down his spine as he pelted along at the best pace his old legs could make. His breath came in wheezy gasps while in his mind still stood those vampire eyes which seemed to thirst for the substance of his very soul. He took another wild glance over his shoulder, saw his tracker maintaining its distance. Dog-like, the thing lolled its tongue, but the crimson organ licked out with the length and brilliance of a devouring flame.

Squirming and yelping in his frantic eagerness to get inside, Soldier was waiting at the cottage door. When Old Josh reached and opened it, Soldier dived through the gap, sought the farthest and darkest corner of the room, tried to embed himself in the wall. From somewhere out back, Tinker and Tailor moaned in horrid chorus.

The dog that wasn't a dog now stood in the gateway staring toward the open door. Old Josh decided there was no time to get around the back and unleash Tinker and Tailor. With his rheumy eyes intent upon the thing in the path, Old Josh cautiously felt behind the door, got his shaking hand on cold metal.

In one swift movement, he stuck his shotgun through the gap of the doorway and let go with both barrels. The heavy charges of buckshot went down the path on a wave of thunder that drowned the slam of the door and the noise of hurriedly thrust bolts. He hadn't done himself any good: in that brief instant after he'd fired he'd seen that the path and the gateway were empty and that there wasn't anything at all where there ought to have been the body of a dead dog.

With the reloaded gun in his hand, he went around and made sure that all the windows were fastened securely on the inside. Then he poked up the fire, treated himself to a stiff shot of corn, sat down to think things over. He'd been thinking them over for half an hour when, out back, Tinker and Tailor screamed together. He'd never heard a dog scream before. It was a godawful sound. He had to take Soldier in his lap and nurse him back to sanity.

Tinker and Tailor were quiet after that. Old Josh wondered why they were so silent. He sniffed, fancied he could smell scorched hair. Something padded softly past the nearest window, below the level of the sill, where he couldn't see it. Soldier went nuts again.

THE fire was still blazing, and the corn half consumed, when daylight faded. Old Josh picked up the gun, went to a window, gazed into gathering twilight. He was slightly drunk, and mumbled steadily to himself in a dull monotone. He saw nothing weaving in the evening mists outside; no shape of menace, no formless fantasm lusting to add his divine spark to its own diabolical fire. He pulled the shades, lit the oil-lamp, had a good drag at the corn jug.

Three hours of silence and much potent alcohol had eased his fears to some extent. He was, he solemnly reflected, getting old. He'd lived by himself too long and had become queer. Maybe if he'd married the Widow Jenson he'd not have been chased around by figments of his own imagination. He dozed before the bright, warm fire. At one moment, Soldier groaned and Old Josh automatically snatched at his gun. But he was only half awake, and his hand soon relaxed its hold. Outside, a ghastly moon climbed into the ragged sky.

He was sound asleep when a thin line of peculiar, flickering light seeped through the narrow gap between the bottom of the door and the stone step. The light waxed stronger, glowing and fattening as if it were creeping in with the silent, secretive flow of some phosphorescent liquid.

The invading luminescence had become

a purple puddle, humping itself toward globulousness, when Soldier opened an eye and saw it. He moaned softly, tried to move, failed. The fearsome globule flicked out an immaterial tentacle and silenced him forever. The dog rolled onto its side, all four legs twitching spasmodically, a thin whiff of burned hair rising from its carcase.

Old Josh knew nothing of this. He had always been a noisy sleeper and now was excelling himself. With eyes closed and mouth open, he gasped, swallowed, mumbled and snorted before the fire whose crackling embers had lulled him into unconsciousness. Now and again his legs jerked, his hands gestured, as if such futile motions served to emphasize the unspoken sentiments of his dreams.

It was a bad dream he was having. And a startlingly vivid dream. A veritable nightmare that beaded his back with sweat. In the depth of his slumbers it seemed to him that something had occupied the opposite chair. He wasn't sure whether it was Soldier, a sheep, or a rabbit. Now it shone blindingly, shifted identities, and became a caricature of himself.

Whatever the thing was, it settled in the chair, laughed in a chilly, pseudo-human voice, and proceeded to cross-examine him. Old Josh strongly resented the persistent questioning, but found himself unable to do anything about it. The inexorable voice went on and on, asking the most idiotic questions about the most commonplace things, and all that Old Josh could do was answer to the best of his ability.

For what purposes were sheep used? Could many other animals be domesticated? Were any animals intelligent? Why did Old Josh wear clothes? What was the weapon with which he had blown some absurd pellets of lead down the garden path? What other kinds of weapons were in general use? Was he of average intelligence, or were there superior minds in the world? Did he know of methods of illumination better than the crude lamp he was using? Electricity . . . ah! . . . was that used for any purpose other than illumination?

Thus it went on. He struggled against it. He disliked this sardonic treatment of an education that wasn't as good as it might have been. He objected to being treated like a child's primer, to be opened and read for the sake of some kindergarten knowledge. Finally, he resented the downright foolishness of some of the questions, the answers to which everybody knew.

"Dogs dislike cats—what are cats?"

II

THE doctor looked down at the body of Old Josh Hawkins and said, "I don't care if a thousand people claim to have seen him since then. I say he died about two o'clock this morning and that his death was from natural causes." He glanced at his watch. "He's been dead about fourteen hours."

Police Officer Kelly felt far from satisfied. There was nothing surprising about the old sheepman's demise, especially when you considered his age. But there were one or two strange features about the case that needed clearing up before it could be considered neat and tidy. Kelly liked his jobs to be neat. In addition to which, he was and always had been a very suspicious man.

"But look here, Doctor Lanigan," he protested. "Jeff Anderson swears he saw Old Josh waiting for the first bus out of the village at seven-thirty this morning. Three people say they saw Old Josh getting off the bus at the depot at seven-fifty. A few more say they noticed him wandering around. They noticed him particularly, because he was acting strangely. He was looking around like a visitor who'd never seen the place before, and when a couple of them spoke to him he wouldn't answer."

"Two o'clock," declared Doctor Lanigan stubbornly.

"If he got a lift back here, or even if he walked, he must have been alive around eight to have reached home again."

"He was dead long before then," asserted the medico, flatly. "The evidence puts it beyond dispute." He closed his bag with the air of one whose position is unassailable. "And let me tell you, Kelly, corpses don't go gallivanting around and catching buses."

"Let me ride down to the village with you," requested Kelly. "There's something

fishy somewhere. I'm going to ask some questions." He heaved his heavy frame into the doctor's car, and added, "Why should Josh's three dogs have popped off with him? Did they die around two o'clock? Heck of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"You'll have to get a vet to examine them," said Lanigan. "I admit that it's very strange that the dogs should have died too. Maybe Josh went queer at the end, and finished them off himself."

"I'll get a vet all right!" growled Kelly.

THEY sped down to the village, the doctor silent and certain, the police officer surly and dissatisfied. As they were passing the tiny post office, Kelly let out a yell, waved frantically to an ambling pedestrian. Doctor Lanigan braked his car to a stop.

"Jeff," said Kelly, as the walker came up, "tell the doctor what time you last saw Old Man Hawkins."

"I told you once." Jeff Anderson's frown showed that already he was sick of the subject. "It was seven-thirty. He had a date with the first bus."

"Impossible!" Lanigan snapped.

"And for why?" demanded Anderson, his frown changing to a scowl.

"He was dead. What's more, he'd been dead several hours."

"That's what you think," said Anderson succintly. "I saw him, the whole medical profession not-with-standing!" And with that shot, he turned to go.

It was the doctor's turn to scowl. Police Officer Kelly chewed his bottom lip and looked bothered. The pair stared at each other.

"Say, Jeff, did Old Hawkins look any different from usual?"

Jeff lounged back, considered a moment, said, "Only that his face fungus was yellow."

"Yellow!" ejaculated Lanigan. "What color is it usually."

"Brown," answered Jeff Anderson. "A dirty, terbaccery brown." He swivelled on one heel, made off with an air of finality.

Again the pair in the car gaped at each other. Utter bafflement showed on both men's faces.

After a while, Kelly remarked slowly and thoughtfully, "Jeff's no speechmaker, but he's got good, sharp eyes. If he says they were yellow, then they were yellow."

"Well?"

"And the bush on Josh's dead face was stained a nice, ripe, fruity brown. You saw those whiskers yourself!"

Lanigan began to breathe words in a soft, low voice, then he said, more loudly, "Hawkins tried to clean up his beard for the first time in donkey's years. He turned it yellow. Then he came down to the village and caught a bus. After that, he returned home, carefully stained his whiskers their former color and finished up by dying several hours after he was already dead. It's pure baloney! Anderson's been drinking!"

"What, so early in the morning?" Kelly objected. "Besides, others saw Old Josh."

"Then you'd better get the opinion of another medical man," growled Lanigan. He accelerated his car with savage determination, whizzed it down the road to where Kelly's home bore the modest sign: POLICE. With a faint touch of sarcasm, he added, "Snoop around a bit and see if Old Whiskers has a twin brother who'll inherit."

Kelly winced, heaved his brawny form out of the car. Then he noticed a familiar figure waiting by the gate. It was Art Calder, booking clerk at the local depot.

"What is it, Art?"

"The boys tell me you're asking questions about Old Josh," replied Art. "So I thought I'd better come down from the depot and say my piece." He blinked nervously, licked his lips. "Josh caught the eight-fifty-five express for London. I sold him his ticket. I saw him get on the train."

Despite his middle age, Doctor Lanigan was a healthy, active man. He proved it by the way he stopped his engine and vaulted from the car in one dexterous twist. He stood chest to chest with the uneasy Art, thrust forward an aggressive face.

"You are prepared to swear that it was Hawkins and no other?"

"Of course, Doc.," Art assured. He fidgeted under his questioner's intent gaze. "I couldn't mistake that dodderer."

Lanigan turned to Kelly. "You know Hawkins far better than I do. You positively identify that body as his?"

"I do," swore Kelly, certainty in his voice, and stupefaction on his face.

"Right!" Doctor Lanigan shoved thumbs into vest pockets, lumped his jaw and peered shrewdly at his puzzled companions. "I admit my error. Kelly, I want Hawkins and the dogs brought in for post mortem examination. It's going to be thorough and complete, believe me!" He turned to Art. "And I want you to phone along the line to the terminus, trying all intervening stations, and find out whether any collector has taken that ticket you issued."

"Sure," agreed Art. "It won't take long to get that information."

"You'd better report this to county headquarters," the physician told Kelly. "Evidently this affair isn't as simple as it looks. None of us really know just what happened or how it happened." He looked from one to the other. "But to me it's mighty like murder."

"Ugh!" grunted Art Calder. He shuddered as he thought of a killer in his little office, with only the glass plate between them. He had pushed his hand through the hole in that glass. If death had clasped his hand, . . .

THE post mortem was official and, as Lanigan had promised, very, very thorough. Old Josh had been electrocuted as efficiently as any condemned gangster. So had his dogs. They'd died in the night —two dogs first, Soldier later, Old Josh last —somewhere between one-thirty and two-thirty in the dark hours before the haunted dawn. They'd died beneath a funereal sky which had released no lightning, had done no more than spread its sable pall across the scene of agony. There the quartet had gasped their last and scented the air with their final burns, man and animals alike, in an oil-illuminated cottage a full seven miles from the nearest power lines.

It was impossible. Nevertheless, it had happened.

The dumbfounded investigators had just reached the conclusion that, since all the signs were those of electrocution, there was no other possible diagnosis, idiotic as that one might seem, when news came in about the ticket. It had been handed in at Euston Station by a well-groomed, prosperous looking individual, presumably a business man.

Ten minutes after the ticket had been surrendered a questing porter found a corpse. It was reposing in one corner of an empty coach. It seemed to be asleep, and blissfully unconscious of its own complete nakedness. The porter nudged the cadaver which promptly flopped over with all the horrible abandon of empty clay. By a most remarkable coincidence, it was that of a well-groomed, well cared-for individual, presumably a business man. A twin, in fact, of the gentleman who had given up the ticket bought by the twin of Old Josh.

The twin of Old Josh was not on the train.

Chief Inspector McKechnie was thinking about this mixture of twins as he sat at his desk in Scotland Yard and stared beneath bushy eyebrows at Doctor Lanigan and Police Officer Kelly. The inspector was big and shrewd: he looked like a bull buffalo with no illusions.

"I'm glad you two came along so promptly. The evidence you've been able to give shows clearly that there is some extremely mysterious but quite definite connection between the death of Hawkins and the body found at Euston."

He paused, thought a moment, then went on, "The body on the train has been identified as that of Wilson C. Fairbrother, a broker of some prominence. He appears to have died by electrocution strange as that may seem."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lanigan.

"Something very cock-eyed links these two tragedies," McKechnie continued. He rested heavy elbows on his desk, propped his big jaw with hamlike fists. "Hawkins, by all accounts, got on that train but never got off it. Fairbrother's double got off it but we've failed to turn up any evidence that he ever got on it in the first place. So what?" They waited for him to tell them. "So the conclusion to be drawn is childishly obvious: the man who caught the train while cleverly impersonating Hawkins was one and the same individual as the man who left the train in the guise of Fairbrother."

"But—" began Lanigan.

"Where is the motive?" said McKechnie, finishing the question for him. He spread

his large, capable hands in a gesture of disgust. "There's the weak spot! Fairbrother was carrying little money, had no known enemies. And, according to you two, Hawkins was a harmless old cuss without a cent in the world. Added to which, I quite fail to see why any killer should chose to masquerade as his victims. It doesn't make sense."

"It's pointless," agreed Lanigan.

"It's nutty," Kelly rumbled.

"YOU'VE hit the nail right on the head!" Chief Inspector McKechnie wagged an emphatic finger. "It's so crazy that that in itself is a lead. Until more satisfactory data comes in I'll make a rough guess that we're bedevilled by an insane actor, an unsuccessful individual who's overdue for the nuthouse, a would-be screen star with delusions of grandeur and a persecution complex."

"Somehow," put in Lanigan, doubtfully, "I can't imagine any make-up artist as supremely good as this one would have to be. Why, he was positively identified as Old Josh by folk who've known the old geezer for years. One of them was a small-holder to whom Josh had sold a dry cow, and out in the country you don't forget the man who sells you a big mouth and no milk. That's not mere acting ability—it's genius too good to believe!"

"I can hardly believe it myself," McKechnie retorted. "In fact I'll admit I've difficulty in converting myself to my own theory. But, at present, it appears to be the only one that'll fit the known facts. I'm wide open to receive a more plausible alternative."

"There isn't one, unless . . . unless . . ." Lanigan broke off, looked confused.

"Unless what?" McKechnie prompted.

"Nothing, really. I was toying with notions of the supernormal. It's too foolish to be worthy of consideration." Lanigan pondered gloomily, then spoke up with a note of sudden defiance that surprised himself. "The more I think of the whole affair, the more I'm convinced that we're facing something never before faced in the history of crime."

"I've faced some damn funny things in my time," said McKechnie reflectively, "but all the lot of them proved astonishingly straightforward after I'd traced them to the bitter end. Three times does it—I'll concede that I've got a humdinger in my mitts directly something just as whacky links up with these two jobs."

He didn't know it, of course, but item number three was on its way to him right then. It came from Bermondsey, running along wires, through telephone exchanges, into the switchboard of Scotland Yard, thence to his desk. His phone yelled for attention.

McKechnie whisked up the phone, holding the earpiece as if it were an underweight dumb-bell. He rammed the thing against a big area of ear.

"Well? I'm busy—can't you deal with him. Oh, all right then, put him on." He sat for a moment, tapping his teeth with a silver pencil. "Yes, yes, go on, I'm listening." Then he uttered, "What!" several times, his voice rising one note higher each time. An expression of slow surprise crept into his normally phlegmatic features. Finally, he said, "I'd like you to come up right away. How soon? In about half an hour—good!"

Breathing heavily, he cradled the phone. He ignored the others, searched hurriedly through the deep litter of papers on his desk. In the end he found what he sought in the pocket of his raincoat, hanging in one corner. It was the morning paper. Spreading it over the mess on his desk, he scanned it eagerly.

"When you opined that we are facing something too tough to laugh off, you were a paragon of veracity and the holiest of prophets," he informed Lanigan. He jerked a beefy finger at the paper, then at the phone. "We got Fairbrother identified by running his picture in the morning papers. Now this chap rings up and says, 'My name's Onions, and it ain't funny!' After which he says that he recognizes the photo as that of a man who made news yesterday afternoon, a mere half-hour after that train drew in at Euston."

"Made what news?" put in Kelly, curiously.

Holding up the sheet, McKechnie pointed to a small paragraph headed: FIRE VICTIM VANISHES.

"The caller says he was one of the several witnesses. He's coming here to tell precisely what he saw." He permitted himself an unofficial grimace. "I've a lousy idea that what Mr. Onions intends to tell us will clear up this case just like stirring a mud-bottomed pond."

III

MR. ONIONS proved to be an emaciated individual with a straggling, black mustache and bat's ears. He had watery eyes that never looked with love on anything other than booze. His derby hat was decidedly cute, his attire had plenty of zoot and exuded a faint smell of horse manure. McKechnie mentally classified him as a racecourse tipster, a stable hanger-on or a bookie's tout.

"I was coming over Lambeth Bridge," reported the equine-odored Mr. Onions, "when I saw this stallion whose picture's in the papers. He was trotting toward me, making a good pace, and I wouldn't have noticed him particularly if it hadn't been for his eyes."

"What about his eyes?" encouraged McKechnie.

"So help me, they were awful!" said Mr. Onions fervently. "They made you feel as if all your insides were missing. Directly I noticed them I said to myself, 'There's a fiend straight from the guts of Hell!' "

The speaker didn't look capable of any thought so dramatically expressed, yet it was plain to see that he'd been considerably shaken. He eyed his listeners with the apprehensive air of a known liar who, for once, is voicing the gospel truth and doesn't expect to be believed.

"Directly I thought that to myself," Mr. Onions continued, "he stabbed me with a look I could *feel*. Then he bust into flames." He stopped, took a long breath, added, "Strike me dead if it ain't the truth!"

"And what then?"

"He flamed like a bale of hay. Half a dozen people came running. They were too late. There wasn't anything."

"What d'you mean, there wasn't anything?" prompted McKechnie.

"The flame just went. It puffed out. Then there was nothing. We all searched around but couldn't find even a pants button. A cop came along and took all our names. He searched around too. He found nix."

"Go on."

Onions licked his lips, began to look desperate. "Last night a kid reporter called at my house. He put all the stuff down in his book, grinning while he did it. I hope he backs all the sitters! Then he left, saying he'd interview the other witnesses. So they stuck that bit about it in the paper."

"We're very much obliged to you, Mr. Onions," said McKechnie, smoothly. He leaned back in his chair, let his speculative eye wander over the silent Lanigan and Kelly. Then he studied the ill-at-ease Onions. He continued the thoughtful and deliberate study so long that the subject began to fidget. Suddenly he said, "I've a firm idea that you've been holding something back. Don't be afraid to tell us—we won't laugh at you."

"It's crazy," protested Onions, not bothering to deny McKechnie's guess.

"My dear man, you couldn't recount anything crazier than the cases we're stuck with right now!"

SHUFFLING his feet around, Onions was half ashamed, half apologetic. He hesitated, pulled at one of his bat ears, met McKechnie's penetrating eyes, blinked his own uncertainly.

"It was only a delusion."

"Never mind—out with it."

"Well, just as this flame went out, I thought for a moment that it looked like the ghost of an old hayseed with a beard."

"Hah!" snapped McKechnie.

"But it was only my fancy, because it was a flame. Then, for a second *after* the flame went, I thought I saw a big purple cabbage with squirming things like snakes sticking out from between its leaves." With astonishing bellicosity, Mr. Onions went red in the face and shouted, "See if you can believe *that!*"

"I do," McKechnie replied evenly.

Onions was dumbfounded by this ready acceptance. He stared around with the bewildered air of one who finds such faith far more surprising than the story.

"Did the other witnesses see the same?"

"No. I asked them. They thought I was drunk. But I was sober—cold sober." Then, in added justification, "I was much nearer than them. In fact there wasn't anything nearer than me except for a fool of a dog."

"A dog?" put in Lanigan. "Did you notice it before this incident happened?"

"Can't say I did," admitted Mr. Onions. "It was messing around my feet just afterward. It popped up in the general excitement, like dogs do."

"Thanks," approved McKechnie. He was about to add something more when a knock at the door silenced him. A uniformed policeman inserted his head and spoke in tones of mock solemnity.

"Inspector, a druggist out in Balham says he's caught a werewolf. It's got his poet's bones, and he wants to know what we're going to do about it."

"Werewolf? Poet's bones?"

"Yes, sir."

McKechnie's heavy frame shuddered from head to feet. He stood up slowly, stared at the now grinning cop, the gaping Onions, the puzzled Kelly, and the apparently day-dreaming Lanigan. Then he said, "When I get out of bed I'm going to swear off late suppers." He offered Kelly a hairy forearm. "Pinch me."

Kelly pinched. McKechnie blinked and rubbed the arm. His temper finally evaporated, and he roared at the cop in the doorway.

"Tell that guy in Balham we're on our way there. Get the car out."

"Yes sir." The other's grin vanished. He gulped twice, departed dazedly.

"Werewolf!" said McKechnie insanely. "Damn!"

THE druggist was one Georges Papazoglous, a Greek. He lay prostrate in the room behind his small, unpretentious store. Perspiration beaded his plump, olive face which was being carefully fanned by a buxom wench of strong resemblance to himself. He sat up as McKechnie's elephantine tread made the floor-boards squeak. McKechnie was wearing a deep scowl that boded ill for whoever was behind this sudden flood of twaddle, the like of which had never been known in the peculiar annals of Scotland Yard.

"In da yard," announced Papazoglous, waving a fat and sweaty hand. "I find him in da yard. I shut da door. I bolt da door. I lock da door. An' then I phone the police." He lay down again. The girl resumed her fanning. Papazoglous uttered a string of names of persons considered holy in the Levant. "You kill him, my god, such quick!"

McKechnie considered the fateful door. Werewolf, bunkum! Fine fool he'd have looked, coming along with a stake, a mallet, and the conventional bouquet of garlic. All that had brought him, in fact, was a queasy feeling behind which lay that incident concerning the "fool of a dog." Maybe it was the same dog.

IT *WAS* the same dog. McKechnie didn't know that, of course, but his whim had not led him astray. So he stood there with a mere couple of inches of wood between him and that eerie something that was neither human nor divine, that alien invader who was Spiro the Spy. Instinct did not warn him that the deadliest peril on earth waited just beyond that door. Inwardly, he felt that he had been somewhat stupid in giving his personal attention to a futile happening that could have been investigated by the cop on the beat. But, having been stupid, he might as well be thorough about it.

With the uniformed driver of his car standing ready behind him, he unlocked, unbolted and opened the door. He went into the yard. It was a small, brick-floored yard holding a tumbledown fuel-shed, half a dozen skeleton crates marked: *Non-returnable,* three old and very dirty carboys with the word: *Acid* faintly discernible through their grime, an ashcan stuffed with crumpled cardboard cartons, a greenish-black shrub-tub harboring a thing that looked like a weary castor-oil plant, and, finally, a rusty, neglected bicycle. Nothing else.

McKechnie snorted loudly, said, "Well, where's your blasted dog?"

Springs creaked as Papazoglous heaved himself off his sofa. He appeared at the door, his eyes wide and round. The eyes searched the yard cautiously, apprehensively.

They went wider and rounder. Nothing! It took half a minute for the sheer nothingness to sink in. Then Papazoglous began to wave his hands to the accompaniment of a veritable flood of words in his native language. Disgusted, McKechnie went in, pushing past the excited Greek.

"Speak English," he said curtly.

"I finda man in my store," shouted Papazoglous, semaphoring frantically. "I catch him pokin' aroun', lookin' at da bottles, bustin' up da packets. I come at him an' shout, 'Hey, you!' an' he run like hell t'rough to yard, me after him. When I get to yard, he is a dog." He crossed himself, mopped perspiration. "Maria, I swear it! He is a dog—so!" He lowered a flat hand to show the animal's height. "Wit' eyes like tiger. They burn. God, how they burn!"

"He's not there now."

"Doan' care. Was there when I phone! A werewolf; Christos yes! I lock door an' phone."

Pensively, Papazoglous gazed through the window at the silent, undisturbed yard. The girl who had fanned him came through with a bucket of water, put it down while she opened the door to the yard.

"Helena," breathed Papazoglous, in a voice strangely low and tense, "from where have we got this plant in da yard?"

"Ain't no plant," contradicted Helena.

"Helena, you got eyes, hah?"

"Ain't our plant, anyway," declared the unruffled Helena. "Maybe somebody dumped it." To show her contempt for the subject under discussion she lifted her bucket, took aim, tried to douse the plant.

McKechnie shouted, "Great heavens!"

Papazoglous' scream went skidding halfway down the street.

THE water sloshed out in a sloppy, glistening arc. It never reached the plant. It merely curved toward it, the motion of the liquid column appearing absurdly slow by contrast with the speed of the amazing reaction.

Like some dreadful djinn released from a bottle after one thousand brooding years, the plant writhed its leaves, contorted itself in mock agony, then shot up to a height of ten feet. Here, for a moment almost too brief to register on the shocked vision of the onlookers, it poised and wavered in the form of a long, leering, caterpillarish thing of extreme horror and supreme obscenity. Next, it was a flaming snake twisting grotesquely in mid-air a few feet above its former haunt. Even as the sluggish water splashed upon the now empty tub, the snake had closed in upon itself, solidified hardened, become a large black cat with optics that were pools of extra-mundane hate.

Displaying all the agility characteristic of the feline tribe, the big cat ran along the top of the wall on which it stood, turned once to sear the watchers with the utter evil of its stare, then dropped from sight. Its black tail vanished, and for an instant something spawned beyond that wall, a leafy, rich-hued object that might have belonged to a huge, purple cabbage. But that, too, went—a vision so brief that it might have been only the figment of a sickly dream.

The clatter of Helena's bucket was the final shock to nerves already stretched to the limit. Even the steel-hard McKechnie jumped. Her face a ghastly white, Helena had flopped in the doorway, falling without a murmur. McKechnie picked her up, bore her indoors. Papazoglous was back on his sofa. He was incoherent, hysterical, and looked like a corpse. The driver who had brought McKechnie used a quarter of an hour and much *sal volatile* to get the Greek into talkative condition.

"Now," demanded McKechnie, firmly, "where do the poet's bones come in?"

"Da right finger bones of eternal Homer," moaned Papazoglous, dully. "So real, so true, what you call authentic. Mine family have them for centuries."

"That," declared McKechnie, contorting his face, "makes everything as plain as daylight. I see it all, now. It is a revelation to me." His voice went harsh. "What the devil have these tomfool relics of yours to do with the matter?"

Papazoglous winced, pointed a trembling finger at an ornately decorated silver casket standing on the sideboard. "I put them in a place ver' safe, or so I t'ink. This man, he snatch da casket an' run. I chase. He drop it. I lock door, save bones, make call to you."

"So," said McKechnie, "he didn't know what the silver box contained. He took it because it appeared to hold the most valua-

ble item in the place, such as . . . such as . . ."

"Such as which?" Papazoglous asked.

"I don't know." McKechnie's irefulness swiftly gave way to a morbid mood. "It's now obvious that we're trying to deal with something likely to have standards very different from ours, something with totally different notions of what is valuable and what is not. It might," he went on, with a touch of ghoulish satisfaction, "think blood more precious than gold."

"Maria!" shouted Papazoglous, frantically. "Take me from this accursed place!" He lay back, rolled his eyes until only the whites showed, sweated from every pore.

IV

THE bulbous-browed experts ended their profound argument, not because the discussion was settled to the entire satisfaction of all, but for the better and peculiarly British reason that it was now time for tea. They claimed their black Homburg hats, departed with pedantic dignity. War Minister Stevenson, carefully folded the plans over which the dispute had raged, just as carefully placed them in a small but exceedingly heavy steel box, double locked the box, handed it to the pair of watchers at his side.

The two accepted their charge as if it held the Crown Jewels. They left the room, one cuddling the box in a beefy embrace, the other fondling a lump of metal in his right-hand jacket pocket. Solemnly they paraded downstairs, descending several floors below ground level. Here, a uniformed attendant swung aside an immense steel grille, permitted them to enter. They crossed a small, metal-sheathed room, and stopped before the great, circular door of an underground vault.

Producing a bunch of keys, the attendant selected four of them, inserted them in a certain order, twisted each of them to a certain degree. After that, he spun dials and did other complicated things. All this took a full minute, during which the waiting pair stood braced and silent. The attendant pressed a hidden button, a concealed dynamo whined distantly, the door emitted the juicy sounds of metal moving in a bath of oil. Then its seven-ton bulk swung ponderously open.

Carrying the box through the steely maw, the escort unlocked one of a long row of metal compartments, slid the box inside and locked it up again. The compartment bore a label inscribed with a seemingly meaningless code; but in another building near to hand, similarly barred and bolted from curious eyes, was a code-book in which this label was registered opposite a brief entry: *Thorsen's Five Thousand Mile Atomic Rocket.*

Still with rocklike pose and equal dumbness, the guardians watched the attendant lock the vault, re-set the dials, extract the keys, shut and secure the grille. Then, and only then, did they go, their thick-soled boots clumping along the passage towards the stairs.

At ten o'clock in the evening, a large black cat slipped through a side door in the Ministry building, dodged a scrubwoman's mop, scampered past the police guard at the nearer end of a long passage, and sinuously evaded the guard at the other end. Like a sable shadow, unseen, unheard, it padded through a room in which the former guardians of the box were boredly perusing the evening papers. It reached the stairs, paused a moment, stared round with eyes that burned ferociously. Then it fled down the stairs.

Behind the grille, the relief attendant was settling down with his book. Some weird instinct made him lift his eyes: he saw the big cat trotting daintily along the passage towards him, and thought of the lethal current flowing through the grille.

"Ssssktz!" he hissed, dropping his book and trying to shoosh the animal away. The cat came nearer. "Scram!" he said, frantically. "You'll be burned to a cinder."

The cat took no notice. It reached the grille, hesitated, eyed it calculatingly, then snaked easily through the bars. Upstairs, a fuse exploded with a bang that brought the lounging guards to their feet. But the attendant did not see the invading cat on his side of the grille. He saw it sliding through the voltage-loaded bars, easily, unharmed, its flaring optics like tiny windows in hell. Then the lights went out; the cat bulged, mixed and swirled in a veritable kalei-

doscopic display of fantastic forms. It was a figure of indescribable horror when the strength went out of his legs and consciousness departed from his mind.

An old, old man pottered around in the gloom, a wrinkled gaffer with yellow-brown whiskers. He fiddled with the door of the vault, trying its dials and exploring its keyholes with strangely sensitive fingers that seemed to have ears at their ends. Once, he turned to the unconscious attendant, placed fingers on the man's forehead as if casually consulting the sleeping brain. Then he found the keys, inserted and turned them in the proper manner, turned the necessary dials and went through all the other functions in the correct way. Finally, he pressed the button. Nothing happened. The hidden dynamo refused to respond; the immense, air-tight door emitted no sounds, stirred not an inch.

At that point, one of the upstairs guards replaced the fuse, power returned, the lights sprang on. Another guard, following the prescribed routine, started down the stairs, his gun held slackly in one hand. He was yawning as he went. Fuses come and fuses go, but he'd go on forever.

The living dummy of Old Josh *saw* current rush back along the wires, gave the button another push. The door of the vault made its usual sounds and drifted open. He went inside, studied the steel compartments with an air suggesting that he could have looked them over just as easily in complete darkness. He was engrossed in the mysterious labels when the guard arrived.

BROAD-SHOULDERED and muscular, the newcomer was a tough individual constitutionally incapable of wild excitement. Keeping clear of the grille, his hard eyes took one swift look at the supine attendant, the open vault, the Josh-like figure inside. Without batting an eyelid, without the slightest change of expression, he whipped up his heavy weapon and pulled the trigger. He did it with the slick motions and cool confidence of one who knows himself to be an excellent marksman. His bullets went *blat-blat-blat,* their echoes roaring throughout the confined space, thundering along the passage and racing up the stairs.

The missiles lanced through the body of the uncanny intruder, pinged off the walls of the vault. They might just as well have been peas. The target turned, stared at the marksman, showed him a face from which the hairy fringe had vanished, a face—aye, even a figure and clothes—more resembling those of a prosperous business man. Or was it a squirming cabbage? Or a monstrous abortion resembling nothing in the tomes of terrestrial zoology? Or. . . .?

"God!" breathed the guard, suddenly. "He looks like *me!*" His struggling fingers got home the second clip he'd been trying to shove into his gun. But he had time to let only two rip before a hellish blast swept through the grille, took him in its terrible embrace, and frizzled his very soul.

Aroused by the uproar in the depths, a second guard came charging down the stairs, a uniformed policeman close upon his heels.

Both held weapons ready in their hands. At a noisy gallop, they took three bends, descended three flights, and on the fourth bend met the guard who had first gone down.

He was racing upward at a speed which vied with their own. He passed them, gasped something they failed to catch, waved his weapon downward to indicate urgency, and continued full pelt up the stairs. The two carried on, managing to increase their speed by a fraction. Reaching the passage, they dashed along it, and found the body lying outside the grille. Flat on its back, its brawny face wearing a queer flush, its eyes rolled upward under the lids, it was clay from which all life had gone.

"Gallaher!" oathed the plainclothes man. He gaped at his companion. "It's Gallaher!" His dazed gaze went around, found the attendant's sleeping form beyond the grille, the open door of the vault. "But, damn it, *we just passed Gallaher on the stairs!*"

At that moment, the man who wasn't Gallaher strolled nonchalantly along the street, stepped into a dark doorway, and looked up at the starlit sky. The object of his attention was a low-hanging orb faintly tinged with pink. What thoughts lingered within his brain—if he had a brain

—or what sensations filled his being—if he had any real being—could not be told.

Passers-by noted, without suspicion, the shadowy watcher in the gloom. An automobile sped down the street, its headlamps momentarily casting his reflection upon an adjacent window. The reflection was not that of the dead Gallaher, but of a mere nonentity, one who, that morning, had rubbed shoulders with a camouflaged thing from the unexplored void, and had passed on, blissfully unaware.

AT THE stroke of midnight, he was in Battersea Power Station. An engineer discovered him walking silently along the diamond-patterned steel plates of the overhead catwalk, pausing now and then to lean over the tubular side-rails and peer at the banks of huge turbo-alternators. This picture of polished metal and of enormous power held in control seemed to fascinate the intruder. The engineer spat on his hands, picked up the useful steel handle of a tube-cutter, sprinted up the gangway and faced the interloper on the catwalk.

"What the blazes are you doing here?"

Aggressively, he poked the other in the middle with the length of steel. The metal made contact. A terrific shock flashed through its length, lifted the engineer off his feet, flopped him backward. He went down like a bundle of rags, his face contorted with agony.

No ordinary individual could have absorbed that torrent of force and lived. Electrical engineers aren't ordinary people. This one merely surrendered both strength and consciousness, feebly aware of what was happening, dimly realizing that what he had encountered was an electric eel in human shape. Absurdly enough, just as his brain was about to lapse into stunned sleep, he fancied that the eel looked more like an enormous flower, a huge, fleshy lily of flaming crimson which bowed and waved over his body in mockery of life.

At the entrance to the power station, two employees on night shift stood chatting. A big door eased open, letting into the cold air of night a smell of hot copper and a shrill whine of energetic machines. Through the door came a cat, a dirty, mangy, wary thing typical of back alley vermin. It leered at them before it scuttled furtively into the night. The two watched it without interest. One sucked his cigarette. The other stared contemplatively into the darkness.

"Hey!" said the second, after a while. "That big door takes some shoving. How did that cat push it open?"

"Ever heard how rats steal eggs?" asked the other. He launched into a lecture on the subject of animal tricks, drawing plentifully upon his imagination. He conceived nothing resembling that damnable thing which had just slunk into anonymity.

"DOCTOR," said Chief Inspector McKechnie, "I hate to believe it because it smacks of lurid literature. But I've got to hand it to you." He leaned forward, his chair squeaking under his bulk. "I'm forced to believe that your guess is dead right!"

"Let's go over the data again," suggested Doctor Lanigan, imperturbably.

"All right." McKechnie lugged out a file and raked through the thick wad of papers it contained. "As you suggested, we got the cooperation of every leading news agency in the world. We asked them to give us as full details as possible of every reported incident that might come under the general headings of fantastic, supernatural or supernormal. Cutting out the resulting flood of spiritualistic stuff, and all the stunts of sensation seekers, we've plenty of interesting data left."

"In a mere couple of months," observed Lanigan.

"Yes, it's only a couple of months since Josh Hawkins became the first victim. Then Fairbrother. Why was he stripped naked? Why did we find his clothes miles back along the line? Then that Greek—his case converted me more than anything. I saw what I saw!" He looked hard at Lanigan. "And when you've seen something like that you're ready to believe almost anything."

"You've missed out Onions."

"Yes. His story ought to mean plenty. Then there was that raid on the War Ministry's documents. They'd been looked at, but none were taken. Not one document missing!" He leafed through his papers. "Next, that incident in Battersea. Afterwards, nothing more until that report from

France about the vanishing man who was found inspecting the transmission system of Radio Lyons. Then that similar report of a strangely elusive spy in a certain aircraft factory. Later, the same uncapturable individual roaming around a famous armament plant."

"The same entity," opined Lanigan, positively. "The times and movements all link up nicely."

"Then that fool story from Portugal about the trespasser in an observatory. He wouldn't or couldn't explain himself. His captor started to drag him to the police station and, when part way there, found himself leading a horse. He let it go." McKechnie permitted himself an amused snigger. "Things have gotten very crazy when we have to admit that even that yarn might be true."

"Anything is possible," declared Lanigan.

"Now, apparently, he—or it—is back in England." McKechnie turned over more papers. "Caught last Wednesday enjoying a private tour through the *Daily Courier* plant. The reporter who challenged him is still in hospital." Slapping down the papers, he made an expression of deep disgust. "Which means more insane antics to drive me mad. Say your piece again—I like to hear my convictions made more convincing."

"He's a Martian," obliged Lanigan, speaking very seriously. "Nothing known on this world of ours has such perfect power of mimicry. His natural form might be anything. He's been seen masquerading as ten or more entirely different types of human beings, and as about six weird forms of life which obviously he is in the habit of imitating, but which are not native to this planet. I have a wild idea that he and his kind may have no such thing as a natural form of their own, and at every moment of their existence are imitating some form with which they are familiar, particularly those on which they prey."

"I'd like to see him mimic a corpse," said McKechnie.

"His uncanny but natural ability functions with such wonderful perfection," Lanigan continued, "that when he doubles as a human being his impression is perfect even to the clothes. He removed Fairbrother's attire and studied it for the sake of gaining perfection. He came very near to perfection at his first attempt, looking so like Hawkins that a close acquaintance saw only a slight difference in the color of the beard."

"Go on."

"He arrived, as far as we can discover, coincidentally with Mars' nearest approach to Earth. No other planet is in so favorable a position. Since then, Mars has been gaining distance rapidly. If he leaves it much longer, it'll be too late for him to return. I think he's making ready for departure."

"I agree," said McKechnie, his voice both reluctant and lugubrious. "What's turning my hair white is the problem of how to catch something that might be anything, and how to hang a man who's liable to turn into heaven-alone-knows-what while dangling in mid-air."

Downstairs was waiting a reporter with something on his mind that might save the bothered McKechnie's hair. With the fatalistic patience of newspapermen, he sat waiting for his interview and pondered the strange case of the vaudeville star who really and truly could give the public exactly what they wanted.

V

THE pert, smartly-tailored usherette conducted them to their seats, handed them a program apiece. Doctor Lanigan bent forward, gazed intently over the balcony edge to the empty stage, in front of which musicians were tuning up. Violins made vague half-tones; an oboe chortled like a fat man laughing at he knew not what. The trap drummer vibrated his sticks in an experimental roll, then put them down and looked bored.

McKechnie twisted his burly form within his inadequate seating space, and surveyed with slightly bellicose gaze the portion of the audience to the rear. He spotted a pair of abnormally muscular gentlemen squatting six rows back, favored them with a knowing nod. The recipients rewarded him with stares of disarming blankness.

"I'm afraid that reporter sold us a pup,"

he grunted. He tried to cross his pillar-like legs, found that there wasn't enough space between the rows of seats, and looked at Lanigan as if it were his fault.

"We'll see," said Lanigan, philosophically.

Clapping announced the arrival of the conductor. The orchestra broke into *Blaze Away* with fire and enthusiasm that contrasted strangely with their disinterested expressions. They finished. A peroxide blonde took the stage. More clapping. The blonde sang *My Heart Belongs To Daddy,* at the same time giving the bald-headed occupants of the front stalls a taste of her high-octane libido. McKechnie sniffed his disgust, had another desperate try at crossing his legs. Failing, he glowered down at the blonde.

The turn ended, leaving some of the stallholders with pepped glands. Three Orientals came on, bowed deeply, politely, with well-drilled precision. They juggled with chromium-plated steel hoops. After a while, they combined acrobatics with the juggling. With a bowed farewell, they gave place to a second-rate comedian. McKechnie craned his neck to survey the pair of powerful persons sitting six rows behind him. They looked at him as if he were a pane of glass.

An hour later, the illuminated numbers placed at both sides of the stage glowed with the figure twelve.

"Now!" breathed Lanigan.

The manager took the center of the stage. He had expensive dentures, a carnation, and much suavity.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, very smoothly, "as already announced, Miss Mitzy la Monte, the Songbird of the South, is unable to appear tonight owing to an indisposition. I am sure that we all sympathize with Miss la Monte in her temporary trouble." He paused, registered reverent sorrow. "But, at extremely short notice,"—another pause while he switched to pleasurable anticipation—"we have booked for you a single performance of the most remarkable exhibition ever to be shown upon the stage."

"Pfah!" snorted McKechnie, shoving violently at the back of his seat without gaining a single inch.

"A performance which has astounded the Continent!"—gestures of heavenly delight—"and now to be shown in this country for the first time!" Comporting himself with seemly mien, the manager reached the wings, turned, waved a dramatic hand at the empty stage. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, loudly, "we have great pleasure in introducing to you—Spiro, the Master of Mystery!"

All the lights went out.

FEMININE squeals saluted this sudden plunge into deep darkness. For ten seconds the stage was a silent area of deeper black within the general gloom. Then, with startling swiftness, a column of peculiarly scintillating light sprang from the center of the stage, bent itself into a vertical ring, whirled like a monster catherine wheel. The trap drummer rolled with gradually rising vigor. The catherine wheel spun, flickered, coruscated, then quickly fattened into globularity. The drum rolled louder.

The globe stood for a brief while, mysterious lights and shadows playing over its surface in baffling pursuit. Then the whole illumination sank into the sub-surface, the globe contracted slightly and vanished to the accompaniment of a tremendous bang from the bass drum. The lights sprang up. The audience blinked at the stage.

Spiro, the Master of Mystery, stood poised on the stage at the precise point where his display of light-magic had popped into nothingness. Cool, composed, he stood and studied his audience, his expression somewhat saturnine. He had all the assurance and self-possession of an accomplished and famous theatrical performer.

A girl joined him from the wings; a slender, shapely girl attired in scanty, attractive uniform of the kind usually favored by illusionists' assistants. Two stage-hands brought on a folding cabinet, opened it out, turned it round and round to give a complete view of all its sides, then erected it.

Doc Lanigan handed his opera glasses to McKechnie, saying, "Last heard of in Spain and Portugal, eh?" McKechnie levelled the glasses, had a look at the Master of Mystery. He saw a lean, handsome, sardonic face with olive skin, blue-black hair, jet-black eyes. It was a characteristic

face, one that his astute mind had no difficulty in classifying.

"I see what you mean," he observed, shrewdly. "An Iberian type." Lanigan nodded silently. "Or maybe it's the girl," added McKechnie. He shifted the glasses, examined the girl's oval, delicate features, noting that she, too, was of Spanish type.

Forcing himself halfway round in his seat, he lowered a significant eyelid. The burly couple sitting farther back suddenly found nothing to detain them, left their seats, departed with the slightly sullen air of men who have yet to see something new. With grim determination, McKechnie got his legs crossed by half rising in his seat. The entire row shook when he flopped back.

On the stage, the girl assistant directed the attention of the audience to the cabinet. With impressive sangfroid, Spiro, the Master, walked into one side of the contraption and out the other side. Or was it the assistant who walked out? Deathly silence pervaded the theater while onlookers stared in amazement at the two girls now occupying the stage. Identical twins, identically dressed.

Somebody said, "Whoo-oo!" and broke the spell. The audience roared its applause.

The magical twin curtseyed gracefully, strolled back through the cabinet. Spiro emerged. The audience thundered. The stage-hands came back, pulled the cabinet to pieces in full view of the audience. Then they packed it flat and bore it off. They returned with a full-length mirror, stood it in the middle of the stage. Near it, they placed a brightly-plated, tubular frame supporting a curtain of black velvet.

SPIRO went behind the curtain, becoming lost to the direct view of the audience, but his sardonic reflection still visible in the long mirror. His girl assistant waved a small glass stick, murmured some meaningless abracadabra in a low but audible voice. The reflection in the mirror dissolved, became a wild medley of blurred colors and shapes, then, with astounding rapidity, resolved itself into the mirrored image of a rose-bush laden with large, lush blooms.

The audience bellowed approval. McKechnie fidgeted around like a man hardly able to wait for a time not yet ripe. Lanigan sat in brooding silence, his eyes straining toward the stage.

More abracadabra, more changes. A prickly cactus which swiftly solidified into an ornate Chinese vase and then, before astonishment had time fully to register, just as swiftly became an Egyptian ewer of graceful design. A few more such demonstrations, then Spiro came from behind the curtain, waited for the frenzied clapping to die down. He spoke for the first time, his voice sharp and penetrating.

"The true explanation of these illusions is a very simple one. It is a discovery of my own which no other magician can duplicate." His features set in a hard grin as he uttered that last word. "But I am now going to attempt a feat considerably more difficult, a feat for which I require your cooperation." Again the grin. "Under cover of darkness, I shall try to offer for your inspection some miraculous reproductions of anything nominated by any member of the audience."

Somebody gasped, several clapped. Spiro bowed in mocking appreciation, and said, "Thank you!"

"Show me," challenged a skeptic in the stalls, "a roc's egg." The lights went out, came on. There was the egg—a huge one. "A giraffe," demanded another. Titters sounded in the following darkness. But he got his giraffe. The animal shuffled awkwardly on the stage, thrust its long neck high over the footlights, blinked at the audience.

"Seen them in the zoo," whispered Lanigan. Pulling out his big, white handkerchief, McKechnie nodded understandingly.

The excited audience continued to call its choice, getting in return a fantastic series of impressions ranging from a pedant's demand for a Brazilian ant-eater to a humorous call for "a five-foot cucumber." One ultra-rapid sample of mimicry was that of a famous political character in a typical pose. It brought deafening cheers.

McKechnie blew his nose, flourishing his handkerchief discreetly. Downstairs, in the left-hand aisle, a gentleman whose jacket almost creaked across his shoulders saw the handkerchief out of one corner of his eye.

He turned his attention to Spiro, placed hairy hands to his mouth, and bull-bellowed a request that resounded all over the theater.

"Show me a Martian!"

The result was stupefying. Lanigan had expected that Spiro would retain his composure and ask the burly caller whether he'd recognize a Martian if he saw one. McKechnie had anticipated being fobbed off with a grotesque imitation of something that might be anything or, more probably, something that not exist except in the alien invader's fertile mind.

What Spiro did do was to turn upon the burly baiter a face of such demoniacal hatred that men quailed and women screamed. His eyes became whirlpools of living fire dredged from an unknown cosmic hell. They seared, and one could almost hear the hiss of their flaming. With pantherish agility, he leaped headlong into the audience, and waded through shrieking people toward that impertinent Terrestrial who had dared to mention a Martian.

VI

BACK at the switchboard, the imperturbable electrician shifted his gum, pulled over a knife-switch, gave his wad another chew. Once more the theater was plunged into blackness, its lowermost portion becoming a sultry pit from which arose a bedlamic uproar of yells, screams and oaths.

His face crimson with excitement, McKechnie bawled a series of violent oaths, strove mightily to get his legs uncrossed. Nearly uprooting the seat in his frantic struggle, he did much to increase the panic of his immediate neighbors. The voices in the pit rose crescendo. With a final tremendous feat of acrobatics, he got himself unstuck, and plowed his way through the milling crowd, leaving behind his big, powerful form a wake wide enough to allow Lanigan to follow without discomfort.

They reached the manager's office just as that worthy got to the switchboard and restored the lights. There were three policemen outside the office.

McKechnie said, "Let nobody in! Nobody! Not even the manager! Not even my twin brother!" They nodded.

Inside the office waited the pair of muscle-bound individuals who had been seated behind McKechnie and Lanigan at the time the show commenced. They had between them a dark-haired, slender, tearful and very frightened girl.

"I think she's safe enough," McKechnie remarked. "He's abandoned her, in view of what's happened." He seated himself by hooking a thick thigh over one corner of the desk. "Now talk—and talk fast."

"He picked me up in Lisbon," said the girl fearfully, and in excellent English. "He said I was attractive and could have a job as his assistant. I would travel much and see the world. He was going to put on his first, experimental show here before commencing his tour abroad."

"Go on."

"He said he'd made a lifelong study of mass hypnosis. He said that the Indian Rope Trick was not a real performance, but merely mass hypnosis, and that anyone perfecting the art could far surpass the world's most famous illusionists, performing more spectacular feats, more easily, with less bother. He claimed that he didn't need the complicated apparatus and expert trickery of ordinary magicians, and could get better results by sending his psycho-waves along the optical nerves of a crowd, making them see whatever he chose to depict as vividly and convincingly as if it were with their eyes."

"Think there's anything in it?" asked McKechnie of Lanigan.

"I doubt it," responded the doctor, thoughtfully. "It is a very plausible explanation, and one well calculated to lull the girl's suspicions. But I've a hunch that his changes are real, physical ones."

"He was going to put on a show in Paris," the girl went on, "but it rained that night and he said he wouldn't go out. So he came to London. He visited Mitzy, and I think he bribed her to abandon one performance so that he could put on his show."

"Yes, a reporter told us about a few sample illusions he put over to clinch the booking." McKechnie turned to one of the guards. "What about you?"

"I dodged him in the general furore caused by the lights going out," answered

the phlegmatic one. "Like you told me, I didn't bother about him, and concentrated on helping Bill to grab the girl and rush her here."

"Good," McKechnie approved. He turned an inquisitive eye upon Lanigan.

"This was his last quest," declared Lanigan, speaking very slowly, very deliberately. "I am doubtful about his alleged powers of mass hypnosis, but I think his last job was to make a study of mass psychology. He revealed some of his abilities, Martian abilities, strange, extra-mundane talents the like of which don't exist in this world; and he got the human reaction to them—the reaction of humanity in the mob."

"Ah!" punctuated McKechnie, with a grunt.

"He is sensitive to human reactions," Lanigan persisted. "Even the comparatively stupid Onions made him respond to suspicion. And he has a photographic mind." He studied his listeners. "That's why documents have been inspected but not taken away. Machines and apparatus have been examined but not drawn. He has gathered into his amazing intellect all the knowledge for which he came, including that of how we alien, two-legged creatures behave in herds."

He jerked a thumb toward the ceiling. "Up there a planet is moving rapidly upon its appointed path. It waits for no man, no *thing*."

"You mean he's about to beat it with all he's got?"

"I'm convinced of it!" Lanigan let his hands rest gently on the girl's shoulders. "My dear, did this person, this creature, tell you when and from where he would take you abroad?"

"Why, yes." Her pale face went a shade paler. "He'd hired a private plane. We were going to Ireland, thence to America by Transatlantic Clipper." Her whisper was almost inaudible as she described the precise point of departure and the time.

"See," breathed Lanigan. "He even intended to take back a sample!"

A RABBIT scuttled furtively across the space surrounded by small, insignificant shrubs. It might or might not have been the very same rabbit which had received the fright of its life two months before.

Overhead, the sky was heavy, brooding, and the color of molten lead.

From his hidden vantage-point on the side of the hill, Doctor Lanigan peered through powerful binoculars at the little knoll that made a lump in the middle of the valley. His glasses swept slowly across the field of view, saw nothing. He might have been alone, far from all human life, but he knew that around the locality were half a hundred anxiously waiting men, some of them concealed within a few yards of his own refuge.

Four hours of this, not to mention the long watch already put in by other patrols, lying and waiting for an event that might never come; silently, patiently, determinedly biding a culmination that perhaps was not to be. There were two and a half thousand million human beings in the world. There was one who wasn't human. And the defeat of an unimaginable menace rested solely upon the supposition that this one entity would appear at this one small spot within the limit of a certain time. On what a thin, fragile thread could human fate and progress be suspended!

All the same, Doctor Lanigan felt that this eerie, elusive foe would be compelled to risk the trap. He, the enemy, had a rendezvous with Mars, and willy-nilly must make the connection or remain isolated for a long time upon an awakened and hostile world. No planet could stand in its orbit even to save a faraway son. So, weary with the strain of waiting, but still full of confidence, Lanigan watched the valley and the knoll.

Half an hour later, a lonely figure wandered along the track toward the knoll. Its pace was indolent, careless, well calculated to disarm the suspicion of any concealed onlooker. At a range of a little over two hundred yards, Lanigan scanned the stroller carefully. He saw a nondescript man of medium build, attired like a farm-hand. A sun-burned face was partly exposed beneath a cap, the large peak of which effectively concealed the eyes. Did those hidden optics have the dull, disinterested stare of an idle, innocent mind? Or were they secretly blaz-

ing with the feral hatred of a hunted werewolf?

Even as Lanigan wondered, the cap tilted when the wearer lifted his head, and for the briefest instant the watcher glimpsed a deep, boiling glow of crimson like that concealed within the heart of a ruby which bears a perpetual curse. It was enough! Lanigan jogged a field telegraph key lying in the moss at his side. A mile higher up the valley, a ready hand turned a waiting wheel, floodgates opened in a concrete dam, an artificial lake poured outward in glad release.

Spiro saw the wall of water rushing madly toward him, the white horses of its foaming crest like an irresistible charge of liquid cavalry. He looked to the left, but there was the swiftly flowing stream that fed the little valley, its volume already swollen, its surface rising rapidly. He looked to the right, glaring ferociously toward the hidden onlookers. But the knoll was his only link with the empire beyond the skies. He raced to the knoll, dashed madly up its slope. The raging waters surrounded the hillock just as he got clear. They swirled around its base, began swiftly to climb toward its crest.

The figure of the thing that was not a man changed as it fought up to the crest. It faded, lumped, distorted, became an upward-rolling ball obscenely fringed with quivering spines and gesticulating tentacles. Then a glowing, fiery python; then a humping, caterpillarish monstrosity of fast and disgusting motion. There were vague suggestions of other fearful forms during and in between its many changes.

"GO ON," muttered Lanigan to himself, his eyes straining at the rising waters. "You hate water like hell. It stands at the top of your long, long list of things to be hated. You fear water as you fear nothing else in the whole of creation. There is little of it on Mars, and what little there is you'd rather be without—for it is death to you and your immaterial kind. *All* your exploits were in dry weather—I checked up, on that! You were unheard-of on the wet days. You fled headlong from Helena's fateful bucket. You abandoned your Paris show because it was raining."

The swirling tide was now lapping within three feet of the crest which the fugitive had reached. He was a python again. Even now he could escape, even now there was an absurdly easy means of evading his fate—if only he could keep calm and think of it.

"Change as much as you like," said Lanigan in a tense whisper. His forehead was damp with excitement and anxiety. "You cannot be anything! You cannot be a fish! Nothing you can mimic will save you, except. . . ." He sweated furiously in his frantic effort to suppress the dangerous suggestion. What if that susceptible creature picked up his thought, and promptly took the easy way out? He was betting entirely on its psychology being similar to the human in one cogent respect—it could be betrayed by its own utter fear, could be made the victim of its own panic. "You cannot escape, unless. . . ." Again he had to kill the treacherous notion.

The flood lapped over the crest. With a sinuous motion, the form of scintillating snakiness escaped the watery grasp, floated momentarily a few feet above the surface. It writhed frantically in mid-air while far, far in the very depths of his mind Lanigan seemed to hear a weird, thoroughly abnormal susurration like a final wail of activated matter before it vanished forever from the burned-out cosmos. It was a horrible sound: a fundamental chord broadcast from the nethermost end of time and space. It was the voice of impending death!

Then the twirling, flaming shape fell back. It struck the hungry waters. They boiled and foamed as if they'd swallowed a one-ton lump of sodium. The opposite hill shivered and quivered as Lanigan saw it through a column of released gases.

"Not true levitation," he said, "but temporary suspension. He made an ultra-slow jump! God, that I should have lived to see the like!"

Getting to his feet, he stared solemnly at the still violently disturbed waters, noting the wild, agitated bubbling as they continued to react viciously upon whatever was left of the thing that had no counterpart on Earth. McKechnie joined him, his ears filled with the termagant sounds and sizzlings from below.

Even as they stood, something plummeted through the sky, plunged headlong into the water-filled valley. Optical retention left them with a vague impression of a strange, egg-like body builded of mist and random dreams. But it was real enough. It struck with a mighty splash, and the hungry waters reacted upon it ferociously.

"The mental connection was broken," observed Lanigan, meditatively. "He had it parked"—he gestured toward the silent, aghast sky—"somewhere up there. He died—and down it came."

"Humph!" said McKechnie. He fondled his heavy gun, glanced over the now visible group of watchers, most of them armed. His expression was regretful. "I'd have liked to have taken a pot at him."

"Without effect," Lanigan pointed out. "He's been shot at before, and a lot of good it did." He pondered a moment, looking to the north where, only a mile away, Josh Hawkins had kept a lonely vigil without avail. "We've learned a few useful things, I guess. We've learned, for instance, that Martians are as susceptible to fear as ourselves. Note that all his frantic changes were into unrecognizable and therefore undoubtedly Martian types. Under extreme pressure of fear, his mind followed a well-beaten track."

"I don't get the point," said McKechnie.

Lanigan smiled. "From what has happened, we can make a safe bet that there are no birds on Mars. Filled with fear, his mind became entirely Martian, forgetting all its acquired Terrestrialism. Think—*he could have been a bird!*"

"Great heavens," rumbled the startled McKechnie. "So he could!"

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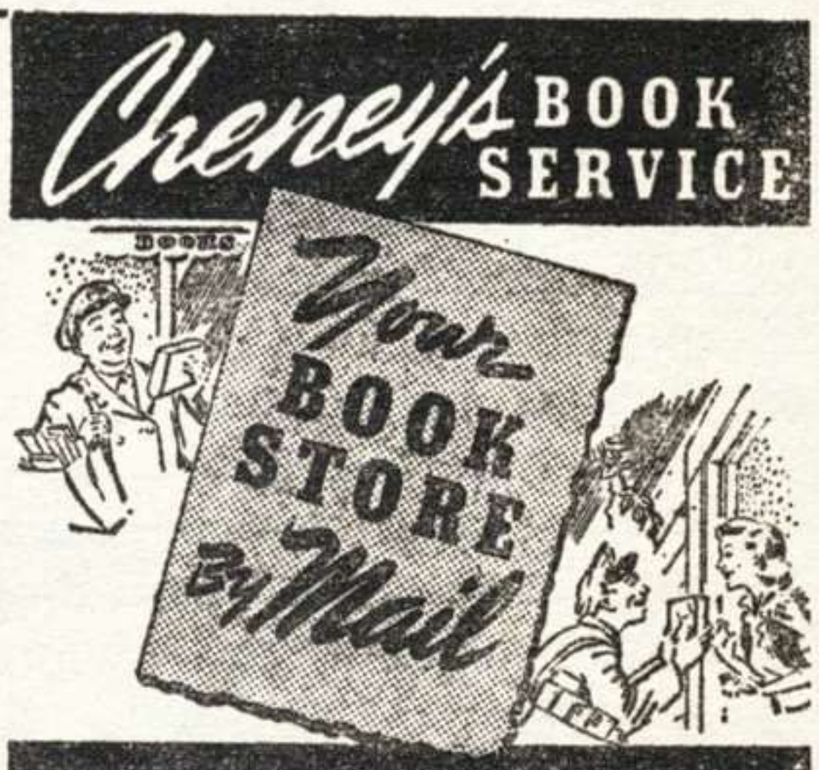

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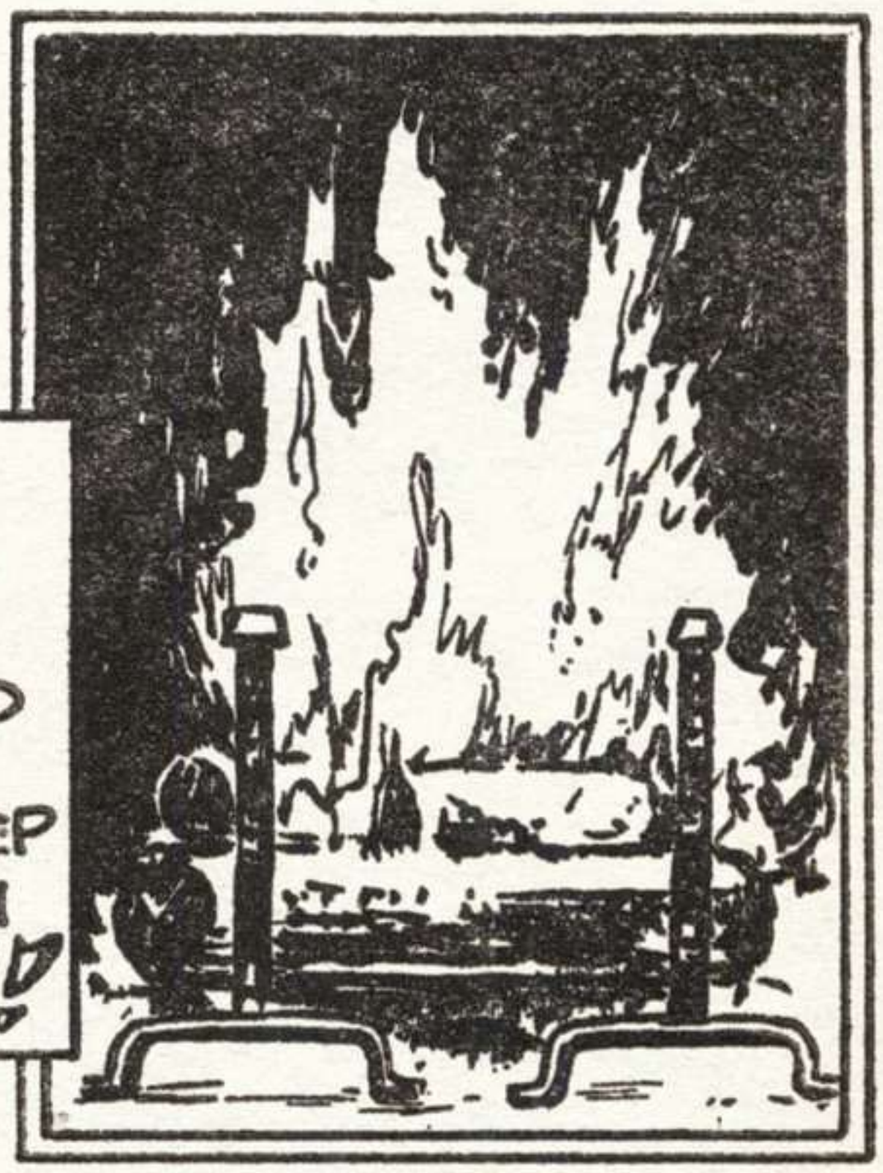
Superstitions and Taboos

By Weill

THE NANDI OF BRITISH EAST AFRICA BELIEVE THAT IF A MAN WERE TO STEP OVER A POT, HE WOULD FALL TO PIECES WHENEVER THE POT WAS **BROKEN!**



IN MANY PARTS OF FRANCE THE YULE LOG IS BELIEVED TO HAVE THE POWER TO AVERT DANGER FROM THUNDER AND LIGHTNING AND DURING A STORM IT IS CUSTOMARY TO KEEP A YULE LOG SMOLDERING ON THE FIRE ***AS PROTECTION!***

THE CUSTOM OF PLACING FLOWERS ON A GRAVE ORIGINATED WITH THE ANCIENTS WHO BELIEVED THAT THE DEAD ***ENJOYED THE FRAGRANCE!***

TO CUT THE NAILS OF A CHILD BEFORE IT WAS A YEAR OLD WAS ONCE THOUGHT TO TURN IT INTO A ***FUTURE THIEF!***

The Immortal Lancer

TO Edmond Trilbo, dramatic criticism had provided, if not a complete personal fulfillment or outlet, at least a revenge on life and upon those who were intrinsically finer and more creative than himself. Like a shoemaker's awl honed to a fine point in his trade, Trilbo's wit had been sharpened through the years and at other people's expense, until now he stood first and foremost, critique magnifique, who had panned murderously nearly all that had passed before him, as conductor of the famous and influential syndicated column, "Lancer's Point."

The notorious columnist was a confirmed bachelor; as a man, no woman would have wanted him. He was small, bald-headed, middle fortyish but with a premature paunch and a chronic sneer to his thin lips. His eyes might have been described with one word: fishy. His hands were effeminately tiny and the fingers plump.

Of course, as Edmond Trilbo, he could have had the pick of actresses, radio and show-business luminaries. As with a handful of other influential persons in his profession, the men who decided the people's tastes in entertainment, their likes and dis-

There are undreamed of places beyond the grave . . . but those who visit there know no return!

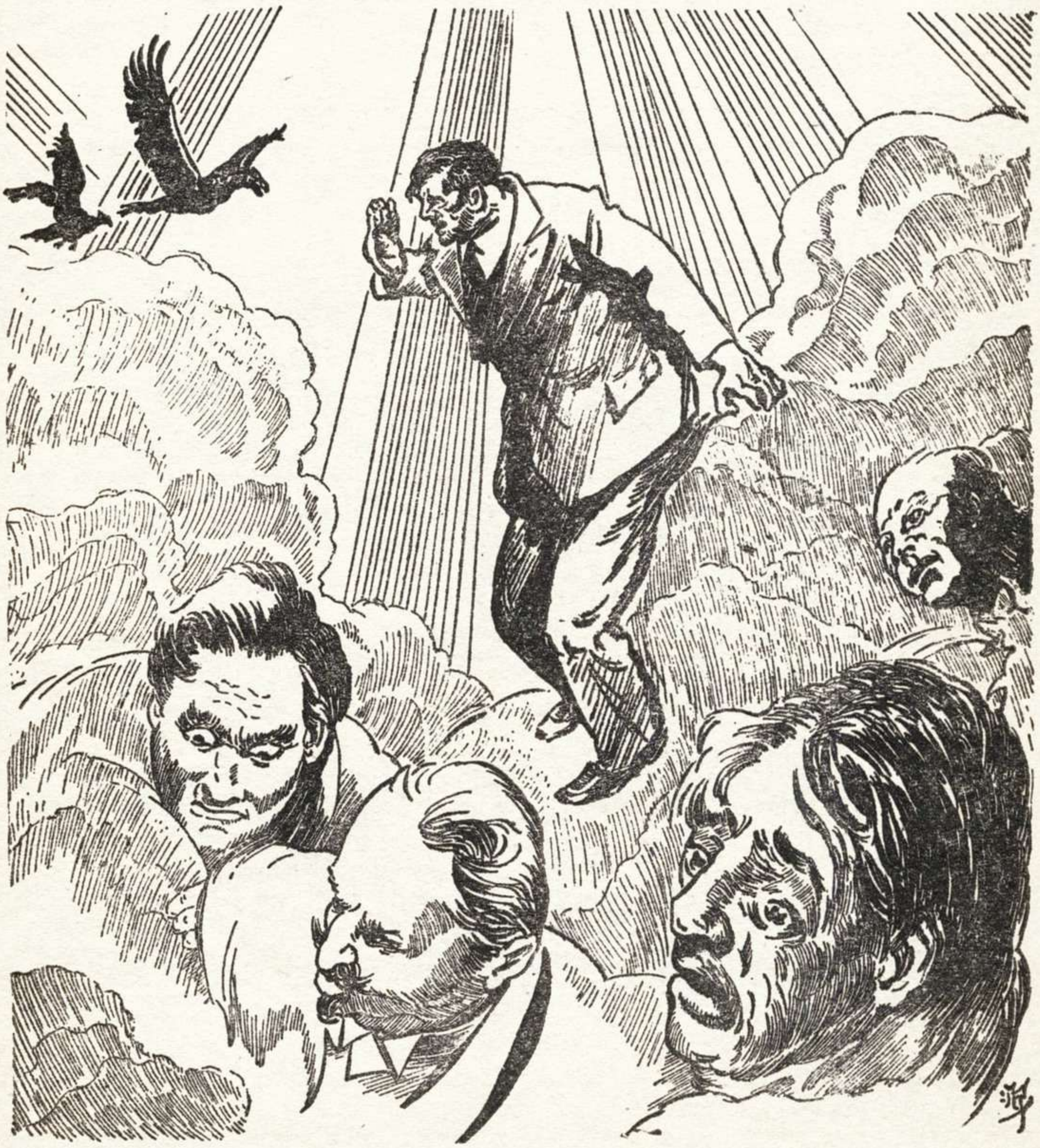
likes, he must, of necessity, be appeased. Few got on the right side of Trilbo. He had no close friends. He was one of those who felt superior to all other mankind and let this fact be known.

Still, the judicious sending of several cases of rare imported wine at the right time by a certain producer would often soften the force with which the Lancer's Point was driven home into said producer's product when opening night came.

It was axiomatic in the trade that the best that could be done as regards Trilbo was to neutralize him. You could not really win him over. In over twenty years (for he'd started at the tender age of twenty-six) of reviewing shows, he had never once been known to give unqualified praise to actor, actress or the play itself.

It was a fetish with the critic that he abhorred amateur theatrics and efforts, no matter how sincere.

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE



If they were clumsy and beginnerish, they drew his unstinted fire.

Oldtimers along the Main Stem also were of the opinion that Edmond Trilbo hit hardest when there was little or no chance of his being hit back. It seemed that he saved his finest and most punishing adjectival phrases for those fresh and enthusiastic youngsters who, every year, gain tiny footholds in our theatres and try to win fame for themselves.

His colleagues had long since given up suggesting that at times a sheathing of the Lancer's Point would be more appropriate. There was the instance only a year ago of Hy Gofkin, a small producer and showman whose theatrical antecedents reached out, truly, into burlesque and vaudeville, but who, at least, attempted sincerely and at the risk of his personal capital to bring the people entertainment.

He'd had a great idea last year: "Animated cartoons, you know how they go over," he gestured, "midget and marionette shows. I got somethin' new. None of your slapstick dog acts but a play where dogs actually do some of the acting!"

EDMOND TRILBO had not attended the opening night. There were those who had apparently enjoyed Gofkin's "Canine Capers," though. Trilbo caught the show ten days later, as it had been relegated on his schedule to things "most unimportant." Hy Gofkin professed to be most disinterested in the critic's opinion, but he was visibly nervous that night waiting for the early editions. After all, it was generally known he had sunk all his money into the novel production.

Trilbo had been seen sitting in his usual fourth row center seat. Spotters had relayed the disquieting information that he had blown his nose indignantly several times through the first act and had left before the end of the second.

The next day the "Lancer's Point" was particularly sharp. Among other things, Trilbo remarked scathingly, that "Canine Capers" was utterly asinine, that there were surely enough so-called actors and actresses on Broadway of doubtful lineage and antecedents and even worse acting ability to allow any extra room for added "caninity." The rest of the report was even more detrimental to the health of "Canine Capers." He branded those who did go to such a show as fourth-rate beyond-morons; to those who were given ducats to the show or who found themselves there by mistake, his advice was only "to seek refuge in the nearest rest room and to remain there, come what may until all danger was past, i.e., the final curtain had fallen."

"So much," ended Trilbo, "for the bedraggled four-footed thespians of the Pretender Producer, Hy Gofkin, who apparently never got beyond throwing beach balls to seals in vaudeville."

People read the column, and those who had seen "Canine Capers" and enjoyed it laughed guiltily and decided after all it was rather an absurd show and spoke accordingly to their friends. Those who had not seen the play promptly decided not to. Attendence fell off abruptly. Gofkin, after having a ten-days-to-two-weeks success on his hands now had a miserable flop—and a great many creditors.

Three weeks after that he hung himself in the basement of his house, a failure and a laughing stock. If anything, the thin corners of Trilbo's mouth that turned expertly into the habitual sneer, lengthened drolly. It was nice to know that you had so much influence over life and other human beings.

That, of course, was a year ago, but it was something that might have happened many times before and would approximately duplicate itself again before Trilbo laid away his lance. For it was on human suffering that the man lived.

It was in February that the critic *met* the Indian. Swami Amend Cohawl was his name and he had something of a reputation as a bona fide mystic. They said he was wealthy beyond counting, and his American wife had drawn him here to the States, although in his manner and outlook you could feel with him always a bit of India.

He had a young daughter, a veritable beauty with the charms of the East and West intermingling. She had wondrous black eyes and high cheekbones and a clear voice of the purest quality. She had intense theatrical aspirations and her mother, who knew about these things, realized that it would be best now to vie for and obtain as far as possible Edmond Trilbo's grudging "permission."

IT seemed that Amend Cohawl was interested in a play. Of course as a vehicle for his daughter. She, who had studied in Indian and American universities, had all the things that Trilbo abhorred: youth, enthusiasm, undoubted amateurishness—and above all, sensitivity. A very sumptuous cocktail party was given, and with it Madame Cohawl and the Swami hoped to launch their daughter on her acting career.

Trilbo came to the cocktail party and was treated in the accustomed manner of a king by his subjects. There were perhaps two exceptions in the circle of his idolizers: young and beautiful Cherice Cohawl and her father, Amend. The girl smiled a small little smile at Trilbo but there was none of her mother's fawning upon the critic. The Indian, himself, was even more reserved. If he, though, was unimpressed by the columnist, the feeling was mutual and Mrs. Cohawl attempted in her extrovertive American way to resolve the unresolvable differences between the two men.

"We're hoping, dear," she said to Amend, "that Mr. Trilbo will like Cherice in her first play."

"Better that Cherice should enjoy herself in her acting than anyone else," stated Amend.

"Ah, that's it," Trilbo was sardonic. "Perdition to the public in the best tradition of show business."

"Not at all," countered Cohawl in his clipped British University-learned English. "There are always some who like and some who do not like any performance or entertainment if they are left to their own devices."

"Hear, hear," sneered Trilbo as Mrs. Cohawl frantically frowned at her husband.

"I would, Sir, I am sure, enjoy your daughter's play more if you were to appear in a turban and levitate a few tables for us off center stage!"

There were thinly disguised guffaws from those of Trilbo's cohorts and toadies standing around. The party broke up as rather a dismal failure, and so the days turned themselves end on end towards the momentous date of opening.

"O Wondrous Morning" had been selected largely because Cherice liked it, and because she liked it, Amend had put considerable money into it—not that it mattered to him—and its heretofore unknown author became known. If there was even a pseudo-playwise member of the producing and acting group of "O Wondrous Morning," it might have been Mrs. Cohawl, whose objections to the selected vehicle on strictly realistic and commercial grounds, were overruled by her daughter's enthusiasm and her husband's belief that that very enthusiasm was much more important than anything that might happen at the box office.

AS Amend had stated many times, in his own India entertainers usually put on their performances free. Their payment was the joy of entertaining and the pleasure of their audience. This American way of judging everything on a critical and commercial basis irked Amend, but it was a magnificent concession on his part to this arrangement that the night before the initiation of Cherice's play, he had called for and obtained an appointment with Trilbo in the latter's hotel suite.

He arrived punctually at nine p.m., and the two men sat in the critic's heavily ornamented living-room, both somewhat uneasily, Cohawl stiffly and Trilbo slouched exaggeratedly in an overstuffed morris chair.

"It is about Cherice's play," the Indian came straight to the point.

Edmond inclined his head as though it were new knowledge to him that "O Wondrous Morning" starring Miss Cherice Cohawl was to have its first showing on the morrow.

"It seems," the Swami went on, "that my wife, who knows about these things, says that it is of the utmost importance what you write in your column about my daughter's play, that if you write bad of it, it will be bad; if you write good of it, it will be good."

"That's something of an oversimplification, but essentially, I can say with due modesty, true, true."

"I want you to write good of it."

There was silence in the great room. Trilbo eyed this man. He was envious of the Indian, of his carriage and height, of his dignified serenity and obvious intelligence. When Trilbo envied someone, he hated him, and now this man was coming to him and

attempting to dictate what he should write in his column.

The Swami went on. He told of his daughter; a lot of irrelevancies, of how hard she had worked and how much she believed and how much she enthused; reasons, all of which, that set Edmond Trilbo's mind more surely. The Swami finally took his leave gracefully. He thanked Trilbo for his time.

There was, the critic noticed, no indication that he would be made a present of some carved ivory statuettes which he had pointedly admired at the Cohawl's. The Indian repeated as he was leaving, "I hope you will write only good of the play."

"I shall see it, of course," replied a thoroughly miffed Trilbo, "but I do not expect to be impressed by it." He shut his specially carved oak door.

The journalist sat for a moment at a window overlooking the park. It was cold neither outside nor in here, but he was chilly. He connected it somehow with Cohawl and decided he disliked the man even more than at first note. He went to bed humming pleasantly to himself and looking forward to the morrow and "O Wondrous Morning" which wouldn't be quite so wondrous when he got through with it in the "Lancer's Point."

THE opening night was typical. The excitement of the cast, the enthusiasm of the crowd, and the reserved attitude of the critics. To be entirely objective, the play was a rather nebulous hodge-podge of irrelevant, even at times, downright inconsequential episodes. It dealt with the dream life of humans and how in the play, one young girl, played by Cherice Cohawl, changed things around so that reality became a dream and her dreams became reality.

It was rather a happy atmosphere but the idea was neither original nor inspiring in its form.

Cherice acted beneath the handicap of a sort of blue-white sheet wrapped around to suggest the ethereal qualities of her dream-world reality. She did her lines creditably, and the audience reaction seemed to signify that they, at least, were passably satisfied.

Swami Amend Cohawl, however, seated with Mrs. Cohawl three rows behind Trilbo's fourth and center noted that the critic laughed out loud on several occasions where no joke was meant, and that this caused those around him who were aware of his identity to titter a bit themselves. Edmond Trilbo walked out in the middle of the third act and that, as ancient showmen along the Main Stem will tell you, was a bad sign. The audience's attitude from then to the end of the play, or at least that in the immediate area of the now-vacated fourth row center, became distinctly chilly.

The critic returned to his hotel suite. With the feverish speed of a purposeful man, he uncovered his portable in the den and began to type almost as soon as he'd taken off coat and hat and mixed himself a rye and water.

Never had his pointed phrases flowed more freely and never more destructively. His noiseless bumped and vibrated as he went on, pausing only to feed new sheets into the machine. When he was through, he realized he had written the entire "Lancer's Point" column on "O Wondrous Morning" but this was too good an opportunity to miss. He rose and was mixing himself another rye when the door chimes sounded.

He crossed to the front, frowning the while. Lord, hotel personnel these days! The people downstairs had explicit instructions not to disturb him and certainly to let no one up without first announcing them.

He called, "Who's there?"

A voice answered, "Open the door," in unmistakably familiar tones.

Almost against his will, yes, in fact quite against his will, Trilbo grasped the heavy bronze knob and the portal swung inward. The Indian, Cohawl, came in. The journalist sputtered with rage.

"What right have you to come up here—I must tell you, sir, that I resent unexpected intrusion by anyone; doubly so by one of your ilk!"

The Indian stood there wordlessly, staring at the man, and Trilbo noticed suddenly and uncomfortably how large and dark his eyes were.

"I suppose," Edmond went on slightly less irritably, "you've come to ask me what I wrote of the play. Perhaps," the sneer again, "you'd like to read my review."

He gestured towards his typewriter and the pile of paper beside it.

"No," said Amend slowly. "I can see in your face. I can see it all."

Trilbo rocked back and forth from heel to toe feeling master of the situation again. The Swami went on.

"I am fully aware, Mr. Trilbo, that it would be worthless for me to ask you to relent, to ask you not to drive your lance so deep into the heart of my daughter even when I tell you that to do so will surely ruin a sensitive young girl's life."

"Sir, I cannot be bribed," Edmond puffed. Ethics, they're wonderful!

Without a word the Indian wheeled and strode out of the room in his great black coat, leaving so suddenly and soundlessly that it seemed the next minute as though perhaps he had never been there and there was nothing but the half-opened oak door a shade flapping somewhere back of him in the apartment, and a strange chilliness in the room and in Trilbo's heart.

YES, said the wise and the sophisticated and those who, themselves, had been wounded but had lived to turn philosopher, their wounds healed, the "Lancer's Point" had never been driven home more skillfully than in his column on "O Wondrous Morning." Trilbo was certainly at his best. The play idea, he referred to as "an attempt at the ethereal with all the mysticism of a bedpan!"

"The stage lighting," Trilbo claimed, had the garish virtues of the main dining hall of an orphans' home, and the subtle effects reminded of a one-bulb country-station platform."

"The actors," Edmond went on, "were of that rare and vicious anomalous class that should not only not be seen but also not be heard!"

There were others and others of comments. His best thrusts were saved for Cherice Cohawl who uttered the inutterable lines with a variety of tonal qualities ranging from a familiar black face station caller he'd once heard in Chattanooga to the Transcontinental Limited taking a frosty switch on the curve above Sandusky. "Miss Cohawl attired in a faded sheet that surely someone used escaping from the third floor of the Flatiron Building fire of '89, resembles at times a bedraggled fugitive from the Bengal Lancers and one would not be surprised were she to gently lapse into Gunga Din offstage."

Trilbo concluded that "perhaps it would be more within the keeping of the ingenious background to retitle the poor play, 'A Night In a Turkish Bath,' and considering Miss Cohawl's Indian background, she might do a strip tease to the accompaniment of muted castanets" which, Mr. Trilbo pronounced, he was ready to supply.

"'O Wondrous Morning' never came," he punctuated, "but lay slaughtered somewhere in a dark, dismal and endless p.m., by an author's ineptitudes and the inescapable amateurishness of its woebegone and sub-vaudeville cast."

High noon of the day after the opening night, Trilbo received a call. He frowned at the voice. It was Cohawl. What he said was simple.

"You shall apologize to my daughter, Mr. Trilbo. You shall beg her forgiveness for what you have written."

Even before the journalist's sputterings and protestations could seek retaliation, a click at the other end told Edmond that the Swami had rung up. He amused himself at the thought that evening of the crestfallen company. And how disspirited a company can be after such a lambasting as he had meted out! Even the audience is against them.

Trilbo did not know until the next morning when he picked up his paper that there had been no performance. "O Wondrous Morning" was no more, but that was not the main story, and his eyes excitedly took in the details. Miss Cherice Cohawl had committed suicide by hanging herself in a closet of her home shortly before five o'clock. "The body was found by Mrs. Cohawl. Miss Cohawl was featured in a new play which opened last night backed by her father, Amend Cohawl of India."

The Indian, Trilbo knew intuitively, would now certainly be very annoying, and having all of a bully's cowardice, he thought long and seriously of calling the police, and yet what could he say? He had not been threatened. Still, the press must not be intimidated. He did check with the downstairs

desk, though, and again reiterated his instructions that no one, no one, was to be let up without his being notified by house phone and only with his permission.

THE critic's hired man prepared the usual light supper. There was no show tonight to be reviewed, and afterward Trilbo sat in a chair by the window sipping some rare wine from one of his producer acquaintances. He'd heard the door into the back hall close some time before as his man had left and he knew he was now alone.

He sat and stared out over the city and he felt, perhaps with the help of a third glass of heady wine, a sense of remoteness to and yet influence over this city and its teeming millions. There was, he was frank enough with himself to admit it, a sense of satisfaction that he, Edmond Trilbo, was so powerful that he held the verdict of life and death over some men's pocketbooks, over some men's ideas, over, even, some men's lives.

That a girl had killed herself, undoubtedly because of his judgment of her acting ability and her play, made one a god sitting atop a gothic Olympus.

It was then that he noticed the draft and the chilliness. And then, too, although he was still deeply satisfied by the spread of the city before him, his eyes almost beyond conscious control, slid away from the scene, slid sideways, their corners catching the image of something tall and dark near his chair where something tall and dark should not be.

He jumped from his chair and made the small frightened sound of one who, in a few minutes, has been jerked from his shell of sophistication and polish and urban security.

The Indian was standing there looking at him levelly, and Trilbo wildly looked at the hands and was glad there was no weapon in them. There seemed no physical menace about the man, in fact, and the journalist angrily demanded to know why, for the second time in twenty-four hours, Mr. Cohawl had intruded upon his privacy, this time not only without being announced but without knocking.

It was too trivial a point just then to wonder how he had gotten in.

The Swami stood with folded arms, and perhaps the shadow in his eyes was from the black fedora on his head, or perhaps it was grief. His dark greatcoat, overlong as Trilbo had noticed with the fastidiousness of the precisely tailored dandy, had a Dracula-like quality which needed only for props a coach, a castle, and a bat.

Then the critic's arrogant conceit came to his rescue.

"I must ask you to leave immediately, sir. I consider myself a very lenient man not to call the police now but I surely shall if you make another one of your precipitous appearances. I, uh . . ." It was a slight concession to the conventional. " . . . I read of the death of your daughter and I of course offer condolences. I do believe, however, that she was misguided in . . ."

An expression crossed the usually expressionless face of Cohawl. It was an expression that Trilbo did not like.

"I did not come here, Edmond Trilbo, to discuss the merits of the situation." The Indian pronounced his words very exactly. "I repeat what I told you earlier before my daughter, as the papers say, took her life, but of course she was dying then of this malady you had stricken her with. I repeat that you shall seek her out and apologize to her. I care little whether the apology is made in this world or the next."

"Are you threatening me?"

"You may designate any word you wish to it. I am merely pronouncing sentence on you," the Swami replied.

This man was obviously mad and he was a trouble-maker. Edmond Trilbo had an abnormal fear of cranks. He'd run across many in his professional life. They were troublesome and they were dangerous and he was of the turn of mind that held there was nothing more precious than his own personal safety and that all should be sacrificed to that. An idea blossomed, grew suddenly big.

Trilbo backed around to the side of the desk, and beneath the level of its top, edged open a drawer by fingertip. His hand closed around the butt therein.

"I believe you came up here with the thought of killing me," he said, quieter now that the way ahead seemed clear.

The Swami stood silently and straight before him.

"That will be taken care of," he replied finally.

It was a more violent thing than Trilbo had ever done in his life before, but it was entirely justified for his welfare and for his peace of mind, and its originality for him held no terrors. It was so like so many plays he'd seen.

He brought the gun up into sight, aimed it at Cohawl and fired. For a moment, the Swami did not move, and there was a frightening instant where Trilbo thought madly of the mystic qualities ascribed to these Indians. He pumped another shot for good measure but then saw the spreading red on the man's overcoat.

The Swami slid suddenly to the floor. It was all very simple. The stage had been perfectly set. He had instructed several times and this afternoon that no one was to be let upstairs. The finding of the Indian unannounced would be sufficient justification.

He picked up the phone, jiggled it. The desk clerk answered. Trilbo pitched his voice high and talked fast.

"For God's sake, get the police! Somebody broke in up here and tried to attack me. I've shot him!"

He hung up and walked gingerly around the side of the desk to where Cohawl lay. Amend's face was still expressionless, the eyes were open, but no more than flesh and blood was he, for his color was very poor and his breathing was very bad.

Still, there were words, not many of them but a few before those downstairs could rush up to the rescue. Witches' words to scare old women, Trilbo told himself afterward.

"I had asked only that you find my daughter and apologize to her, either here or in the hereafter. But there are things worse than life and death, Mr. Trilbo, as you shall have an eternity to find out, and yet your search and your task shall be the same."

With that he died on the elaborately marked carpet that hardly showed where the blood stained it.

THEY came and took him away and Trilbo acted very well his surprise at finding who the man was. The police took a police view of the whole thing. A father crazed by the suicide of his actress daughter comes to revenge himself upon the critic who panned her play. No charges were preferred.

For a while Trilbo was very cautious. Some mystical part of him that he shied at and tried to reason over cautioned him to be very careful.

He stayed away from building sites, never walked under ladders, stepped carefully in rainy, slippery weather and told his cab drivers to take it easy.

Still, it was only a little over three months later that in walking to the next corner for a newspaper, it happened.

He had crossed the street and was on the far sidewalk when the shouts of passers-by and the thundering sound of a racing motor caused him to look up from his city final edition.

The truck, obviously out of control, was almost upon him. It too had mounted the curb and was coming towards him only yards away, like an enraged bull.

Trilbo stood and met his fate with no more fear than a man can muster up in two fifths of a second. Clutching the paper in both hands, he faced the metal monster squarely and was tossed rudely like a dressmaker's dummy into the air for at least thirty feet, to fall there a huddled, nondescript form.

That, as far as Edmond Trilbo was concerned, was the end of his concern for his life, and many was the editorial writer who commented on the strange chain of circumstances, starting with the ill-starred "O Wondrous Morning."

But there were stranger things in store for Trilbo. It was like waking up after an operation or a very bad, very deep dream. He was on his back, and beneath him was a sort of undistinguishable ground. The remembrance of the truck, of the exploding impact and of the abysmal nothingness that followed was clear within him. Yet this place was no ambulance, no hospital.

For a moment, he wondered if he was still in the street but there were no people and this was not concrete he felt under his fingers.

Trilbo rose then and saw on the ground at his feet the same city final edition he had purchased before. When? Minutes,

hours, days before, he did not know. Where he was, was far more of a mystery.

IT was a plain that seemed limitless in all directions, and the sky, what should have been sky, was no more than a monotonously perfect degree of light, not bright, not dark but entirely even, coming from a source which was not apparent.

Trilbo picked up the paper, mechanically placing it under his arm. He started to walk, for that seemed the only thing to do. It was an hallucination. He was under ether, perhaps, being operated on, part of his mind in a fantasia. And then ahead of him, he saw something, at first unidentifiable but gradually to his straining eyes it took form and significance to him: *a figure swathed in a blue-white gown.*

He knew then a terrible fear that gnawed at his small soul. He had a fine tradition of plays, plays that he'd watched and smirked over, plays about death, about waking up and the obsequious tenant saying, "But, sir, you *are* dead!"

Corn, and yet what was this? He looked at his hands. He pinched himself. There was feeling. There was movement in his limbs. He was not under anesthesia. He was him, himself, Trilbo.

He commenced to run. This sinister farce must have a reason and an explanation. A feverish urgency drove him onward toward the figure in the distance on the limitless plain. He ran for minutes, many minutes until he was panting like a little dog. Still he drew no nearer to the white-sheeted figure. It remained always exactly the same distance from him.

He screamed then as the first mad conception of his predicament oozed into his consciousness. The paper, the city final edition with the date in black type was his starting point, and *She,* the image of Cherice across there, across the unattainable plain was his goal. The urgency to reach her was the whip that drove him on, his purpose forever now. He must follow her and follow her and follow her, for if there was senselessness in chasing one whom you can never reach across a strange dusty plain that had no outer limits, it was as senseless to stay here in the small dry center of his growing madness.

For he knew now full well that this was neither Heaven nor Hell . . . . . but Eternity!

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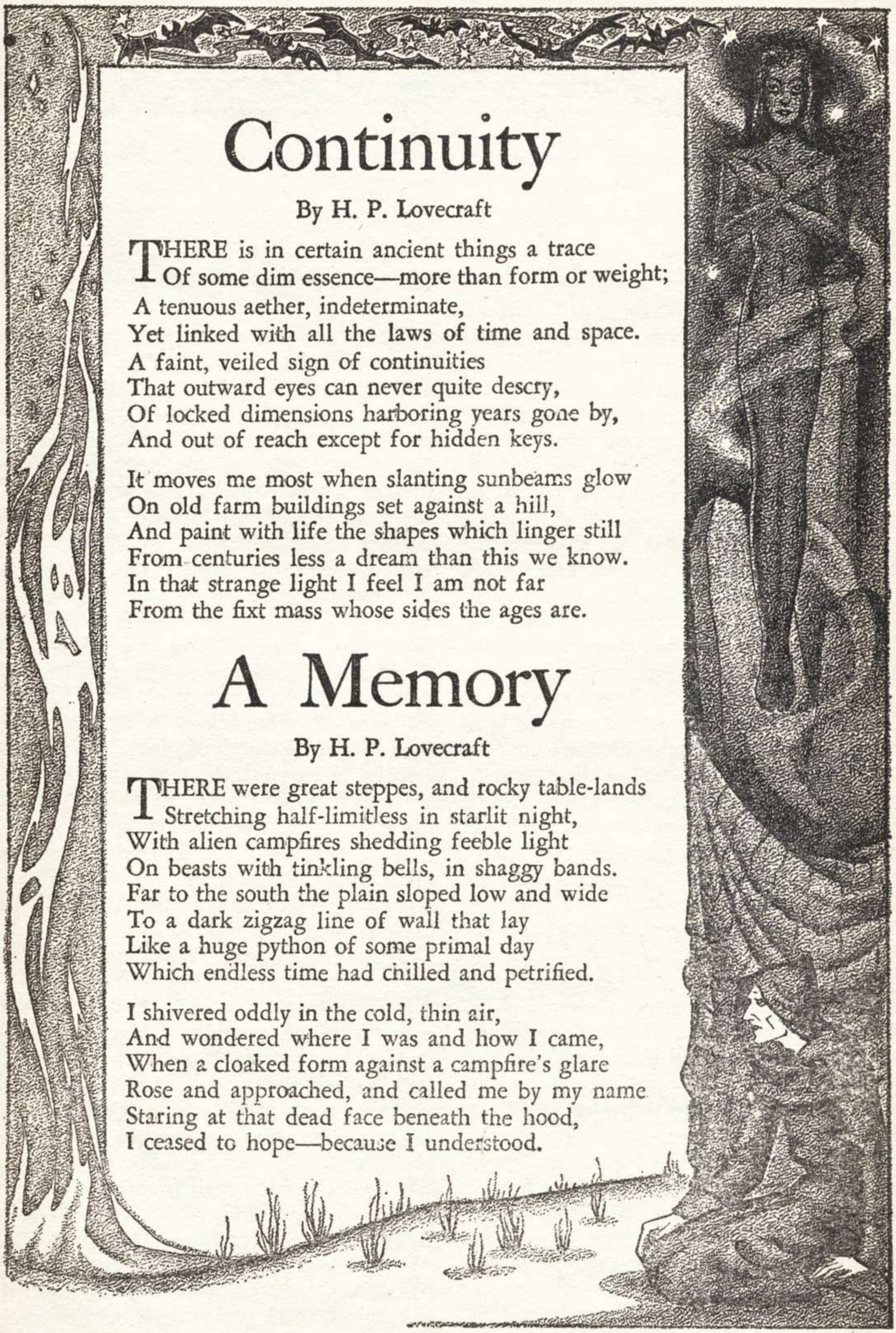

Continuity

By H. P. Lovecraft

THERE is in certain ancient things a trace
Of some dim essence—more than form or weight;
A tenuous aether, indeterminate,
Yet linked with all the laws of time and space.
A faint, veiled sign of continuities
That outward eyes can never quite descry,
Of locked dimensions harboring years gone by,
And out of reach except for hidden keys.

It moves me most when slanting sunbeams glow
On old farm buildings set against a hill,
And paint with life the shapes which linger still
From centuries less a dream than this we know.
In that strange light I feel I am not far
From the fixt mass whose sides the ages are.

A Memory

By H. P. Lovecraft

THERE were great steppes, and rocky table-lands
Stretching half-limitless in starlit night,
With alien campfires shedding feeble light
On beasts with tinkling bells, in shaggy bands.
Far to the south the plain sloped low and wide
To a dark zigzag line of wall that lay
Like a huge python of some primal day
Which endless time had chilled and petrified.

I shivered oddly in the cold, thin air,
And wondered where I was and how I came,
When a cloaked form against a campfire's glare
Rose and approached, and called me by my name.
Staring at that dead face beneath the hood,
I ceased to hope—because I understood.

The Terror in Teakwood

A great pianist must have a great pair of hands. His own or somebody else's!

THE night of the first day that I worked for him I knew that Ondia Hurok was terrified either of the teakwood casket or its contents. I didn't know why—then. There were a number of things I didn't know that first night, because I hadn't as yet had an opportunity to talk with Leonie.

The thing really began for me with the rapping on my bedroom door at two o'clock in the morning. The knocking wasn't loud, but there was an urgent insistency about it that finally penetrated the uneasy fitful slumber into which I had fallen.

I awoke, but I lay there a moment without moving, thinking I'd heard the sound in a dream. The freak March thunderstorm that had blown up at midnight had died by now. But the wind still howled and whistled about the penthouse which Ondia Hurok had leased atop the St. James, so convenient to Aeolian Hall just next door on the street level of the same skyscraper.

The rapping came again, rousing me completely.

I stuck my long legs out of bed, shrugged into a robe, and went to the bedroom door, throwing it open to reveal my new employer, Ondia Hurok, standing just outside in the darkened hall.

And Hurok held the teakwood casket in his hands.

That was the first time I ever saw it uncovered. A lidded, ornately carved box it was, about a foot and a half long by six inches high and wide—in size, not unlike the sort of box you rent in a safety deposit vault.

But for the moment I paid no attention to the casket. And of the horror it contained I hadn't the faintest conception, of course. Good God, how could I have? In this, the fifth decade of the twentieth century?

No. It was the ghastly appearance of the man himself that made me stare. He was in heavy white silk pajamas, without a robe—or that is, what was *left* of heavy white silk pajamas. They'd been literally clawed almost entirely from his body. I say clawed advisedly, because his naked brown chest, his hard flat stomach and tanned thighs, were blood-streaked and welted—as if from the claws of a venomously angry black leopard.

He was a handsome specimen as he stood before me, with a superb physique like a V set on an I. Handsomer by far, certainly, than I. And I wondered again, wincing inwardly, if that was why Leonie had jilted me unceremoniously to marry him so suddenly a month before in Miami.

All this fleetingly while I recovered from my initial amazement. Behind him the apartment was darkened and silent. Of Leonie herself there was no sign.

I found my voice. "What in God's name has happened to you?"

It is difficult, admittedly, to appear debonair while one is nearly naked, but Ondia Hurok managed the feat somehow. But he couldn't hide the sheer stark fear in his black onyx eyes. Nor did he answer me directly.

He said suavely, "I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Welch. Or may I call you Giles? And may I ask one very small favor of you?"

He knew damned well he could do both. He'd hired me, hadn't he? Though in what capacity I was yet to learn. Leonie's hysterical letter of a week before had told me little or nothing. And genius itself seldom made explanations, I found. At least, I supposed

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

he was a genius. Known in Europe as a concert pianist, his fame here had been somewhat obscured by the war, and America, for the most part, had yet to hear of him.

But I said now, "Of course. Anything. But first let me help you. You've been terribly clawed."

"A few scratches," he said. "They don't matter."

He was lying, and I knew it, despite his casual manner. If the scratches didn't matter, something did. For fear again had licked like a hot flame back of his slanted eyes.

HE CAME into my room, and half-closed the door behind him. He held the black teakwood casket negligently under his left arm, and held out his right hand to me. Resting on the palm of it was a thick golden key, which I immediately assumed fitted the teakwood casket, for the box had an old-fashioned keyhole, shaped like a Moorish doorway, edged in the same gold.

"Keep this key for me until morning, will you, Giles? In a safe place, of course. I'll ask for it then."

"Certainly," I agreed. "But I wish you'd let me wash those wounds and apply antiseptic. They look pretty deep to me. I can't understand what—"

He froze instantly. "Keep your conjectures to yourself, if you please!"

I stifled a sharp reply. An even temper isn't one of my assets, but I kept my mouth shut—for Leonie's sake, I told myself.

It was almost as if Hurok read her name in my mind. "Oh," he added, at the door, "and not a word of this to Madame Hurok, if you'll be so good. While here, we're occupying separate apartments, and evidently she hasn't heard the—disturbance. I prefer that she should remain in ignorance."

I bowed coldly in assent.

He was gone then, as abruptly as he'd come, leaving me to stare at the white panels of the door he'd closed so softly behind him.

I turned on the bedside lamp and switched off the ceiling light. Then I sat down on the edge of the bed, and stared mystified at the key in my hand.

Why in the name of all that was holy had he left the key with me instead of the casket? When it was so obviously the casket that he feared? I'd seen it at once. Oh, he'd held the coffer carelessly enough under his arm, but all the while he'd talked to me he hadn't been able to help stealing furtive, apprehensive glances at it. It was as if the thing exerted some strange fascination over him, as if he'd been both attracted and repelled at the same time.

I called up a mental picture of the casket as I'd just seen it. A small dull black box, elaborately carved, with a golden Moorish keyhole and fancifully wrought hinges also of gold. It had a foreign look, but surely there was nothing about it intrinsically to cause a man to eye it with such obvious terror, tinged with triumph?

Unless there was something *in* the casket.

But—what? It had presented no suggestion of great weight as Onida Hurok had held it so lightly under his arm. No sound had emanated from it, though once I'd imagined I'd heard a faint scratching, so faint that I couldn't be sure.

I shook my head, and shrugged. Placing the thick golden key in the drawer of my night table, I switched off the light and again stretched myself out on the bed.

But not to sleep. To listen instead to the wind sobbing mournfully about the eyrie Hurok had rented atop the St. James. And to think longingly of Leonie. And to wonder again and again what creature on earth or in hell—what manner of *thing*—had clawed so ferociously the body of Ondia Hurok.

I HAD stared unbelievingly at the curt note I'd received the month before from Leonie in Florida.

"Giles: (it had read)

I married Ondia Hurok, the pianist, yesterday. I'm sorry.

Leonie."

We had planned to be married in June. The damned note left me dazed. I don't think it really sank in until I took it to Glocky—Papa Glockstein, under whom both Leonie and I had been studying piano. I took all my troubles to Glocky. He was almost the only father I could ever remember.

His glasses slid farther and farther down on his rhombic nose as he read it. *"Du lieber*

Gott!" he muttered at last in stupefaction. "Ondia Hurok! But the liddle Leonie—she was in loff with you, Giles, boy!"

"It says here," I said. I guess the sound I made was meant to be a careless laugh, but it was a lousy failure. "Apparently women can switch their affections with all the ease and celerity of a fireman changing his pants."

Glocky laid a hand on my shoulder sadly. "You are bitter, isn't it? You are young, boy, and that is the time when the heart breaks easily. But—another Spring, another pretty face, and the so-broken heart is whole again, not so? Glocky knows."

Ah, well. I wouldn't argue with him. Glocky was so old. If he'd ever known what it was like to be in love, he'd forgotten long ago. But me, I'd love Leonie till I died. I couldn't help myself.

But I only said, "You spoke Ondia Hurok's name as if you'd known him."

"Long ago, in Wien, when he was young." He thought a moment and said a strange thing then. "I hope, for the sake of the liddle Leonie, that he has changed."

He wouldn't let me question him further. "When the liddle Leonie returns, Papa Glockstein will find out why she married him."

"She's coming back?" I hadn't expected that.

Glocky looked surprised. "Why, Giles, haven't you heard? Hurok is to play with the symphony at Aeolian next month. So you see, cheer up, Leonie will be back."

I didn't know what good that was going to do me—when she was another man's wife. I told myself bitterly that I never wanted to see or hear from her again. And I honestly thought that I wouldn't.

BUT just a week before Hurok's scheduled appearance with the symphony orchestra there came that second hysterical letter from Leonie. That letter that made me wonder what was wrong, and what manner of man Leonie had married so hastily.

"I know I've forfeited the right to ask anything of you, ever again. But Giles, don't refuse me. I'm so afraid! And of what—I do not know.

"Listen! Hurok wants to hire a man—I think I know why—I mean, I'm *afraid* I know why. But I'm pretending to know nothing. A secretary, he says. At my suggestion Hurok is writing to Glocky to recommend someone. Giles, please! Go to Glocky, and apply for the job. *Please!*

"If you get it, we must meet as strangers. There's something wrong with Hurok."

The whole letter sounded unlike her. Leonie had never been a timid sort of person, never one to jump at shadows. But she was certainly afraid of something, or someone.

Naturally I thought it was Hurok.

The soreness had worn away a little from the first blow she'd dealt me, and it never occurred to me to ignore her request now. I loved her too deeply, though I was determined never to let her see it. But I lost no time in getting in touch with Glocky, and applying for the job.

I showed him Leonie's letter, and his furry gray eyebrows climbed toward his scalp. "Ah, so. Perhaps Hurok has not changed, then, so very much."

I said impatiently, "Well, what's wrong with the man?"

"He was such a cruel liddle boy, Giles. Ach, Gott, what is the word? Sadistic, yes. Long ago I warned him he would bring bad trouble on himself one day. Perhaps he has at last."

But when I met them at the train, everything seemed all right on the surface. I introduced myself to Hurok, who was carrying what I now believe was the teakwood casket, wrapped in a canvas cover. He eyed me sharply, then presented Leonie, who was looking Slavic and beautiful in Persian lamb and a shako, her long black bob like a waterfall over her collarless coat.

Following her instructions, I bowed politely. "Madame Hurok, how do you do?"

"Mr. Welch," she murmured.

But when Hurok had turned to attend to the luggage, she moved a little closer. "Oh, Giles," she said softly. "You cared enough to—"

I was determined to be distant, too proud to let her think I still cared. "I can't understand all this mystery," I said. "Your husband only wants a secretary."

She looked hurt at my coldness. "Sec-

retary?" You couldn't call it amusement, that brief smile that twisted her lips. "*Bodyguard*, you mean."

That startled me. "Who's threatening him?"

"I—don't know." But she knew something. There was just the shadow of fear for a minute on her face. Then she said swiftly, "I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can, and we'll talk."

And it was that night, while the wind howled and mourned, that Hurok brought me the golden key to the teakwood casket.

And the fear was in his face, too, though tinged with a sort of morbid triumph.

II

AFTER I'd showered and dressed in the morning, I started out to find Ondia Hurok. It was high time I was learning just what my duties were to be.

I left the room but before I could pull the door shut behind me, the telephone rang. I re-entered, leaving the door hanging open.

"Hello," I said, picking up the receiver.

There was the sharp intake of breath at the other end. "At the old meeting place. At noon. Hurok will practise till two."

The click of the receiver at the other end of the line, then. But despite the soft, breathless hurriedness of the anonymous voice, I'd recognized it as she'd known I would. Leonie's.

I was still standing there, the receiver in my hand, when there was a short cough behind me. I turned. Ondia Hurok was standing in the doorway, his eyes fixed on me unblinkingly.

"That isn't an outside wire," he said, nodding toward the telephone. There was accusation, suspicion, in his voice.

"Oh," No one else was in the apartment but Leonie. I thought fast. "Stupid of me. I was trying to get the desk to—to send up cigarettes."

"Indeed?" Hurok's eyes shifted to the chest of drawers next to the bathroom door. I followed his glance. The man missed nothing.

There was a carton of cigarettes on top of the chest.

Whatever he thought of my lie, he said nothing further. He just let his silence hang in the air ominously.

"I'm ready for work," I said, changing the subject clumsily enough. "I suppose there will be fan mail to answer, as well as other correspondence? Or—just what are my duties to be?"

He waved a hand carelessly. "There's no hurry. In a few days—" He let his voice trail off vaguely.

I began to wonder if perhaps Leonie hadn't been right, after all, in saying it wasn't a secretary that her husband wanted.

Hurok went on. "I've come for the key I gave you last night."

"How are you feeling this morn—"

"The key, please," he said, effectively stopping my question. He must have been in pain still from that clawing, but he gave no sign of it.

I shrugged, and turned to the night table, feeling his eyes boring into my back as I did so. Retrieving the key, I handed it to him. And I think I would have risked his anger and questioned him about the teakwood box, then, only he said something else that drove every other consideration from my mind temporarily.

"You knew Madame Hurok before?" he asked sharply. "This was her home town, I know."

So. He was suspicious already. And I hadn't improved matters with my clumsy lie about the cigarettes.

But I kept my face blank. "No. We'd never met before. After all, the city is large."

And I looked him right in the eye.

He left then. But whether he believed me or not, I couldn't tell. Mentally I pictured him going through the hall, returning to his room. To open the teakwood casket? To find therein—what?

I didn't know. And Leonie's story was to enlighten me only a very little, and to puzzle me even more.

"THE old meeting place."

I knew where she meant. The balcony tearoom of a downtown department store, cheap and quiet. It seemed strange to see her sitting there on the red leather bench, waiting for me at noon. I'd met her there so many times before. And though I told my-

self I was a fool, still my heart leaped just as gladly at sight of her as it ever had in the past.

I hoped I didn't show it.

There were a thousand questions I wanted to ask her, but she said, "Please, Giles. After lunch."

So it wasn't until we were having coffee that she said, "It was good of you to come. And to take the job, as I asked. I treated you so shabbily."

Some devil made me say it. "Well, well. This *is* news."

Her lashes fell. "I deserved that, I know," she said, low. She looked at me then. "But —what's done is done." She sighed. "I've made a terrible mistake."

There were tears in her eyes. I could no longer pretend indifference. "Leonie, why did you marry him?"

"I—I don't know. Honestly, I don't. I think I must have been hypnotized. Hurok was at Aunt Flo's when I reached there. She'd picked him up somewhere—you know how hipped on music she is, even though she knows nothing about it, really—and she'd installed him in the house as a guest, with a Mason and Hamlin for him to practise on. She'd even sound-proofed the room she'd given him, at his request.

"He didn't come down to dinner that first night, and I didn't meet him at all. But after dinner I was out on the terrace alone. And I could hear him playing through the open window. And, Giles, he was playing—the piano part of Czarnowitz's *Seventh Piano Concerto!*"

She knew I'd be startled, and I was. "On a record, you mean?"

"No, no! He was playing it himself."

I looked at her disbelievingly. "You know that's impossible. Nobody could play the *Seventh* but Czarnowitz himself. It's common knowledge."

Leonie nodded. But she persisted in her statement. "He was playing it superbly."

"It's impossible," I said again. This made me forget all about the teakwood casket. I was no maestro, but I knew something about music. "Czarnowitz had a phenomenal handspan. Abnormal, really. Nobody on God's earth ever had a pair of hands like his. Those chords of the *Seventh,* Leonie! They're impossible to anybody else. When Czarnowitz died last year, remember they said the *Seventh* would never be played again? Sylvia Satterlee mourned about it three Sundays in a row in the *Globe.*"

"I know all that," Leonie said impatiently. "That's why Hurok's playing it dumbfounded me. I just stood there on the terrace, but I'd been transported to another world, really. Presently Hurok came out, and my shadowy figure must have startled him. I told him I was Mrs. Masterson's niece, and he lit his cigarette lighter and held it up so he could see my face.

"I suppose there must have been something very near adoration in my eyes. I whispered, 'You were *playing* it. The *Seventh. How?*'

" 'Ah, you know it can't be played by anyone else,' he said. The lighter was still flaming and I could see his face plainly. The most peculiar expression was on it. A mixture of—of terror and triumph. Yes, that was it. And he laughed softly, 'They said Hurok was not so great as Czarnowitz, the fools. They shall see! But of this, nothing —until after I've played the *Seventh* in public for the first time. It shall be a little secret between you and me, yes?' "

Leonie looked pleadingly across the table at me. "Perhaps the secret made a sort of—of bond between us. Or perhaps I was just fascinated, mesmerized. I told you I didn't know. But we were married—three days later."

I SAID gently, "But there's something else. You're afraid, Leonie, I can see it."

"Yes," she shivered. "It's Hurok. No, no, don't look like that, Giles! He hasn't been cruel to me—yet; though he's insanely jealous and I shouldn't care to anger him. That's why I didn't want him to know that you'd known me before. But—he's *afraid.* Of *Something.* And I think I know what it is. He's alternately elated and terrified, until sometimes I wonder if he's quite sane."

I said nothing.

"Something peculiar happened the third night after we were married," Leonie went on. "I woke up. It must have been about three o'clock in the morning. Something had touched my throat. It was cold and clammy, as if it had come from a tomb. Then it moved up to my face, passed over my fea-

tures as if striving to recognize them in the dark. I remember screaming then, just once. And I must have fainted immediately.

"When I came to, all the lights were on, and Hurok was slapping my face gently to rouse me. I looked around, terrified, but there was no one else in the room. I told Hurok what had happened, and he said it must have been a nightmare. He himself, he swore, had noticed nothing.

"But, Giles, he was lying. He *knew* what had touched me. His face was putty-colored, and great drops of perspiration stood out all over his forehead. He was shaking like a leaf, and though he tried to conceal it from me, I saw that his pajamas were torn as if he'd been struggling violently with someone."

"And he made no further explanation?" I asked, wondering.

"None. I pretended to believe him. It seemed—simpler. Besides, there was a terrible expression on his face that forbade further questions. But in the morning there was something else. I went to the closet, and the door was locked. Hurok came upon me struggling with it. Without a word, he took the key of the closet from his pocket, opened it, and came out carrying—a teakwood box."

Ah. The casket again. "I've seen it," I admitted.

"The night before, when we'd retired," Leonie said, "the casket was lying on the dresser. Hurok always seemed to hate to have it out of his sight. But sometime during the night, he must have got up to lock the casket in the closet. It made me wonder. Why? Was the casket bound up in any way with the attack on me—the attack he stoutly insisted had been a nightmare? I think it was. Because, Giles, I know this much. Hurok is mortally afraid of that teakwood box!"

It was only then that I told her of the key he'd given me the night before.

But this puzzled her as it had me. "Why should he give you the key instead of the box, if he were seeking protection from it?"

I didn't know, either. But I told her of the appearance he'd presented when he'd knocked on my door, and the way he'd been horribly clawed.

She nodded. "You see? There's something, or someone, after him."

"But if it's something in the box, why doesn't he get rid of the thing?"

"Because, though he's terrified of it, he loves it, too. It's as if he were chained to it. I've seen him actually—oh, *gloating* is the only word that expresses it. Gloating over that teakwood casket."

"But after the attack on me," Leonie concluded, "Hurok began to speak of hiring a secretary—a male secretary. But I knew in my heart he wanted another man near—as a sort of bodyguard—just in case he loses what little control he has over this thing that menaces him."

Well, that could be. It might even explain why he left the key with me, that he might not be tempted to open the box to gloat over its contents. But what in the name of God could the casket contain? A venomous serpent, a blood-thirsty animal? Surely it was too small to hold any animal large enough to wreck such violent damage, such lacerations as I had seen with my own eyes on Hurok's tanned body?

And, anyway, would either of these be cause for gloating?

What *was* this terror — imprisoned in teak?

III

AS LEONIE and I were leaving the tea-room, I noticed a little man with a dark-green hat sitting on one of the red leather benches in the foyer. He held a spread newspaper in front of him, but, somehow, I had the impression he was watching both of us over the top of it.

Downstairs, as we waited for a cab, the little man in the dark-green hat was standing at the cigar counter. But when the clerk asked him what he wanted, he shook his head.

In the cab, I looked back. There was another cab behind us, and I was certain who its occupant would be. We were being followed, and I wondered why. Had Hurok set a watchdog upon us?

I resolved to find out without saying anything to Leonie.

In front of the St. James, our cab halted, and I said, "You'd better go in alone."

"I suppose so." She thought I meant for another reason, and I think she really real-

ized for the first time that she was married to another man. For she cried, "Oh, I hate this furtiveness!"

I stayed in the cab while she entered the hotel alone, then I told the cabbie to drive on. I looked through the rear window. The cab behind hesitated for a moment in front of the St. James, then came on after mine.

I smiled to myself in satisfaction. Two blocks further on, I paid off the driver and left the cab. Under pretense of looking at a display in a men's shop whose window acted as a mirror, I saw the little man in the green hat alight from the cab in which he'd been following.

Satisfied, I walked on, turned a corner, and ducked into a doorway. Presently the plump little figure passed, anxiously looking ahead. I fell into step behind him, caught up to him, and said softly, "You were looking for me?"

He started. But if I'd expected him to attempted escape or denial I was disappointed. He said, instead, "Yes, I was. I want to talk to you. You're connected in some way with the concert pianist, Ondia Hurok?"

He had a faintly foreign accent.

I said, "And if I am?"

"Please." He looked around, and saw the door of a tavern a few steps farther on. "Let's go in there where we can talk uninterrupted."

Mystified, I followed at his side, ready to grab him if he attempted to run. But he seemed content with the way things had turned out. We found a table at the back of the place, and when we were settled with beer before us, I said, "Well?"

He looked at me defiantly. "I want my money. The money Hurok promised me."

I'd expected to hear almost anything else. I said, in surprise, "But if Hurok owes you money, why come to me? Why not go directly to him?"

Because the little man was afraid—afraid of Ondia Hurok. He wanted his money, but safely, from a go-between.

Little by little, under my questioning, his story came out. His name was Stepan Gafke, and he'd been employed as caretaker of a small cemetery near a little town called Mydia, in Poland. One rainy night last fall a tall handsome stranger had approached him in his little cottage.

What in all the world, if he could have it, did Gafke most desire, the stranger wanted to know?

Gafke was prompt to answer. "Passage to America, and a little money." He'd lived there once, returning to Poland to care for an aging parent since dead. Now, if only some miracle—

The stranger had laughed. "Miracles sometimes happen."

A FEW nights later the stranger returned. He dangled a strip of plane tickets before Gafke's eager eyes. All these, and five thousand dollars besides, would be his, if Gafke, on a designated night, were to leave the cemetery gates unlocked, and remain in his cottage with his eyes and his ears closed. The tickets now; the money later.

Gafke had not hesitated for very long.

But there had been trouble, great trouble afterward. A vault had been opened during that night, and a body disturbed. Whose body, Gafke had never learned. But the scandal was hushed up so thoroughly, he was sure it had been the corpse of someone very important.

The cemetery authorities had been suspicious of him, and he had fled possible prosecution. And he'd never received the money the stranger had promised him. Only the tickets. They were not enough.

In America he had seen a picture of the tall handsome stranger who'd approached him on that rainy night last fall. The man had been Ondia Hurok.

I heard him through, and sat there biting my thumbnail. So Hurok numbered grave-robbing among his other talents? It was preposterous. Why should a man of his standing in the musical world run the risk? And what could he possibly hope to gain by it?

The little man broke into my thoughts. "So you see?" he said childishly, "I want my money, or I'll tell."

I don't know whether I really believed his story or not. But one thing was certain—the affair was complicated enough already without Gafke muddling it further. I determined to get rid of him for all time.

I laughed aloud, and sneered, "And who would believe you? Your word, against Hurok's?"

The little man looked faintly alarmed. "But it's true! It happened in Poland, just as I said."

"Poland is far away." I narrowed my eyes. "You know, I think there's a word for what you're trying to do. Blackmail!"

Gafke jumped to his feet. "No, no!"

"And do you know the penalty for blackmail, in this country?"

His jowls were trembling. He couldn't answer.

I jerked my head toward the door. "Beat it."

He beat it. I never saw him again.

I waited five minutes, then thoughtfully went back to the St. James. In the lobby, on impulse, I stepped into a phone booth and called Sylvia Satterlee, music critic of the *Globe*. I'd had an idea, a crazy idea, and there was something I wanted to learn.

SLYVIA remembered me. She was even cordial. She'd once been in love with an uncle of mine.

But when I told her I was working for Hurok, she snorted.

"Met that lad in Salzburg, before the war," she said crisply, "and confidentially, Giles, he stinks. A rude, ill-mannered, egotistical, fat-headed—"

When she paused for breath, I said, "He's going to play Czarnowitz's *Seventh* tomorrow night. It's all very hush-hush."

I had to hold the receiver away from my ear then till her excited voice died down a little.

"He'll be the most colossal flop!" she screamed. "He must be out of his mind to attempt it when failure is certain. No one could play that but Czarny. And did they hate each other's—uh—intestines! Remind me to tell you of their feud sometime. Hurok was insanely jealous of Czarny's great success—I mean, he was really *pathological* about it, Giles, dear, and—"

"There's one thing, Sylvia," I broke in, before this could go on all day. "Can you tell me where Czarnowitz is buried?"

"Buried? What a peculiar— But, wait, just a minute."

I waited till her voice came over the wire again.

"Giles? Czarny is buried in a little town called Mydia—yes, Mydia—in Poland."

I hung up then, and stood there for a minute looking blankly at the telephone.

And I wondered.

THAT night the teakwood casket entered the picture again. After calling Sylvia, I hadn't seen Hurok all day. He was in the soundproof studio of the penthouse, alone. He wouldn't permit anyone in the room with him while he was practising. And Leonie had told me at lunch that she would be out with friends for dinner and the theater.

But at eleven o'clock, as I was preparing for bed, Hurok knocked on my door, and I opened it. He was fully dressed this time, and if he bore fresh scars they were hidden beneath his clothes.

In his two hands, he held the teakwood casket. But he did not speak of it at first.

Instead he said, "You were out this morning, Giles?"

"Yes."

He looked at me. "Madame Hurok was out this morning, too."

His ellipitical statements didn't fool me. He was suspicious of both of us, and artfully trying to get me to trap myself. Sometimes a strong attack is the best defense. Remembering this, I said coldly, "Are you suggesting there was any connection?"

"My dear Mr. Welch!" He eyed me blandly. "How could there be? And if there were—it would be very, very sad, wouldn't it? What is mine, I *keep*."

It was a warning. I said nothing. Apparently satisfied that he'd gained his effect, Hurok held out the box.

"Will you keep this for me overnight?" He eyed it strangely, looking harassed tonight rather than terrified. His mouth was beginning to twitch, and inwardly I agreed with Leonie's estimate of the man.

If he wasn't insane, he was certainly emotionally unstable, for his moods seemed to change with the wind.

I took the box from him in silence and put it on top of the dresser. I knew he wouldn't answer any questions I might put to him, questions that were seething within me.

He stood there a moment, a hag-ridden figure if there ever was one. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his beaded forehead. And he said nervously,

"If—if you should notice anything unusual about the teakwood casket, pay no attention. It—it won't mean anything."

He was no sooner gone than I saw the key to the casket on the floor. He must have pulled it from his pocket with the handkerchief and the thick carpet had muffled the sound of its fall. I picked it up, and started to open the door and call after him. But with my hand on the knob, I hesitated, tempted.

I might never have such a chance again. The casket and key might never both be in my possession at one time.

I did not call Hurok.

Weighing the key in my hand, I went over to the dresser and put my ear against the teakwood casket. There was no sound from it.

I lifted the casket and shook it slightly. Still no sound. And it was impossible to tell from the weight of the thing whether or not it contained anything.

I was thinking, naturally, in the light of its past performances, that it held a creature of some kind. But if such a creature were in there, it must be either dead or in a comatose condition.

I stood there a minute thoughtfully, wondering, weighing the possibilities of what manner of unknown horror I might unleash. Then I put the key in the box and opened it, raising the lid slowly, ready to slam it down at the first hint of danger.

Nothing happened.

I drew a deep breath, boldly threw the lid back, and looked in.

THOUGH the box was not empty, it was an anti-climax of a sort. And my first feeling was one of acute disappointment and let-down.

The teakwood casket was lined with crimson velvet, and on a small pillow of the same velvet rested what appeared to be plaster-of-paris casts of a pair of hands. They extended from a point just above the wrists to the end of the exceedingly long spatulate fingers with their glossy colorless nails.

The wrists faced the ends of the box, and the hands themselves were placed one upon the other, much in the same manner in which the hands of a corpse are disposed.

They were pale ivory in color, and I touched them with a tentative forefinger. They were smooth and cold. Curious now, I leaned a little closer. Then, gingerly, I picked one of them up.

Seen closer, in a brighter light, I marveled at the wonderful work it represented. The ridges in the fingernails, the wrinkles at the knuckles, even the short dark hairs with which the back of the hand was dusted, all were faithfully, microscopically, exactly reproduced.

It might almost be the actual hand of a man.

AND then I jumped, and nearly dropped the thing in my disgust. The story Gafke had told! Of Ondia Hurok, and the disturbed vault in the cemetery at Mydia.

Shuddering a little with revulsion, I replaced the hand in the teakwood casket with the other, shut and locked the lid, not noticing in my disgust that I left the key in the lock.

I knew now. Those abnormally long fingers. These could be only the hands of Vladimir Czarnowitz, cut from his exhumed corpse!

It wasn't until I was calmer that I realized nothing was explained, and I was more in the dark than ever. I still thought the casket contained the hands of Czarnowitz, stolen by Hurok to be gloated over in his pathological jealousy. But even so—what then had been menacing Hurok? Apparently trying to kill him?

Dead hands?

It was ridiculous, impossible. Some intruder, some living being must be responsible for the attacks on Hurok. Some human being who wanted the teakwood casket and its contents. That could be the only possible explanation.

A little relieved, I went to bed. I awoke once that night, thinking I heard the sound of scratching.

Only half-awake, I pushed myself up on one elbow and listened.

The sound was not repeated.

Satisfied, I fell asleep again, innocent of the fury I had unknowingly let loose. Fury, frustrated in its real purpose, that was to expend itself savagely on the darkened stage of Aeolian Hall, many stories below.

IV

THE next morning—the morning of the day that Ondia Hurok was to play with the symphony orchestra—there was hell to pay.

Hans Schiltz, first violinist and concert-master of the orchestra, sent for me. I had met him casually when we'd first arrived. I went down to Aeolian Hall to see what he wanted, wondering not a little why he had sent for me.

He was waiting for me in the little green room behind the stage, pacing nervously back and forth.

"You sent for me?" I asked.

"Yes, the strangest thing has happened." He whipped out a handkerchief to wipe his brow. "I'm afraid to let Mr. Hurok know about it. The concert is tonight, and—well, you know these artists. It takes very little to throw them off."

I was completely mystified and must have looked it. For he took my arm, and said, "Come. There's nothing you can do, but I thought someone connected with Hurok ought to see it."

He led me out onto the stage, bare of everything at the moment except the great sprawling black concert grand which Hurok was to play that evening. I took one look, and it was unnecessary for Schiltz to explain himself further.

God only knows who had got at that piano, tearing at it in an insensate fury. But someone certainly had. The strings were ripped entirely from the instrument and lay in coiled masses on the floor, like the intestines of some disemboweled beast. And the ivory had been stripped from the keys, and great gouges and scratches marred the dull finish of the ebony case.

I could only stand there, my jaw ajar.

"That's the way I found it when I arrived this morning," Schiltz said. "It was in perfect condition last night. The question is, who destroyed the thing?"

But I said slowly, "You mean, who is determined that Hurok shall not play tonight?"

Schiltz stared at me. "Surely you can't believe that's the reason behind this vandalism? Who do you suspect?"

I shrugged, and wished I'd kept my mouth shut. "No one in particular."

"Anyway," Schiltz said, "if your theory is correct, our unknown vandal failed in his purpose. For the concert will go on tonight as scheduled. I've already called Weber and Garst, and they'll get another instrument over here for us in plenty of time. The thing is—I feel it is wiser not to tell Hurok what has happened. No sense upsetting him."

I thought it over a moment and nodded agreement.

"The concert is going to be a mess anyway," the little man continued fretfully. "No one can play that damned *Seventh*. Hurok will only limp through it if he gets through it at all. Bradsky, our conductor, must have been mad to agree to Hurok's proposal to put it on. He regrets it now, all right."

"Why?"

"Because," Schiltz said excitedly, "if you can believe it, Hurok has absolutely refused even to rehearse with the orchestra! I tell you, it's unheard of, for orchestra and soloist to go on cold!"

I LEFT him there, shaking his head dubiously. And in the elevator, I wondered why Hurok was so unwilling to let anyone hear him play the *Seventh* before his scheduled appearance tonight—so unwilling, in fact, as to go to the extreme of refusing to rehearse with the very men with whom he was to appear.

Upstairs, I had no sooner left the elevator at the penthouse floor when Hurok rushed at me from nowhere.

"You fool!" he cried. "Where is the key to the teakwood casket?"

"In the box," I answered as calmly as I could. "You dropped it last night, and I picked it up and put it in the lock."

I waited for him to ask me if I'd opened it and seen its contents. But he was too preoccupied with something else.

"*In* the box!" he screamed, as if I'd been unspeakably stupid. "You might have killed me! Look!"

He led me down the hall to the closed door of his bedroom.

Our unknown vandal had been busy up here, too.

The white-painted panels of the door were scratched and gouged down to the bare

wood, just as the concert grand in Aeolian Hall had been.

"Forget you've seen this," Hurok snarled. "Say nothing to anyone. It's the least you can do for me, after the damage you've already done."

"I don't agree," I said. "I think the thing for us to do is to find out who's doing this damage. Who is making these attacks on you."

"Who?" Hurok looked surprised at first, then, for some unfathomable reason, amused. "*Who?*"

But his amusement faded fast enough when I said calmly, "I think I know."

The question I'd expected earlier came then. "You opened the teakwood box!"

"Yes," I admitted. "But the one who is making these attacks on you is someone—someone who—"

He'd recovered himself. The thin smile was again on his lips. "Yes? Someone who—?"

"Someone who is seeking," I said boldly, "the thing you stole from the cemetery at Mydia."

For a moment I thought he meant to hit me. His face purpled, and his eyes grew positively maniacal. Then he froze, and his voice was cold and even. "It would be as well, Mr. Welch, if you did not concern yourself with matters that are none of your business."

He turned then and was off toward my room, and I could do nothing but follow. The door was open, and Hurok rushed in, picking up the teakwood casket still bearing its key. He showed no fear of the thing now. His body was between me and the casket, but I'm sure he opened it. And I'm sure it still contained the hands, for he emitted a grunt of satisfaction.

THEN, without another word, he pushed past me, and I watched him go down the hall toward the studio.

My puzzlement only increased. And it didn't add to my peace of mind to reflect what an unheroic part I was playing in all this. But what could I do? I couldn't fight someone I couldn't put my hands on. Until this mysterious intruder who was terrifying Leonie and Hurok put in an appearance, my hands were tied.

IT WAS agreed that I was to escort Leonie to the concert that evening, occupying seats that had been assigned for Hurok's use through the courtesy of the management.

By seven I was dressed, and went into the living room of the penthouse to wait for Leonie.

But she was already there, in the darkened room lighted by only one or two dim lamps.

"Hello," she said softly as I came in.

She was looking more beautiful than ever in a tight clinging gown of some gold-colored stuff, and the furs she was to wear were tossed in a careless heap on a chair near the door.

I went over and sat down on the sofa beside her, before the dying fire. "Where is your—" I stopped. I couldn't say "husband," not tonight. Not now. "Where is Hurok?"

"Still dressing, I think. Giles, have you learned anything further about—about the box?"

I hesitated. After all, why alarm her needlessly? I said nothing about Gafke or the casket. But I did tell her Hurok was suspicious—of us.

She heard me through. Then, "Do you think he's insane?"

I shrugged. "No. That is, not any more than the rest of us. After all, I guess we're all more or less cracked on one subject, at least."

"Perhaps you're right." She sighed, and looked at me in the dusk. "What's *your* particular insanity?"

Perhaps she said it idly. Perhaps she'd already guessed that I was still in love with her. It was torture for me being near her like this, smelling the faint fragrance of her perfume, knowing I had only to reach out an arm to draw all that sweetness near. What if she *had* married, someone else? She was mine. She'd always belonged to me until, in a moment of madness for which she wasn't really responsible, she'd married Hurok.

I said thickly, "My insanity? You. And you know it."

She sighed again. And then she was in my arms, and my lips were on hers, and in all the world there might have been only the two of us.

We were still pressed close together when

the ceiling light clicked on abruptly. Leonie and I sprang apart. But it was too late.

Hurok was standing there watching us, his face dark with fury. He was in evening clothes, and again the teakwood casket was under his arm.

"So! The strangers who had never met before!" he sneered. The words seemed to choke him. "I've been expecting this."

Leonie said nothing, stiff with surprise. And I, too, stood there silently, guardedly waiting for what was coming next, but glad in my heart that at last the thing had been brought out into the open.

But nothing happened. Hurok surprised us. Visibly gaining control of himself, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and then he laughed without amusement. "Later, Giles. Later, dear Leonie. More important business for me is at hand. But after the concert—"

There was menace in his voice, silken as it was. And I knew he would never find it in his heart to forgive us. Or to forget what he'd seen. I'd met egoists like him before, and I knew that once their pride was wounded, their exaggerated sense of possession outraged, they'd stop at nothing to salve their hurts. It only remained to be seen what form his revenge would take.

He left then abruptly as he'd come. When he had gone, Leonie moved closer to me. "Giles, I'm afraid. There's no telling what he may do."

To comfort her, I pretended to scoff. "He won't do anything. Leonie, you must leave him in the morning."

"I had meant to, anyway. Giles, I must have been mad to marry him. And now I'm sane! And when I'm free—"

She had no need to pursue that thought further. I caught her close again, and longed for the time when it would be like this always.

Do you wonder I had forgotten the teakwood casket completely?

STRANGELY enough, it never occurred to either of us to stay away from the concert. Perhaps we were still so dazed with our new-found happiness that we only went down to the hall like automatons, scarcely knowing what we were doing.

I remember, when we were settled in our seats, I looked around and said, "Will you tell me what we're doing here *now?*"

The same thought must have just struck Leonie, for she laughed. "Isn't it crazy? But what does it matter where we are, darling, so long as we're together?"

I caught her hand and held it, not caring who might see.

The orchestra was settling itself on the stage, and there was a round of applause when Bradsky, the conductor, made his way to the stand. Silence then, while we all waited for the crowded house to grow quieter. But there was a buzz of excited comment like the droning of bees, and I caught a stifled giggle or two.

Word had spread via the grapevine that Hurok was going to attempt the *Seventh,* and I think most of the audience had come with the firm expectation of seeing Hurok make a fool of himself. I knew Sylvia Satterlee, across the aisle, certainly had. For she turned once, and gave me a broad wink.

I smiled faintly, then turned back to keep my eyes glued to the door at the back of the stage through which Hurok would enter.

No matter what my private opinion of the man, at least it must be said that he was a master showman. He kept us waiting for minutes, then dramatically came without haste from the retiring room. Over his evening clothes, he wore a long-flowing scarlet-lined black cape—a theatrical touch that heightened the importance of his entrance.

His pale face was infinitely cold. He must have known why they'd come, too, for his faint smile and resentful eyes conveyed an indifferent contempt that flicked the audience like a lash.

There was no applause. They resented that look, resented him already. I almost found it in my heart to feel sorry for the man. God, if he failed, they'd tear him apart with their mockery!

He threw the cape from his shoulders carelessly, letting it fall where it would. Then he seated himself, and I think he flexed his hands. We couldn't see, for his back was toward us. A nod to the conductor then, and Bradsky raised his baton, rapped sharply twice.

And the music began.

Three great chords from the piano alone, repeated four times, evoking the memory of

tolling Moscow bells. A pause. Then the orchestra joining in pianissimo.

The first two movements went well, as I had known they would. Quiet, flowing, they were not beyond the talents of any well-trained musician. It was the third movement, and the finale, that would be the real test. Hurok was playing well, drawing a fine singing tone from the instrument, limpid as water in a pool.

I closed my eyes, and waited for the third movement. On the retina of my memory I could see those great jagged heartbreaking chords leaping over the white pages of the score.

Poor Hurok! Poor egotistical fool to think he could do it!

And then it came, the dramatic pause, prelude to the third movement. My palms were damp with vicarious nervousness. I couldn't open my eyes. My breath came quicker, raggedly, waiting for Hurok to begin, to falter.

It started. The mood changed abruptly from the previous movements. It was wilder, now. The tempo broken, erratic. Barbaric, Slavic. Harsh dissonances that melted, somehow madly, into exotic harmony.

I clutched Leonie's hand. My chest was rising and falling. He was doing it! Doing it, by God!

The tearing, crashing chords came again and again, while the orchestra seethed and melted above and below them.

The finale, now. Sweeping faster and faster. Frenziedly fortissimo. The piano like a great voice crying ecstatically above the other instruments, a legato that flowed like honey. And, at intervals, the great chords evoking the bronze-throated bells tolling, tolling with thrilling majesty.

My eyes jerked open. Across the aisle, Sylvia Satterlee was leaning forward, staring like a woman demented. Bradsky's face was purple with effort and amazement. Hurok's back was erect, pliant, only his arms flailing the instrument. No wonder Leonie had succumbed to this enchantment!

The great Moscow bells tolled again, on a note of unbearable ecstasy. Once, twice, thrice.

It was ended.

Silence. Silence while Hurok rose, composed, contemptuous, one pale hand still on the piano.

It came then, almost unwillingly. The applause. Thunderously, in waves.

Hurok didn't acknowledge it. He didn't bow. His eyes only swept the house. But on his face was an expression of such triumph as I have never seen of the face of a human being.

Shaken, I looked at Leonie. She was leaning forward, eyes wide. She clutched my hand convulsively. "Look! Look! Those hands! They aren't—*his!*"

It was a preposterous statement. I thought she'd gone mad momentarily. But I looked. And it was true. The hands at the ends of Hurok's long slender arms weren't the thin tanned hands I remembered.

These—these were a pale, bleached, almost boneless white, faintly bluish in the glare of the lights lining the proscenium arch.

These were—unmistakably, unbelievably—the hands of the teakwood casket!

V

TORN apart emotionally by the music I'd just heard, I couldn't seem to think clearly. Of the hands, I didn't want to think at all. Dear God, madness lay just beyond! There could be no rational explanation for what we'd just seen and heard!

But going up in the elevator to the penthouse I wished heartily I might have gotten Leonie away—now, tonight. But a blizzard had blown up, and I knew the other hotels would be full of suburbanites staying the night in town.

Yet what could there possibly be to fear? This nameless menace, this sense of brooding terror. It could be only my imagination playing tricks on me.

I was tempted to warn Leonie to lock her door, and deny Hurok admittance. But again I hesitated. And cursed myself for an imaginative, melodramatic fool. Why alarm her unnecessarily?

However I determined to be watchful myself. After I donned pajamas, I left my bedroom door open, and sat up in bed reading. It was impossible to sleep in any case, and I meant to stay awake until I was sure Leonie would have no need of me. With the door open, I could hear any sound of a quarrel, any evidence that Hurok was

attempting to put into effect the threats he'd mouthed earlier. And I could reach her side quickly enough, if neecssary.

But despite my vaunted watchfulness, I never heard Hurok approaching my room on the thick carpet. It was shortly after midnight when I looked up, the corner of my eye just catching the suggestion of a shadow in the doorway.

Hurok was there again, the scarlet-lined cape still over his shoulders. But the teakwood box was not in evidence, this time. There was an innovation.

He held a revolver in his hand.

My first thought was for Leonie, and my heart leaped in sudden panic. "Leonie!" I said.

His lips smiled thinly. "Madame Hurok is sleeping. I have just come from placing the teakwood casket in her room."

I looked at him in bewilderment. "The teakwood casket! But what has that—?"

"Never fear, dear Giles. I have every intention of explaining clearly. Oh, most clearly, so that you will not possibly misunderstand the little surprise I have in store for you. For you and Leonie both."

I didn't like the way he was smiling, the way he was gloating over the advantage he held in my ignorance. But I wouldn't let him bait me. I put the book I held down on my knees, and managed to look at him calmly enough.

His smile faded. "What do you know of the cemetery at Mydia? And where did you hear of it?"

I hesitated. There seemed nothing to gain by lying. "Gafke told me."

"Ah!" You must know then—or have suspected by now—that the teakwood box contains the hands of Vladimir Czarnowitz?"

I nodded. "You cut them off, cut them from his dead body." Perhaps if I could goad him, trap him into carelessness. I slid lower in bed, and raised my arms above my head, my hands clutching the corners of the pillow. "It confirms what I've long suspected. You are insane."

His face darkened. "I'm as sane as you are!"

"Insane. For I know why you wanted those hands. Those hands that always made your talent inferior. You wanted them to mock. To gloat over, now that you were greater. For they, you see, were dead."

THE reference to his inferior talent must have infuriated him. He cried, "What do you know, you fool, of the years of heartbreaking work and effort that have gone into my career? And for nothing! Always to be second-best! Never, they said, would I approach the genius of Vladimir Czarnowitz! Those hands of his! Always they mocked me. I drove myself, almost killed myself, that he might not surpass me too greatly. I held my own, and he hated me for it. Hated me, I tell you!"

Hurok was choking with emotion, remembered hatred. "And then, deliberately, Czarnowitz composed the *Seventh,* knowing it was impossible of performance by anyone lacking those freakish hands of his, knowing that at last he had me stopped forever. Do you wonder, when he died, that I was glad, glad? And that I wanted those hands of his —to mock in turn? I wanted them, helpless, in my possession. I wanted to whisper to them every night that now I—I was greater at last than Czarnowitz. For I was living, and he was dead, a corpse, a nothing, only food for worms."

Hurok's eyes were glittering. I eyed him watchfully. If I could just keep him raving. "So you broke into the vault, stole the hands."

"Yes. Then one night, while I was gloating over the hands, I noticed that they were growing flexible. The discovery excited me. And in time they grew more and more flexible, even hollow, and I learned that I could don them, as one would a pair of gloves. That I could even play the piano wearing them. Day after day, I slipped them on, scarcely believing it was true. Till I found that they could become a part of me, subject to my will. Till I found that the *Seventh* was at last within my powers!"

Good God! For some time I had considered Hurok mildly insane. But I hadn't thought him a stark, raving lunatic!

"Ah, the sweet irony of it!" he cried. "Do you see it! At last I should become great—*using Czarnowitz' hands!* The very hands that had mocked me so long!"

But the triumph was dying now in his eyes, and bewildered fear was dawning. He

shook his head dumbly. "But while the hands were docile to my will in the daytime, I found that at night they became again the hands of Vladimir Czarnowitz, possessing some strange animation of their own. And they were vengeful hands, I was to learn. Hands that hated me still, and sought to destroy me, until I was forced to keep them imprisoned at night in the teakwood casket.

"They escaped once, frightening Leonie. And here, even with the key in the lock and the box locked, they possessed an abnormal cunning sufficient to permit them to open it from the inside. They escaped again, to claw at and tear and try to mutilate me, so that I had to struggle for my life. It took every atom of my strength to overpower them."

He couldn't be talking rationally. But, good God, if his story were true! The box was now in Leonie's room! I started out of bed, but Hurok waved the gun.

"Haste is unnecessary and futile," he said, suave again. "The hands served their purpose tonight. I have no further use for them. Let them perform one last duty. Soon now we should hear Leonie's screams. The screams of an unfaithful wife. Sweet music, Giles."

I TENSED, ready to spring. But it was already too late. It came, then. Leonie's scream, shrill, ululating, piercing even through the doors that separated us.

Hurok's head turned involuntarily at the sound, the smile widening wolfishly on his lips. And in that instant, I acted. My hand tightened on the corner of the pillow, and I hurled it at his gun hand. He retained his hold on the revolver, but his hand was swept back by the force with which I'd hurled the pillow.

I leaped. I was on him then. We were struggling, panting, grunting like animals, our breath whistling hoarsely from our lungs.

My left hand caught his gun hand, held it. My right fist connected solidly with his chin. He was down then. And I was running, racing down the dark halls to Leonie's room.

Her scream hadn't been repeated. The apartment was ominously, dreadfully quiet. I prayed that I wouldn't be too late. Her door was locked, and the hall lights only emphasized the gloom.

Sweat trickled down my sides as I hurled myself at that locked door. It didn't give. I tried again. And again. And on the third try, my lungs laboring desperately, the door burst from its hinges.

At almost the same instant, while I was still fumbling frantically for the light switch, something slithered from the room, down low near the floor. I had only a confused glimpse of whiteness against the dark carpet. A blurred pallor. Then whatever it was, it scuttled, crab-fashion, down the darkened hall in the direction from which I'd just come.

I found the light switch at last, pressed it desperately.

Leonie was lying back in her bed, and I thought for one horrified minute—

But she was all right. A swift examination assured me she had only fainted—a faint from which she was already rousing, thank God! She started up with a cry of terror, and I caught her to me.

She was shuddering convulsively. "The thing, Giles! The thing from the tomb! It was here again! It touched my throat!"

She buried her face against my shoulder, and grew quieter in my arms. I was murmuring to her when I heard it.

An hysterical, unintelligible mouthing of words coming from somewhere back there in the darkened apartment. "No, no, no!" I could hear it plainly. Then the hoarse shrieks began. I'll remember those animal-like cries forever.

Leonie shuddered, and covered her ears with her hands. I pressed her back gently against the bed, and motioned for her to stay there. Then I turned and ran for the door, down the hallway, back to my room. Fearing what I thought I would find. For I knew now it wasn't Leonie that the thing had been seeking, but another.

And I was right.

Hurok was there. On the floor of my room. His eyes staring from his purple face, his tongue a swollen, black, monstrous thing between his lips.

And about his throat, clutched in a relentless grip, were the hands—the hands of Vladimir Czarnowitz!

Sweets to the Sweet

BY ROBERT BLOCH

IRMA didn't look like a witch.

She had small, regular features, a peaches-and-cream complexion, blue eyes and fair, almost ash-blonde hair. Besides, she was only eight years old.

"Why does he tease her so?" sobbed Miss Pall. "That's where she got the idea in the first place—because he calls her a little witch."

Sam Steever bulked his paunch back into

You can't bring up all children the same way. For instance, take a little witch . . . .

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

the squeaky swivel chair and folded his hammy hands in his lap. His fat lawyer's mask was immobile, but he was really quite distressed.

Women like Miss Pall should never sob. Their glasses wiggle, their thin noses twitch, their creasy eyelids redden, and their stringy hair becomes disarrayed.

"Please, my dear, control yourself," coaxed Sam Steever. "Perhaps if we could just talk this whole thing over sensibly—"

"I don't care!" Miss Pall sniffled. "I'm not going back there again. I can't stand it. There's nothing I can do. The man is your brother, and she's your brother's child. It's not my responsibility. I've tried—"

"Of course you've tried." Sam Steever smiled benignly, as if Miss Pall were foreman of the jury. "I quite understand. But I still don't see why you are so agitated, dear lady."

Miss Pall removed her spectacles and dabbed at her eyes with a floral-print handkerchief. Then she deposited the soggy ball in her purse, snapped the catch, replaced her spectacles, and sat up straight.

"Very well, Mr. Steever," she said. "I shall do my best to acquaint you with my reasons for quitting your brother's employ."

She suppressed a tardy sniff.

"I came to John Steever two years ago in response to an advertisement for a housekeeper, as you know. When I found that I was to be governess to a motherless six-year-old child, I was at first distressed. I know nothing of the care of children."

"John had a nurse the first six years," Sam Steever nodded. "You know Irma's mother died in childbirth."

"I am aware of that," said Miss Pall, primly. "Naturally, one's heart goes out to a lonely, neglected little girl. And she was so terribly lonely, Mr. Steever—if you could have seen her, moping around in the corners of that big, ugly old house—"

"I have seen her," said Sam Steever hastily, hoping to forestall another outburst. "And I know what you've done for Irma. My brother is inclined to be thoughtless, even a bit selfish at times. He doesn't understand."

"He's cruel," declared Miss Paul, suddenly vehement. "Cruel and wicked. Even if he is your brother, I say he's no fit father for any child. When I came there, her little arms were black and blue from beatings. He used to take a belt—"

"I know. Sometimes I think John never recovered from the shock of Mrs. Steever's death. That's why I was so pleased when you came, dear lady. I thought you might help the situation."

"I tried," Miss Pall whimpered. "You know I tried. I never raised a hand to that child in two years, though many's the time your brother has told me to punish her. 'Give the little witch a beating,' he used to say. 'That's all she needs—a good thrashing.' And then she'd hide behind my back and whisper to me to protect her. But she wouldn't cry, Mr. Steever. Do you know, I've never seen her cry."

SAM STEEVER felt vaguely irritated and a bit bored. He wished the old hen would get on with it. So he smiled and oozed treacle. "But just what is your problem, dear lady?"

"Everything was all right when I came there. We got along just splendidly. I started to teach Irma to read—and was surprised to find that she had already mastered reading. Your brother disclaimed having taught her, but she spent hours curled up on the sofa with a book. 'Just like her,' he used to say. 'Unnatural little witch. Doesn't play with the other children. Little witch.' That's the way he kept talking, Mr. Steever. As if she were some sort of—I don't know what. And she so sweet and quiet and pretty!

"Is it any wonder she read? I used to be that way myself when I was a girl, because—but never mind.

"Still, it was a shock that day I found her looking through the *Encyclopedia Britannica.* 'What are you reading, Irma?' I asked. She showed me. It was the article on Witchcraft.

"You see what morbid thoughts your brother had inculcated in her poor little head?

"I did my best. I went out and bought her some toys—she had absolutely nothing, you know; not even a doll. She didn't even know how to *play!* I tried to get her interested in some of the other little girls in the

neighborhood, but it was no use. They didn't understand her and she didn't understand them. There were scenes. Children can be cruel, thoughtless. And her father wouldn't let her go to public school. I was to teach her—

"Then I brought her the modelling clay. She liked that. She would spend hours just making faces with clay. For a child of six, Irma displayed real talent.

"We made little dolls together, and I sewed clothes for them. That first year was a happy one, Mr. Steever. Particularly during those months when your brother was away in South America. But this year, when he came back—oh, I can't bear to talk about it!"

"Please," said Sam Steever. "You must understand. John is not a happy man. The loss of his wife, the decline of his import trade, and his drinking—but you know all that."

"All I know is that he hates Irma," snapped Miss Pall, suddenly. "He hates her. He wants her to be bad, so he can whip her. 'If you don't discipline the little witch, I shall,' he always says. And then he takes her upstairs and thrashes her with his belt—you must do something, Mr. Steever, or I'll go to the authorities myself."

The crazy old biddy would do that, Sam Steever thought. Remedy—more treacle. "But about Irma," he persisted.

"She's changed, too. Ever since her father returned this year. She won't play with me any more, hardly looks at me. It is as though I failed her, Mr. Steever, in not protecting her from that man. Besides—she thinks she's a witch."

Crazy. Stark, staring crazy. Sam Steever creaked upright in his chair.

"Oh, you needn't look at me like that, Mr. Steever. She'll tell you so herself—if you ever visited the house!"

He caught the reproach in her voice and assuaged it with a deprecating nod.

"She told me all right, if her father wants her to be a witch she'll be a witch. And she won't play with me, or anyone else, because witches don't play. Last Halloween she wanted me to give her a broomstick. Oh, it would be funny if it weren't so tragic. That child is losing her sanity.

"Just a week ago I thought she'd changed. That's when she asked me to take her to church one Sunday. 'I want to see the baptism,' she said. Imagine that—an eight-year-old interested in baptism! Reading too much, that's what does it.

"Well, we went to church and she was as sweet as can be, wearing her new blue dress and holding my hand. I was proud of her, Mr. Steever, really proud.

"But after that, she went right back into her shell. Reading around the house, running through the yard at twilight and talking to herself.

"Perhaps it's because your brother wouldn't bring her a kitten. She was pestering him for a black cat, and he asked why, and she said, 'Because witches always have black cats.' Then he took her upstairs.

"I can't stop him, you know. He beat her again the night the power failed and we couldn't find the candles. He said she'd stolen them. Imagine that—accusing an eight-year-old child of stealing candles!

"That was the beginning of the end. Then today, when he found his hairbrush missing—"

"You say he beat her with his hairbrush?"

"Yes. She admitted having stolen it. Said she wanted it for her doll."

"But didn't you say she has no dolls?"

"She made one. At least I think she did. I've never seen it—she won't show us anything any more; won't talk to us at table, just impossible to handle her.

"But this doll she made—it's a small one, I know, because at times she carries it tucked under her arm. She talks to it and pets it, but she won't show it to me or to him. He asked her about the hairbrush and she said she took it for the doll.

"Your brother flew into a terrible rage—he'd been drinking in his room again all morning; oh, don't think I don't know it!—and she just smiled and said he could have it now. She went over to her bureau and handed it to him. She hadn't harmed it in the least; some of the hair from his head was still in it, I noticed.

"But he snatched it up, and then he started to strike her about the shoulders with it, and he twisted her arm and then he—"

Miss Pall huddled in her chair and sum-

moned great racking sobs from her thin chest.

Sam Steever patted her shoulder, fussing about her like an elephant over a wounded canary.

"That's all, Mr. Steever. I came right to you. I'm not even going back to that house to get my things. I can't stand any more—the way he beat her—and the way she didn't cry, just giggled and giggled and giggled—sometimes I think she is a witch—that he made her into a witch—"

II

SAM STEEVER picked up the phone. The ringing had broken the relief of silence after Miss Pall's hasty departure.

"Hello—that you, Sam?"

He recognized his brother's voice, somewhat the worse for drink.

"Yes, John."

"I suppose the old bat came running straight to you to shoot her mouth off."

"If you mean Miss Pall, I've seen her, yes."

"Pay no attention. I can explain everything."

"Do you want me to stop in? I haven't paid you a visit in months."

"Well—not right now. Got an appointment with the doctor this evening."

"Something wrong?"

"Pain in my arm. Rheumatism or something. Getting a little diathermy. But I'll call you tomorow."

"Right."

But John Steever did not call the next day. About supper time, Sam called him.

Surprisingly enough, Irma answered the phone. Her thin, squeaky little voice sounded faintly in Sam's ears.

"Daddy's upstairs sleeping. He's been sick."

"Well, don't disturb him. What is it—his arm?"

"His back, now. He has to go to the doctor again in a little while."

"Tell him I'll call tomorrow, then. Uh—everything all right, Irma? I mean, don't you miss Miss Pall?"

"No. I'm glad she went away. She's stupid."

"Oh. Yes. I see. But you phone me

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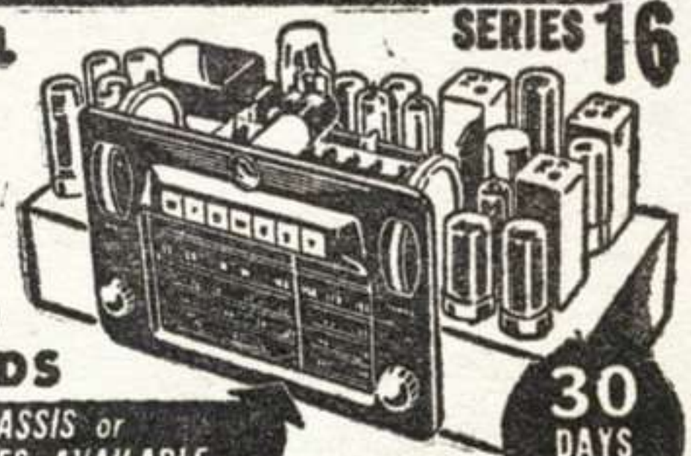

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if you want anything. And I hope your daddy's better."

"Yes. So do I," said Irma, and then she began to giggle, and then she hung up.

There was no giggling the following afternoon when John Steever called Sam at the office. His voice was sober—with the sharp sobriety of pain.

"Sam—for God's sake, get over here. Something's happening to me!"

"There's a client in the office, but I'll get rid of him. Say, wait a minute. Why don't you call the doctor?"

"That quack can't help me. He gave me diathermy for my arm and yesterday he did the same thing for my back."

"Didn't it help?"

"The pain went away, yes. But it's back now. I feel—like I was being crushed. Squeezed, here in the chest. I can't breathe."

"Sounds like pleurisy."

"It isn't pleurisy. He examined me. Said I was sound as a dollar. No, there's nothing organically wrong. And I couldn't tell him the real cause."

"Real cause?"

"Yes. The pins. The pins that little fiend is sticking into the doll she made. Into the arm, the back. And now heaven only knows how she's causing *this*."

"John, you mustn't—"

"Oh, what's the use of talking? It's the doll all right, the one she made with the candle-wax and the hair from my brush. Oh—it hurts to talk—that cursed little witch! Hurry, Sam. Promise me you'll do something—anything—get that doll from her—get that doll—"

III

HALF an hour later, at four-thirty, Sam Steever entered his brother's house.

Irma opened the door.

It gave Sam a shock to see her standing there, smiling and unperturbed, pale blonde hair brushed immaculately back from the rosy oval of her face. She looked just like a little doll. A little doll—

"Hello, Unce Sam."

"Helo, Irma. Your daddy called me, did he tell you? He said he wasn't feeling well—"

"I know. But he's all right now. He's sleeping."

Something happened to Sam Steever; a drop of ice-water trickled down his spine.

"Sleeping?" he croaked. "Upstairs?"

Before she opened her mouth to answer he was bounding up the steps to the second floor, striding down the hall to John's bedroom.

John lay on the bed. He was asleep, and only asleep. Sam Steever noted the regular rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. His face was calm, relaxed.

Then the drop of ice-water evaporated, and Sam could afford to smile and murmur, "Nonsense," under his breath as he turned away.

As he went downstairs he hastily improvised plans. A six-month vacation for his brother; avoid calling it a "cure." An orphanage for Irma; give her a chance to get away from this morbid old house. . . .

He paused halfway down the stairs. Peering over the banister through the twilight he saw Irma on the sofa, cuddled up like a little white ball. She was talking to something she cradled in her arms, rocking it to and fro.

Then there was a doll, after all.

Sam Steever tiptoed very quietly down the stairs and walked over to Irma.

"Hello," he said.

She jumped. Both arms rose to cover completely whatever it was she had been fondling. She squeezed it tightly.

Sam Steever thought of a doll being squeezed across the chest—

"Daddy's better now, isn't he?" lisped Irma.

"Yes, much better."

"I knew he would be."

"But I'm afraid he's going to have to go away for a rest. A long rest."

A smile flittered through the mask. "Good," said Irma.

"Of course," Sam went on, "you couldn't stay here all alone. I was wondering—maybe we could send you off to school, or to some kind of a home—"

Irma giggled. "Oh, you needn't worry about me," she said. She shifted about on the sofa as Sam sat down, then sprang up quickly as he came close to her.

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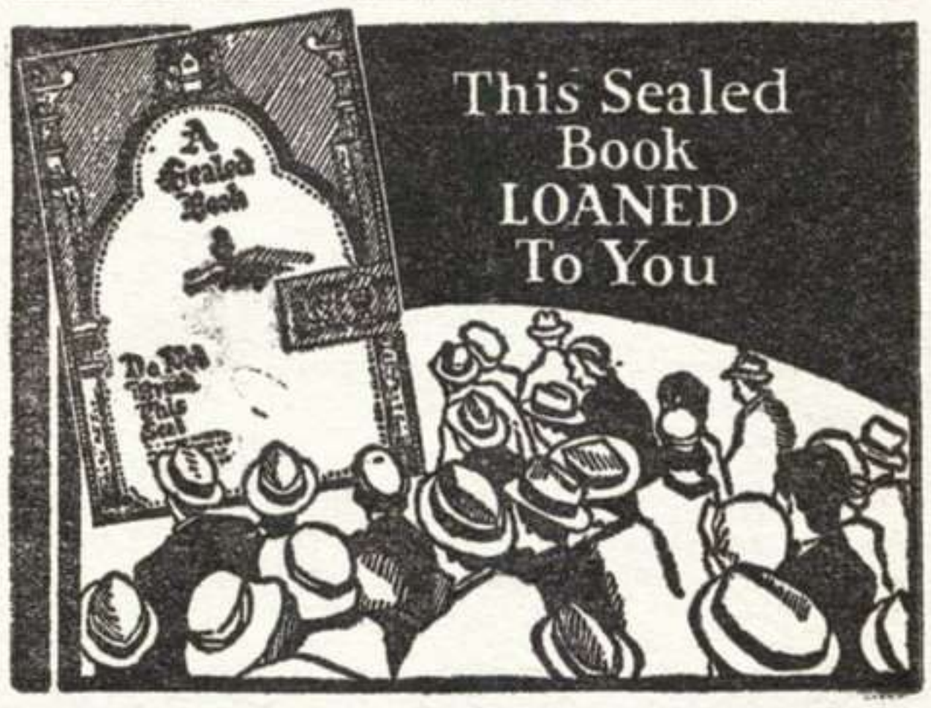

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HER arms shifted with the movement, and Sam Steever saw a pair of tiny legs dangling down below her elbow. There were trousers on the legs, and little bits of leather for shoes.

"What's that you have, Irma?" he asked. "Is it a doll?" He extended his hand.

She pulled it back.

"You can't see it," she said.

"But I want to. Miss Pall said you made such lovely ones."

"Miss Pall is stupid. So are you. Go away."

"Please, Irma. Let me see it."

But even as he spoke, Sam Steever was staring at the top of the doll, momentarily revealed, when she backed away. It was a head all right, with wisps of hair over a white face. Dusk dimmed the features, but Sam recognized the eyes, the nose, the chin—

He could keep up the pretense no longer.

"Give me that doll, Irma!" he snapped. "I know what it is. I know *who* it is—"

For an instant the mask slipped from Irma's face, and Sam Steever stared into naked fear.

She knew. She knew he knew.

Then, just as quickly, the mask was replaced.

Irma was only a sweet, spoiled, stubborn little girl as she shook her head merrily and smiled with impish mischief in her eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Sam," she giggled. "You're so silly! Why, this isn't a *real* doll."

Irma giggled once more, raising the figure as she spoke. "Why, it's only—candy!" Irma said.

"Candy?"

Irma nodded. Then, very swiftly, she slipped the tiny head of the image into her mouth.

And bit it off.

There was a single piercing scream from upstairs.

As Sam Steever turned and ran up the steps, little Irma, still gravely munching, skipped out of the front door and into the night beyond.

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AS THIS issue of WEIRD TALES goes to press we have on our desk four new books from Arkham House. These volumes are Henry S. Whitehead's "West India Lights," "The Clock Strikes Twelve," by H. R. Wakefield, "Fearful Pleasures" by A. E. Coppard and A. E. Van Vogt's "Slan."

Some of the stories in these collections are new to us. All, we are sure, will interest us as they will fantasy enthusiasts and WEIRD TALES readers.

And we tip our hat (the one with the chin strap so it won't blow off in New York's winter winds!) to August Derleth, who of course *is* Arkham House, for his kindness in shooting along these books as they are published by him, and for the fine job he is doing.

Incidentally, in this connection, we were referred to a not-so-long-ago N. Y. *Times* book section containing a review of the Whitehead book "West India Lights."

After mentioning WEIRD TALES as the source of most of the stories therein, the reviewer concludes as follows:

"One factor that 'West India Lights' points up is the ofttime superiority of the sneered-at pulp magazines, where most of these tales were first published, over their haughty relations, the slicks!"

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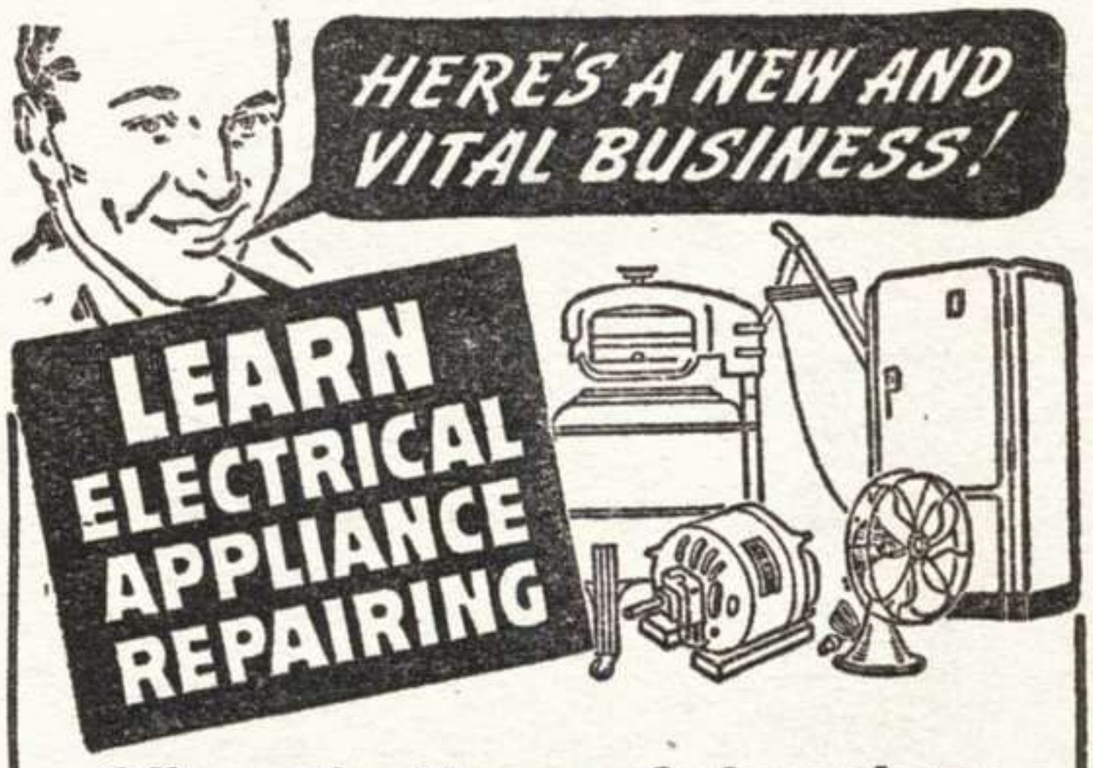

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and very long. The primary function of WEIRD TALES is, of course, to bring entertainment to its readers. If we can please most of our readers most of the time and just about all of them some of the time, then we've done our job. If we fail, well, you let us know about it quick enough!

One of our thought-provokers has been the question of aforementioned length. We get letters saying, in effect, "Give us more of those very short two or three pages with the punch at the end—that way we get more stories per issue."

Then we get other messages urging that we "cut out the short stuff, give us longer, even if fewer stories, per issue." After all, even an editor knows that a magazine contains just so many pages, and try as you may you can't stretch 'em. So we seek that elusive called balance. A little of the short, some of the medium and some of the long. Usually, that is!

However, in this issue of WEIRD TALES you will notice that we have a slightly smaller total of stories. But we are bringing you three long novelettes, and two other stories not very much shorter. We think the long novelettes are particularly good. One is by the competent Stephen Grendon; another is by Harold Lawlor who can always be counted on to shake a mean bit of horror and fantasy your way. The third is a slightly different type of story for WEIRD TALES by a writer new to this magazine, Eric Frank Russell. We think you'll like it.

So if the balance of this issue seems a bit different, if we seem a little top heavy with long material, its because the "mostest" of you recently have wanted it that way. Let us know your reactions. After all the quickest, easiest and nicest thing we do around here is to contrive to give you just what you want!

READERS' VOTE

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	SWEETS TO THE SWEET

Here's a list of seven stories in this issue. Won't you let us know which three you consider the best? Just place the numbers 1, 2, and 3 respectively against your three favorite tales—then clip it out and send it to us.

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But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blood vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice new, beautiful suit of muscle!

Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc. Then write for details about *"Dynamic Tension"* and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. *"Dynamic Tension"* does the work.

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension,"* you can laugh at *artificial* muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No *theory*—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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