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NOVEMBER

Weird Tales

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by

ALLISON V. HARDING

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What in the world—or outside of it—would ever set such a chain of events in motion?

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Strange things can happen to a child in those precious playtime hours.

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It was a strange old structure, and the strangest part of it was that green opaque window to the left of the fan-lighted door.

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When the sun plays on the other side of the world, He comes toward you from the shadows.

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It was a poor piece of land where nothing would grow but the hopes of one who would do anything, yes anything, *to fulfill a strange dream.*

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The Underbody

By Allison V. Harding

white ones with chocolate icing and jelly fill.

And it was just then that he heard Jamie yipping and hollering, the sound of his small-boy voice coming from outside, getting louder as the little legs drove him closer.

JAMIE had a secret. It was the biggest secret he'd ever had. Too big for its excitement to be contained in his small body dressed garishly in last Christmas' cowboy suit. After looking and looking to be sure, he ran away from it through the field and up the meadow hill, over the stone wall and across the lawn, his little feet splattering through puddles. He started to call before he reached the house, and his father met him at the back door.

"Young man, come in here directly and wipe your feet!"

"Daddy!" gasped Jamie, all out of breath.

His father marched him into the library. "You know perfectly well, Jamie, you wouldn't have been out playing cowboy and Indian in this rain if your mother hadn't just gone away!"

"Daddy—"

"Young man, it won't look good for either of us if when Mother gets back, you're sniffling around with a head cold. I think you'd better go upstairs and change. Let me feel those shoes and socks."

"But, Daddy! *Daddy. . . !*"

"Yup, they're wet! Now march yourself upstairs."

"But there's a *man* out there in the field, Daddy, lying all in the ground looking up at me!"

"Now don't you try and get me in on your Indian games, Jamie."

"Really, Daddy, hones' and truly—come an' see!" The little boy's voice rose to a crescendo and he pulled at his father's hand.

"You take yourself upstairs, young man, and change out of that costume. If you want to put on rubbers and a slicker, I'll walk out there with you. What did you say this was . . . an Indian chief?"

"It's no Indian chief, Daddy. Just a man lying there in a hole in the ground!"

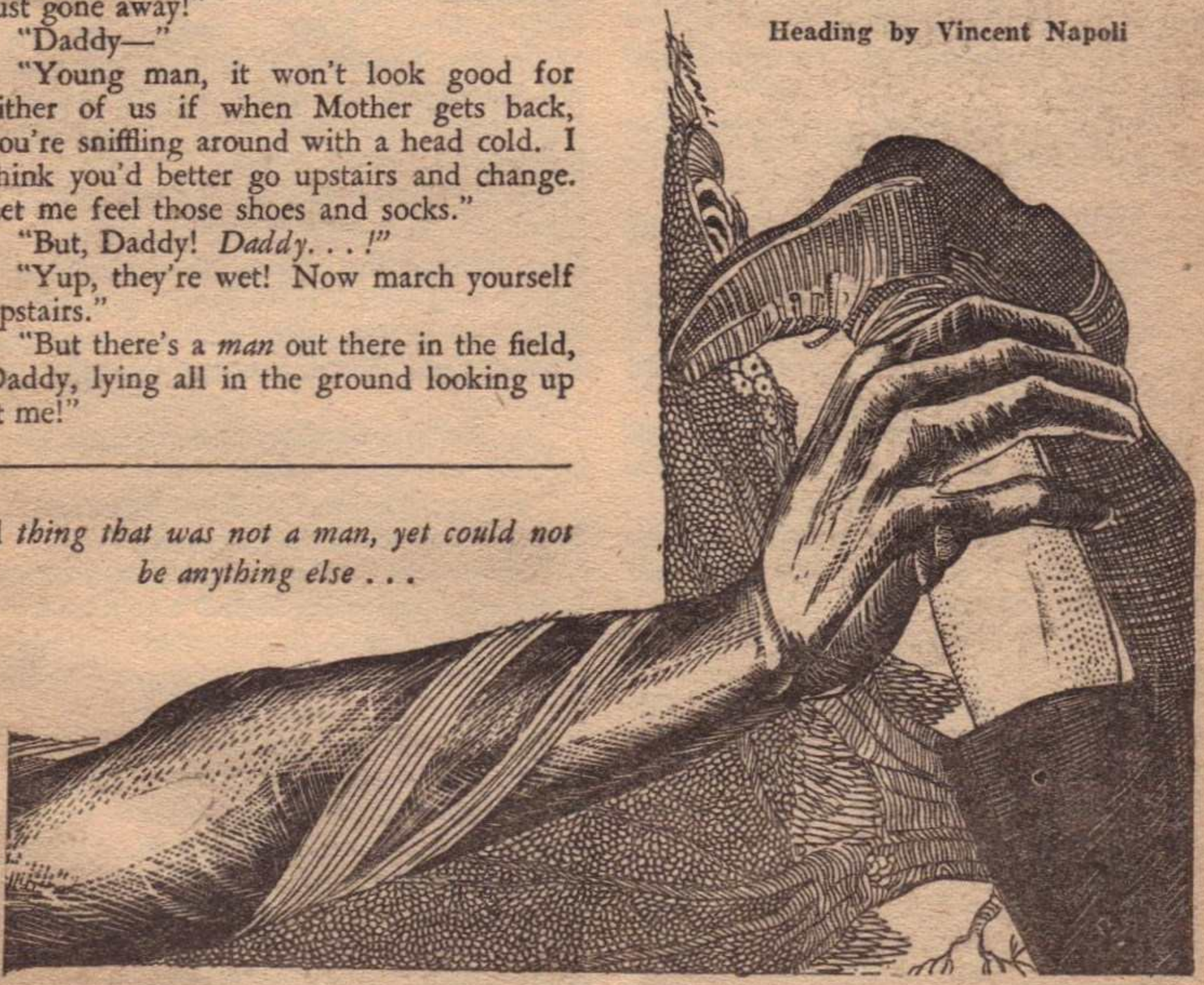
"If you want me to go outside with you and help you hunt Buffalo Bill, you go upstairs and do as I told you!"

THE little boy clattered away. A few moments later, father and son walked across the lawn over the stone fence and into the fields beyond. The drizzle was over, but mist had taken its place and clung with gray fingers to the meadow.

"Don't tug so, Jamie. Anyway, we want to sneak up kind of careful like! I don't want an arrow through me, pardner!"

A thing that was not a man, yet could not be anything else . . .

Heading by Vincent Napoli



Jamie's excitement increased as they reached the far side of the meadow. There between a boulder and a tree stump he stopped, he looked at the ground and then he looked up at his father crestfallen.

"Mister Mole was there, Daddy, right there!" He pointed.

There was some newly turned earth here, the top of it muddy from the rain, as though Jamie himself or someone else had used a spade. Dr. Holland poked at it with the tip of his boot. There was nothing.

"Guess the Injuns got to him before we could, Jamie. Or maybe a mountain lion got him!"

"He *was* right there, Daddy!"

The physician laughed and put an arm around his son.

"Back to the house with you, youngster."

He liked the boy being imaginative. To him it signalled brains, and that in one's progeny never displeases a parent.

That evening at supper Jamie seemed unusually quiet, and Dr. Holland wondered if he'd made enough of the episode. To please his son he brought it up again.

"Why did you call that varmint Mister Mole, Jamie?"

"Because he was in the ground—stuck in the ground kind of, Daddy."

IN THE mornings the physician contrived to get their breakfast.

"I'm not much of a cook, Helen," he had confided to his wife, but she laughed and said, "Well, you men can't starve with Amanda getting two meals!"

Later this particular morning the schedule called for him to pick up Cook and she would spin her magic in the kitchen.

Dr. Holland was having a poor time with the breakfast dishes when Jamie came tearing into the kitchen.

"It's Mister Mole again!" in one great gush of air.

"Jamie . . . now look, you've tracked dirt in here. I don't mind, but you know your mother's told you not to do that and it means Amanda will have to clear it up. Maybe *we'd* better."

"Quick, Daddy!" The little boy was already pulling at Dr. Holland's apron. "Quick, before Mister Mole goes away!"

The Doctor went, something less than willingly, but forced along by his little son's urgency, out the back door again and across the lawn. And much nearer the house this time, just over the stone wall was a hole—funny, he'd not noticed that before; his son was getting to be quite the boy with the shovel—and in it. . . . Dr. Holland stopped so abruptly that his hand in Jamie's pulled the little boy off balance backward.

"See, Daddy! See, it's Mister Mole, like I told you!"

There were two steps to be taken to the hole in the ground and Dr. Holland took them, instinctively pushing his son back a bit as he did.

THE thing in the hole was . . . a man . . . or had been! He was dressed in nondescript brown jacket, shirt and trousers, shoes, and his skin had something of the color of earth too, and there was earth coming from his nostrils and his ears and at the corner of his mouth.

His eyes were opened, staring upward—for he was lying on his back—as Holland knelt beside the thing, he noticed the quirk of the lips. The man, whoever he was, could not have been very pretty in life, and the leer turned the face into a distasteful grimace.

The Doctor reached for the wrist. As he lifted it to feel at the pulse, earth fell away from between the fingers. It was as he expected—no beat. He slipped a hand in under the man's jacket and felt over the heart region. There was not the slightest vibration.

He rose, and herding his son before him, hurried back to the house.

"You see, Daddy, I told you about Mister Mole! He comes out of the earth!"

"Now, son, I've got some things to do and I want you to stay here."

So there *had* been someone yesterday! Jamie must have become confused and led his father in the wrong direction.

Holland was due soon for a call on Mrs. Foster, whose nagging arthritis and irritable temperament demanded punctilious attendance by her physician. He thought of calling Ed Quinlan the next house away. Quinlan, aside from being town clerk, was also deputy sheriff of the district; but instead, professional curiosity made Holland first reach

for his small medical bag and head out again to that grave across the lawn, unraveling his stethoscope as he went.

He was quite sure . . . well, positively sure, that the man was dead. The shock of the whole thing—his son, of course, didn't realize the dreadful significance of this gruesome business. He walked briskly—he figured afterward he could not have been in the house more than five minutes, and yet . . . yet when he returned and stood there where the spot was, the thing, Mr. Mole, was gone!

"Impossible!" Holland murmured half to himself.

This was the place, no mistake about that. The loose earth; he sifted it with his fingers. There was nothing! *Nothing!* He stood from kneeling and looked around, half fearful that he would find this man he had thought—no, he was sure—was dead walking somewhere away from his earthy grave. There was no one, and he could see a good ways in every direction!

He folded his stethoscope thoughtfully and returned to the house. It came to him that this might be some sort of outrageous joke played by persons unknown, like the time some of the high-schoolers had monkeyed with the pipe on his birdbath and a fire-hose stream of water had come out instead of the usual graceful spray the birds welcomed.

But still it *had* been a body and it *had* been dead. That would mean either grave-robbing or a corpse from some morgue or hospital laboratory.

He instructed Jamie to stay indoors "positively, and don't you dare disobey me" until he got back.

He made his call to Mrs. Foster as short as possible, picked up Amanda and drove back at a great rate to find his son unconcernedly playing with his toy soldiers on the library floor.

ONCE, twice during the day the Doctor walked out to the plot of loose earth beyond the wall. Once he went out into the fields where Jamie had taken him the previous day. There was nothing to be seen except what looked like an area of spaded earth.

No more was said until that evening when Jamie brought the subject up just before being ordered to bed.

"Where does Mr. Mole go, Daddy?"

That was a stickler! If you presumed Mr. Mole existed, he couldn't just vanish without reason and to places unknown. If you presumed Mr. Mole didn't exist, then Dr. Holland should instantly fetch his son to an eye doctor and get himself to a psychiatrist!

For several days Dr. Holland thought a lot as he went about his doctor's tasks and as he puttered around the house being a father, and he found more than a few excuses to walk around the lawn and across the stone fence and into the meadows beyond.

In a few days the holes where Mr. Mole had appeared lost their freshness, lost their appearance of having been newly turned and again were reclaimed by the broad bosom of the earth.

It was one evening just before bedtime that Jamie said, "Mister Mole invited me to go for a walk today, Daddy!"

Holland almost dropped his pipe cleaner. He tried to keep his voice steady, for in the silence that had surrounded this subject for several days, it was as though that ugly dream had been swallowed up. The physician kept his voice even with an effort.

"Where was he, Jamie? Where was Mister Mole?"

The little boy indicated with a vague sweep of his arm and repeated again, "He asked me to take a walk with him. Down below, he said, Daddy."

"Jamie!" This thing had gone far enough. "I want you to tell me, when did you first see Mister Mole?"

"The time I told you. That rainy day."

"And, Jamie . . . hones' Injun, now . . . he *talks* to you!"

"Sure, Daddy."

Holland rose to his feet. Something now would have to be done. This could not be set upon or dismissed with the hopeful conclusion that it was, after all, only a figment of the imagination.

"Let's go see Mister Mole, son, right now."

"But you can't! He's gone! He went right while I looked!"

"Which way? We'll follow him."

The boy crinkled up his brow as though

even to his young and credulous mind, the event was unusual.

"He just kind of went. Down into the earth like. He said he'd be back."

THE physician got his son to tell him the whereabouts of Mr. Mole's latest appearance and then bustled the six-year-old off to bed. He looked for himself later, and there about where his son had described it were the markings of freshly troubled and tossed earth. Precisely what to do was perplexing. His ordered scientific mind made Dr. Holland seek some definite, logical action, and yet there was none.

The thing—whatever it was, and it appeared to be a man—should be examined by the authorities. The first step in that program, though, was to find Mr. Mole and constrain him from any more of his vanishings.

Albert Holland spent twenty-four hours thinking over a course of action and then the thought came to him that he should talk to his neighbor, Ed Quinlan, the deputy sheriff who lived across the long meadow that ran out back and down the hill apiece. Quinlan, a widower with a son about Jamie's age, was a nice fellow. He'd always appreciated that Holland had treated him without mention of a bill when things had been tough for the Quinlans a while back. And he showed his appreciation. But more, he was a bluff, realistic individual whose long suit was not imagination—though he was not stupid by any means—and would, therefore, bring a good slant to bear on this proposition, plus the weight of his official office in the county.

Holland was going to stroll over there this very evening, and now with Jamie bedded down, he was about to start when the knocker of his own front door sounded. It was, coincidentally, Quinlan.

"Hello, Ed!" the physician greeted warmly.

"Evenin', Doc. Sorry to bother you."

"Not at all. Come on in."

Holland saw immediately that the man was agitated. His broad, ruddy face looked worried and his big thick-fingered hands gripped at the somewhat worn panama he was never without.

"Missus still away, Doc?"

"Yup, another week, Ed."

They talked of things like this and that for some moments and then Ed got around to the point.

"Doc, if your youngster's safe in bed, I wonder if you could walk down toward my place apiece. Something funny has happened."

HOLLAND waited, his own feeling of uncomfortableness increasing.

"My son, Eddie, Doc. Damndest thing you ever know. He came across a body lying out there—in the meadow back of our place. I thought the youngster was pulling my leg . . . you know the way these kids carry on. Kept after me all afternoon, he did. I went out with him just now, Doc. Seen *him* for myself, I did. All stained from the earth, kind of grinning like. Was the spookiest lookin' fellow you ever saw, Doc. I felt of him myself. Didn't have no more warmth anymore than a tree. Sure he *looked* dead, although I can't really say if there's been some crime committed."

Quinlan stopped and took a deep breath, fiddled with his hat and then fixed his troubled eyes on the doctor again.

"Would you come along with me?"

"Why sure, Ed."

Quinlan hurried on: "I think I saw the fellow move. It was getting kind of to twilight out there. I'd sent Eddie back to the house for a flashlight. To be honest, I couldn't see so good. But, Doc, he'd been lying on his back with the earth and all coming out of his mouth like, and when I looked again, I could swear he'd kind of rolled over. But there was still this grin on his face like he'd died smiling—only it wasn't a nice smile—or if he wasn't all dead, he was enjoying this."

The man rattled on, following the physician out into the hall as Holland went to the coat closet to get his own flashlight.

"I'll go with you, Ed."

"But here's the thing, Doc." Ed's hand held him just inside the front door as they were about to step out into the darkness of the summer evening. "I lost him. I must've been watching through the gloom for Eddie to come back with the light and all, but I turned around and he was gone—just like that as though he'd never been there 'cept

that I knew he had 'cause the earth was all turned up new-grave like!"

The two walked then, the bobbing flashlight held in Holland's hand showing the way across the lush July countryside. The night with them and silence now between them; this lawman and the man of science, each with his thoughts and his puzzlement until they stood together, close together, brought there by Quinlan's sense of direction and the bobbing shaft of light that followed to its goal.

Ed's voice sounded small under the black archway of night as he breathed out and said, "There's where he was. Right there, Doc."

AND Albert Holland stood and looked at the ground, the familiar look to it. Stood with flashlight beam steady, for there was nothing to do. They both were thinking what to do next and there was no need to say it. Finally Quinlan spoke.

"Guess you think I'm crazy, Doc."

And at that, the physician put his hand on the other's arm.

"No, I don't, Ed. You're not crazy. You saw something." And he was going to say, I saw it too, Ed. Out here in the meadow and then back nearer my house. Jamie called me just as Eddie called you. We've seen *something* all right—in God's heaven just what, I don't know and I'm a doctor and supposed to know what life and death look like.

But he didn't say it because Quinlan was talking some more:

". . . claims he talked to him—imagine this, Doc, a corpse speaking to him—and invited Eddie to take a walk with him, although he couldn't be a corpse moving over onto his side, could he? People can't do things like that—if they're really dead, Doc, can they?" The deputy sheriff was plaintive.

Holland put his arm on the other's shoulder again, this time with more urgency.

"Ed, you say you shooed Eddie home before you came up to my place?"

"Why, sure . . . sure!"

Then the two almost automatically started walking towards Quinlan's small cottage just over the brow of the hill, and as they walked, though nothing more was said, their steps speeded.

It was the night that did it, Holland told himself, the night that puts fear into even the most unsuperstitious man, the most prosaic, the most unimaginative, but by rights they *should* feel that way, for this experience the two fathers shared with their two small sons was—poor weak word—extraordinary!

There was a light on the ground floor of the Quinlan house and they could see it through the gloom and it grew bigger as they walked hurriedly towards it. Quinlan, a tightness in his voice now, called as they went forward.

"Eddie! Eddie, lad? Are you there? It's your dad!"

And from the bigger bulk of house ahead of them through the night the small boy's voice came back.

"Gee, Pop, is that you? You been out there in the meadow talkin' to *him?*"

There was no need to answer. Almost simultaneously, their hurrying steps slowed. The crisis, not declared between the two men but appreciated by both of them, was over. Quinlan turned to face the physician.

"Thanks, Doc. Thanks a lot for coming over."

In the dark the two men shook hands. Fervently, it seemed. And then they parted to go their separate ways in the darkness—Quinlan to his home and Dr. Holland back across the night-grown meadow.

HOLLAND sat up till very late that night thinking of the chain of events which were now more than the imaginings of one person or two. Quinlan was his anthithesis, his opposite and antidote, and yet the plain, good-hearted man had *seen.* The possibility of this being some ill-mannered joke was quite implausible. Aside from any other objections, people don't play that kind of joke on a deputy sheriff, even if the town physician is less immune. No, there was something out there . . . somebody. He was a man, or had been once, for he looked it and he wore clothes.

There were, Holland was well aware, cases of improper diagnosis. Persons have been declared dead who were not dead. There are diseases and conditions and states which resemble death and yet are not. The catatonic is one, for instance, and yet be-

neath his reasoning, beyond his speculating and his attempts to lay out at least in his own mind each possibility, and then rationally to plug these loopholes, he was certain as a physician that the man he had seen, the one Jamie had—so aptly wasn't it—called Mr. Mole, was not of the living.

He wished Helen were here for she was not only a good listener—and he needed such to parade his facts and suppositions before—but she had good suggestions. The night insects were quiet and there was a hint of light in the east when the physician retired to his room.

To explain to Jamie that he was not supposed to run small-boylike far and wide across the meadows necessitated the thinking up of a story about Indians on the move outside.

The little boy looked at his father closely, more wisely, the physician thought, than a child of his years should.

Holland went about his business glad that the days were six, five, four, then three until wife Helen would return. He could not in all conscience restrict his son to the house for there had to be a reason more than make-believe Indians and the danger to the small, tow-headed boy was not proven, dwelling perhaps more in a father's mind than anywhere else.

As the days passed, the physician chided himself a bit. He became annoyed at the feeling of uncomfortableness that he experienced when he needs be, got the coupe with the physicians' emblem over the back license plate, out of the garage to go on some necessary call or errand, and yet still felt uneasiness at leaving Jamie.

But the very passing of time gave strength to the hope that grew almost to conviction that whoever it was, whatever it was out there in the ground, moving like a mole from place to place, had gone back to whatever place from whence it had come, or had been stilled forever in some dark crevice beneath the earth's surface away from men's eyes.

Holland met Quinlan one day down in the village, and both men's spirits were good.

They didn't say so, but the meaning was clear. *I* haven't seen him nor have you or we would have spoken of it. The knowledge was between the two men and then they parted cheerfully.

THE night before the good day Helen was to return, Holland's phone rang. Jamie was already upstairs, presumably asleep in his cheerful, wallpapered east room, and Holland had long since given Amanda a lift home explaining to her carefully that they'd "want her later on the morrow" because Helen would be coming back in time for supper and it would be nice to have something extra-special for her homecoming.

"Hello, Doc," it was Quinlan when Holland picked up the receiver. "Eddie's seen him again!"

The doctor's hand tightened on the instrument.

"Out back in the woods apiece. Swears he moves around an' talks to him. Wanted Eddie to take a walk with him."

Holland tried to keep his voice even: "What's to do about it, Ed?"

"Tomorrow . . ." Quinlan added just as though he'd thought it out, ". . . I'll get a bunch of us together and we'll find out who or what this is! Maybe it's some kind of queer drunk." This last, hopefully.

"I think we ought to do something, Ed," the physician said resolutely. "Can't let this go on, you know!"

On that note the two men hung up, Holland to re-enter the library where he sat, the uneasiness with him again. In the last few days he had found the time and opportunity to peruse both the county clerk's and newspaper records. There had been no unaccounted-for disappearances or other incidents in this area which would explain this peripatetic "thing" which haunted the summer countryside. And in present-day society the hardest thing in the world to do is to disappear or get oneself killed or destroyed in any way without attracting considerable attention.

Yes, whoever heard of an unclaimed body or corpse? Try as he would, Holland could not dissuade himself from the nagging thought that here was something that did not fit in with the commonplace and, therefore, did not follow everyday laws of the workaday world.

Actually, it was a few minutes past seven the next morning when Holland

heard his front-door knocker clattering. It seemed much earlier. The rain and mist across the land had held up the day. Jamie was just stirring in his room as his father clumped down the stairs muttering under his breath.

And then before he put his hand on the great knob that would turn the door to open it, a feeling of presentiment took hold of him, stiffened his arm and touched his back with damp, cold fingers.

He pulled the portal open, and out of the early morning grayness stepped Quinlan, in his arms a bundle, his mute face wide-eyed, storm-streaked. He seemed to offer the thing cradled in his arms to Holland and Holland, seeing, suddenly became the physician.

He said gently, "Here, Ed. Let me take him," though he knew at first look it was no good.

There was dirt all over little Eddie; dirt turned to mud by the rain in his eyes and mouth and ears. The youngster had died, it was apparent, of suffocation—not from hands wrapped around his throat, but from going down deep, deep into the earth and being buried there.

The thought came back to Holland of what Quinlan had said over the phone the previous night, what his own son had said the last time the "thing" had visited over here—what was it?—Mr. Mole had invited him to take a walk *below?*

As the physician was thinking, Quinlan was talking brokenly, trying to hold onto himself with the will of a strong man, twisted and bending under the cruelest tragedy of his life.

"I'm sure the youngster was to bed when I talked to you last night, Doc, but sometime in the night or early this morning, he must have gone out—God knows why—'cept that that devil has a power, a kind of fascination! I'm up early, you know, and Eddie was nowhere around the house this morning. I went out to look . . . and there was one of those holes not far from the house. You know . . . like we'd seen before. Seen little Eddie's footprints, I did, around this place like they went into the hole. . . .

". . . I got me a spade then, Doc, and I dug faster than a man's ever dug before . . . and after I got down a ways in that hole . . . I found him . . . like this. But there weren't a 'hello, Daddy' or a breath left in 'im at all. . . ."

Quinlan sank down on a chair, sobbing now, his head between his great, strong hands, shaking like a terrified child.

"Ed," said Holland quietly and sympathetically. "Ed, follow me into the medical room."

The physician led the way, carrying Eddie's body in his arms, and Quinlan dutifully lurched along behind. Jamie was a sensitive boy. Holland could find no use for having him look down the stairs through the bannisters and see the scene in the front hall. Also, Quinlan himself needed some medication.

The doctor laid Eddie's body carefully on the examining table, made sure with his stethoscope what he already knew—that there was not the slightest flicker of life left in the earth-choked body, and then mixed the unfortunate boy's father a potent sedative.

"He's gone, isn't he, Doc?"

"I'm afraid he is, Ed. It's a terrible thing . . . terrible! And I know any words of sympathy now from me seem poor and inadequate."

QUINLAN sat for a time, not saying anything, turning the glass that contained the sedative around and around in his strong fingers. He drained the medicine, and after a while, stood up.

"Well . . . thanks, Doc. I'll take my son, if you please. Take him home and then down to the undertaker's. I want to go quick, Doc . . . 'cause I'm going to get after the devil out there in the ground! I'm going to get the men together. You'll join us, Doc?"

"You know I will, Ed. I'll come over to your place a little later in the morning."

"You got an axe, Doc? Bring it!" The deputy's teeth bared in a snarl. "We're gonna get this fellow!"

"Ed . . . don't you want me to go with you, or take little Eddie down to town myself?"

Quinlan shook his head determinedly. "What's done's done, Doc. Now we gotta get after the one who did this!"

He went out with Eddie again cradled in his arms, and the growing morning, as the light of it touched his face, showed it set in

hard lines, the terrible sadness, shock and despair replaced with something else that was healthier in man.

Holland went for Jamie then and was steeled when the boy asked, "Daddy, what was Mister Quinlan doing here?"

"He had a very great problem, son," the physician replied carefully. "He came to ask me about it. How about driving into town with me, Jamie, to pick up Amanda?"

As they drove, the clouds scurried away before them and the sun came out to dry and heat up the wet, early morning world. Holland drove numbly and instinctively. He returned Amanda's greetings automatically There was nothing to be said, but already, his son was looking at him curiously.

That was one of the curses of imagination. Amanda was old, good to bake cakes and make apple pie dumplings and filled with the desire to serve them and affection for them as a family, but she was too old to understand if he said, "Now look, Amanda. Something terrible has happened in this neighborhood. There's a man loose . . . a dead man, and he's just killed a little boy. We have to be careful . . . we don't know from what direction danger may come. Maybe it won't come but there's the situation!"

He couldn't talk like that to her, or even if he could, not in front of his son.

THEY arrived back at the Holland house, and Amanda noticed at once that the physician had not gotten any breakfast. She insisted on getting something together. Holland ate poorly. Afterward, he must get over to Quinlan's as he had promised. The men would be gathering there for their grim task.

Jamie, from behind his glass of milk, said to his father behind his coffee cup, "I'm going over to play with Eddie this morning. We're going to fly the new kite, Daddy!"

Albert Holland swallowed with difficulty.

"No, Jamie, not this morning."

"But, Daddy—!"

What could he say? *What could he say?* Not "Jamie, I have something to tell you . . . Amanda's too old and you're really too young to understand the why of this, but the facts are, Eddie is . . . dead! He was pulled into a hole by a corpse and suffocated out there in the meadow where you and he have played so many times . . .where you were going to play this morning with your kite. He's dead, Jamie. No use looking for him out there."

How could he say that? What could he say? And all the time Jamie sitting there, tow-headed and wondering why.

"Daddy, we're going to . . ."

The boy's quick mind kept searching around his father's silence.

"Is he sick?"

(That's a doctor's son for you.)

"Thats what it is!" said the little boy, gathering momentum and sureness. "He's got measles!"

No, Jamie, that happened last winter and you don't get them twice, but you still remember how Helen and I wouldn't let you go over because Eddie had measles. This time, Jamie, it's something worse . . . oh, so much worse than measles.

"It's something catching, Daddy? Measles?"

"No."

No, Jamie, not measles, not something catching—not really. Or maybe it is! Maybe that's why I'm more frightened than I'd ever dare let you know. That's why in a moment I'm going to get the axe out of the woodshed and go over and join Quinlan and the rest of the men.

Instead he said, "No, Jamie, you can't go over this morning. Find something to do around here. And don't you disobey me! I'm going to tell Amanda to keep her eye on you, hear?"

ALBERT HOLLAND walked towards Quinlan's, the axe in one hand, across the low stone wall into the meadow and towards the hillside. The sun was out now, accentuating the softness and the peace of mid-summer. The fertile greenness soothed his eyes and made the unpleasant thoughts in the physician's mind seem incredible and implausible. That these things could have happened under the blueness of the sky, the brightness of the sun here in the softness of the land was surely not possible.

And yet as he walked farther, he saw the knots of men standing around Quinlan's house. From a distance they were short men and tall men, fat and lean. Here and there

the sun touched a gun barrel. He recognized faces as he came closer—a drugstore clerk, several boys from the volunteer fire department, the assistant postmaster, others. They nodded to him and he nodded back. And there was one thing they all had in common, and that one thing was grim and unsmiling.

Men made suggestions and barked orders at one another, and finally they walked out onto the broad bosom of the meadow, taking their shovels and axes and clubs and guns with them, prodding at the earth, poking at it as though it, itself, had committed this awful crime.

Quinlan was everywhere, filled with a terrible rage that was the worse because it was silent except as it came out in the man's unquenchable energy.

The hours passed, and the men plodded across the fields, sloshed through brooks and tramped through underbrush. They had long since poked and spaded into the holes Quinlan and Dr. Holland knew of. Midday passed and afternoon. The sun slid towards the rim of the westerly hills, and Holland, consulting his watch, knew he should be getting back to get things all ready for Helen.

With the fatigue of walking, searching, there came a feeling of futility. What had they done . . . what could they do? What did they know, tapping their boots and steel instruments against the ground here and there for something that would not stand up fairly and say "Here I am!"

In relays some of the men came back to Quinlan's cottage where womenfolk were keeping coffee pots on the stove. Holland left his axe at Quinlan's and turned his steps towards home. He told himself that sooner or later they'd have to uncover this creature —whatever *he* was or *it* was. It was good, he thought with a physician's analysis, that Quinlan had the direction of this posse on his hands at this moment of his so-great sorrow.

HE MADE the house, went inside, the screen door slamming behind him. The noise of Amanda in the kitchen drew him there. She was "making something special" for the supper when Helen would be with them again.

"Where's Jamie?" he asked loudly.

Amanda was a little on the deaf side and had to be bellowed at.

"He's around—playing in his cowboy costume, he is." She waved an old arm in a semi-circle. "Doctor Albert—" she always called him that—"Doctor Albert, you look a fright! Whatever have you been doing?"

Holland looked down at himself. Five or six hours of walking through thickets and looking at dirt holes in the fields had left

him rather bedraggled. He'd have to clean up. The physician looked out the kitchen window.

"Where did you say Jamie was?"

"'Round somewhere," she repeated again. "Saw him not very long ago. Well, now maybe it *was* an hour. Had a friend, he did. Mister Somebody-or-other come to see him."

Holland froze. "Mister . . . Mister *Mole?*" His voice was much louder than necessary.

"That's it! Knew it sounded like an animal. Peculiar handle, isn't it, Doctor Albert? Said his friend invited him—this Mister Mole—to take a walk down below. Must mean out towards the meadow, Doctor Albert."

But Holland was gone, flinging himself out the door, running and trying to look in all directions, the inner hand clamped over his heart tightening, agonizing.

The house was behind and the lawn and the stone wall, and then in the woods in the other direction from the meadow, he found it. A new hole like all those others!

Holland went at it with his boots and hands, wishing he had something else, but there was no time to run back for a tool. He scooped and kicked the earth away as fast as he could. And by and by a corner of material showed and then he had it in his earth-coated shaking hands. It was a hat—a small boy's cowboy hat . . . from Jamie's outfit!

The doctor redoubled his efforts then frantically, clawing, getting down on all fours, and finally he found what he knew was there, and shaking away the earth covering and clinging, he laid it on the rim of the hole he had excavated with his hands . . . the same size bundle as Quinlan had brought to him the night before, equally lifeless and useless now.

Holland made a noise like an animal, and like that animal, he dug on, hollowing and scooping, for it was for him to do this thing. *He* would have to stop it. The old who had forgotten how to dream and who don't want to believe, like Amanda, and the very young who still believe in everything, like Jamie—they had caused this, unknowing.

He went on and on, a man in an earthen hole in the green countryside. And it must have been hours later that Amanda, wondering, came looking and heard the noises from that place in the woods. She got men from the posse over at Quinlan's, and they found him like that in an unbelievably deep hole of his own making, with the small earth-caked body of his son lying guard above.

It was Quinlan, himself, who pulled Albert Holland out, and later with Helen, who had arrived home again, tried to reassure and quiet the physician. Helen, whose shock, at finding this terrible tragedy in her own family, was only slightly more than the frightening condition of her husband.

FOR Dr. Holland was not a man of science any more, not a physician but a squealing, screaming, crying creature, stuffed with earth that came out of him when he talked. They sent for another doctor up at the county seat to come quickly, but there were miles in between, and meanwhile Holland had the time to tell over and over again how they shouldn't have pulled him out of the hole in the earth, for twice, three times, *more,* he had caught up with Mr. Mole down there. He had felt a trousered leg, an arm, a torso, and it had wriggled and twisted away from him like a worm in the earth.

Yes—and it had leered at him!

"It speaks and it moves!" Holland ranted this over and over.

Sometimes in his horror he screamed so loudly that he frightened the birds outside in the twilight of the July evening, and even poor, old half-deaf Amanda far away in other parts of the house staying, with her kindly tear-streaked face, because "Maybe there's something I can do," would clap her withered hands to her ears to keep the awful sounds from them.

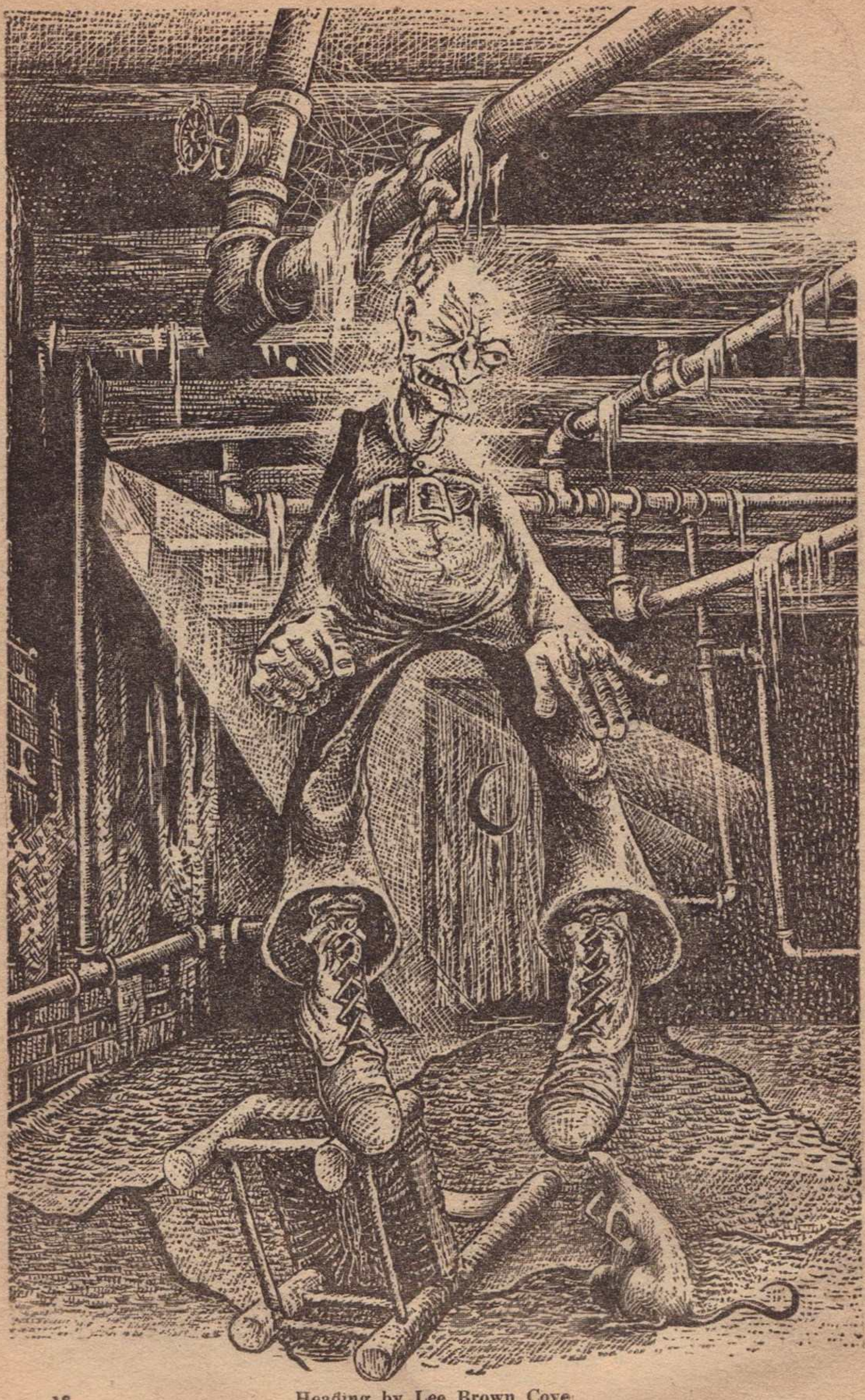
But Albert Holland's screams did not carry far enough, for later, not too much later, across the green land cooling in evening, a blond child named Janice ran across the spongy green ground—a child who believed in fairy stories, in everything—running and calling through the evening, filled to bursting with the secret as she ran.

"Mummy! Daddy! Guess what! Guess what *I've* found!"

Weird Tales

LEE BROWN COYE

IN ENGLAND, DURING THE REIGN OF KING JAMES THE FIRST, THE PRACTICE OF WITCHCRAFT & ITS VARIOUS MODES & CEREMONIES WAS DECLARED FELONY WITHOUT BENEFIT OF CLERGY. HENCE THERE AROSE A PROFESSION AS CRUEL & SADISTIC AS EVER HAD BEEN KNOWN TO MAN-THAT OF THE WITCH-FINDER. THESE OBNOXIOUS SPECIMANS OF HUMANITY WENT FROM PLACE TO PLACE WHEREVER OCCASION DEMANDED - ROUNDING UP ACCUSED WITCHES & WIZARDS & UNDER UNBELIEVABLE TORTURES OBTAINED CONFESSIONS. FOR THESE CONFESSIONS THE WITCH-FINDER WAS HIGHLY REWARDED & ESTEEMED.



Heading by Lee Brown Coye

Conscience Maketh Cowards

By Seabury Quinn

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.

—*Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1.*

LIEUTENANT JEREMIAH COSTELLO of the homicide squad refilled his coffee cup, drained it in two gargantuan gulps, and tilted the silex pot over it again. "No, sor, Dr. de Grandin," he reported, "I'm not exactly satisfied with th' findin's. It *looks* like suicide, I'll grant, but there's many a wolf—four- or two-legged—as looks as innocent as any lamb at first glance, too. Here's th' setup: This felly is supposed to have committed suicide by jumpin' out o' th' sixth storey winder, an' to make assurance doubly sure, as th' felly says, he tied th' cord o' his bathrobe round his neck before he jumped. But, says Dr. Parnell, th' coroner's physician, th' cord broke an' he was precipitated to th' courtyard. O.K., says I. Could be. But there's more here than meets th' eye; leastwise, Dr. Parnell's eye.

"You've seen throttlin' cases, I dunno?" he raised his almost copper-colored brows inquiringly.

De Grandin nodded. "Many of them, my old one."

"Just so, sor. An' ye'll be rememberin' that in most o' them th' hyoid bone is fractured an' th' larnyx cart'lages is broken, whereas in hangin' you don't often find this?"

"Justement," the little Frenchman nodded.

"Well, sor, every sign was present. If I ever seen a throttlin' case, this was one. I'm thinkin' that they choked him 'fore they swung him from th' winder. An' here's another thing: Th' cord by which he hung before he fell down to the ce-ment o' th' courtyard hadn't frayed out gradual-like. It was clean-cut as if a knife or scissors snipped it off."

"*Vraiment?* And what does Dr. Parnell say to this, *mon lieutenant?*"

"He brushes it aside. Says th' fractures o' th' hyoid bone an' larynx could 'a' been made when th' felly hit th' ground—which I ain't disputin'—an' th' cord could just as well 'a' broken clean as frayed out, which is also possible, but"—he stabbed a thick, strong forefinger at de Grandin—"What gits me goat is that *all* these signs an' tokens manifestin' homicide 'stead o' suicide should be present, yet th' coroner's physician bulls th' jury into bringin' a verdict o' self-murder."

Jules de Grandin tapped a cigarette against his thumbnail, set it alight and blew smoke through his nostrils. "And what do you propose doing, my old and rare one?"

The Irishman raised ponderous shoulders in a gesture of futility. "What can I do, sor? Officially th' case is closed. Th' felly died by his own hand, an' that's th' end o' it. All th' same, I'll be afther doin' some gum-shoein' on me own. If someone's done a murder it's me job to find it out, an' afther that it's up to th' judge an' state's attorney—"

The cachinnation of the office telephone broke in, and I rose to answer it. "It's for you, Lieutenant," I said, and,

"Yes?" Costello challenged. "Oha? At 1515 Belvedere Street? An' th' name—glory be to God!"

In a moment he was back, a look that might have betokened anger or amazement on his broad face. "I'll say there's sumpin devilish in this business, sors," he told us. "That was th' Bureau callin' to report another suicidal hangin'. Right around th' corner from the one I'd just been afther

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"There is many a wolf—four or two-legged —as looks as innocent as any lamb!"

tellin' ye about, an'—here's th' payoff!—'tis th' first man's brother who's supposed to 'a' bumped hisself off this time."

THE days of blistering heat were done, and September had come in like a cool and gracious matron. Although there was a hint of fall in the clear air it was still warm enough to enjoy coffee on the veranda that overlooked the side yard where the dahlias bloomed, and after a late dinner we were sitting in low wicker chairs enjoying that delightful languor that accompanies the mingling of eupepsia and slow poisoning by nicotine, caffein and alcohol when Nora McGinnis, my household factotum, came to us wearing that peculiarly forbidding expression she assumes when anybody obtrudes on "her doctors'" prandial period. "If ye plaze, sors," she announced with something more than a thin rime of frost upon her voice, "there's two people askin' for ye; a man an' woman."

"Patients?" I asked, stifling a groan. I'd had five T. and A.'s at Mercy Hospital that day, and performed an emergency parasentesis on an aging woman—necessarily without anesthesia—and the fatigue of strained nerves had left me in a state of near-exhaustion.

Nora raised her shoulders in a shrug—a trick she'd caught from Jules de Grandin—and gave me a look that announced complete nescience. "I wouldn't know, sor. They says as how they'd like to see yerself *an'* Dr. de Grandin. Shall I go back an' say it's afther hours?"

I was about to nod assent, but de Grandin intervened. "By no means, *ma petite*. If they desire to see Friend Trowbridge solely it is obviously a medical matter; but if they also wish to consult me that is another pair of sleeves. Tell them we will see them, if you please."

The couple who awaited us in the consulting room were not entirely prepossessing. The man was middle-aged, balding, heavy-shouldered, rather puffy at the waistline. He wore a neat, dark, formally-cut suit with narrow piqué edging at the V of his waistcoat. From his black-rimmed pince-nez trailed a rather wide black ribbon, and through their lenses he was studying my excellent copy of Renoir's "Boating Party" with evident disapproval. (In passing I might state I studiously avoid "professional pictures" such as "The Doctor," "The Study in Anatomy," or even the slightly humorous cartoons of Hogarth and Hans Holbein.)

His companion was more difficult to catalogue. She was just an average female of indeterminate age with undistinguished features and an undistinguished hat and hairdo. Her dress, though well made and of good material, seemed somehow not quite urban. A man might find some difficulty saying what was wrong with her, but a woman would have known at once. She had, as Jules de Grandin would have put it, a total lack of *le chic*.

"Dr. Trowbridge? Dr. de Grandin?" the man asked as we entered.

"I am Dr. Trowbridge," I answered, "and this is Dr. de Grandin." I paused, awaiting an exchange of confidences.

Our caller cleared his throat and looked at us, rather expectantly, it seemed to me. "You know me, of course." He did not ask it as a question, but made the announcement as a statement of fact.

De Grandin shook his head and looked distressed. "*Je suis désolé, monsieur*, but I do not. I have lived in this so splendid country but a little quarter-century, and have not met all its celebrities. You are not George Washington, or Général Pershing —"

"I am Pastor Rodney Roggenbuck of the Complete Scriptures Congregation."

The smile that hovered underneath the waxed tips of de Grandin's small blond mustache gave way to something like a sneer. The shepherd of the flourishing new congregation was known to both of us by reputation. With calculating shrewdness he had filched doctrinal bits from such divergent sects as Whiteism, Christian Science, Russellism, fundamental Calvinism and the Eutychian heresy, spiced them highly with intolerance, and with this potpourri for creed and doctrine had begun crusading against the theatre and movies, medicine and Sunday papers, vivisection, vaccination, newspaper comics, liquor, coffee, tea and tobacco, the teaching of ele

mentary geology in public schools and "graven images"—in connection with which later he had attempted to enjoin the May processions of local Catholic churches and statuary in the city's parks. That one professing such beliefs should consult a physician was, to speak conservatively, amazing.

"And which of us do you desire to consult, *monsieur*?" de Grandin asked. "Is it that you are *indisposé*?"

"I've come because Lieutenant Costello suggested it."

"Ah?"

"He tells me you are skilled in magic, witchcraft, and such things."

"A-ah?" de Grandin repeated, and there was something like cold-lightning flashes in his small blue eyes. I braced myself for an atomic explosion.

"Precisely, sir. He's no more satisfied that Fred and Theobald committed suicide than I am."

"And just exactly who, if one may ask, were Fred and Théobald, *monsieur*, and why should they not have destroyed themselves, and what concern of mine is it if they did so? Were they, perhaps, your brothers—"

"They were."

DE GRANDIN sucked in a quick mouthful of air, but his look of angry suspicion did not soften. "Say on, *monsieur*," he ordered. "I am listening."

"Frederick Roggenbuck was my younger brother. He lived at 1213 Quincy Street. Night before last he was supposed to have hanged himself from the window of his apartment. The coroner says it was suicide.

"Early this morning, or very late last night, my elder brother Theobald who lived with us at 1515 Belvedere Street, just around the corner from my brother Fred's, is supposed to have hanged himself from a pipe in the basement. None of us heard him rise from bed, or heard him in the cellar, but when Lucinda, the maid who gets our meals and looks after the house, let herself in this morning she found him hanging by a length of clothesline.

"Both my brothers were good, religious men, sir, and well aware of the enormity of the crime of self-murder. Neither would have thought of doing such a thing. Besides, they both had everything to live for—they were well fixed financially, and were engaged in work they loved with holy zeal —"

"Were they, by any chance, associated with you in your labors, *monsieur*?" de Grandin interrupted.

"They were. Theo was a presbyter and Fred a deacon."

"U'm?"

"What are you implying, sir? Why do you say 'u'm' in that manner?"

"*Pardieu*, *monsieur*, why should I not say 'u'm' in any manner that I choose?" de Grandin shot back testily. "I shall say 'u'm' or '*hé*' or '*sacré bleu*' or anything I wish to say in any manner I desire, and if you do not like it there is neither lock nor bolt upon our door. You are at liberty to leave forthwith."

"Oh, no offense, sir, I assure you," Mr. Roggenbuck soothed. "Perhaps we do not understand each other. I wish you'd let me tell you—"

"Your wish is granted, *monsieur*." De Grandin dropped into a chair and lit a cigarette. "Begin at the beginning, if you please, and tell me why it is that you suspect your estimable brothers did not give themselves the happy dispatch. Have you, perhaps, physical as well as moral reasons for your supposition?"

"Lieutenant Costello tells me he informed you of his reasons for suspecting Brother Fred did not do away with himself. In Brother Theo's case his suspicions are even more firmly founded.

"Theobald was portly, somewhat stouter than I, and just a little shorter, say about five foot six or seven. The pipe from which he is supposed to have hanged himself is eight feet from the floor, the rope by which he was suspended was just a little over two feet long from knot to noose. Theo's feet swung four or five inches from the floor, and there was no stool or chair or other object which he could have stood on near them. It would have been physically impossible for him to have looped the rope around his neck while standing on the floor, and equally impossible for him to have

hanged himself without standing on something, yet there was nothing underneath him, and no object on which he could have stood anywhere within such distance as he could have kicked it from under him while he struggled as he hung."

"U'm?" Jules de Grandin put his fingers tip to tip and pondered. "And how was Monsieur Théobald arrayed? In his *chemise de nuit*—"

"No, sir. The night-shirt is a garment feminine in form, and Holy Scripture says explicitly a man shall not put on a woman's garment. He was wearing pajamas and a cotton bathrobe. His straw slippers had fallen from his feet as he hung from the pipe."

De Grandin lit another cigarette and blew smoke from his nose. "Perhaps you have a point there, *monsieur*. I could not say until I've reconnoitered the terrain. Have you other grounds for suspicion, or is there any person you suspect?"

"Yes, sir; I suspect one Amos Frye, my sister-in-law's husband. I believe he drove them to self-murder by vindictive witchcraft—in fine, that he 'put a hex upon them,' as they say in the part of the country from which I come."

"But this is of the utmost interest, *monsieur*. Where may one find Monsieur your belle-soeur's husband?"

"He is dead."

"*Hein? Feu noir du diable*, do you say so? Proceed, *monsieur*. Tell more; tell all. Like Baalam's ass, I am all ears!"

"MY WIFE has an afflicted sister named Eulalia," our caller answered. "For some years she has had the impression of tuberculosis, but stubbornly refuses to drink of the healing waters of faith, preferring to entrust herself to the worldly aid of physicians."

De Grandin pursed his lips as if to whistle, but made no comment. His features gave no indication of his thoughts; his eyes were absolutely void of expression.

"She was a wilful, headstrong girl," continued Mr. Roggenbuck, "and when the war came on as punishment for the sins of the world she insisted on becoming involved in canteen work. Strictly against our wishes, I may add. The Scriptures say specifically, 'Thou shalt not kill,' and every soldier is potentially a murderer. However, she insisted on consorting with these men of blood, and finally she married one of them.

"We offered her a home while he was overseas, and would have made him welcome when he returned, although he was a gentile—that is, not of our faith—but he insisted on her living with him in an apartment he provided. Then he secured employment as a traveling salesman, and was forced to be away from home much of the time. Eulalia's impression of disease became stronger, and at last we took her to our house, where she could receive treatment in accordance with the tenets of true religion. When he returned from his trip we refused to let her go to him, or let him come to her. My wife Rosita is her sister, and I am like a brother to her, aye, more than a brother, since I have her spiritual welfare at heart—what's that, sir?" he broke off as de Grandin murmured something sotto voce.

"*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur*, it is that I seem to recall a passage in the Bible that says a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, since the twain are one flesh—"

"My dear sir! If you understood such things you'd know that Holy Scripture is to be received seriously, but not literally. Besides, the reference is to a man's cleaving to his wife, not a wife's cleaving to her husband; and in addition we are not Eulalia's father and mother, but her sister and brother-in-law. I challenge you to find a passage in the Bible which says a woman shall desert her brother-in-law to follow her husband!"

De Grandin's expression would have done credit to a cynical, blond Mephistopheles, but he answered with astonishing mildness, "You have me fairly there, *monsieur*. I do not think that I can cite you such a verse. And now, as you were saying—"

"Amos made several attempts to see Eulalia, and was on the brink of bringing legal action when he was unfortunately killed in a highway accident. Most fortunately my brothers happened by while he lay dying by the roadside, and Theobald,

who as a presbyter has power to loose or retain sins, gave him absolution. We thought, at least we hoped, that he was saved, but it appears his vengeful, earth-bound spirit has pursued my poor, dear brothers, hounded them to suicide; made them self-murderers."

"What makes you think so, *monsieur*?"

"Almost a year ago, shortly after Amos's fatal accident, my brother Fred began to have strange feelings. Have you ever had the feeling you were watched intently by some evilly-disposed person, sir? That is the feeling Fred complained of—as if someone who wished him ill were looking at him from the back continually, waiting opportunity to pounce. Sometimes the feeling grew so strong that he would turn around to see if he were actually being stared at; but there was never anybody visible.

"Three months later Theobald began to suffer the same eerie sensations. They had no privacy. When they disrobed for bed or for the bath that feeling of surveillance was on them; when they walked along the street or drove their cars they felt another walked behind them or was sitting at their sides; when they wrote a letter or perused a book there was always the impression that another looked across their shoulders, watching every move they made, never taking their eyes off them, never ceasing to hate them with poisonous, suppurating hatred. It must have been a terrible sensation, and one calculated to drive them to madness and self-murder."

De Grandin's eyes had lifted as our caller spoke. Now they were fixed in an unwinking cat-stare on a point a little beyond Mr. Roggenbuck's shoulder. For the first time the other seemed aware of the Frenchman's intent gaze, and a tremor ran through his hard-shaven, rather fleshy face. His jaws seemed suddenly to sag flaccidly like the dewlaps of a hound, and his mouth began to twist convulsively. "What—who—is it?" he demanded in a voice that seemed to come from a clogged throat.

The little Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. "Who can say, *monsieur*? Perhaps it was no more than a shadow."

"What sort of shadow—what did it look like?"

"*On ne sait pas*? Perhaps it was like that of a man, perhaps that of a curtain shaken in the wind, perhaps a trick of the lamplight. *N'en parlons plus*. At any rate, it is gone now."

"You're sure?"

"Oh, quite sure, *monsieur*."

"Then"—Mr. Roggenbuck drew a silk handkerchief and wiped his brow—"what would you advise, Dr. de Grandin? Are you willing—can you help?"

"I am willing, and I think that I can help the cause of justice, Monsieur Roggenbuck. My fee will be a thousand dollars, in advance."

"A thousand dollars!"

"Perfectly. In fifteen minutes it will be increased to fifteen hundred. In half an hour I am not for hire at any price."

He pocketed the check, and, "Now, *monsieur*," he suggested, "suppose we go to your house and inspect the scene of your late brother's *déces*."

THE house in Belvedere Street was a substantial frame dwelling, neither opulent nor unpretentious, with a wide portico behind the tall, white pillars of which shadows seemed to be imprisoned. No lights showed anywhere in it, and Mr. Roggenbuck had to feel for the keyhole before he was able to admit us. Inside the place was quite as uninspiring as it was outwardly. It seemed to have been ordered, straighted into complete impersonality. The furniture was of good quality and obviously expensive, and just as obviously chosen without taste. Mahogany of no particular period stood cheek by jowl with golden oak and maple patently of neo-Grand Rapids design. The floors were waxed and highly polished, and on them were some simulated Kashan rugs arranged without regard to pattern or color. Such pictures as adorned the walls were of the Landseer-Rosa Bonheur school. I almost expected to see "The Stag at Bay" or "Pharaoh's Horses," or an enlarged sepia print of the Colosseum.

"The basement first, if you will be so kind," de Grandin asked, and led by our host we descended a flight of narrow stairs. The room ran under the entire house and was in nowise remarkable. In one corner was

the gas furnace, flanked by the hot water tank, with stationary washtubs and a mechanical washer beside them. Odds and ends of cast-off furniture, rolled-up summer matting rugs and similar lumber lay around the walls.

"Here was where my brother was found," Mr. Roggenbuck told us, pointing to an iron pipe that snaked between the joists supporting the first floor. "He hung, as I told you, with his feet almost on the ground, and there was nothing under or near him which he could have stood on while adjusting the noose—"

"Did you observe him before he was cut down?" de Grandin interrupted.

"Why, yes—"

"He wore no slippers, I believe?"

"They had dropped from his feet, I assume—"

"One does not make assumptions in such cases, *monsieur*. Have you any reason to believe that they had fallen, rather than been slipped off?"

"No-o; I can't say I have."

"*Bien. Bon.* We begin to make the progress. Now, what, exactly, was his position?"

Roggenbuck was silent for a moment, then dropped to one knee. "I'd say he hung just about here, with his feet clear of the floor."

"U'm. And he was five feet and a half in height, the rope by which he hung was approximately two feet long, his feet lacked four or so inches of contact with the floor?"

"That is correct, sir."

"H'm. Then something less than a foot high—something perhaps no more than six or seven inches would have been sufficient for him to mount as a scaffold—"

"But there was nothing there, I tell you —"

"Not even this, perhaps?" Wheeling as if on a pivot, the little Frenchman walked to the wall opposite the place where we stood, stooped and retrieved an object lying in the shadow.

It was a bowling ball of some eight inches diameter, black and highly polished, but overlaid with a thin film of dust. As he held it daintily, with thumb and forefinger in the grip-holes, we saw the dust upon its surface had been wiped away in two parallel patches roughly oblong in shape, and that a wavering diagonal of cleared space ran down one side. "Unless I am far more mistaken than I think," he told us, "*Monsieur le Suicide* stood on this globe while he adjusted the loop to his neck, then kicked it from him so it rolled to the spot where I spied it. That we can readily determine. Your brother balanced barefoot on this ball, *monsieur*. The slippery soles of his straw shoes would not have afforded a purchase on its smooth surface. *Alors*, he left the prints of his feet on the polished wood. See them?" He indicated the two spots where the dust was disturbed. "The ridges on the friction skin of hands and feet are as highly individual as the prints of the fingers. Your brother has not yet been buried. It is necessary only that we bring the prints on this ball out, make an impression of the pattern of the soles of his feet, and *voilà*, we can be sure that he stood upon the sphere before he did *la danse macabre*. Yes, certainly." He wrapped his salvage in a newspaper taken from the pile that stood in readiness for the trash-collector, then:

"If you will be so kind as to conduct us to Madame your sister-in-law, we shall be obliged," he said.

"I'm sorry, but I can't permit her to be disturbed," Mr. Roggenbuck refused.

"*Très bien*; just as you say," de Grandin agreed. "I think that we have gleaned sufficient data for one call already. If you will be so good as to give me an order on the mortician permitting me to make prints of your brother's feet we need not trouble you further at this time, *monsieur*."

"WHERE'VE you been?" I demanded as he came in sometime after eleven the next evening and began attacking the snack of turkey sandwiches, champagne, lemon pie and coffee Nora had left for him with a ferocity that would have made a famished wolf seem daintily abstemious by comparison.

"*Mon Dieu, mon Dieu*, where have I not been, my old one?" he answered between mouthfuls. "Me, I have been up hill and down dale, and completely round the barn of Monsieur Robin Hood. I have visited the

excellent mortician, the newspaper office, the office of the county clerk, the house of Monsieur Roggenbuck—*grand Dieu,* what a name!—and a dozen other places, also.

"And has my search been vain? *Par la barbe d'une pieuvre,* I shall say otherwise!" He finished the last morsel of sandwich, washed it down with the last sip of champagne, poured a cup of steaming coffee, and prepared to demolish a great wedge of lemon meringue. "My friend," he leveled his fork at me like a weapon, "my old and rare one, I learned a number of most interesting things today. Some of them may have a bearing on *l'affaire* Roggenbuck, although at present I cannot make out their pattern. Consider, if you please:

"The Brothers Roggenbuck appear to have worked as a team for years, the estimable Rodney furnishing the invention, his less talented kinsmen attending to the details. Before the 1929 debacle their specialty was peddling securities, stock of goldless gold mines, oilless oil wells, real estate entirely under water, and the like. Their favorite clients were bereaved ladies left some small insurance, or, failing those, old couples who had laid away a little for their final years. Frédéric, the younger brother, went to jail, Théobald was fined, but not incarcerated; Rodney went free for lack of evidence.

"Let us, like surveyors, drive a peg down there, and proceed with our examination of the terrain. The present Madame Roggenbuck is not the first, nor second, nor third spouse of this *manqué* evangelist. He has, it seems, been married three times previously. It seems she was the elder of two orphan daughters of a *viellard* named Stretfuse."

"Old Henry Stretfuse?" I asked. "I remember him. He had a farm out on the Andover Road—"

"*Précisément.* A very old, worked-out farm which was considered worthless when he left it to his daughters. But with the coming of the war, when the city commenced expanding like a blown-up bladder, it became most valuable for building sites. The boom in building had just begun when Monsieur Roggenbuck married Mademoiselle Stretfuse.

"She was, as I have said, the elder of two sisters, and much flattered to receive attention from the reverend gentleman. Eulalia, her younger sister, was already suffering from incipient tuberculosis." He paused, swallowed the last crumb of pie, and added, "According to the terms of the will, the sisters were named joint tenants in the land. Does that mean anything to you?"

I shook my head.

"Nor did it signify to me until I had consulted Monsieur Mitchell the *avoué.* Then I began to scent a little so small mouse. Joint tenancy, the lawyer told me, means that tenants hold the land in equal, undivided shares, but at the death of one the whole estate passes to the other instead of going partly to the heirs of him who dies. *Et puis?* No one will buy the share of one joint tenant unless the other also signs the deed, since he who buys is subrogated only to the rights of his grantor, and liable to have his heirs' inheritance defeated if he dies before the other joint tenant. Do you also begin to smell the rodent?"

"H'm; can't say that I do."

"*Très bien.* Regard me: If Monsieur Roggenbuck married Mademoiselle Eulalia the chances are that she, the victim of an often fatal malady, would predecease her elder sister; but if he married Mademoiselle Sara, as he did, the chances are that she, though older, will survive and become sole owner of a valuable property. For that reason, and no other, I am convinced, he chose the elder of the sisters for his bride.

"However, complications rose when Mademoiselle the younger sister married Monsieur Frye. Under his loving care and cherishment she might outlive her elder sister, then *pouf!* where would the reverend gentleman be?

"Not to be caught napping, *pardieu*! Not he! When Monsieur Frye goes to the war he takes his sister-in-law to his house, sees that she has no medical attention, and hopes for the best.

"*Hélas,* the soldier-husband comes home from the battlefields, so stronger measures must be taken. He takes the young wife from her home and holds her virtually a prisoner, *incommunicado.*

"Now, listen carefully. Monsieur the hus-

band is about to ask the court to give him back his wife when he meets death upon the highway. The accident occurs on a steep hill, and, quite fortuitously, two of the firm of Roggenbuck Frères are there at or about the time it happens."

"Are you implying—"

"I am implying nothing. I am merely marshalling the facts for our review. Two days before this fatal accident Monsieur Frédéric buys a motor car, a swift vehicle fitted with a driving searchlight, such as police cars carry. Moreover, he goes to a garageman and has an even more powerful light installed. He is a city-dweller and not given to much driving on the country roads. Why should he desire so powerful a searchlight?"

"I haven't the remotest idea."

"Well spoken, my good, trusting friend. You would be the last to entertain unworthy suspicions. Me, I am otherwise."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Not anything at present. This is just another peg we drive down in our surveying tour. But listen further, if you please:

"This afternoon I made it my business to watch Monsieur Roggenbuck's house. By a 'phone call I ascertained that he was at his office. I saw Madame his wife go out; I telephoned his house and got no answer. '*Bien*,' I tell me. 'The house are empty; the domestic is not there.' So, like the robber in the night, I break into that house. *Parbleu*, I tell you a most excellent burglar was lost when Jules de Grandin decided to be comparatively honest.

"I went through that house carefully. And in an upper room, a little so small sunless room set high beneath the roof, I find poor Madame Frye. She are locked in like any *félone*. She lies upon a narrow, unkempt bed, her *robe de nuit* is far from clean, she coughs almost incessantly.

"I speak to her, me. She answers feebly, between coughings. She tells me that her brother-in-law keeps at her constantly to deed her share of the farm to her sister. He tells her that her husband is dead, but she will not believe him. She stubbornly withholds her signature, for he, her husband, had told her to sign nothing. Until he comes she will not sign. *Parbleu*, unless we intervene all soon she will assuredly succumb, and Madame Roggenbuck will be sole heiress. When that occurs, *cordieu*, I do not think that she will be a good risk for insurance. No. I ask to know if it is not a pretty pan of fish I have discovered?"

"It's infamous!" I exclaimed. "We must do something—"

"*Précisément, mon vieux*, we must, indeed. Come, let us go."

"Go? Where?"

"About a little piece of business that I have in mind."

PETEROS read the small bronze tablet on the red-brick house before which we stopped half an hour later. As far as I could see it was the only thing distinguishing it from the other houses in the eminently respectable block. When de Grandin pressed the bell a neatly uniformed maid answered and led us to a parlor.

I glanced about me curiously. The place was rather elegant. A Chinese rug of the Kien-lung period lay on the floor, against the farther wall hung a Ghiordes prayer-cloth, the furniture was clearly of French manufacture, gilt wood upholstered in an apple-green brocade. The only picture in the room was a life-sized portrait of a blond woman with wide, brooding eyes and a sad mouth. A latch clicked, and a small, neat gentleman entered.

He was perhaps fifty, his hair was slightly gray at the temples, his rather long face was clean-shaven, the dark eyes behind the tortoise-shell spectacles were serious and thoughtful. His dinner clothes were impeccable, but of a slightly foreign cut. He might have been a lawyer or a banker, or perhaps the curator of an art gallery, but I recognized him as Gregor Peteros who, though professionally a medium and clairvoyant, was so highly thought of that psychologists of reputable standing did not hesitate to consult him, and whose monographs on extrasensory perception had been printed in a dozen scientific magazines. "Good evening, gentlemen," he greeted. "I'll be with you in a moment. If you don't mind I'll take a topcoat; I'm rather sensitive to chill."

"As near as I could determine from studying the newspapers and police re-

ports, this is the spot," de Grandin told us as we drew up at a curve that twisted down a steep hill above Harrison Creek. The roadway had been widened recently, and where a hundred-foot drop led to the rock-studded, bawling waters of the stream a breast-high wall of stone and reinforced concrete had been erected. The spot had been a famous—or infamous—one for fatal accidents until this safeguard had been put up, I recalled.

"Can you put yourself *en rapport* with the past, Monsieur Peteros?" de Grandin asked. "I realize it may be difficult, for much traffic has passed since—"

"Do not tell me the details!" Mr. Peteros broke in. "When did the accident occur?"

"September eighteenth, two years ago."

"I see." The medium made a note on a slip of paper, did a quick calculation, and tapped his teeth with his pencil. "That would have been under the sign of Virgo in the decanus of Mercury." He settled himself back on the cushions, closed his eyes, and seemed about to take a nap. For several minutes there was complete silence, and we could hear the ticking of our watches beating out a fugue; from the distance came the dismal wailing of a freight train's locomotive, somewhere nearer a dog barked, and the mounting sound was slender as a strand of spider-web.

Abruptly Mr. Peteros sat up. His eyes were closed, but his face worked excitedly. "I see him!" he exclaimed. "He has swung around the curve at the hilltop and commenced the descent. He seems distrait; he is not watching the road. He should not rely on his brakes, he ought to put his engine into low gear."

He swallowed with excitement, then turned his closed eyes down the road. "There is another car coming," he announced. "It's a small, open car, with two men in it. One drives, the other leans out. He is watching . . . watching. He has his hand upon a driving searchlight set upon a rod beside the windshield. It is covered with some kind of cloth, a bag or sack of heavy felt through which no light can pass. The two cars are not more than fifty feet apart now. The man descending the hill swerves to the right, toward the guardrail. The other car swings to the left. They are approaching head-on. Ah! The man beside the driver of the second car has turned his hooded spotlight squarely on the driver of the first vehicle. Now he snatches the hood off. A-a-ah! There is a beam of dazzling light shining full into the other driver's eyes. It blinds him. He—his car is out of control! He will crash against the barrier. He has crashed through it! His car is turning over and over as it tumbles down the bank. *Kyrie eleïson!* The glass of his windshield has shattered. He is pierced by a great splinter of it. He is bleeding, dying. . . ."

He paused a moment, breathing hard, like an exhausted runner, then, more calmly: "The other car has stopped and its passengers have gotten out. They are slipping, sliding down the steep bank. They have reached the wreck, but they make no move to take its occupant out. One of them reaches in and feels his pulse, shakes his head, and steps back. They wait . . . wait. Now they feel the wreck victim's pulse again, and still they make no move to lift him out. Now they seem satisfied. They reach into the wreck and lift the victim out. He is dead. I see them nod to each other, then turn to scramble up the bank again. . . ."

"*Yes, yes, monsieur?* What next?" de Grandin rasped as Mr. Peteros ceased speaking. "*Pour le chapeau d'un cochon vert,* what else is it you see, I ask to know?"

"Eh?" Mr. Peteros looked at him with the blank stare of a wakened sleeper. "What's that?"

"*Mordieu,* what else was it you saw?"

"I don't remember. I can never recall what I've seen in the trance."

The little Frenchman looked as if he were about to spring on him, then raised his narrow shoulders in a shrug of resignation. "*Tenez,* it is of no real importance. I damn think you have told us quite enough."

"JE *SUIS AFFAMÉ,* I am hungry, like a wolf, me," he told me as we reached the house. "Let us see what Madame Nora has concealed in the ice box."

We rummaged in the frigidaire and brought out some cold roast lamb, some lettuce and a jar of mayonnaise. Also several bottles of beer.

"Now," he asked, seating himself on the kitchen table with a sandwich in one hand and beer mug in the other, "what is it that we have? It seems that in the matter of eliminating Monsieur Frye the middle Roggenbuck brother was, as usual, the master mind. He planned the so clever assassination, his henchmen-brothers executed it.

"I am persuaded that they died self-hanged, and that they richly deserved hanging. Of Monsieur Théobald's suicide there is no doubt. The prints upon the bowling ball exactly match the lines of his feet. That he stood on it, then kicked it away when he had draped the noose around his neck, there is no question. Concerning Monsieur Frédéric I cannot say with certainty, but I incline to think that Dr. Parnell is for once right, and the good Costello once unfortunately wrong.

"Why did they do it? Who can say? Perhaps it was their guilty conscience, though I do not think so, for *fripons* such as they have little conscience. Perhaps it was the vengeful spirit of their victim seeking justice —forcing them to do that which the law could not. It could be so. At any rate, they are eliminated. Our problem now is Monsieur Rodney."

"There's nothing we can do about him," I rejoined. "There's no way we can bring the crime home to him. No court and jury in New Jersey would listen to such testimony as Peteros gave us tonight, and even if they did we can't prove Rodney planned the murder."

"I AGREE with you, *mon vieux,* but we may do what the law cannot. His conscience—granting that he has one—is not clean. His brothers' statements that they had a feeling of being watched troubled him. He is persuaded that his murdered brother-in-law has the power to bewitch him—to 'hex' him, as he puts it. When, to test his sensibility to suggestion, I pretended to see someone standing behind him last night, did not you see how frightened he was? I think that there we shall find the chink in his armor, and I shall work industriously to enlarge it. Yes, certainly. Of course."

It was shortly before noon next day when he entered Mr. Roggenbuck's office. The place swarmed with activity. A battery of typewriters, operated by singularly photogenic young women, filled in spaces in processed form letters and addressed envelopes; a boy and girl were busy at a multigraphing machine, several curvaceous females stuffed the filled-in forms into envelopes.

"Yes, sirs?" challenged the young woman at the switchboard, who also evidently acted as receptionist. Advised of our errand she whispered something into an inter-office communicator, and in a moment looked up with a smile. "Straight ahead, please," she directed. "The Bishop's office is at the end of the corridor."

"Parbleu," de Grandin chuckled as we walked down the hall, "when he first came to see us he was a simple pastor. Today he is a bishop. We must hurry to take care of him, my friend, or he will assuredly become pope.

"Monseigneur," he announced as we entered Roggenbuck's dimly-lighted, softly carpeted sanctum, "I have the proof that both your brothers died by their own hands, and—*mon Dieu,* who is that!" he stepped back, both hands raised as if to ward away some horror.

"Who—where?" the other turned half round in his swivel chair.

"The one who stands behind you with his face all smeared in blood and points at you accusingly—"

"No!" Roggenbuck exclaimed. "It can't be—he can't say—"

"Friend Trowbridge, do not you see him?" de Grandin turned to me. "Do not you see him standing there?"

I knit my brows and tried to sound as convincing as possible. "Yes, there's someone there. He seems to have met with an accident. Shall we call an ambulance—"

"No! No!" Roggenbuck broke in hoarsely. "You're lying, both of you!" He pressed a button on his desk, and in a moment there came the click of high heels on the floor outside.

"Did you ring, Bishop?" asked a young woman as she entered. "I—oh! who is it—what's happened?" She stared across her employer's shoulder, apparently wide-eyed with horror, then put her hands up to her face

and dropped back a step, shuddering. "Oh, o-oh!" she moaned. "The blood—the blood!"

Sweat was streaming down Roggenbuck's face, his full-lipped mouth began to work convulsively, and at its corners little flecks of foam showed. His eyes were bright and dilated as if under the influence of a drug. "Do you see it, too, Elsie?" he choked.

She made no answer, but nodded, her face still cupped in her hands, her shoulders shaking with repressed sobs.

"Oh, my God!" the frightened man rose from his desk and stumbled toward the rear door. "He's come for me, too. He came for Fred and Theo, now it's my turn—leave me alone, Amos Frye, I didn't—I didn't—" The door banged to behind him, and de Grandin patted the girl's shoulder.

"Bravo, Mademoiselle," he applauded. "The great Bernhardt at her greatest could not have done better. Here is what I promised you." From his wallet he drew several bills and pressed them into her hand.

The girl giggled. "I wouldn't 'a' done it if he hadn't been such a heel," she confessed. "But he was always makin' passes at us girls, an' threatenin' to fire us if we squawked. The pious old hypocrite!"

The Frenchman grinned delightedly. "You have given me a new word for my vocabulary, *ma chère*. It are entirely as you say. He was an eel of the first water, him."

From the driveway beside the office we heard the rasp of gears and the roaring of a motor being started. In a moment, from the corner came the shrill, hysterical scream of a police whistle, the crash of metal smashing into metal and the ring of breaking glass.

We rushed into the street and raced toward the corner, with the shriek of the policeman's whistle and a chorus of hoarse cries still sounding.

Telescoped until it was foreshortened by at least a third its length, Roggenbuck's convertible stood at the intersection of the street and boulevard, while towering above it, like a bulldog straddling a luckless cat, was a ten-ton truck.

"Hullo, Dr. de Grandin," greeted the policeman. "Good mornin' Dr. Trowbridge. Gimme a hand with him, will you? He was comin' hell-bent-for-election down the street, payin' no more attention to the red light than if it wasn't there, when *zingo!* he barged into this here now truck, like he'd knock it outa his way. Yeah, the cemeteries is full o' birds that drive like that. He didn't have no more chance than a rabbit."

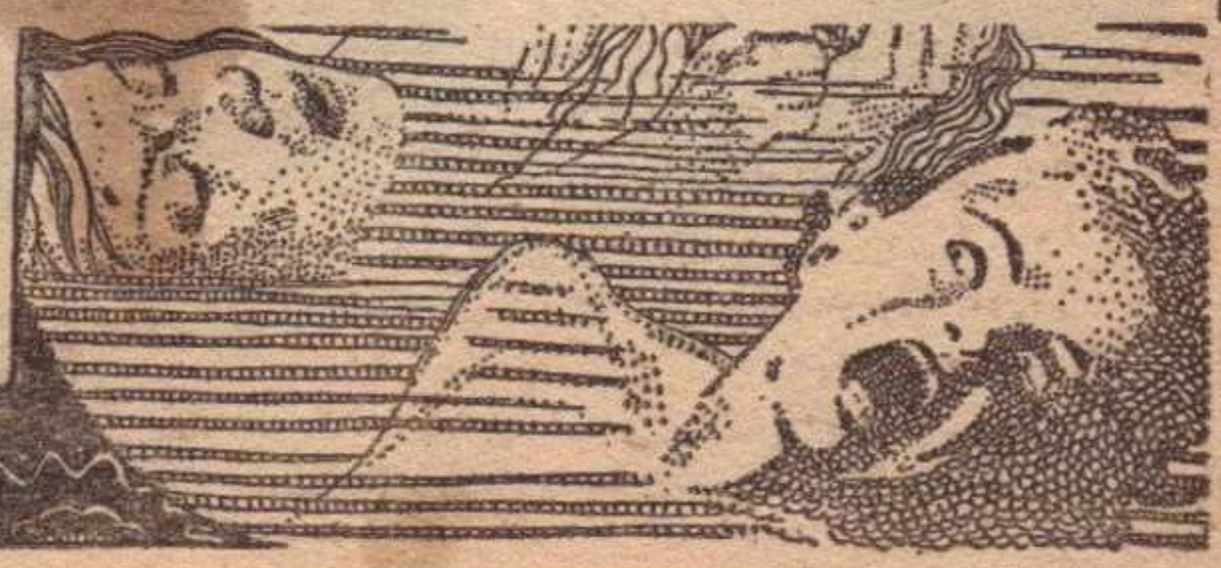
"One sees," returned de Grandin as, assisting the policeman, we lifted what was left of Roggenbuck from his car. Death must have been instantaneous. Certainly, it had been messy. His whole face was bashed in as if it had been struck by a battering-ram. His skull, from frontal bone to occiput, had been smashed like an egg and almost denuded of scalp. "*Mort,*" pronounced de Grandin. "*Mort comme un mouton*—he is dead like a herring, this one." He nodded to the policeman. "This is for the coroner, *mon brave*. Do not disturb the internes at the hospital. They hate to have their poker playing interrupted by such fruitless calls."

Malevolence as profound as absolute zero!

"Black Harvest of Moraine"

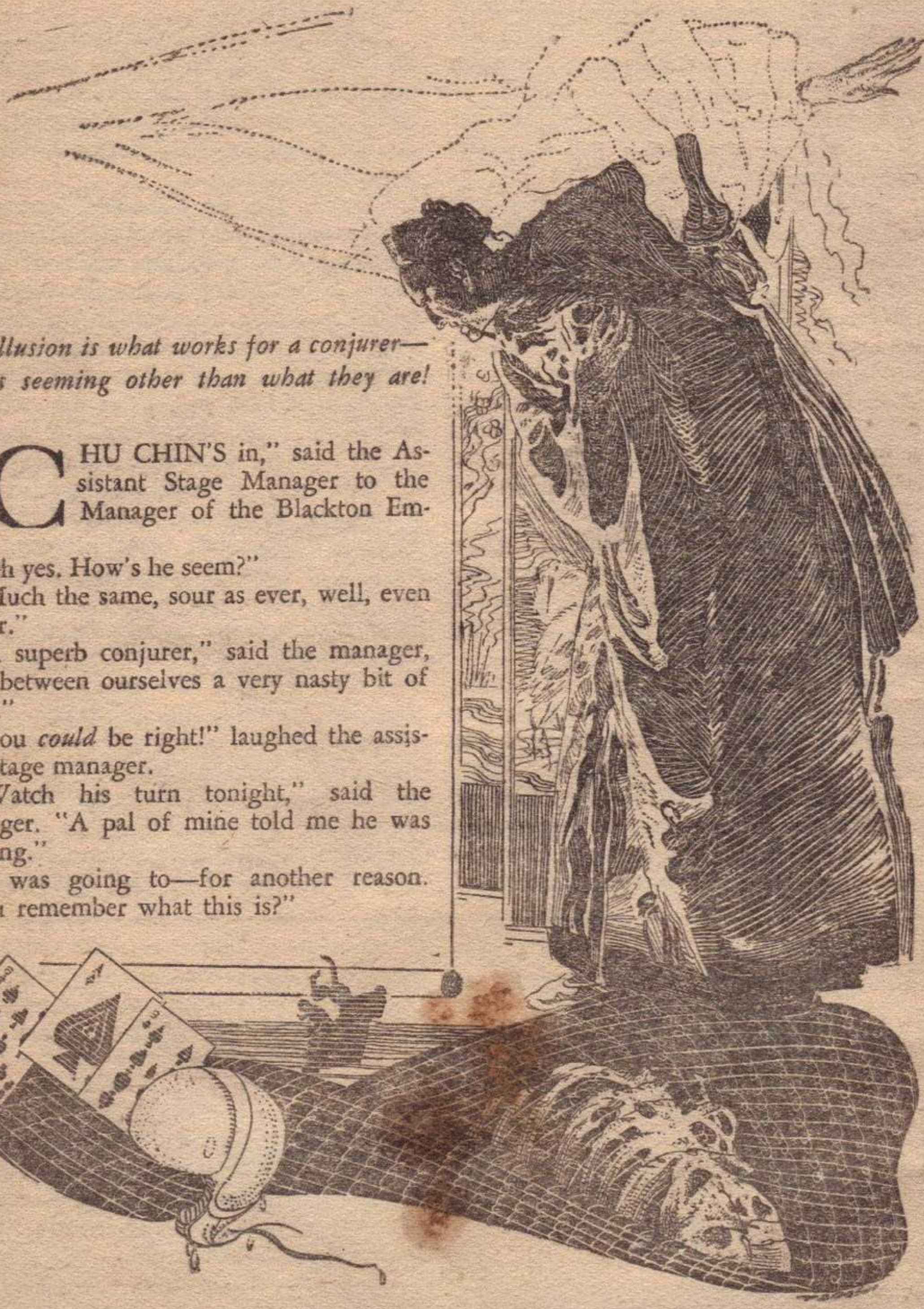
ARTHUR J. BURKS

In the next Weird Tales



Out of the Wrack I Rise

BY H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD



The illusion is what works for a conjurer—things seeming other than what they are!

"CHU CHIN'S in," said the Assistant Stage Manager to the Manager of the Blackton Empire.

"Oh yes. How's he seem?"

"Much the same, sour as ever, well, even sourer."

"A superb conjurer," said the manager, "but between ourselves a very nasty bit of work."

"You *could* be right!" laughed the assistant stage manager.

"Watch his turn tonight," said the manager. "A pal of mine told me he was slipping."

"I was going to—for another reason. D'you remember what this is?"

Heading by Vincent Napoli

"How do'you mean?"

"Anniversary of his wife's death."

"Good Lord! How time skips. He has married again, hasn't he?"

"Yes," said the assistant stage manager, "that assistant of his."

"There was a certain amount of—well—talk, when his wife was drowned, wasn't there?"

"Yes; may have been unfair. It always looks a shade odd when you take your wife out night-bathing and she doesn't come back."

"Her body was never recovered, was it?" asked the manager.

"Well, no, but oddly enough a trawler landed a skeleton, believed to be a woman's, this morning. It had been caught in their nets. It's in the mortuary round the corner now. There'll be an inquest in a day or two, but I understand it's quite unidentifiable."

"He treated her pretty rough, didn't he?"

"She certainly looked as if he did. And then of course getting married again within a couple of months to a girl half your age and such a bold, designing minx into the bargain! As a matter of fact I didn't think *she* looked too happy just now."

"I can understand *that!* Is there feeling against him in the town, d'you think? Will they give him the bird?"

"I don't think so. Anyway I'll watch carefully and report to you."

"Okay."

Chu Chin's real name was Jerry Pullin. He had adopted this stage name because he had the Mongol fold to his eyes and a vaguely Oriental cast of countenance. With a mandarin's skull-cap, a black boot-lace moustache, and enveloped in a voluminous priest-robe, he looked the part well enough. He was very tall and always paced the stage in majestic Mr. Wu attitudes. He used no patter at all, never opening his mouth from start to finish of his turn. He "distracted attention" by two means. He fixed his queer eyes on the audience, and the female members of it were often slighty hypnotized by this piercing stare. To lull male alertness he relied on his assistant, a big bold-eyed strapping wench. He dressed her in the briefest and tightest of shorts, a low-necked almost transparent blouse, and a Coolie hat. He made her move frequently behind him, as though arranging the things on his work-tables, and the men gave her plenty of eye. She also did any talking that was necessary. Jerry was around fifty and cordially detested in the profession, being sly, grasping and utterly unsociable, but he was recognized as a master of his craft, his manual dexterity being unrivalled and his over-all technique superb. He topped the bill everywhere.

THE assistant stage manager took his stand in the prompt wing as the curtain rose and Chu Chin and the girl came on the stage. His reception was damp and unenthusiastic, but there were no boos or other manifestations of hostility. The assistant stage manager was himself a competent amateur conjurer, and always watched Chu Chin when he got the chance, to sharpen his skill; just as a golfer or billiards player studies a "Pro," to absorb something of his balance, touch and rhythm, the essence of his mastery. And on this occasion he was particularly concerned to decide whether the manager's suggestion about Chu Chin's decline was true or not. His was, as ever, the last turn of the evening.

He had two work-tables, one on each side of the stage, some chairs for volunteers from the audience, and at the back was a high contraption, a three-sided screen with an orange silk curtain making the fourth side. And always behind him moved the big girl, smiling and showing off her points.

His first trick was about the oldest on the list, just pulling things out of a top-hat, but he made it fresh and amusing. He would place in the hat, say, a miniature baby's feeding bottle and extract a small bottle of whiskey, replace that and produce an imitation red rose. The assistant stage manager knew how it was done, but he never ceased to marvel at the slick virtuosity of Chu Chin's execution. He usually ended by flashing out the flags of all the more respectable nations, but on this occasion he drew out a woman's black bathing-cap.

The assistant stage manager frowned and shrugged his shoulders. What an incredible and monstrous error of taste! But was it that? Jerry stared at it for a second and then

flung it down like a hot coal. Then he glared out at the audience as though demanding, "Which of you has done this?" And somehow at that moment the assistant stage manager knew beyond all doubt that Jerry had drowned his wife. From the audience came a short-lived, puzzled murmur. The girl ran forward, picked up the cap and put it on a work-table. The assistant stage manager watched her do this. The brazen smile had left her face, and when she was standing still again, he saw she was trembling violently.

It then became her business to appeal to the audience for four volunteers to come to the stage and coöperate in the next trick. Her voice as she did so, the assistant manager noted, was not quite under control. After some hesitation four persons responded; a girl, two young men, and a tall woman dressed in unrelieved black and heavily veiled. She looked, thought the assistant stage manager, extremely out of place.

Chu Chin took up a pack of cards and the assistant said, "Each of you, please, take three cards and memorize them."

The woman in black took three cards and at once held them up for Chu Chin to see. The assistant stage manager could see them, too. They were the eight of spades, the ace and the nine of spades, in that order. Now, the assistant stage manager, like all conjurers, did a little light-hearted fortune-telling for the amusement of his friends; so he knew that was the most sinister combination of all, spelling a sudden death and very soon. Then the woman in black let them fall from her hand and left the stage, and, apparently, the theatre also. In his subsequent investigations the assistant stage manager had reason to doubt whether she had been in the house at all until the girl called for volunteers. The doorman denied having seen her come in and, still more oddly, ever seeing her go out. Her appearance and disappearance remained a complete mystery, which was never solved.

Jerry took this contretemps fairly well and went on with his trick, but the assistant stage manager could see the audience was getting restive. They vaguely sensed something was going wrong; and there was much shuffling and some murmuring.

The assistant stage manager himself was perplexed in the extreme. Was there a conspiracy on? Had certain persons determined to wreck the turn? If so, it had been most subtly organized, for how had they been able to tamper with Chu Chin's props? He knew the discomforting sense that there was something afoot of which he could not grasp the significance, as though there was being enacted some play within a play, as it were.

CHU CHIN finished the card stunt, a very clever and difficult one, satisfactorily, and there was some applause from the audience, which had quieted down. The assistant stage manager, who understood audiences like the back of his hand, and could register their reactions with delicate certainty, realized it was still on edge and embarrassed; about twenty persons even left the house. But if all went well from now on, it would settle down. Any further irritant, or upset, however, might send it right out of control. He'd seen that happen once and it was a daunting memory.

Chu Chin's next offering was his famous Poster Illusion, which he kept a tight secret; the assistant stage manager had no notion how it was done. The conjurer took a large sheet of paper, about the size of a newspaper bill, on which was inscribed in the boldest scarlet lettering the legend, "Today's date is—." Then, in full view of the audience he screwed up the paper into a tight ball, then unscrewed it again, smoothed it out, and what *should* have appeared was "August 21st, 1947," the current date. Instead the "7" was a "6," so that it read "August 21st, 1946," the date of his wife's death.

At once there came a loud murmur, a loud and *angry* murmur from the audience, and the applause was still-born.

"Who is doing these things," thought the assistant stage manager, "and how is he doing them?" And now for the first time he felt fear. Chu Chin had unrolled the paper without glancing at it, but now he hurriedly inspected it. Once more his face was convulsed with rage, and he screwed it up again and hurled it into a wing.

Realizing his act was on the verge of

disaster, he omitted some further business and hurried on preparations for his final illusion. For this he employed the screen-contraption. First of all the girl called for a volunteer, and after some delay an elderly man came up. She asked him to pick out any spot near the middle of the stage on which he would like the contraption to be placed, first assuring himself there was no trap-door, by scrutiny and stamping. He did so, and the contraption was erected over the indicated spot. As the elderly man turned to leave the stage he slipped and fell heavily, and was in obvious pain as Chu Chin assisted him to his feet. "Why don't you keep the stage dry!" he angrily exclaimed. "Look at that damp patch!" Refusing to be mollified, he hobbled from the theatre.

THE audience began whistling and shouting, and a number began hurrying out. The assistant stage manager later asked one of them why he had done so and he replied, "It was simply that I had a feeling something horrible was about to happen, something I had no wish to witness." There was consequently much stir and some confusion as Chu Chin went on with his trick, and the girl in a vibrating falsetto asked for silence. The illusion consisted, the assistant stage manager knew, in the girl entering the tent. Then Chu Chin would lower the silk curtain, raise it again and reveal the tent empty. He would then enter the tent himself and lower the curtain, and a little later they would both come onto the stage from different sides. It was a brilliant mirror invention entirely undetectable by the audience.

Now came the moment for the girl to enter the tent, but this, it appeared, she refused to do. The audience became very quiet and watchful. The assistant stage manager was utterly baffled and more than ever conscious of strangeness, unreality, and growing apprehension. After a moment Chu Chin, his face a mask of fury, thrust the girl hard through the curtain. Just at that moment the assistant stage manager saw something white—could it be a fleshless arm?—flung up above the screen and down again. There came a high thin scream of agony and terror and the tent was violently shaken.

The assistant stage manager turned and shouted an order for the curtain to be lowered; instead every light in the house went out. Now the audience started shouting and screaming and surging towards the exits. For a moment the assistant stage manager felt inexorably compelled to watch the stage. He heard the tent crash over, and then he could just discern in that dimmest of glows, three—he could swear it was three—figures struggling violently near where it had stood. Still in wild motion they staggered down towards the footlights, and then the iron safety curtain roared down like the blade of a huge guillotine, and all the lights came on again. Another shriek of terror came from the crowds milling around the jammed doors.

"Play something!" yelled the assistant stage manager to the dazed conductor of the orchestra. He could see runnels of red seeping through below the curtain, and dashed round onto the stage. The bodies of Jerry and the girl were lying in their blood. The heavy safety curtain had crushed their skulls and then hurled them aside. After stage hands had carried them to the dressing-rooms and the ambulances were summoned, the assistant stage manager returned to the stage. In the middle of it lay the eight, ace, and nine of spades, in that order. By the side of one of the work-tables lay the black bathing-cap. He picked it up—it was damp to the touch.

These Debts Are Yours

Ten years is a long time or a very short time depending on how one looks at it.

EX-CAPTAIN EVAN FROME entered Lincoln Highway with some misgivings. He was not accustomed to walking. Drivers, it seemed to him, now that he was temporarily afoot, tried to see how close they could miss the pedestrian. Sometimes they came too close and there was a funeral. Yesterday Frome had met a neighbor near a long red smear on the concrete; the neighbor explained the darkening smear. Evan Frome shivered a little. He had seen enough dead men to last him through eternity. He had never become accustomed to corpses.

"The car threw the old man fifty feet, clear across the highway," the neighbor said.

The neighbor seemed very familiar, he remembered, and there was a haunting ring in his voice.

Evan Frome stooped a little; not because he was old but because he had borne burdens; burdens like ordering troops out into the open to die in the name of good tactics. Burdens of the mind. He shook his head impatiently. He had become accustomed to those burdens. They must not continue to make him h u m p b a c k e d. Yesterday, though, when he came to Christ's Home, a different accustomedness which he did not understand came with him. He had never had amnesia or been in Christ's Home before in his life, unless he had come through in his car before the war at his usual seventy miles an hour. Yet all Pennsylvania, as well as Christ's Home, had been familiar. It made him feel uncomfortable and at peace, all at the same time. He had looked forward to Christ's Home since Peter Beltz, the best friend he had ever had, dying in his arms, made a holographic will, deeding him the snug house at the edge of the village.

"You're all the family I have," Pete had said, then grinned and died.

Cars flipped past him, speeding. They all speeded. Monster trucks almost pushed him off his feet with the wind of their passing. Down the highway embankment to the left snowy ducks swam in a muddy creek. Sheep too fat for their hides, looking as if a pinprick would explode and deflate them, raised their smudged heads to stare blankly at him. The sheep were familiar, too.

"It must be because Pete described the place so many times," he thought, "even the ducks and the sheep."

He followed the curves of the winding path on the shoulder, just off the concrete, without looking down, as if his feet knew the way. He looked right, across the Highway, and the towering, sprawling two-story house on the hill was an old acquaintance. He might have been born in the Dutch barn.

"*That* I *know* is silly!" he told himself. "If there is anything I *don't* have it's a Pennsylvania Dutch connection."

He fought down a shiver as he came to the first house beyond the meadow and the creek on the left. The houses were old, bright red with paint laid upon ancient out-size bricks, perched on rock-reveted embankments. He felt almost as if the houses, and the rock walls higher than his head were greeting him by name, asking him where he had been and when he had returned home. It was an eerie feeling.

He knew the building on the corner was a bank before he saw the words on the door. He knew when he rounded the corner that the post office would be across the side-road, and that the side-road would lead away east, down a gentle slope, through a corridor of weeping willows.

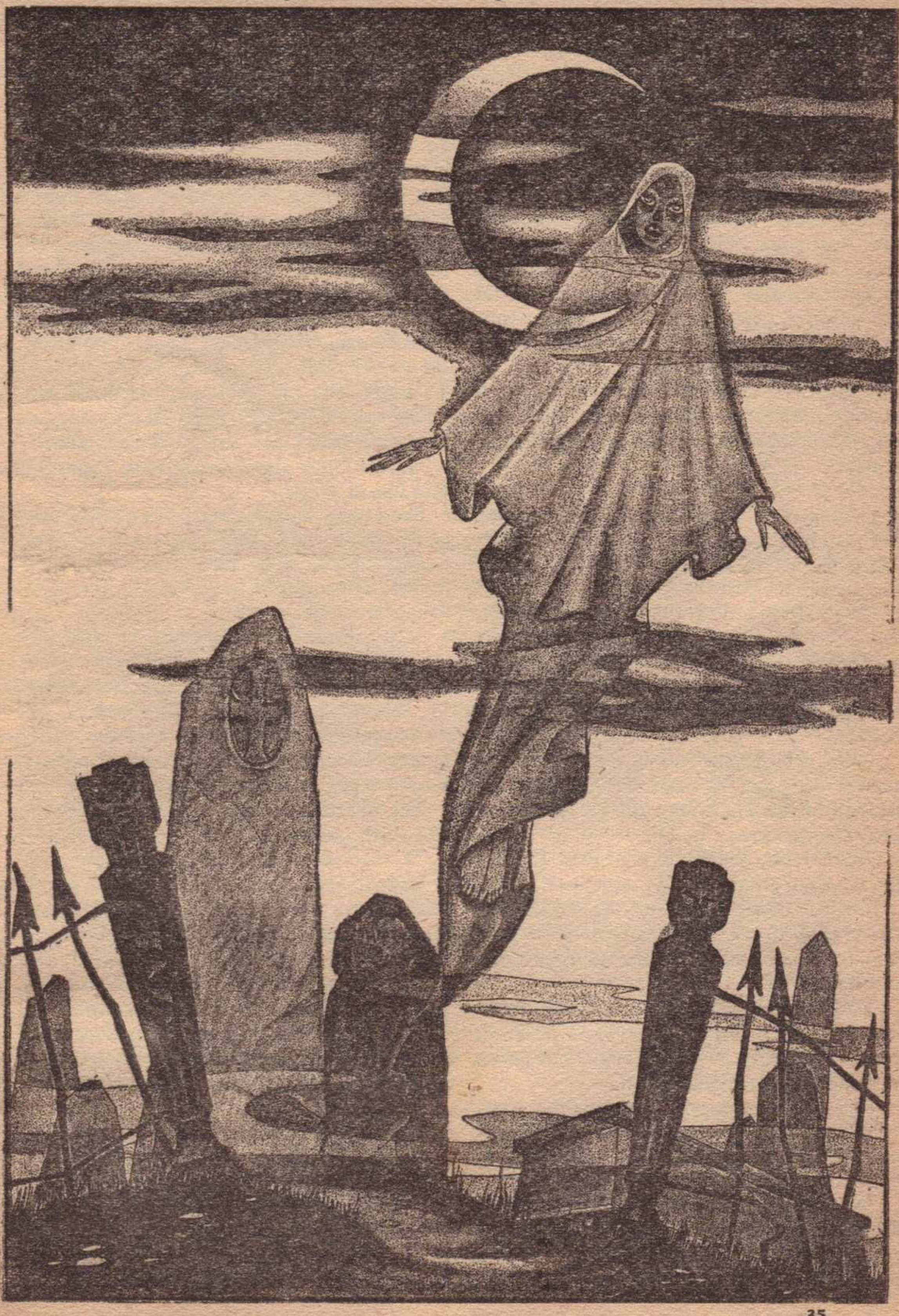
He looked, and it was so.

"Of course it's like that," he told himself. "I saw it yesterday!"

He knew he was going to have to accept, sooner or later, the fact that yesterday, when he saw the heart of Christ's Home for the

Heading by Boris Dolgov

By Arthur J. Burks



first time, he had known it *then*. The knowledge had been tinctured with many feelings; sadness, futility, anger, a little fear perhaps, for which he had no explanation.

He climbed the steps of the aged stone post office building almost as if he were running to sanctuary. The autumn chill in the air gave way to the stuffiness of too much steam heat. He looked at the row of windows marked "General Delivery," "Stamps and Registered Mail," "Money Orders and Parcel Post." They too, faded gold lettering, were accustomed. And half the men behind the windows looked as if they had been born gray of hair, stooped and shaky of hands, bespectacled, slow of movement. They had, he was quite sure, spent their lives behind those windows. They would have died anywhere else. The post office was the beating of their hearts.

ONE of the old men stared at him, mouth hanging open. Then he called quaveringly to someone else: "Ollie, Captain Frome is here. Evan Frome!"

Frome stepped to the largest window, leaned on his elbows, his head through the opening.

"Is that unusual?" he asked testily. "I was here yesterday without creating a furore."

"That was before we had the cleaning woman in, Captain," said the oldest, most stooped of the lot, whom he was sure must be the postmaster.

"And what, may I ask," he said, "has the cleaning woman to do with me?"

"It's just made us curious, Captain," said old David Vogel. "Maybe you know how it is in a small town where nothing much ever happens."

"No, I don't, but I've heard. Small towns live on gossip. But I came here to be at peace. I'm going to pay my way. I'm going to mind my own business. . . ."

"No man's business is entirely his own, even the most personal!" said old David sharply. "However, we won't tell this thing until and if you start the talk yourself."

"I'd answer with more confidence," said Frome, losing his hostility in the mild light gray eyes of the old Dutchman, "if I had some idea what you are talking about."

The old man turned, limped to a height of shelves behind the lock-boxes, took down a thick brown envelope. Frome shook his head. He wasn't expecting any official communications. He'd even made sure he would receive none for a month or two, by giving no one his address—no one, that is, save Harriet Hedr, who might be his wife one day, after he got things settled in his mind. Harriet would never send him a letter like this. Hers were always small, neat, scented. These old men would snort when they experienced Harriet's scent the first time.

"There is no question that your name is Evan Frome?" said David Vogel. "E-V-A N F-r-o-m-e? And you're a captain?"

"I gave you my name yesterday, told you I was expecting mail. Why should it seem strange to you that I should receive some?"

"Don't know about strangeness, captain," said David Vogel.

Every gray haired clerk on the sprawling mail room was lined up behind the counter, looking at him. None of them smiled. They seemed to be waiting, like amiable gray crows.

"Do you mind, before I give you this letter, telling me how old you are?"

"I was born on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918!" he snapped. "That makes me thirty years old *today*. It's my birthday, postmaster. Now, do I get that letter or must I show you my marks and scars too?"

The old men looked down the line, back and forth, at one another.

"Remarkable!" said the old clerk.

"Not in Pennsylvania!" said David Vogel. "Well, here's your letter, captain, and you can understand why we have acted a little like idiots."

Evan Frome shrugged, his khaki shirt adhering even more closely to his broad shoulders, as te took the thick envelope, addressed in a faded, quavery kind of handwriting—he almost called it "spidery"—and read the address first.

Captain Evan Frome, United States Army,
General Delivery,
Christ's Home,
Pennsylvania.

He knew he had never seen the handwriting, yet something inside him stirred, caused his hands to shake ever so little, for.

the handwriting was familiar, as familiar as his own. Yet for the life of him he could not remember where or when he had seen it, and the return address was a name he did not know at all—for all its accustomedness!

Joseph Toelle,
General Delivery,
Christ's Home,
Pennsylvania.

It was, for a moment, almost as if a bell rang inside him. Then the thing was gone, utterly elusive. He knew quite well he had never known a Joseph Toelle.

"There must be some mistake," said Evan Frome, knowing even as he spoke that there wasn't. "I don't know any Joseph Toelle."

The old men exchanged glances again, not a smile among the five of them.

"It's not likely you'd know him, captain," said old David Vogel. "He died in '98. He used to be the postmaster here. The first one in this building, built in '83!"

Evan Frome sighed with relief.

"Then it must be clear there has been a mistake," he said. "This letter can't possibly be for me."

"We didn't think so either," said old David, "when the cleaning woman fished it from behind that bank of shelves," he turned and pointed, "that was installed over fifty years ago. Don't know what possessed her to clean behind 'em, or me to insist, unless. . . ."

"Well, unless what?" said Evan Frome

"Unless it was to get out your letter!"

"That's not likely, is it? Look, you five don't look to me like practical jokers . . . no," as they expressed hurt, all five of them, at his tone and his doubt, "no, you probably never played a practical joke in your lives. . . ."

He broke off himself then. He had been staring at the thick envelope, staring at delivery instructions, of which he suddenly became conscious. The sender had written in that spidery script—there now seemed no other description of it—to the right of the return address:

"Hold until November 11, 1948, when called for!"

FROME jerked up his head, stared at the five old men. He fully expected them to fade away, become strangers, *young* strangers. He fully expected the entire old stone post office to dissolve and the ceiling of the Base Hospital to appear above his head, to find Harriet Hedr, the nurse, bending anxiously over him to say: "Take it easy, Captain. It's all over, you know. You've just had a shock, but you must not give way to it!"

But the old men did not fade. The old post office remained, solid, stuffy with steam heat, as firm as Dutch Pennsylvania.

"When," he asked, "did Joseph Toelle die?" He hoped his voice did not sound as unreal as he felt, that they did not notice the beads of sweat on his forehead that were *not* squeezed out by the steam heat.

"September 13, 1898," said old David Vogel. "I took over from him. I've been here ever since."

"You've been around quite a while, haven't you?" said Captain Evan Frome. "Well, I'll be going. It's plain this letter can't be mine. It's just coincidence, is all. I'll see what it has to say, bring it back to you. Maybe I should open it here, at the desk?"

"Suit yourself," said David Vogel, "but it's your letter all right. Joseph Toelle never made a mistake in his life!"

Old Vogel said it as if he still hated the postmaster who had been dead over fifty years. It was strange, Frome thought, how long hate could endure. What else, he asked himself, hefting the bulky envelope, could endure for half a century?

He harked back to the accustomedness of Christ's Home, then refused to think about it. He had left such fleeting dreams at the hospital where he had left Harriet Hedr until he sent for her.

CHAPTER II

Evidential

BACK in the two-story, five room house that Pete Beltz had given him, Frome dropped the envelope on the table, rubbed his hands briskly, stared at himself in the full length mirror set in the parlor door. He looked okay, he decided, straightening up to take that burden-stoop out of his shoul-

ders. His hair was as sandy as always. Hair, he thought, was unconcerned about death. His weight was a little off, but Harriet had not allowed him to overeat in the hospital. A man could get very fat without exercise and she wouldn't marry a fat man. He weighed a hundred and eighty, had big bones on a big frame, so that it was just about right for his six feet of height.

He bent close to the mirror to look into his own eyes. They looked all right to him.

"Queer," the thought struck him, "that Pete should have given me this house. But then, if he was the last of his line, what could he have done with it?"

There was still something unreal about it, he thought, but not as strange as the letter. And he might as well get that mystery solved, right now Peter Beltz had left his house well supplied with everything when he went away to war, including basement furnace, steam heat, a wealth of gadgets, and the ancient letter opener with which he now slit the yellow envelope—noting for the first time that it was yellow with time. The enclosure consisted of at least twenty pages of closely written foolscap. There was no salutation, but the first lines caught his attention:

"The house," it said, "is not a gift, but full payment of an old debt, so cease to marvel. It is not possible to read the name of the payer."

It was intriguing, even if it was rigamarole.

The next paragraph, however, was different.

"The name Harriet is easier, because it is more closely connected. Hedr appears to be the surname, odd though it is. You should send for her at once. She has a definite part in your task. We have built up this indebtedness together; our mistakes are shared!"

Evan Frome referred back to the envelope, studied it again. Harriet Hedr was twenty five; Joseph Toelle had been dead fifty years; they could not have shared mistakes. He thought of something else: Peter Beltz had never met Harriet; Harriet had never visited Christ's Home, Pennsylvania. Nobody at the post office could have known her name.

A queer sensation began at his coccyx and moved slowly up his spine. It was a sensation of chill, with no touch of fear in it. The chill moved as if reluctantly eager for whatever might come.

"Debts are owed which must be paid," went on the letter. "I have waited carefully until all the current debts were paid. Save that you owe Harriet Hedr the life you will devote to her all your debts to man and God outside Christ's Home have now been paid."

That chill moved a little further up his spine. The statement was true, though it could still be rigamarole. He didn't owe a cent to a soul in the world, and his religion did not trouble him. He was at least as good as average Christian. He owed nothing, had fourteen thousand dollars in a New York bank which he would transfer later to the local bank in Christ's Home. It was queer, he told himself, that this ancient letter should speak of his financial situation. It would mean little, however, if the letter did not refer to Harriet by name.

He read on.

"I have sixty seven days left to live," said the spidery script of Joseph Toelle, in which Frome thought he could actually hear the marked Pennsylvania Dutch accent. "It is not enough time to pay my obligations; but I do not worry greatly since I cannot help it and am therefore not meant to help it. However, in this world or the next, a man must pay his debts. So these debts are yours!"

"And just how do you make *that* out, if I may ask?" said Evan Frome aloud. His eyes jerked up to the phrase, "sixty-seven days left to live" and he thought. "I wonder if, at *that* moment, he knew how much time I had to live at *this* moment? If he did, of course it doesn't matter whether it's months or years—so long as I spend them with Harriet Hedr!"

"The complete list follows:" the ancient letter continued. "Some of my creditors will be dead, but all will have heirs. To some of them the relationship between the dead and the living will be much the same as yours and mine!"

"I trust," said Frome, bowing ironically to the empty sitting room, "that eventually you will tell me just what that relationship is, if I'm saddled with your debts."

Then he read on to find his question par-

tially answered: "What that relationship is you will know at the proper time!"

"I don't" said Evan Frome, "particularly like your Papa-spank attitude!"

There followed a list of seven names, after each of which there was an amount of money set down. Taking up a pencil was an automatic action with Evan Frome. He set down each figure on a pad on the desk, a pad which caused Frome a quirk of the lips. On it were the words "Waldorf Astoria Hotel"; Pete had always carried mementos away from hotels, though he had never mentioned the Waldorf Astoria and Frome wondered what page of his life the pad represented.

Frome totalled the figures.

"Three thousand one hundred eleven dollars," he said. "An insignificant sum. Joseph could add, too, for we agree exactly."

But the next line gave him pause.

"The interest is very low, but because of the lapse of time the total will be approximately fourteen thousand dollars."

HE PUT the manuscript aside while that odd chill crawled a bit higher on his spine. This thing was getting outside the bounds of coincidence, was becoming something other than rigamarole. It was in fact, quite impossible that in mid-summer, 1898, Joseph Toelle should look so deeply and accurately into Evan Frome's bank account in 1948.

"If he names the bank," decided Frome, "I'm going to telegraph Harriet to get here by the fastest plane. Matter of fact, I'm going to do that anyway!"

However, he was not afraid. There was something here decidedly unusual, but behind it there had to be an explanation. When he got it it would be something over which to chuckle.

"If I can still chuckle after these debts break me!" he told himself, something inside him saying that the debts *were* his and that he would pay them, to the last cent.

"It is not necessary," the letter went on, "to visit my grave, but it would, in the circumstances, be an unusual experience because, in this instance, you *know!*"

"Know *what,* Joseph?" snapped Evan Frome. "I know less than nothing!"

"Anna and I," the letter continued, "lie side by side. No arrangement has been made to keep the grave cared for in perpetuity because there is no sense in that, as you know; but egotism suggested a marble headstone rather than sandstone, which weathers so easily, so you can see, and read, if the spirit moves you."

Evan Frome read for two solid hours, then, without looking up from the crabbed, spidery handwriting of Joseph Toelle, who had been nearly eighty when he wrote. Frome wondered why there had been no salutation, knew that the fact of its absence was some sort of an explanation in itself, but could not quite grasp the meaning. He had the feeling, every time he laughed or chuckled, that Joseph Toelle laughed or chuckled *with* him, or *at* him.

Somewhere in the letter Joseph Toelle felt obliged to provide Frome with some striking evidential. Toelle spoke of the Armistice in 1918, which did not come to pass until some months after the death of Frome's father in Flanders; Toelle spoke of both, and of Frome's birth on that historic date. He also spoke of the circumstance of Christ's Home post office staying open on that morning each year until 8:30. Much of Frome's Second World War experience was referred to with some accuracy in the body of Toelle's letter. Nothing, however, Frome noticed, that at least two people did not know: the late Peter Beltz and the current and eager Harriet Hedr.

That they had not known each other Evan Frome had regarded as unfortunate.

When he had done with the strange document Frome felt an almost irresistible urge to visit the cemetery where Toelle lay buried, beside "Anna," whoever she had been, doubtless Toelle's wife. Frome could see no reason why she was mentioned in the letter from yesterday, except to identify the headstone. No, that could scarcely have been the reason. Toelle doubtless had a reason, which would become apparent in due course.

Frome thrust the letter, which was as much a diary as a letter, though it was little of either, into a wall safe of which Peter Beltz had never spoken, which he had found standing open on taking possession of the house.

Frome slipped on his field jacket over his

khaki shirt. He wondered, as he let himself out of the house again, whether now that he owed all the money he had in the bank, he dared invest in a couple of suits of clothes! And who would buy the marriage license when Harriet arrived?

That reminded him. He stepped back inside, telephoned the telegram, went back into Lincoln Highway, turned left to the top of the hill that hid his house from the village of Christ's Home, looked both ways to see whether he had possibly risked his neck by crossing the road, then made a run for it.

THE road eastward from the store where he had picked up his supplies and arranged with the storekeeper to find a housekeeper, circled away to the right past a Mennonite church, to lose itself among tall bordering trees of which he should know the name because it seemed to be right on the tip of his tongue. He stepped out briskly on the sidewalk, heading eastward until he came to a dirt road leading up a steep hill to vanish beyond another row of tall trees as if the road climbed the trees from the far side. He crossed that road, went through a fence where somebody had failed to close the gate, felt the pebbles roll under his field shoes. From the right a huge chained dog barked at him.

Dogs seldom barked at Evan Frome and the fact that this one barked disturbed him a little. He wondered why. There was nothing strange about a dog barking. This one, however, sat on its tail, looked at Frome, then pointed his nose at the sky as if it were night, instead of broad day, before noon, and he were baying the moon. It was a sound that was unbelievably mournful. Frome paused at the yard gate and snapped his fingers at the huge animal.

"Here, Bud, let's be friends!"

The dog mourned again. A woman came hurriedly through a screen door and Frome started on because there was something vaguely familiar about her and he was becoming fed up with the familiar things and people in Christ's Home. But after he had taken a few steps he turned and spoke to the woman, who stood outside the door, fists on hips, looking after him.

"Does your hound always bay like that?" he asked.

"No, Captain Frome," said the woman, whose name he didn't know at all. "He only does that when a funeral cortege passes. That's why I came to see. I hadn't heard of any funeral, unless," she smiled in friendly fashion, "you're one!"

"No," he said, "no, I'm not. At least I don't *think* so. Maybe, though, if your hound could talk. . . ."

But she had turned and gone back into her house, her screen door slamming behind her. Evan Frome, oddly disturbed, fearful that the day's series of disturbances and improbabilities might be part of the shock which had kept him in the hospital so long, walked very thoughtfully on up the dirt road.

The cemetery was huge. Part of it was clearly quite old and well filled, while a newer portion held only scattered tombstones, monuments and markers. The burial ground was on a rounded knoll, thickly sown with a gray-green grass which grew to a height of over a foot; wind played over the grass, bending it, twisting it, so that its color changed from gray to green, from green to gray, and made the cemetery look as if the markers thrust up from the surface of some secluded tarn. Frome had seen many cemeteries, but none that looked as cheerful, even friendly, as this one.

He turned left into the older section, past a towering monument whose legend he did not then take time to read beyond the fact that it referred to a still older cemetery somewhere else. He followed a deeply rutted path through the center of the graveyard. To right and left the grass grew tall, so that some of the marble and sandstone markers—the latter much worn, so that he could scarcely read their inscriptions—were little more than just visible above the wind-swept tarn.

He turned right. He turned left after twenty paces or so. He turned right again, and stopped before a simple marble monument, the first he had noticed in the older section, noted the names and dates on it: The names of Joseph and Anna Toelle, with the dates of birth and death in each case. Anna, it was clear, was Joseph's wife. She

had died in 1890, eight years before her husband.

So far this day had been one of the strangest Evan Frome had ever spent, even when waking dreams and sleeping nightmares had been so difficult to reason away in the hospital.

IT CERTAINLY felt no less strange to stand there and look at the monument of Joseph Toelle and his wife and realize what *seemed* to be a fact was that Toelle had written a letter to Evan Frome, over twenty years before Evan Frome's birth and christening, to be delivered to that same Evan Frome on his thirtieth birthday.

Something one of the old men in the post office had said came back to him: *"It could happen in Pennsylvania!"*

He shook his head angrily. He didn't believe in hexerei or any thing like it. Some sort of a joke, obviously, was being played upon him. He couldn't imagine those old men in the post office being in on it, nor that Pete Beltz had anything to do with it. If Pete had started the ball rolling he must have foreseen his own death, which was just as queer a thing as what was happening to Evan Frome.

No, it was simpler than that. He'd wager that there were service comrades of his right here in Christ's Home, maybe even watching him somewhere this instant, who had cooked this up as a queer "welcome home" stunt. Since all his friends knew what he had gone through in the hospital it didn't seem likely that a *friend* would set such a chain of events in motion. Still, you couldn't tell about army gents. Some of them had peculiar senses of humor.

"Your names," he said softly to Joseph and Anna, "are being taken in vain. But I'll run it down so they'll have their fun, whoever is doing this."

He turned away, walked a dozen paces, halted, stood stockstill, with that cool feeling perceptible on his spine again, much higher now.

He was positive he had not asked, nor been told by anyone, the location either of the cemetery or of the graves of Joseph and Anna Toelle!

The desire rose in him, keeping pace with that chill along his spine, to sneak past that woman's hound without attracting the animal's attention.

He didn't make it. The hound bayed and its chain rattled.

CHAPTER III

Dead End

THE order in which Joseph Toelle had set down the list of creditors seemed as good as any. The first was Adolphe Bruner, the debt four hundred dollars even. Evan Frome did not step onto the Lincoln Highway to visit the house of Adolphe Bruner. There was a path leading back through the privet hedge around the Beltz home, through the backyard of the Dahlings to Bruner's. Evan Frome walked briskly along that path. A bloodhound on a back porch raised a muzzle at him.

"If you bay, sister," he said to her, "I'll paste you one."

The bloodhound thumped a tail on the porch in acknowledgement, and did not bay. Frome went through the break in the Dahling hedge, entered a ramp leading up to a garage door, climbed a long flight of front steps to one of the oldest houses in Christ's Home. He raised and dropped the brass knocker. A young woman came to the door.

"Oh, Captain Frome!" she said. It was heartwarming how quickly village people knew the name of the newcomer; embarrassing, too, because he did not know hers.

"Miss Bruner?" he said.

"No, Miss Bruner is my great aunt. She isn't feeling well, but she is always glad to see visitors. You'll have to speak loudly and clearly to her; she's somewhat deaf. She's ninety-seven years old."

Frome stepped into a neat living room, took a solid, ancient chair the young woman indicated. He shook away the feeling of accustomedness. After all, so many old living rooms were alike; the one in which he had walked softly through childhood was much like this one.

The young woman ran upstairs. Frome watched her speeding ankles with appreciation. He wasn't too old still to be interested in well turned feminine legs. He felt a little

guilty, since by now Harriet must be flying to him.

A very stately old woman, straight and thin as a lath, with a wealth of snow-white hair piled on her head, perfectly coiffured, wearing a choker that must be worth thousands, came downstairs ahead of the young woman. Her ankles, Frome noticed, were as trim as those of her grand niece. She did not wear glasses, this old one, and her black eyes were as piercing as those of a hawk. When she stepped down to where she could see Evan Frome she paused and a thin hand went to her throat. Her mouth opened, but she did not speak until she stood before him, holding his hand.

"I am Captain Evan Frome, Miss Bruner," he said.

"Remarkable!" she replied. "For a moment I thought . . . but there, it's impossible, of course. I *must* be getting old."

"Nothing is impossible in Pennsylvania, Miss Bruner," said Evan Frome, "according to David Vogel, in Christ's Home post office. I think I must have reminded you of someone. Please tell me. It is most important to me."

She laughed lightly.

"I assure you, captain," she said, seating herself in a chair within arm's reach of his own, "that what came to my mind when I saw you could not possibly be important to you. Tell me why you have come to see an old woman?"

He scarcely knew how to begin. He did know that he had no intention of telling even this old woman about the Joseph Toelle letter.

"I came about an old debt, Miss Bruner," he said. "A debt owed to Heinrich Bruner. . . ."

"My brother," she interrupted, "has been dead forty-seven years! I doubt very much if you could have owed him anything. As a matter of fact he was careful, *most* careful, to allow nobody to owe him money!"

Was there a touch of bitterness in her voice? It was easy to imagine things.

"There were no exceptions?" insisted Evan Frome. "Did Joseph Toelle owe him something like four hundred dollars?"

The young woman was singing in the kitchen, as if to assure them she was not listening. Miss Bruner rose to her full height, so quickly that Frome had the illusion that she was seventeen or eighteen instead of practically at the century mark.

"And if he did, captain?" she said. "What then? How could that possibly interest you?"

Frome took a shot in the dark.

"Perhaps for a reason akin to the reason why you mistook me for someone else when you first saw me—that same Joseph Toelle, for instance!"

The shot missed. Her laughter was tinkling and girlish.

"This is nonsense," said Miss Bruner. "Joseph Toelle has been dead fifty years. His debts could not possibly interest. . . ."

"I came to pay them!" snapped Evan Frome, surprised to hear himself say so. "I did not come to spar with you verbally. I came to pay that four hundred dollars! If I don't tell you why, it simply gives you something to wonder about."

"Young man," said Miss Brunner, "if there were any conceivable reason why you should pay that debt, if such a debt existed, it ceased to exist long ago. Debts outlaw themselves in seven years."

"No!" said Frome. "We may think so, but that doesn't make it so, even if the law affirms it. This one is not outlawed."

The old spinster still stood.

"I don't understand this, Captain Frome," she said, "but I don't like it. It makes me feel as if I'm teetering on the edge of my own grave, and I'd like to live another ninety-seven years yet. Please go! I'll check papers left me by my brother. If there is any debt . . . but no, it's quite impossible."

"You'll telephone me if something shows up?" asked Frome. "With accumulated interest that four hundred dollars would total quite an interesting sum."

HE WENT outside, turned left down a shady macadam road, wondering just when three or four of his old friends, still in uniform like himself, would jump out at him from behind a tree or a privet hedge, and give him the old service horse laugh for his gullibility. Even so, the old postmaster, David Vogel, would have to be in on such a gag, and he just couldn't see the gray haired gentleman in the role.

He harked back to the lack of salutation on the foolscap manuscript purportedly written by Joseph Toelle. The lack still intrigued him. It suggested the possibility that some joker had found the old manuscript, actually left by Joseph Toelle, and had rigged up the envelope. No, he had been named in the body of the letter, as had Harriet Hedr, and some of his war service outlined. His buddies could have know of this—but not of his father's experiences, and death, in World War One.

He turned right and climbed another flight of steps, older even than those before the ancient Bruner home.

"I'll bet every last one of these old houses," he told himself, "vanishes after I visit it! Why not? This is Pennsylvania!"

This time he found an old man, Manfred Richter, who looked to be older than Miss Ilsa Bruner, but was a mere eighty, and quite blind. It gave Frome a turn to have the door open in his face and to look into milky eyes that plainly did not see him.

"Yes?" the voice was quavery. The old man was several inches over six feet tall, and stood proudly erect, looking out over Frome's head. "Who's here?"

"I am Captain Evan Frome, sir," Frome began. "I wish to see Mr. Manfred Richter."

"I'm Richter, young man," said the old one. "Your voice is quite familiar though I'm *sure* we haven't met. Come in, please. An old man likes visitors."

"I had thought Pennsylvania Dutch folks were wary of strangers," said Frome.

"I guess they are, young man. I used to be myself. But when you are old there is little reason to be wary of anything."

They sat. Frome thought the old man lived alone and wondered how he kept everything so neat and clean—until he saw a ghostly face at the swinging door which led into what had to be the kitchen, and thought again that these old houses and people must disappear into mist as soon as he had visited and gone.

"Tell me, sir," said Frome, "about the familiar sound of my voice. You said it sounded familiar."

"Yes, yes, I did, but it is out of the question, of course. Let us say no more about it."

There was definite anger in the old man's voice, a tinge of spitefulness. Frome studied the sightless eyes, the apple red cheeks, the snowy silken hair.

"How much did Joseph Toelle owe you when he died?" Frome demanded. "You're thinking of him in some connection, aren't you? It makes you angry."

The old man began to shake. His mouth opened and a foamy fleck appeared at each corner. The shaking frightened Evan Frome. One never knew what a sudden shock would do to the old. Frome hurried to that swinging door, pushed it open.

"I'm afraid I upset Mr. Richter somehow," he said to the old woman in the kitchen. "Maybe you'd better come."

"Martha," said Richter, "look at this young man and tell me—who is he? He just asked me about that scoundrel Toelle. . . ."

The old man could not finish. Evan Frome suddenly had an unreasoning and unreasonable aversion to Manfred Richter. There was no sense in it. He felt that Toelle and Richter must have been bitter enemies for some reason and that somehow he had taken over the feud as well as the debt of Joseph Toelle. It was a queer feeling. He forced himself to help the old woman get the old man upstairs and into his bed, where he was still shaking when Frome left. Downstairs Frome explained his visit as much as he could.

"Business people don't discuss their business with strangers," she told him. "But I'll ask around, and look through Manfred's papers. If there is anything . . . well, I don't know why you should be told, though if there is any conceivable reason why you should pay, it is enough to bury Manfred, anyway."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars with eight percent interest compounded for over fifty years," said Frome. "Yes, the total would bury two or three people."

He wished he hadn't said that. It startled the old woman. He wished he hadn't said a number of things. He wished he hadn't come to Christ's Home. But no, he told himself when he was back out on the macadam road, he didn't wish anything of the sort. This odd series of improbable events was beginning to interest him to an unusual extent. Even if it turned out to be a hoax it

would still be something to talk about around a fire on a cold winter's night.

Ottokar Gettman was next.

Evan Frome turned into a path which led up through a field that appeared not to have been farmed for years. The path looked as if it had been burned into the ground rather than trodden. A queer feeling settled over him like a cloak when he lifted his eyes to the high knoll up which he climbed, to see the rock foundations of what must once have been a huge rambling farmhouse. It probably included a barn, also. The rocks were smoke-blackened. Frome wondered how many human beings and animals had perished in the fire which had taken the buildings. A man with a shotgun in the crook of his arm was poking about in the rubble. Frome was almost on him when the man heard him, whirled, shotgun swinging to firing position.

"Hey, take it easy!" said Frome. "I'm no pheasant. I'm Captain Evan Frome, *ex*-captain. I'm looking for Ottokar Gettman."

"You're ten years late," said the man with the shotgun. "If you'd come right after the fire you could have poked around with the rest of the neighbors, looking for his bones. Maybe I'll do. I'm Georg Gettman, his only surviving relative. This place came to me after the fire wiped out old Ottokar. Have you been here before, looking for the old man?"

"No, why?"

"Well, it just struck me as queer, is all. Ten years and nobody asks about my uncle. Then I come here to bag a pheasant on the land while making up my mind what to do with it, and you come along. It just seems queer we should happen to meet this particular day. What did you want of old Ottokar?"

FROME phrased it carefully. He mentioned Joseph Toelle without explaining his connection with the long dead postmaster—how *could* he explain it?—and spoke of an ancient debt. The younger man shook his head.

"Ottokar's papers all went in the fire," he said. "I'd be glad to collect on old debts, outlawed or not, but honestly I just don't know. Still, I could use the money. I'll check around with my lawyer and let you know. Where do you live?"

"I own the Peter Beltz place, on Lincoln Highway."

"I know where it is. Pete and I were fairly well acquainted when we were kids and I sometimes visited old Ottokar. I live in New York City. I'm in the telephone book."

Evan Frome turned and went back down the path. Three complete misses for Joseph Toelle! If after disclaiming debts, the creditors of Joseph now showed up with claims, he would not believe old Joseph, or pay the debts, he decided. "These debts are yours!" indeed! He'd never chased such elusive debts in his life, nor heard of debtors who went around demanding the right to pay debts.

He returned to his own home, where he went over the Toelle letter again, with utmost care, to see whether he had missed anything. It seemed now that the prophecies therein, about his own activities in the Second World War, were wider of the mark than he had first believed. This thing was going to fizzle out, that was clear. What had promised to be his most unusual experience was turning out to be nothing of the kind.

He decided to take his time about visiting the other four "creditors" of Joseph Toelle. A housekeeper had reported for work, an Amish woman who was the best cook and best bargainer Evan Frome had ever met. She was in her sixties and probably had never been pretty even in her 'teens, but what she didn't know about Pennsylvania Dutch food was not worth knowing.

Auburn-haired, efficient, athletic Harriet Hedr, who arrived two days later, fell in love with Hedvig at once.

"She makes it perfect, Evan," said Harriet. "We'll keep her until death do us part. What do we do first in this marvelous village? You know, Evan, I felt as if I were returning home after a long absence, the instant I reached Lancaster!"

"No, Harriet!" he said. "No! Whatever else, but not that? You've never been here before."

"No," she looked at him as she had often looked at him while the shock was wearing off in the hospital, questioningly. "What do we do first, darling?"

"Get married as fast as we can. I under-

stand that people hereabouts are opposed to couples living in sin!"

"I'm opposed to it myself," she retorted. That questioning look was still in her eyes, but Frome did not explain until they were safely married. Since neither had ever been in Christ's Home before, the Beltz house became automatically a honeymoon house. There was no reason to travel anywhere. Besides, both had traveled far too much; both were eager to settle down and stay put.

Frome told Harriet about the letter. She listened quietly. Then she took the letter and read it through herself, carefully. Frome left out some of the queer things about it—like going to the cemetery when he couldn't have known its location, visiting the first three Toelle creditors as if he had done it every day of his life. No, there was such a thing as too much.

TOGETHER the newlyweds checked on the four other creditors. They came up against a complete dead end. If Joseph Toelle ever owed any one of the seven, no slightest record of it remained. Even Manfred Richter, who became angry to palsy when he heard the name of Joseph Toelle, had nothing to report.

"So we're robbed of a weird story, darling," Frome told Harriet. "I was making too much of it, I guess. You know, I even worked out a theory about why Joseph Toelle didn't put any sort of salutation on that ancient manuscript."

"Yes, what was the reason?"

"It was a memorandum," said Frome, grinning uncertainly. "I've made lots of them, so I wouldn't forget administrative details. But I never addressed one to myself!"

Harriet gasped.

"You mean you think that Joseph Toelle, writing to you, believed he was actually writing to himself—and automatically left off the salutation for that reason?"

"No, no, I don't, but wouldn't it have made an interesting story? I got to thinking of all sorts of things, about being literally born again, and again. I could just see all the dead rising from all the cemeteries, starting in as babies again. . . ."

"I don't know," said Harriet thoughtfully, "whether people would like to know such a thing to be true. Many people at least *say* they wouldn't go through it again for anything."

"But every last one would jump at the chance if by some miracle it could be offered. However, we have nothing. It has simply petered out. Not even one of Joseph's creditors produced a dollar of the fourteen thousand I still, thank heaven, have in a New York bank!"

CHAPTER IV

Whispers In the Years

THERE was a sudden loud, prolonged knocking on the outer door. Visitors in Christ's Home, Frome had discovered, always made sure that people behind doors could hear when they knocked. The doors had to be sturdy to endure it.

Frome opened the door.

A slight, dried up man of perhaps fifty, who couldn't have weighed over a hundred and ten, bowed apologetically. Frome noted his brief case.

"I waited," said the slender man, "in consideration of your marriage, to give you a chance to more or less get settled down. I'm Christopher Berg, of Lancaster. I'm a lawyer. I've come," he said apologetically, bowing again as Harriet asked him in, took his hat and indicated the easy chair, "about the mortgage on this house."

Harriet and her husband exchanged glances.

"Mortgage?" said Frome stupidly. "Peter Beltz gave me this house. He said it was free and clear. At least I *think* he did."

"There has been an error," said Berg. "Most regrettable, of course. I imagine that Peter Beltz did not know of the mortgage. It seems incredible that such an obstacle to title should have been missed, but so it appears."

"Dollars to doughnuts," said Frome, "the mortgage runs to. . . ."

"Fourteen thousand dollars!" said Harriet.

"Oh, so you already know!" said Berg, relieved. "That makes it much easier, of course! It is difficult," he said, fidgeting, "to know just where to begin. It is also

embarrassing. And as a lawyer I should advise you that you could probably fight this claim successfully."

"Why not begin," suggested Evan Frome, "with Joseph Toelle, the *late* Joseph Tolle?"

"Of course," said Berg. "Yes, of course. For if you had not asked people about him and started a search of old records, I would probably not be here now. There are seven persons directly involved, besides Joseph Toelle and the grandfather of Peter Beltz, from whom you had this house. Of the seven persons, two only are living. But there are heirs."

"Once again," said Frome, "may I suggest you begin at the beginning."

"Well, it starts with Peter Beltz, the grandfather of young Peter Beltz, who gave you this house. I know he gave it to you because the will is a matter of record. Grandfather Beltz and Joseph Toelle were close friends all their lives. Grandfather Beltz helped Toelle secure appointment as postmaster of Christ's Home."

"All this is a little before *your* time, Counselor Berg?" said Frome.

"I am a third generation of Berg lawyers in Lancaster," said Berg. "My grandfather was a contemporary of Toelle and Beltz. I got the papers from among those belonging to my late grandfather. But to continue. Joseph Toelle got some idea—not the first nor even the last, so I have heard—for a revolutionary invention. He couldn't possibly promote it on his meager salary as a postmsater. But he was persuasive. . . ."

"So he induced friends to invest," said Frome.

"You are as certain of that as if you were there!" said Berg.

"I've a yen to invent things myself," said Frome, smiling at Harriet Frome. "But go on. I could probably help a lot with this, up to a certain point. The bank wouldn't loan Toelle three thousand one hundred eleven dollars, without proper security. So he set out to get it from friends like Bruner, Gettman, Richter, and four other friends. Just how it gets to Grandfather Beltz I don't see —unless he went on each of the seven notes that totalled the amount I have just mentioned?"

"Exactly so!" said Berg, his brows lifted. "The total you mention is correct. Joseph Toelle persuaded those seven people to invest with him. Beltz went on his notes, which the bank refused to accept because Beltz's only security was this house in which we are sitting—built by that same Grandfather Beltz! The house was already mortgaged, and Beltz was struggling to pay it off. Just the same, he paid the interest on all those notes until he had paid off his own first mortgage. Then . . ."

"Then," said Frome, "he took back the notes and gave those seven people a joint first mortgage on this house! But how did Peter Beltz, the grandson, remain in ignorance of it?"

"That is where you might escape this mortgage," said Berg, "but you might also lose the house which, I assure you, is worth considerably more than fourteen thousand dollars, probably twice as much, perhaps even more. I think the seven creditors must have got together at some time, after the death of Joseph Toelle, and declared a moratorium on interest payments on this mortgage. They all knew that Joseph Toelle left nothing from which anything could be recovered. . . ."

"Wrong!" said Frome. "He left a letter. The Toelles, I gather, pay their debts."

"Letter?" repeated Berg. "I know of no letter."

Evan Frome grinned at Harriet, who grinned back. Both were enjoying themselves immensely. It was grand to be in love, and know something nobody else could possibly know. Frome wondered just what Berg would think, do, and say, if he were to show him the Joseph Toelle letter. He knew that queer stories were already going the rounds and decided to let well enough alone.

"The mortgage," said Berg, "was filed and gradually forgotten. There may have been quarrels about it, among the mortgagees, but no record remains of them. Nor would we have found the mortgage now, if you had not asked strange questions, Captain Frome. Now, the question is, what is to be done about it? The mortgage now clouds the title to this house, unless you accept it as just—together with accumulated interest."

"Do the two living creditors," asked

Frome, "and the heirs of the five dead ones, wish me to pay the interest and leave the mortgage face at three thousand one hundred eleven dollars, or accept the mortgage at its present total principal and interest of fourteen thousand dollars? I can do either one. I'd prefer, temporarily, to pay interest on the fourteen thousand dollars. What's the interest rate?"

"Two percent higher than is now legal," said Berg ruefully. "It will amount to eight hundred and forty dollars a year."

"I'll pay the first year, now, by check, and let the principal ride for the time being!"

"The creditors will be glad to have the money," said Berg, rising. "I'll see that all details are taken care of, and include my fee. . . ."

"Let me point out, sir," said Frome, "that *I* have not retained you. Take it out of this check. You're retained by the creditors, remember?"

WHEN the little man had bowed himself out, Frome and Harriet looked at each other. Frome was excited. He couldn't help it. Happy, also, to have some money left.

Frome began to laugh. Harriet sat down beside him. They went into each other's arms.

"Nobody," said Harriet, "ever loved as we do."

"Of course not," said Frome.

"So you might as well let me know why you laugh to discover you owe fourteen thousand dollars!"

"I was just thinking. What if people knew about past lives, if any, and were able to check back on them? I was wondering how I would feel if I could follow my bone trail back through the ages, from grave to grave, from ocean bed to ashes, to fossils. If I am Joseph Toelle, I am probably the only man who ever stood in the flesh and looked at his own grave, filled with his *past!*"

"Why don't we go have a look now?" said Harriet. "I don't hold much with all that this seems to imply, but I'd like to take a look at Joseph's grave."

Frome hopped to his feet. As he did so he hoped that the telephone would ring. There was something he wanted to try, but Harriet must not know what it was, or even suspect. But as the two slipped into their coats, his mind worked at top speed.

"You run on ahead, dearest," said Frome. "I want to get a fresh handkerchief and a package of cigarettes. I'll catch you before you've gone very far."

He waited with bated breath, as he hurried to the stairs, for her to ask the simple and obvious question: "Which direction?" But she did not ask it. She said: "Okay, darling, but I'm a fast walker, remember?"

Harriet went out, closed the door. Frome gave her a few seconds, then went to the window, looked out. Harriet turned left on Lincoln Highway, stopped at the first intersection, looked carefully right and left, hurried into the road that led away east. Frome waited until she vanished around the corner of the old house beside the road. Then, without either a fresh handkerchief or a package of cigarettes, he started out.

Harriet seemed to be in a terrific hurry. She didn't look back. It was almost as if she were running away. She didn't pause on the steep pebbled dirt road that led up the slant to the cemetery. If anything, she walked faster when the chained dog bayed mournfully.

Frome hurried after his best beloved.

But she did not look back, nor did he overtake her until she stopped. She was still standing, a rapt expression on her face, looking down at the Toelle headstone.

He put his arm around her.

"Just who," he said softly, "told you how to get here? *I* didn't!"

"Obviously no one needed to tell me, darling." She turned and looked at him. Both looked back at the old headstone showing that Anna Toelle had died in 1890, Joseph Toelle in 1898. Then the two newlyweds looked at each other, deeply into each other's eyes.

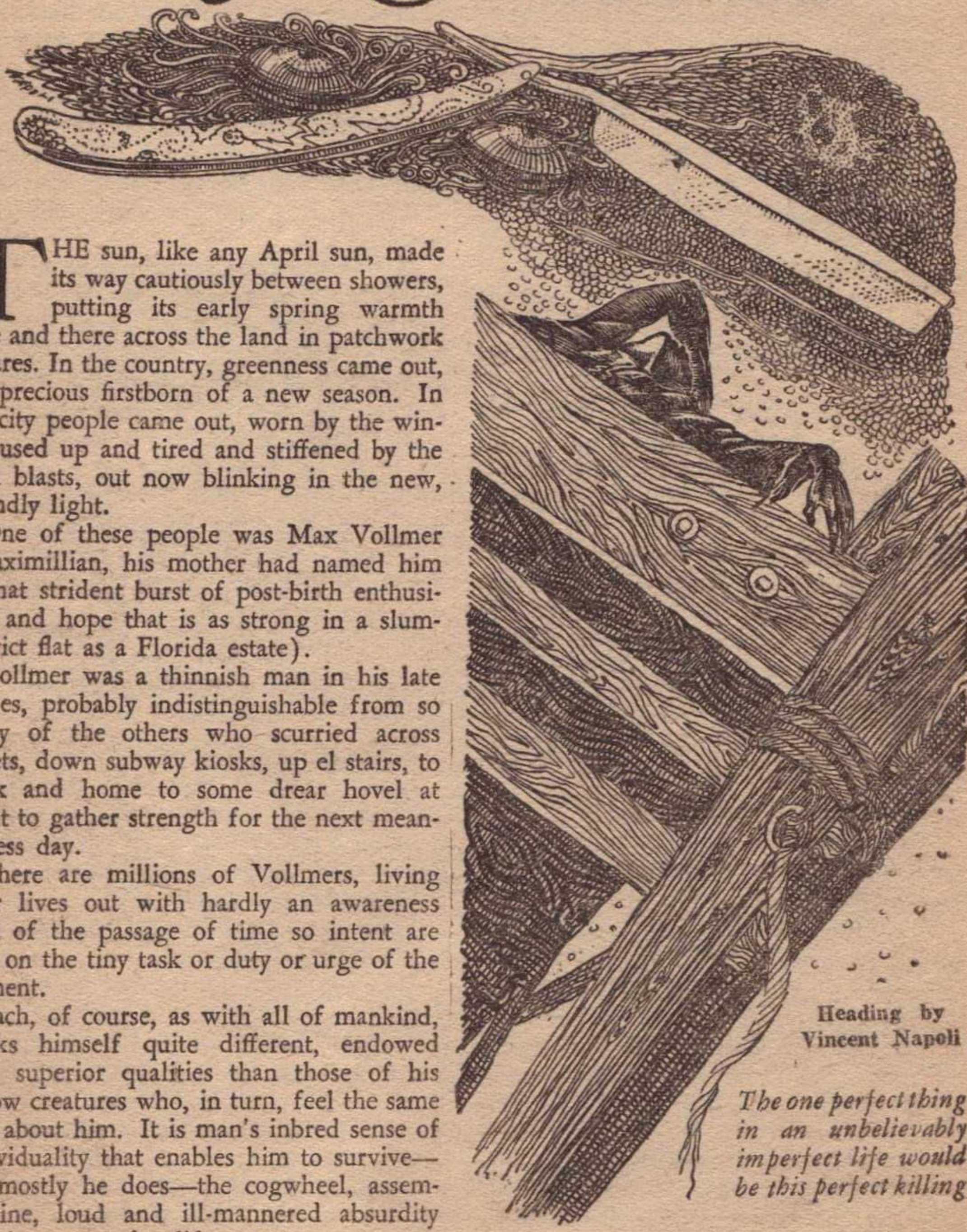
"Well, at last we *know!*" said Harriet.

"Yes, we do," said Frome. "But just *what,* for certain?"

"That the profound love of Anna and Joseph lasted! I hope they had many happy lives together! But *please,* Evan, no inventions!"

Murder Man

BY EWEN WHYTE



THE sun, like any April sun, made its way cautiously between showers, putting its early spring warmth here and there across the land in patchwork squares. In the country, greenness came out, the precious firstborn of a new season. In the city people came out, worn by the winter, used up and tired and stiffened by the chill blasts, out now blinking in the new, friendly light.

One of these people was Max Vollmer (Maximillian, his mother had named him in that strident burst of post-birth enthusiasm and hope that is as strong in a slum-district flat as a Florida estate).

Vollmer was a thinnish man in his late forties, probably indistinguishable from so many of the others who scurried across streets, down subway kiosks, up el stairs, to work and home to some drear hovel at night to gather strength for the next meaningless day.

There are millions of Vollmers, living their lives out with hardly an awareness even of the passage of time so intent are they on the tiny task or duty or urge of the moment.

Each, of course, as with all of mankind, thinks himself quite different, endowed with superior qualities than those of his fellow creatures who, in turn, feel the same way about him. It is man's inbred sense of individuality that enables him to survive—for mostly he does—the cogwheel, assembly-line, loud and ill-mannered absurdity that is present-day life.

But this Max Vollmer was different from the other millions of Vollmers, whatever their names might be, because of one greatly distinguishing feature.

This Max Vollmer was planning a killing, a killing that he would surely carry through and one which the police would not solve.

There are many humans walking the dusty, unsatisfying paths of life who think of

Heading by Vincent Napoli

The one perfect thing in an unbelievably imperfect life would be this perfect killing

murder, who, when you see them smile, are smiling at the delicious thought of destroying another human being. All the people you'd never suspect and some you would. But these people, most of them, keep their murderous hates against life and other humans to themselves, for they know with primitive instinct that to action the impulse means not only the end of someone else's life, which is fine, but also their own—not so good—while a fumbled attempt means an even more restricted incarceration than the four walls of their grubby little homes.

With Max Vollmer it was different. He had thought this proposition over for too long to be turned away from it. He had pondered it on his way to work and as he came home at night, one among the hurrying thousands upon thousands, but accompanying him this dread secret.

Strangely, the one who was to be killed was not much thought of. Vollmer, exercising the godlike privilege of the killer-to-be, was concerned only with the time, the method, and the tantalizing proposition of completely fooling the authorities. For this then was to be the one perfect thing in a lifetime of imperfection; the too-large family he'd been born into, the lack of money, of food, of care . . . all so imperfect. The public school growing up, the struggle, always the struggle, and then the best job—not at all good—that could be gotten and the day, week, month, year monotony of that.

To understand the whole dreadful scheme that would end in death, you would have to understand the whole tragedy of being a Max Vollmer—a medium size, less than average in all qualities including luck, unprepossessing in every way. A child, a boy and a man not once smiled on by fortune either in the endowment of natural characteristics or the good breaks which would serve to minimize the lack of these. Many Vollmers go wrong very quickly and therefore do not join the throngs that crowd the streets and paths of this community and that. A car "job," a quick snatch at a corner store, starting with clubs and knives, graduating to guns and plots more elaborate . . . these Vollmers are weeded out fast. They fill the gray, faceless tiers of penitentiaries across the world, and they themselves become faceless, with their identity whittled down to a number.

OTHERS, of less physical or mental vigor, see less of life and are saved from some of life's burdens by the burden of their very own illnesses and they too travel the inexorable way across the stage of life —which after all, is a very poor figure, for life is no stage and nobody watches. That is it. Nobody cares as we slip in and out. Vollmers have cars and buy houses, woo girls and marry them and have children. But all the time they are pre-doomed to indistinguishment, and saved by their universal anesthesia from the dreadful knowledge of that fact.

But here one of them, Max Vollmer by name, was distinguished enough to know some of these things, to have a glimmering of them which made him unlike the rest and worthy of a story. Knowing in him did precisely what knowing does to most people . . . for, of course, if there is one thing sure it is that ignorance is bliss. Knowing made him naggingly unhappy. Unhappy, that is, until the perfect solution came to him. Until the strong emotions could be channeled into a new direction . . . into burning, overwhelming hatred as the alpha and omega of all of life and of the universe which, after all, was no bigger than he was. And the perfect solution was, quite simply, the perfect crime. He would commit it; the killing would right all wrongs.

This was what drove Max Vollmer on. What brought him through the noise-stained, dirt-stained nights of the city; what sent him on his way in the gray, diffused light of early morning to his stand-up breakfast. That took his thoughts from the awful faces of the crowd, in the subway, at work, everywhere. Those faces bobbing and ducking through the streets, carried along at incredibly eccentric paces by the peripatetic bodies that propelled them; tired faces, thin and fat, drawn, over-madeup, sagging, jouncing with the impact of heel on the infernal sidewalk; and the eyes—made him think of "the ayes have it"—the eyes, fish eyes, mackerel and cod, cold eyes and calculating eyes; occasionally the brown hurt puppy dog eyes of someone who hadn't been here very long. And wouldn't be. For

you got like those others, or left, or perished.

The victim—Vollmer never thought of him by name—was a man of forty-seven. A good age for such an event as was about to befall him. A good age to write Finis to that life. The whole setup delighted Vollmer as though he had existed for this alone, for perhaps he had.

THE monotony of life dropped away and began the supreme adventure of planning this creative effort of destruction. Max Vollmer became blessed with a peculiar sixth sense. A deep sensitivity developed, he thought, belied by his nondescript, one-like-millions face. It seemed now as though he were in league with forces beyond the ordinary ken. When he sat in a movie house, he thought he noticed the way people sitting near him would regard him with sudden but surreptitious interest; his next-door neighbor at the stand-up breakfast place; his co-worker at the office; the tired other sheep-people who lived in the old, creaking, smelling rooming house where he existed.

Max had the feeling that these people *knew, sensed* that he was different, different in ways they could not analyze. And that their knowing was a form of respect. But it pleased him to realize that they could not possibly guess his secret, as they said "Pass the mustard" to him and eyes held together for a flickering instant. He could root them to the spot by telling, cement them forever in that one place by revealing what he was going to do, but left it unsaid for each to go his own way into the maw of the city, to forget there in its throng and bustle all thoughts and dreams but the sheer, instinctive survival ones. But with Vollmer it was different. He never forgot.

The beauty was the way the police would be fooled. Those bumbling self-important idiots who were fit merely to stand on wind-swept street corners and misdirect traffic. The law, in a way, was symbolic of all the things that Max Vollmer detested. The police, in or out of uniform represented man's hypocritical conscience, man's inbred distrust of himself. If there was, for instance, a church where one spoke of the freedom of the human heart and spirit, there would surely be a policeman on the corner of the street making sure there would be no freedom of heart of spirit.

For freedom was, after all, doing exactly what you wanted to do precisely when you wanted to do it, and isn't all of civilized life and its rules formulated against just that? So Max Vollmer was sure.

When a man kills, he is really free. And he is free in those quiet, whispering moments when the act belongs only to the killer and the victim—and is locked up forever as the last page of the snuffed-out life —and the silence of the night; before the deliciousness has been shared with the hungry hordes that live on the vicarious sensations of their tabloids, and with the minions of the law who are policemen because they lack the courage of the criminal yet still must be close to violence.

THAT is the exquisite moment that makes all the dullards worth the pain and insufferability. Even the dead, the victims legion, must know a kind of strange victory in this triumph over the usual, the mundane and the man-ordered ways of their lives which prescribe gallstones or cancer or an errant bus or atom bomb as being Good and quite moral but this as being Bad. This, then, was the final victory and the very horror of society, the smackings of their satisfaction over the thing, the agencies set in motion to catch the wayward human who had dared, yes, dared to do other than wait for the gallstones, the cancer, the misguided auto, the atom bomb . . . dared, and in so daring, freed both himself and the victim.

Max Vollmer had chosen as murder weapon a razor. Not the much-advertised safety kind with fancy streamlining rhapsodized by the subway posters, poor fang-drawn impotent device. Instead, he would use a fine, old-fashioned—weren't old things always the best despite commercials —straight-edged one, the kind still found in barber shops. Vollmer had thought over the possibilities of all lethal weapons and this appealed to him the most. And a razor was better than a knife; it had more subtlety; it was a flute as against a tuba; a rapier instead of a broadsword.

The sweet, clean pain of a razor cutting was a pure virtue. A razor slicing, cutting deep had the cleansing quality of fire; and

Max had thought of fire for the victim, but that is improbable. How could a perfect crime be committed with the use of fire? Fire controlled was a beautiful thing, but it blossomed and mushroomed and soon lost its personalized intimacy.

No, it would be a razor. And the site was important. That too had been decided. A nighttime pier in the deserted dock district. A place left by the roustabouts and herky derricks and cursing after working hours, visited only by darkness, by fog and water-smell, and the eerie cries of river traffic moving their red and green and white lights up and down the great bosom of the ageless current out there beyond land's reach.

A razor could be dropped so easily into the deep water off the pier side, and nothing so small would ever be recovered. And the extra pair of shoes, they would go down too; heavy shoes they were and most important to the whole scheme.

Sundays daytime Max Vollmer had gone near the pier, by it, around it, not wanting to be seen or noticed by the Sabbath Day couples who love-strolled or the bums who lounged. The one chance in a million that if he walked boldly out on the rough wood planking, someone *might* say later, Yes, I remember this man. But there was not to be even the one chance in a million. So Vollmer noticed all the details he had to notice from the inconspicuousness of afar. And that was all that was necessary. It would be here that the final scene would be played; played in all its intensity with the dark and the sounds of the river as audience and the dark water as juror.

THE blackest night came finally on the heels of unimportant days and other meaningless nights. After work—and how did those other fools know the importance of today as they worked beside him, with their crude jokes and talk about stupid things like women and poker and the fights—Vollmer took himself home to prepare. The extra pair of shoes had to be cunningly weighted; the razor was newly sharpened and secured in his thin, gray overcoat.

Nobody at the bedraggled rooming-house with its bedraggled people paid any mind to the comings and goings of the other inhabitants. Vollmer slipped out of the door unseen sometime before eleven. He took a subway downtown; at that hour it was not crowded, and when he reached his stop, he rose to street level alone. He stood for a moment in the little puddle of light from the kiosk, got his bearings and then plunged into the dark, deserted streets. These thoroughfares were unused at night. They were poor and squalid, dividing more desirable sections from the waterfront. Movie houses and bowling alleys and new construction had moved away from here. This part seemed to sleep in the memory of a long ago when the crumbling brick and masonry fronts had been new.

Vollmer went on more by instinct than sight, for it was very dark, but his feet told him the cobblestones were rougher and the smell of dark swirling water came strong to his nostrils. A street light bisected the gloom ahead and threw feeble yellow rays across the desolate street. Ahead the light faded into the nothingness of space. The river was there, unseen but waiting. And the pier.

Max Vollmer went on until, from his many previous visits here, he could sense the exact directions he needed. The mouth of the pier opened out on a concrete foundation. But beyond that, stretching out over the tide, the wood planking was dirty with disuse; footprints would show clearly from the moment one left the concrete. Vollmer stopped on the cement part and listened, but there was nothing but the swirl of the water and the river sounds. He made sure of the pair of shoes and the razor.

There were a few things he had to do; he'd thought them out, oh so carefully. And now there was the final screwing up of courage, and it was like squeezing a tube of paste. For a while you squeezed and nothing happened, and then suddenly out would pop the substance of determination and resolve.

Max Vollmer did what he had to do with the weighted shoes; then, standing just above where the tide lisped and murmured at the under-pier wood, there was another sound. The final rendezvous would be complete now in a moment or so more. It was impossible to see anything in the impenetrable gloom. Sounds there were, but re-

mote, as of the darkness and the water and traffic borne along its surface, things belonging to the night and the river.

Soon now. Soon, so soon. Vollmer put his hand inside the pocket of the worn, gray overcoat and felt the reassuring handle of the murder weapon-to-be. His fingers on it tightened. He tensed at what could have been a sound of the wind—it would never do to have some blundering outsider stumble onto this scene now. His palm was sweat slick, and he forced his hand against the cloth side of the pocket to dry it.

WHY was he nervous? It irked him ever so slightly. For this was the goal, the incentive that had guided him all these weeks and months. After planning this way, after holding his secret, after knowing his superiority over all the other poor fools, poor driven sheep that passed him by through the little moments of their lives, would he hesitate now? Not now.

The breathing, living thing was at his side now. In the impenetrable darkness where only the imagination could see and *know*. The other human was here. Vollmer's hand, with the razor in it, straightened against the night and task, slipped so easily out of the gray overcoat pocket. He struck then, with the frenzy of a man born for just this minute.

The razor touched cloth and parted it, caressed flesh and slitted it with thirst for the blood within. Vollmer himself felt every sweet, clean thrill of the slashing strokes.

He felt the solidity of an arm and struck at it; other solids came before the steel and were shredded, stroke by stroke, blow after blow until there remained in this weaving, drunken, monstrous hulk that had once been whole and human, only the supremely enticing and virginal area of the throat.

That too was fulfilled for ecstasy . . . a bubbling, gurgling ecstasy that slipped and slimed and then gaped so silently as the thing, once human, tottered and fell, no more than tree-like, to the kindred wood of the pier apron.

For Max Vollmer, this was the caress of a thousand beautiful women, the embrace of sublime delight, and only now at the very last moment before the end did he, with a tiny flip of his hand, send the razor—so coated with bright fulfillment even though unseen—into the night at pier side where the river water plopped it down to the depths to wash and forget the shining red deeds stained there. This, the final act of complete accomplishment.

And the wind that had been here and seen, the water that had flowed by and heard, these were gone far away after a time; away with the night.

WITH light and morning there was finally a person; then people and then the police. They came, sirens screaming with the impotence and noise of recriminators after-the-act. They swarmed to the pier and repaid the dear curious who had called them by pushing them back as though by denying them the pleasure of *looking*, the thing there at wharf's end would rise in all its grisly un-humanness and say hoarsely, "See, I'm all right again."

Patrolmen waved nightsticks, sergeants g l o w e r e d and lieutenants-of-detectives thought. They noted the clear footprints, clear on the filth of the wood planking. The two pairs leading out to the end, the intermingling of prints, signs of scuffling there at the end, and the one set returning.

"Murder," the wise men of aurthority said positively and with distaste, for this was the kind of thing you don't solve.

"With a knife or razor," it was obvious.

And those in blue who had rolled him over and looked at the thing poorly hid by shredded clothes, the chest and arms and face and neck, they whistled and somebody who'd seen a lot of these said:

"Somebody sure must've hated this guy to do a carving job like this on him."

That was it, just a grudge, not robbery. Blind, terrible hatred.

For inside the worn, gray overcoat—what was left unshredded of it—was an equally worn wallet, two dollars in it and a card that said that this miserable, un-whole thing, to be bundled out of sight as soon as possible in the high, black morgue wagon, was once a human called Max Vollmer.

Twilight Play

BY AUGUST DERLETH

Heading by Vincent Napoli

IN THE evening it was playtime for one precious hour before bedtime, and, as usual, Donald ran into the park to the place of the mounds, where darkness already scouted the last sunlight.

"Hawk!" he called softly. "Hawk!"

No one answered him. In the midst of an oak an owl keened softly, its thin wailing sad and lonely. Over in the fields larks and robins caroled; on the edge of the park three mourning doves sobbed.

He sat down on the thunderbird mound and waited.

The evening drew in. The long shadows of the park grew darker, almost concealing him. Larksong and robins' caroling diminished, and a nighthawk rose up to circle and spurt high into the evening's blue, sky-coasting down with a harsh *zoom* of air in its wings. The streetlights came on at the corners, but no light strayed to the mounds.

"Hawk!" he called impatiently. "I know you're hiding. Come on."

And Hawk was there, as always, coming like a shadow out of the darkness. His luminous eyes shone in the evening, startling Donald.

"You can do it every time," said Donald in admiration.

In a moment they were at play—riding imaginary horses around the mounds, doing Hawk's special dances together: the war dance and the moon dance and the night-bird and the thunderbird dances, playing with intense solemnity, broken only occa-

And his unusual playmate could be found in the park at eventide
where the shadows were longest.

sionally by an excited cry from Donald. The night crept in, following orange and magenta afterglow down the west, and any moment now it would be time for Donald and Hawk to go in. But the play went on, though the very air seemed to be waiting for the sound of Donald's mother's voice calling him.

From the fence north of the mounds, separating the park from the long wooded lawns and the distant house rose the detested voice of Archer Connelly.

"Yah, Sissy Carstair! What d'you think you're doing?"

"None of your business," said Donald, faltering.

Archer fingered a sharply pointed stone. "Don't you talk to me like that, you gutter-snipe!"

"Just let me alone and mind your own business," said Donald.

He was properly aggrieved. Four out of six nights Archer Connelly came to lord it over them—Archer, who had everything his parents' money could buy, who was too good to play with poor children, but who could never let them alone. Meeting them on the street, he ran them off; at school he tormented them, and, since his father sat on the board of education, teachers tried not to see Archer's misdeeds. Even here, in the park, he could not keep from plaguing them by every means within his power.

"Your pants got holes in, Sissy Carstair," he said.

"They're all right to play in," said Donald.

"'Cause you haven't any others, that's why," jeered Archer.

A screen-door slammed and someone called, "Archer!"

ARCHER flashed a glance around toward the house. Then he turned and flung the stone in his fingers; it caught Donald in the small of his back. He cried out and stumbled. Straightening up, he faced Archer's laughter. Instinctively, he reached for a stick to throw, but then he saw Archer's mother coming down toward the fence.

"Archer, come away from there," she was saying. "Haven't I told you not to associate with those children?"

Donald dropped his stick, cowed.

"I wasn't playing with him. I was just watching. He plays like a rummy," said Archer, walking away with her.

Donald looked around, but Hawk was gone. He knew he would be. Almost every time Archer came, Hawk went. Donald reflected ruefully that Hawk wouldn't stay to listen to Archer, or to wait for the stone or the stick or whatever Archer might throw. Hawk went. Hawk had pride. He could just see Hawk's dark face with his tight lips and his black eyes lifting and turning away. Donald was ashamed of himself. But he was stubborn, too. Why should he run from Archer Connelly? Why should he?

"Don-ald!"

"Coming."

He got up and sought vainly in the shadows. "Good-night, Hawk. See you tomorrow," he said. The screech owl in the oak wailed, and he ran home, across the bear mound, across the man mound, along the thunderbird mound, past the oak grove, along the rows of maples and elms, past the bandstand and the ice-cream stand, and across the road to the little house on the corner which was home.

"And did you have a good time?" his mother asked.

"Yes, 'cept for that old Archer."

"Oh, don't pay any attention to him."

"I don't, 'cept he throws stones an' tonight he hit me—an' he scares Hawk away," he added as an afterthought.

"Who's Hawk?"

"You know, I told you."

"Oh, the boy whose daddy bought him that nice Indian outfit."

"Uh-huh." He began to talk animatedly. "He's got a tomahawk even, an' he just calls himself Red Hawk, that's his name, an' he can tell stories an' do dances . . ."

"What kind of stories?"

"Oh, like fairy tales. How he can change into a big hawk an' go hunting . . ."

"Is he older than you are?"

"He's bigger. He's a lot bigger. But you know what—he can come into the park an' he never makes a sound. Just like a real Indian. He can come right up behind me an' I never know he's there an' sometimes he scares me, he comes so quick. An' his mother never calls him!"

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know. I never was at his house."

"Well, run along to bed now. Just as long as he's nice, I guess it's all right to play with him. Maybe someday your daddy'll get you an Indian suit, too."

"Oh, will he, Ma, will he?"

"If you're good, maybe. We'll see. Maybe at Christmas . . ."

"I'll be good, Ma. I'm good."

"And he is good, too," said Mrs. Carstair to her husband long after Donald had gone to bed, followed by his two sisters. "I wish we could get him an Indian suit."

"I don't know how. We've got all we can do to make ends meet. Anyway, I don't know what kid in town's got an outfit like that one. And the town isn't that big that I couldn't find one. With a name like that, too—Red Hawk."

"It's the name of an old Sauk chieftain's son. You know, they used to have their village around here somewhere. Didn't they dig up his bones somewhere in town?"

"Oh, yes, that's town history. You can hear that every so often."

"It's just the sort of thing some kid would pick up and use. It helps to point up everything we can't do for him, that's all." She shrugged. "I wish somebody could do something with that Connelly boy."

"There's no use starting on that again. His parents aid and abet him, and you can't get to them."

NEXT evening Hawk came a little earlier. It was an evening with a sickle of new moon low in the west, very beautiful to see among the dark trees silhouetted against the evening heaven. Donald confided eagerly that his parents might get him an Indian suit, too, not as nice or as complete as Hawk's, but just the same, a suit; they could play together at Hawk's games then with so much more gusto.

Archer came earlier, too.

"Who's that you're playing with?" he demanded suspiciously, leaning on the fence.

"He's my friend."

"'He's my friend'," mimicked Archer. "What's his name?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"You better tell me, Sissy Carstair, or you know what you'll get."

"Try and make me," said Donald defiantly.

"Hawk," said Hawk like a short bark.

"That's not a name," said Archer.

"It is so a name, Archer Connelly," said Donald.

"Is not."

"Is too."

"I know better. You tell that Hawk friend of yours that all the new boys in this town have to come see me."

Hawk made a sound deep in his throat like an angry dog.

"You better look out, Archer Connelly, or Hawk'll get mad. And when he gets mad, he gets awful mad. You'll be sorry."

"'You'll be sorry,'" mimicked Archer again. "Is he another one of those poor people like you?"

"What's wrong with poor people?" demanded Donald.

"You ought to know. Do you hear me, Hawk? Are you poor, too?"

Hawk made a growling sound.

"I guess if you weren't poor you wouldn't be playing with Sissy Carstair." He looked back at Donald. "What were you playing?"

"Rain dance."

"What kind of a game is that?"

"It's a game; it's Hawk's game," said Donald.

"Did you ever look funny jumping around like that! You're just crazy, Donald Carstair. And that Hawk boy, too."

"You don't have to watch us."

"I can watch all I please. This is our fence. If you don't like it, you can go somewhere else, and see if I care."

The inevitable Mrs. Connelly appeared out of the darkness and seized Archer, pausing only long enough to berate Donald and Hawk for "keeping Archer out."

Donald looked at Hawk. This time, for once, Hawk had not run away. Hawk's eyes looked soberly back at him; they were strange eyes, burning as if there were fire in them. Hawk said nothing, but sat quite tense, looking at him, as if trying to find out what he was thinking without asking.

"I can't help it if I'm poor," volunteered Donald. "Can you?"

Hawk shook his head sympathetically. But he had a suggestion to make. He knew a game the old witch-man of the tribe had

taught him, he said. It was a game of getting even with boys like Archer. You pretended you had him helpless, at your mercy; there he was, all tied up, staked to the ground and tied to the stakes; then you imagined you were a hawk, and he was a mouse or something, and you came down out of the sky and you tore him to pieces. They could pretend Archer was the mouse.

In a moment Donald forgot his hurt and was engrossed in the wonderful pastime of pretending Archer Connelly was staked out on the thunderbird mound and being torn to pieces by Hawk and himself, also a hawk, and Archer was begging him to save his life, promising he would never do it again, but it made no difference, they tore him to pieces just the same, which served that old Archer right. At this they played diligently until Mrs. Carstair called Donald home from the night-held park.

"Good-night, Hawk," called Donald over his shoulder. He could just see Hawk standing there on the thunderbird mound—one moment he was there, and the next he was gone. Donald was filled to bursting with admiration for the way Hawk could move without a sound.

ON THE third evening, Archer Connelly, moved in the depths of his narrow, selfish soul by envy of Donald's manifest happiness, determined to avenge himself on both the boys. He would give them enough of Indian games. He had invaded his father's collection of Indian arrowheads, and abstracted the most pointed. He discarded a bow and arrows for his sling-shot, which had hitherto done nothing more dangerous than bring low the songbirds which strayed over from the park. He went out early and lay concealed behind a syringa along the fence-line; from there he could see the mounds clearly enough.

He saw Donald coming, but Donald did not see him.

He waited, bitterly.

"Hawk," called Donald softly. "Hawk!"

There was no answer. No wonder, thought Archer; I could hardly even hear that. But he was patient, and waited with his intended victim. He meant to see from which direction the boy Hawk came, but the evening darkened the mounds quickly, even while the sun still shone redly on the distant hills to the west, and suddenly he saw that Hawk had come, dressed up once more in that silly Indian outfit with the feathers and skin of a bird on his back.

He shifted position slightly, carefully stretched his sling-shot, and took aim with the sharpest of the arrowheads.

The first arrowhead caught Donald a glancing blow on his shoulder.

He half-turned, looking for Archer.

The second arrowhead struck him above one eye, gashing his skin so that blood began to run toward one eye.

"Archer!" he cried out. "You hurt me."

The third arrowhead cut into his side; Donald fell, crying.

"Sissy Carstair can't stand an Indian raid," Archer shouted. He fitted another arrowhead to his sling and took aim at Hawk. "And neither can Sissy Hawk," he called. The arrowhead sped through the darkness, true over the mound, straight at Hawk, who stood unmoving to receive it.

The arrowhead struck him in the middle and went straight through him.

Donald cried out. "Hawk! Hawk! You're hurt!"

But something terrible was happening to Hawk.

It was no longer Hawk who stood there. It was a great bird. Donald thought it was as if that bird-skin Hawk wore had just grown and covered him. In another instant the bird was up and away, flying toward Archer.

And then it came down at Archer, and Archer was screaming horribly.

Donald closed his eyes and ran blindly toward home.

It was almost midnight when Frank Carstair came home. His wife was still up.

"They got Mrs. Connelly to bed at last. Gave her a sedative strong enough to knock out a horse. Ugh!" He shuddered.

"I had to give Donald something, too. Frank, what was it?"

"Donald stuck to his story?"

"Yes. It was a big bird, bigger than a man, he said. They questioned him until I had to stop them. He said the same thing every time. Did you see Archer?"

"As much as I could stand to look. God, honey—it was awful! Just torn to pieces—

both arms torn off, head, too." He shook himself and grimaced.

"Where could Donald have got such an idea?" he asked. "All those stories that other boy told him, I suppose."

"Yes, of course. We'll have to keep him home a little more." He looked speculatively toward the park.

"Donald's had enough Indian stories to last him for years. How's Connelly taking the shock?"

"He's hard."

"But such a terrible thing. I don't understand how it could have happened. Was that a shot?"

"Yes. Some of them are out hunting."

"Hunting? At this hour?"

"Yes. Birds. Big birds."

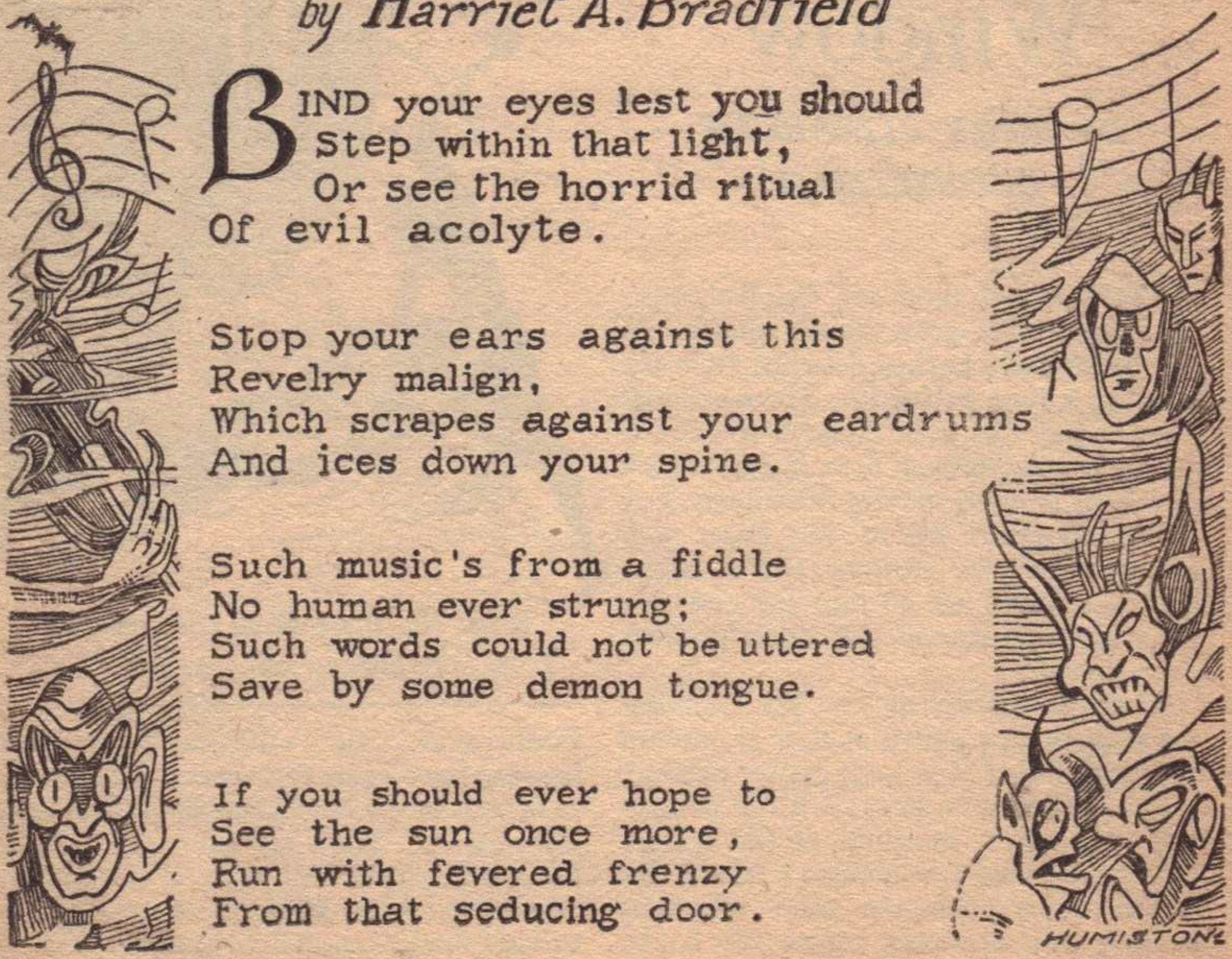
"Let's get to bed, Frank. I'm exhausted. Put out the light, will you? Birds. What in the world for?"

"Because the coroner said Archer had been killed by a bird. The marks on his body were like a predatory bird's—only much larger. Claw marks, definitely. He said they were just exactly the kind of marks, only larger, of course—you don't suppose he met up with Donald's friend, do you?—the marks of a hawk."

The light went out.

Demon Lure

by Harriet A. Bradfield



BIND your eyes lest you should
Step within that light,
Or see the horrid ritual
Of evil acolyte.

Stop your ears against this
Revelry malign,
Which scrapes against your eardrums
And ices down your spine.

Such music's from a fiddle
No human ever strung;
Such words could not be uttered
Save by some demon tongue.

If you should ever hope to
See the sun once more,
Run with fevered frenzy
From that seducing door.

Heading by Vincent Napoli

The Green Window

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

What was there about the window? Look long enough and you shall know!

IT IS one of those old Colonial structures, with great fluted columns in front and a kitchen detached from the house by a long hall-porch. There are half a dozen just like it in Stuartsboro—but if you are driving through here, if you will ask any of our leisurely-moving inhabitants, they will gladly direct you to "the house with the green window." Anyone, that is, except myself. I would not go near the place for any reason whatsoever. I'll never go back there. *Never.*

There is nothing to see. The beautiful old grounds have grown up now in mustard and Jimson seed. The large plaster fountain on the lawn runs no more; it is full of stagnant rain water, probably, at this season, and choked with last autumn's leaves that drifted down from the giant whiteoaks standing like sentinels before the house. Furthermore, the windows have been boarded up—even that queer opaque one to the left of the fan-lighted door. Especially that one . . . There are ten-penny nails in the heavy planks that cover it from sight. Otherwise, Aunt Millicent insists, passing tourists would swarm in with claw hammers

and rip them off, to take a peek at those panes. The American tourist is a predatory animal; he would break pieces off the Venus de Milo to take home a souvenir to the folks. Several times the "window lights," as panes are called locally, have been broken out by the curious, by would-be detectives of the supernatural who yearn to give that weird green glass a laboratory test.

I wish I could see their faces when they smugly take it out of pocket or handbag, back home again, with a tale to tell the neighbors. For, whatever it is that causes the glass in that one particular window of the old Dickerson home to cloud over, it disappears about half an hour after the panes are removed from the windowframe. I don't know why. Jeb and Mark and I, as children, have scraped them with razor blades, peered at them under our toy microscopes, and smeared all sorts of acids on them. But the green scum—that is what it looks like; a foul gray-ish-green scum on the surface of a pool—seems to be *inside* the glass, under surface. I could not tell you how many times the opaque discolored panes have been replaced by ordinary glass, only to cloud over again by sunset of the next day.

BUT that is not its attraction. The "green window" is supposed to be a prophetic window, an opening into the future; or, more accurately, a mirror for tomorrow. The story is: when Great-great Grandpa Dickerson was thrown from his horse and lay dying in that room, over a century ago, he called for an old slave on the Place, a wizened old negress purported to be a *mamaloi*. The plantation was heavily in debt, and it seems the old boy was worried about the welfare of his wife and two small sons. Lying there on the brocaded couch, with his spine broken from the fall, he had begged the old voodoo woman to look into the future for him, to help his widow make necessary plans.

She had done so, the story goes, using that window as a sort of "psychic screen." All the Evil Ones that crowd about someone who is dying, she had summoned to that spot—it was their fetid breath, she explained, that clouded the glass panes. But there was only one trick of dark magic in her power: to make a mirror of that opaque window, in which could be seen the dim reflection of the room where her master lay dying. A reflection of the room, yes—not as it looked at the moment, but as it *would* look, at some unnamed future date, when the *next* person in the house should die. The mental picture of that mumbling old black crone, of the sobbing wife cuddling her two terrified children before that slowly darkening window, has always been vivid to me.

All my life, of course, I have heard family tales about its prophecies. But the old Place itself has become a white elephant, tax-ridden and run-down. Mother married a Virginian and moved away, but she would never sell her equity in the property to Mark's father or to Jeb's mother, my uncle and aunt. Jeb's mother married a local lawyer and moved across town, but Mark and his father lived on at the old Homeplace, selling off some of the land when the old man had his stroke. It was, I may add, somewhat of a disappointment that his actual death occurred in a hospital. I think half the people in Stuartsboro had planned to "drop in" at the moment of his demise, for a peek into that prophetic window. No death had occurred in the house for seventy-two years—a fact I believe people resentfully accused our family of arranging, just for spite.

As a matter of fact, none of my generation believed in the hoodoo. We grinned about it fondly, the way others smile at myths about Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Mark, Jeb, and I—children of the Depression and the Second World War—were not inclined to believe in anything we couldn't see and touch. Jeb took over his father's meagre law practice in Stuartsboro, and managed to support himself and his widowed mother. Mark sold off more and more land, then went into the Air Corps. He came back with a charming little bride, a redhead with a bright gamin-face and a Brooklyn accent you could cut with a knife.

They were such a gay fun-loving young couple that I began visiting them, or Jeb, every summer after my teaching job closed in June. Mark was small, arrogant, with the lazy good looks of a Spanish don. Jeb was tall, lanky, good-humored, and wore glasses

that ruined whatever good looks he might have inherited from Aunt Millicent. As a girl, I often toyed with the idea of marrying one or the other of them, if they had not been my first cousins. Occasionally we would pretend among ourselves that they were my brothers.

But after Sherry came, with her light laugh and boundless energy, I had to take a backseat as their "best girl." Mark worshipped his little redhead; he became restless and bored unless they were in the same room.

It was easily apparent, too, that Jeb was in love with her, in that quiet awkward way of his. I felt sorry for him, because it was just as easy to see that Sherry's attention was all for her husband.

The plantation had dwindled now to only the grounds around the house, hardly an acre. Small houses had sprung up like mushrooms all about it, making it look like a dignified old dowager drawing her skirts haughtily away from a flock of tenement children. Mark started a real estate office, failed at it; built a movie drive-in outside of town and had to sell it at a loss; found two more jobs, and lost them. Then the family—especially Jeb Randolph and I—became distressed because of his drinking. He drank all the time now, lounging around the house in an old dressing-gown with a highball tinkling in his hand.

We all worked at getting him back on his feet. Jeb and I dropped in several times a day to pull him out of one of his moody spells. And Sherry was never more cheerful and loving. I often noticed the stiff pained look on Jeb's face when she sat down in Mark's lap, throwing her arms around him and kissing him with the childlike abandon that was her greatest charm. She invented things to amuse him around the house—small tasks to take his mind off his failures; little games to coax him out of his despondency.

ONE afternoon when we dropped by, she had been cleaning out the attic, and had come across an old letter wedged into a skylight. It was brown with age, streaky with rain, and almost illegible. But Sherry had made out the fine cramped old-fashioned handwriting, and was perched on Mark's chair arm, reading it aloud to him excitedly.

"Liz, Jeb—it's about the green window!" she called as we entered. "Some relative of yours, way back there . . . It's signed 'Lucy.' There's a blot on it, See? It's unfinished; she must have been writing to somebody, and spilled ink on her letter. Then the skylight rattled, and she or the servants stuffed the page in to wedge it . . ."

"Detective," Mark laughed, jerking a thumb at her. "She's got it all figured out . . . Jeb," he chuckled, "the 'Lucy' was Aunt Lucy Dickerson, Grandfather's maiden sister. She never did have all her buttons, I remember Dad used to say. And this letter proves it!"

"Something about the window?" I asked, amused at Sherry's excitement, "What'd the old gal say? Read it!"

"Well, it starts off in the middle of a sentence," Sherry said importantly. "Must have been the second page of her letter, or some such. She's thanking somebody for the funeral flowers they sent, as I make it out. '. . . *beautiful wreath,*' it starts out. '*There were so many lovely flowers, and poor dear Ellen looked so natural, lying there in the casket . . .*'"

Mark, Jeb, and I yelped with laughter in chorus.

"That's Aunt Lucy, all right!" Jeb nodded. "She was always going on about somebody's funeral. Liked to cry, so she went to 'em all! What else does it say?"

Sherry made a face at us. "All right! Laugh! I'll skip a few sentences, where she tells what the pastor said about . . . Allen? No, it's Ellen . . ."

"That was Grandma," Mark told her. "Died of cancer, poor old gal . . . Say!" he burst out, suddenly interested. "She *was* the last person to die here in the house, wasn't she? Aunt Lucy nursed her for years. Old maid. She lived for the family; never had any life of her own."

Jeb and I nodded. Sherry was poring over the stained letter-fragment again, trying to make out the words in faded ink.

"*. . . my dear, what I saw in the window! You'd never believe . . .*" she read. "*Never believe* . . . something-something; it's blotted out. ". . . *'twas an Oriental,*" she

made out another phrase or two. *"Sitting there in Father's chair with a turban on his head—if indeed 'twas a man, dear Martha —and . . ."*

We laughed again uproariously.

"Good old Aunt Lucy!" Mark hooted. "Wasn't that about the time of the Yellow Peril talk? When everybody thought the Chinese were going to take over the country? And the gals sneaked around, reading Indian love-lyrics?"

Jeb grinned, nodding. "Guess Aunt Lucy took it from there, planting a rajah in our parlor! She had so little romance in her life . . ."

SHERRY gave him a sharp look I could not translate. "Aunt Lucy isn't the only one," she muttered cryptically. "Don't you even want to hear the rest of it? All about a thief breaking in to steal the rajah's treasure, and the Oriental shoots him—she saw it all in the mirror, the letter says. There's a cap pulled down over the burglar's face. When the Oriental sees who he's shot, he falls sobbing on the body of the young boy. Maybe his brother, she says, or his son . . ."

"Good grief! How corny!" Jeb held his nose expressively. "Mother told me Aunt Lucy used to read dime novels all the time —and I can well believe it! Kept 'em hidden between the leaves of a *Godey's Ladies' Book . . .*"

Sherry gave us one glance of disgust. She flung the wadded letter into the fireplace, then whirled on us, directing most of her temper at Mark.

"All right, of course it's silly! But we could *pretend,* couldn't we? You three are so . . . stuffy about everything! Mark half drunk all the time, and we never go anywhere any more! I never have any new clothes or . . . or . . ." Tears welled into her pretty brown eyes. "Or anything but family pride!"

Mark went white, averting his eyes from our faces. I could not think of a word to say, but Jeb, with admirable tact, leaped into the breach.

"Sure," he said gently. "We're getting to be a bunch of stick-in-the-muds. That's why Liz and I ran by this morning, to persuade you two to go to the Lindsay's dance at the country club. We . . ."

"Not going," Mark snapped. "Sally Lindsay yapping in my ear, and Jay handing out those dishwater cocktails like they were champagne . . .!"

Sherry looked at him, temper sparkling in her eyes. She compressed her lips, fighting for self-control, then burst the dam:

"Maybe *you're* not going. But *I* am! Jeb will take me, and Liz can go with that drip of a Joe Kimball who keeps trying to marry her off. She's too smart, though! Marriage is . . . a bog hole! Ours is, anyhow! . . . Come on, Liz," she whirled and swept out of the room to run upstairs. "I'll take some clothes, and dress at Jeb's with you. Mark can sit here and *drown* in his cheap rye. I'll spend the night at Aunt Millicent's!"

She came running down again with a lavender tulle dress, slip, and gold sandals, and stalked out to the car with no further word to Mark. Jeb and I mumbled something to our cousin; but he was already gulping down several slugs of whiskey in white-lipped anger, and did not reply. We followed Sherry out to the car, and drove away, not blaming her, only wishing Mark would find his way again and return to his old self.

On the way to Aunt Millicent's, Sherry became contrite, but covered it by chattering about the letter she had found in the attic.

"Oriental potentate!" she laughed. "With a turban on his head, and a flowered robe! She really dreamed that one up, didn't she? It's not so fantastic, though. The window didn't predict the date, by any chance? Say, December 7th, 1941 . . .?"

We fell in with her mood and began to kid each other about the Japanese Invasion of Stuartsboro that might have actually come off in 1941, but hadn't quite made it. At noon I discreetly called Mark on the phone, but he sounded very drunk when he answered. Sighing, I hung up, and went ahead with our plans for the dance.

What I had forgotten to tell Sherry was, it was a masquerade ball. She was disappointed, for she had a lovely little Pierrette costume at home. She would not go back after it, however, so I promised to get her

some kind of costume, if I had to lend her my own "Colonial belle" outfit—inherited from Grandmother, complete with powdered wig and hoopskirt.

Meanwhile, Mark was sulking in the big cool parlor, with a mystery novel held upside-down in his hand and a half-empty decanter beside him on the floor. He was in pajamas and dressing robe, as usual, with a two-day growth of beard on his puffy face. He also had a splitting headache, and had tied a rubber icebag on his head. I could picture him when I phoned—a tragi-comic figure, sulking there in the semi-gloom.

He sat there, pretending to read, until the sun sank below the Blue Ridge foothills. Then, still muttering things he wished he had thought to say, he fell into an alcoholic doze . . .

ABOUT midnight, he awakened with a start. His head was pounding. The dim light from a lamp in the hall illuminated the high-ceiled room palely. Mark heard a faint scraping noise to his right. Somebody was prying at the window that faced on the garden, trying to open it, trying to get in.

Dizzily, his heart pounding, Mark slid out of his chair and made his way over to a cabinet where his father had kept a collection of pistols and knives. His fumbling hand found one weapon, a blunt automatic. Mark could not remember whether it was loaded or not; but, he thought, it might scare the prowler. He waited, motionless in the half-dark, eyes glued to that window across the room. Beside it, locked as always, the green window —the prophetic green window—gleamed back at him like a shadowy mirror.

The window raised slowly. A figure in slouchy pants and a patched white shirt climbed up stealthily, shinnying up the trellis outside. A tweed cap was pulled far down over the intruder's eyes. A knife held between the teeth, a knife that had been used to pry open the window, gave the lower part of the face an evil distorted look.

Mark took careful aim, and pulled the trigger. No one was more startled than he was at the deafening explosion that rocked the room, fiilling it with the acrid stench of cordite.

The intruder screamed—a high-pitched cry of anguish and pain—then toppled forward over a chair, knocking it to the floor. Mark quickly switched on the light, aiming at the marauder again. But a gasping cry stopped him.

"Mark! Don't shoot—it's me! I left my latchkey! Thought you were in bed."

Then Mark cried out, throwing himself to his knees beside the still figure lying face up on the rug. It was Sherry—in an old pair of Jeb's pants, a shirt of mine, and someone's borrowed cap: the "Bowery thug" costume she wore to the masquerade dance. Moaning, Mark gathered her up in his arms. He rocked back and forth, crooning to her as her blood flowed out over his dressing gown.

And the green window began to glow with a weird radiance, mirroring the room as it had many times before, according to my parents and grandparents. A picture began to take shape in its shadowy frame, like a dim movie. My cousin Mark raised his head, holding his dead wife in his arms and watching the pattern of the future unfold in those green panes.

The day before the funeral, Jeb left Stuartsboro abruptly. Even Aunt Millicent could not explain his sudden departure, following a decision to join a law firm in New York. I was there, standing beside Mark as a loving sister might uphold a bereaved brother. He seemed stunned and vague. Now and again I caught him staring at me all during the service. There was a deep bewilderment in his piercing gaze, a look of horror that transcended even what I expected him to feel. Was it only his great sense of loss?

"Mark dear," I whispered. "Get hold of yourself. *I'm* still around."

After the interment of pretty shallow little Sherry, we were riding back from the cemetery. At my words, Mark broke his sober silence abruptly.

"Liz," he said quietly, "I have a hunch she was running away with Jeb, that night after the dance. He must have been waiting for her. She just came back for her clothes, probably—though I let Jeb believe it was to make up with me . . . She wasn't. You see, I know. I lost Sherry, not by death,"

he said heavily, "but a long time ago, to Jeb. Didn't you suspect?"

I stared at him, amazed. "Sherry? I knew he was in love with *her*, but . . . Whatever gave you the idea that she . . .? Why, Sherry adored you!"

"No." Mark's smile twisted. "She didn't," he said heavily. "She told me over a year ago that she'd married me for a meal-ticket, one of those war marriages. If Jeb would have taken her, she'd have left me long ago . . . but I played on his sympathy, let myself go to seed, just to keep her. Out of loyalty to me, he held out against her . . . until the night of the dance, is my bet. He blames himself for the whole mess, but of course I should have given her up to him long ago. Well . . ." He straightened his shoulders with an effort. "That's all over now. Think I'll go back into the Army. And, Liz . . ." He hesitated queerly. "It might be well for you to sell the old place. We must never go back there, the three of us. I told Jeb if we did, there'd be tragedy. That I saw *murder* in the green window that night . . ."

MY EYES widened. "Mark!" I took his hand in both of mine; he stared oddly at our entwined fingers. "You told him *that?* No wonder he left so suddenly! He must have thought you meant you were going to kill him, or he you! . . . Oh, Mark!" I sighed. "The three of us grew up together. We've been so close, I couldn't bear this town without you both. Look here!" I laughed. "Are you forcing me to marry Joe Kimball and move to Idaho with him? No sir! I won't do it! I'll stay here with Aunt Millicent and grow into a lonely old maid like Aunt Lucy, without you and Jeb around . . . Mark, I'm ashamed to confess I've rather resented Sherry barging in and taking both my . . . my best beaux! So now, please, I'd like to have you back! With a little teamwork, we could make the old Place into a tourist hotel. Call it 'The Three Cousins' . . ."

Mark did not respond to my attempt at levity.

His dark eyes were still searching my face with that bewildered expression. He shook his head slowly, and patted my hand.

"No . . . we've got to board it up. Don't . . . don't ever open it, Liz . . . How little people really know about each other!" he muttered. "I about Jeb, or he about me, or both of us about . . . Only the green window really *knows* . . ." He passed a shaky hand over his forehead. "I wonder. If I'd been forewarned by that letter, could I have prevented the accident to Sherry? Do you think . . .? Liz, if we never go near the old home again, the three of us together, how can it happen, the thing I saw . . .?"

I shivered at the peculiar look of dread on my cousin's face. The car had rolled to a halt in front of the old Dickerson home, built by our great-great-grandfather nearly two centuries ago. The murky green window stared out at us like a blind eye, seeing not the present but the future—the incredible future, like that strange trick of fate which had caused Mark to shoot his adored wife and Jeb to leave his hometown forever.

"Mark," I demanded, "What did you see in the window, the night poor Sherry . . .? Mark, she's gone now, and you and Jeb must forgive each other! We three have to stick together, as we did when we were children. Blood is thicker than water, Mark, and . . ."

My cousin looked at me, and all at once he began to laugh harshly.

"Blood?" he said queerly. "That's what I saw, Liz! Blood all over the room, that shadow-room inside the window, our parlor as it will look . . . I don't know when. Next month. Next year. I don't know. Jeb and I were lying there on the floor, hacked to pieces. And someone was standing over us with . . . with an ax. Still . . . still *chopping* . . . That's what I saw."

I shuddered and hid my face against his shoulder. "Oh, Mark! How awful! But it couldn't ever happen, of course," I laughed nervously. "Jeb has gone, and you'll be gone next week . . . D—did you see who it was? I mean, the face? Did it look like anyone we know?"

"Yes," my cousin held my hand tightly for a moment, then answered quietly. "Yes, I saw the face. Liz . . . it was *you*."

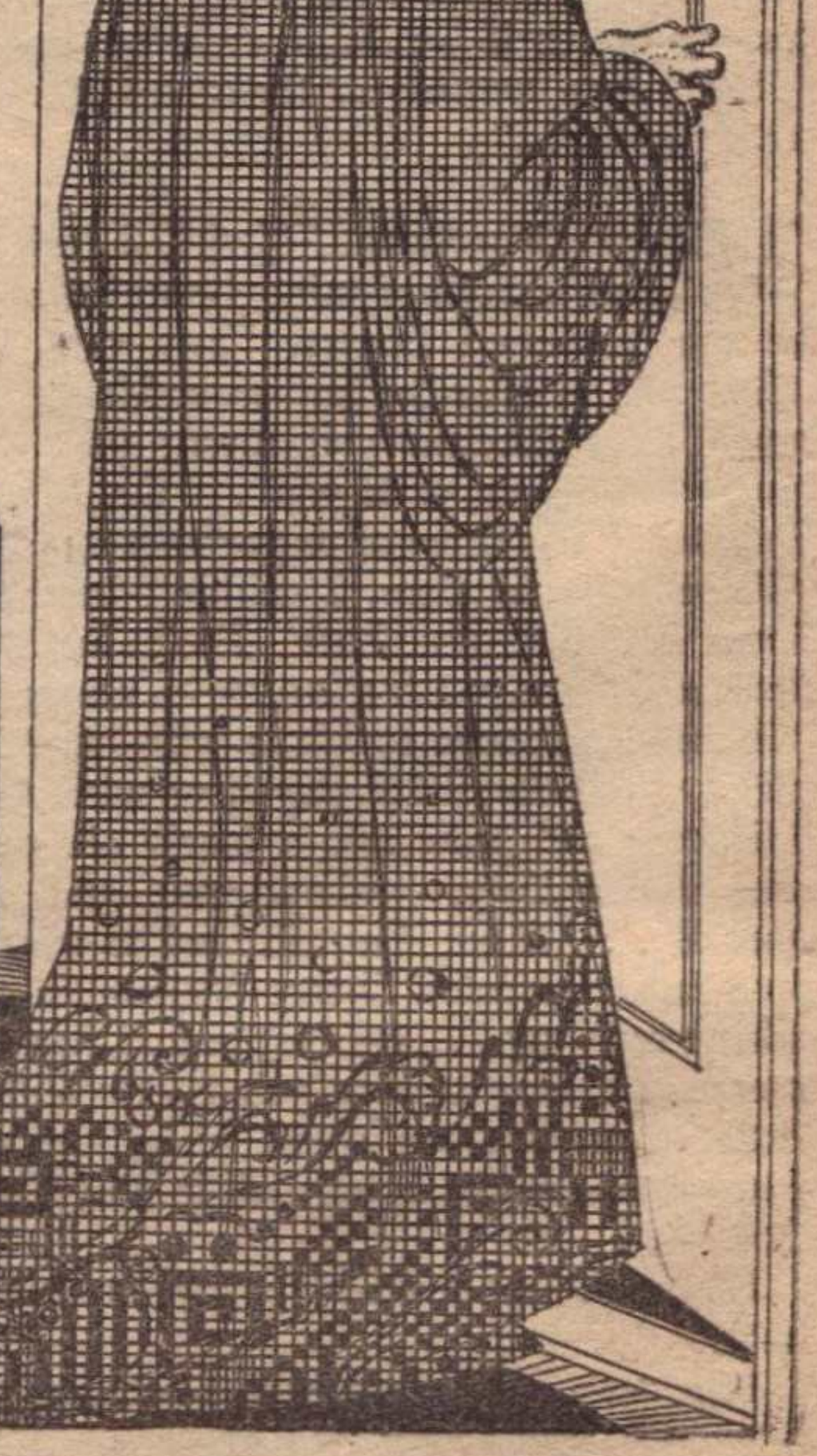
Stranger at Dusk

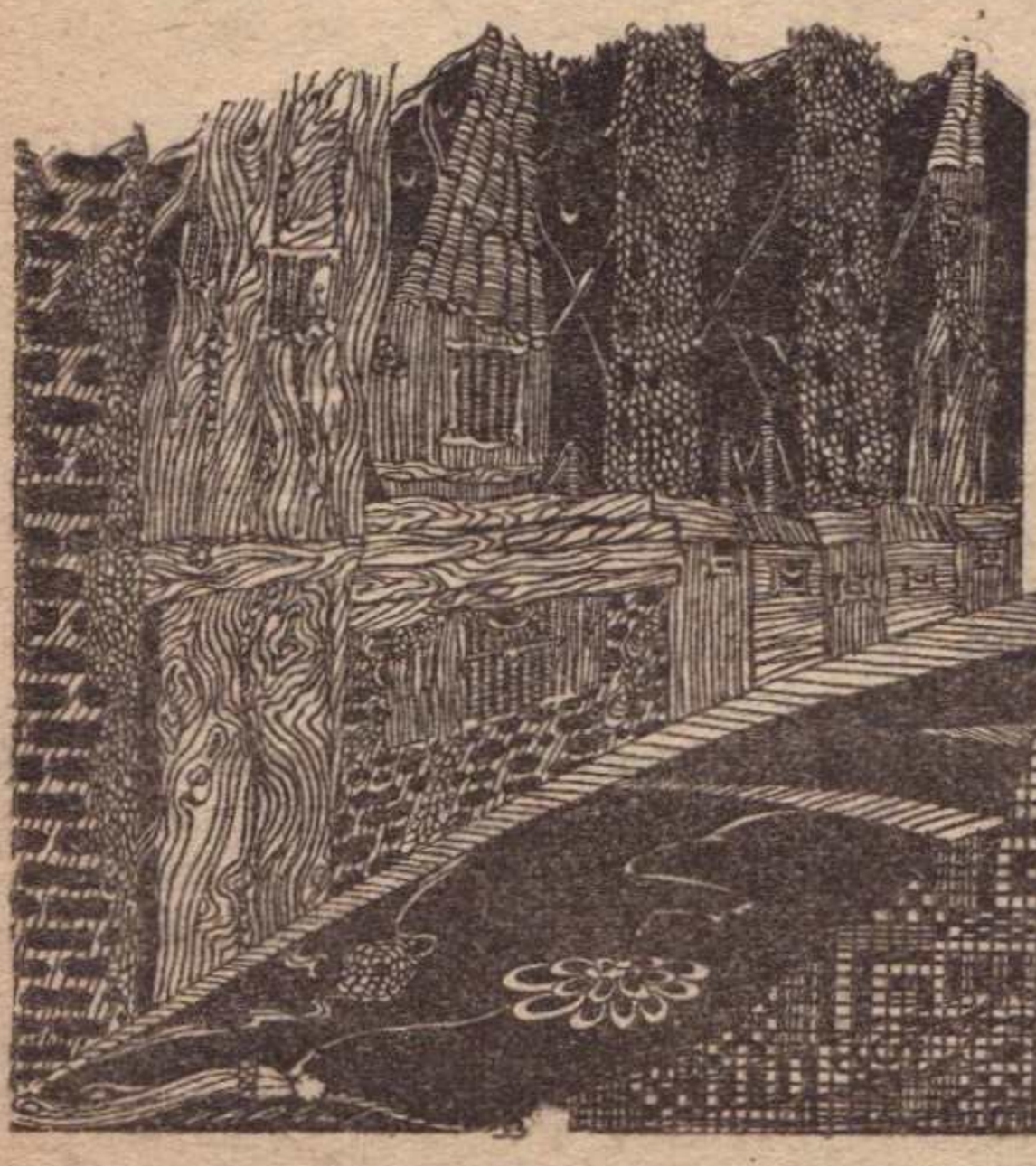
BY MALCOLM KENNETH MURCHIE

YOU are a little child again. The sun is a warm part of you, the air that touches you and fills you inside, the sounds that you will remember forever. That rumbling from the elevated that seems always to be there, or going, or coming but silent only in the silences of the night when your ability to hear is also stilled. The call of the flower vendor, shrill with the want for telling about those new fragile tiers of growing color on his rickety wagon pulled by the old horse who knows just when to stop and likes to.

The noise of other children, each noise so different to a parent, so same to a stranger; the high squeal of clothes lines being pulled at dusk, and the shrill talk of the women pulling in those stiff-with-cleanness cloth people. The ten-piece band that came out to walk and play their sad music in slow cadence from the gray and red faced church

Many men are called by the name
"Stranger," but only one is wholly true to it!





Heading by Vincent Napoli

at the corner while mourners walked beside the shiny limousine with its so-precious, so-dead burden, and behind the dressed-up relatives riding this time in the best cars they would ever know.

The yards at the back of the brownstones, neat rectangles fenced each off from the others with grubby gardens trying to make their living out of the poor soil of the city.

A child can play in these yards, for all the poorness of the earth and bulging of the fences. A child can play and raise his voice to the blue top of the sky and hear it come bouncing back from the windows that look down like sightless eyes on the yards, row on row, house by house.

Children play in these yards to go out someday through the brownstone houses into life beyond, down the many paths of experiences and accomplishments, good and bad, happy and unhappy. They are all right here, wrapped in dreams, safe with bright, eager hope in them, tomorrow ahead of them. But once they leave, like in Victor Herbert's Toyland "Once you pass its borders, you can ne'er return again. . . ."

HAROLD WILSON lived in one of these old brownstones, played ball in its backyard; by the hour with a rubber ball and a yellow fielder's mitt. He went to the school several blocks away and had to be very careful what he did between times.

"No son of mine is going to run breakneck around the streets," his mother used to say. Long ago the neighbors guessed it wasn't fondness for Harold, but a cruel purposefulness that made her talk and act so. But she was a good mate for *him*.

He, Mr. Wilson, was a huge, bent-over man filled with gruffness and anger, unsmiling, unfriendly.

Miss Fretchett, who occupied a room in the next-door boarding house and who had, quite happily for a curious old maid, made the choice discovery that at one spot in her closet she could hear very well through the paper-thin dividing walls what was going on in the Wilson living room, used to wonder to herself how such ugly and disagreeable parents could beget themselves such a sunny little boy.

For the birth of this boy-child to this glowering, forbidding couple was surely some sort of mistake. It was more than improbable, it was wrong in every way. For it was apparent that they neither wanted the golden-haired youngster nor loved him. Yet he grew up, even if painfully at times, for a child grows best on affection and security—these make the soil in which a child thrives best; the way nature grows things. He went to school and home. But always, nearly always, he was alone. His friends were never welcomed at the brownstone, and Harold was not allowed to stay out with them.

But he could be seen day after day out in the backyard, playing by himself with ball and glove—Miss Fretchett could see the yard from her back window and remembered well the one time there'd been another youngster there with Hal for a game of catch and the way Mrs. Wilson had come storming into the yard, chasing the other boy yipping with fear out of the yard into the street, cuffing Harold brutally. Miss Fretchett followed the scene by moving from front to back. Later Mrs. Wilson used her strong whiskey breath to deplore, at the neighborhood market, "that no good son of ours" to Miss Fretchett who had all she could do to keep from rearing up her slender old maid's frame to the ogress and telling her a thing or two about being a mother. But of course she didn't.

On occasions, Miss Fretchett, who was almost as fond of cookies from the corner bakery as a small boy might be, tried to offer young Hal some. The first time was in front of the two adjoining houses, and as the golden-haired youngster stepped forward eagerly, there was an imperative rat-a-tat on the window pane of the Wilson house. It was Mrs. Wilson looming there, holding back the curtains with her brawny arms, scowling and shaking her head angrily.

Harold put his hand behind his back and said politely, "Thank you, Ma'am, but I can't."

Miss Fretchett was exasperated and stood, mouth agape, watching the boy scurry back into the old brownstone. It wasn't fair, the way they treated that young 'un, she thought. Next time and next she offered the cookies further afield where the disapproving eyes

of parents could not see—land's sakes, what was the harm of giving wholesome cookies from Geitzer's Bakery to a child! But Hal always shook his head. It vexed Miss Fretchett, that and other things she saw go on, but what could she do?

FOR instance, the old maid thought they *neglected* him. In the worst weather they let him run around without proper clothing when anybody knows—even someone like herself who'd never had children—that of course the child would get coughs and sneezes and illnesses.

A mother says, "Now Johnny" or "Bill" or "Eddie, put on your rubbers and wear your muffler . . ." like that, said Miss Fretchett to herself. Not the Wilsons. And, surely because of it, wasn't the boy sick a lot? And did they care for him properly—all the frustrated maternal instinct of the woman welled up—she never saw a doctor, well, hardly ever. There were a few times, she recalled. . . . And ask Mr. or Mrs. Wilson about the boy! They'd like to snap your head off. Act like it was none of your business! Which maybe it wasn't but *somebody* had to think a kind thought about the little fellow. His family certainly didn't and most of the world is too busy to notice or care about those things.

He was a strange boy . . . well, naturally. No friends his own age except during school hours, having to play that way so much of the time alone in the yard. She'd gotten to talk to him a few times, at the corner store, away from prying eyes. He had, with all his sunny hair and bright eyes, a sad, shy little manner that pulled at her heartstrings.

When he spoke to her—always polite in reply to something she'd said first—he seemed hesitant and she guessed the meanings of his sideway glances out the store door. But—and it was an arch triumph—she won him over to a degree. So that his thin face would light up when he saw her come into a shop, if he were there first.

They didn't talk much or of many things but enough so she caught the bleak unhappines of the child's soul underneath his politeness.

"Don't you have any real good friends? Real good, the kind you tell your secrets to?"

Hal started to shake his head, but then he smiled a half smile. And finally he told her of a man, a stranger who he'd seen a few times, who knew, well, just *everything* about him.

"That's nice," said Miss Fretchett, both pleased for the boy and crestfallen that he had a better confidant than she.

"An uncle perhaps, a friend of the family?"

The boy wrinkled his forehead. "I don't know," he replied. "I don't know, Miz Fretchett."

HAROLD *didn't* know. For in the beginning, at least, it happened in the night or dusk or shadows, when the sun is playing far away on the other side of the world.

The first time he could remember well . . . as he could all the meetings and what went on and what was said. The first time was in his very own street, it was evening's gloom made darker by soft spring rain that tiptoed in neat lines across the pavement. Harold was going home from some ordered errand, along the street that ran between the rows of houses, their blank stone and glass faces weeping from the rain. He was hurrying, for the chill and wetness was on his skin and in his bones. It was just then that Harold saw him. Just then like that, for one moment he had not been there, it seemed, and the next he was.

Tall, very tall to a child, dressed in dark clothing that suited the night with a big long angular face that grew in size as the boy looked up into it and listened to the words it spoke.

They were very simple. They said, "Why not come with me?"

And though the child had been told about strangers and warned, this one was different . . . this stranger.

They fell into step, the tall stranger and the small boy, the great shoes of the one, the little shoes of the other, keeping sloshing pace along the sidewalk.

"You don't want to go home," the stranger said. It did not sound like a question. It was a positive statement.

Hal did not answer. But in his heart he knew that was very true.

As though reading his thoughts, the stranger then said, "Then come with me. It will be easy, Harold."

The boy did not wonder how this tall man knew his name; it seemed so natural at the time. But Harold did quicken his steps. He must get home, he must hurry. Even now, through the rain he could see the lower floor windows of his house and Mother or Father might be watching and would punish him for being with somebody, anybody.

Just as though he knew the decision had been made, the stranger stopped. Harold slowed his steps, looked back. The man was standing there watching, no sign of farewell, no final words, silent as the night. Then he turned and walked back down the street, his steps whispering with the rain, a tall, tall shadow fading into the gloom, into other shadows and was gone. Hal hurried on and made the great front door.

But how could it be true, he had thought about that first time again and again. For he had been in bed so sick and Dr. Finn, whose breath smelled whiskey the way his parents' so often did, came in and thumped him and mumbled about "scarlet fever."

That was so, so how could he have been out in the street? But it was not *like* a dream. It was *not* a dream; he knew that somehow.

There was another time; he was in the country walking in a small verdant valley that cozied between two hills. The hills were crowned with waving grass that tickled the blue skyline beyond. The sun was hot. They had come to this place, his father and mother bringing him to see an aunt. A woman too old for this life and the two Wilsons sensed it. Hal heard words about "wills" and "the legacy" which he did not entirely understand. He was left to himself, shushed irritably out of the house, the very old lady in the high poster bed calling in a cracked voice and his parents, behind her back, making unpleasant faces he could not understand.

SO HE found the valley. It had a brook. Harold liked to dip his feet in it . . . for once he was far enough away to be beyond his parental displeasure.

And into the valley one day came the stranger. Hal saw him coming first as a dark silhouette against the far-away horizon, knew instinctively who he was and waited, waited quietly while the man climbed down through the grass-sided hill and came to his side, so tall and, and . . .

"You remember me, Harold," the stranger said gravely.

The boy nodded.

The man stood waiting, the peak of his somber hat centered in the sky where Hal sat at his feet.

The stranger offered a hand, a huge, gnarled thing that must be a Bunyan-like strength. Harold sucked his breath in.

"I don't want to go. Thank you, I don't."

The stranger's great head seemed to bow, and it was as though he gave great thought to the little boy's words.

He talked then, as though not in the least upset that his invitation had been rejected. He talked and Harold talked more than he had to anyone before, even nice old Miss Fretchett. It seemed that the stranger knew much about Harold; the things he had done, the places he'd gone, even the thoughts he'd thought—really everything.

And, for some reason his small boy's mind did not bother to grapple with it, it was all perfectly natural . . .

But he had been very sick again, and when he came to know of the things around him, the cottage, his parents and their looks —not of thankfulness as he opened his eyes, but of something else unfathomable—like the looks before, behind his old aunt's back —there was still a clear memory of the valley, and the stranger. He brought these memories back to the city with him.

Miss Fretchett worried and thought—poor old thing—there was nothing else in her life to worry and fret about but the little boy next door.

By dint of much putting of two and two together, by long observation and by the lucky break of a mailman's mistake—leaving a letter intended for the Wilsons at her door instead—she came to a conclusion that was as inescapable as it was dreadful.

She chided herself about the letter. Yet it was Providence. Was she not the child's only friend—Oh, that stranger Hal talked about—but where was he? *She'd* never seen

him. Anyway, the letter flap was a little loose at one edge; it wasn't hard to p-r-y-y-y it up very carefully . . . there! It was a letter that talked about money . . . from a lawyer . . . a good deal of money. Goodness! And about little Harold . . . who should receive this amount on his eighteenth birthday . . . of course in the event of (she couldn't bear to read *that*) those two, the Wilsons would get it all.

MISS FRETCHETT carefully refolded the letter. She would put it at their box in the morning. There . . . and she started to seal it up with old fingers that shook from what she'd been reading. Oh, Allen & Courtney, Counselors, Estate Management (the print letterhead had read), would you believe me, would you believe an old woman, an old maid, if I came flying to you and *told* you what was going on? No. She knew not.

So it was just *her* secret . . . and the Wilsons. And what could she do; she could not go up to either of those evil, evil parents and say:

"I know the truth. You don't mean to *let* Harold grow up!"

No, she would have to do what she could peering through the lace curtains of her window, watching him go to school and come home, or play alone, so alone in the back yard, listening so hard in the square tomb of her closet to their voices next door and wringing her hands impotently while the tears coursed down her old, wrinkled cheeks, almost in time to the sound of the beatings, the harsh words.

So she had been at her window, the lace curtains held aside by her gnarled old hands, the evening of the accident. Harold had been across the street when they called. The two of them were on this side, home from some errand, and Hal had been across the street. They called, shrieked at him purposefully, and he came with that blind, terrified obedience as always.

Of the four, only Miss Fretchett seemed to notice the truck lumbering down the center of the road. Afterwards, she realized *three* of them had noticed—all but Harold, too intent on obeying. She filled the room with her scream, beat at the window with her hands. Harold never saw, never knew until the crushing impact was upon him, tossing his body aside.

In the evening street the boy lay, but only for the moment it took for the father to get there. The truck driver's face was one of astonishment and shock as he clambered down from the cab.

"Geeze, the kid ran right in front of me," mumbled the truck driver, wagging his gray-with-shock face from side to side.

Meantime, Mr. Wilson had picked up his son—almost roughly—*anybody* knows you don't move someone so badly hurt. Miss Fretchett went as fast as her old stiff legs would carry her, out the door of her house toward the scene.

"You murderer," she shrieked in her high voice, shaking her thin fists at Mr. Wilson. "You murderer!"

The man turned, the child still in his arms, his face wolfish, threatening. He flung a foul word at her. It was a scene beyond the wildest imaginings. Miss Fretchett floated through it, unreal herself as the whole tabloid was unreal.

They were letting the truck driver go.

"Those things will happen!" He had said that; Mr. Wilson. Little Hal's father. Dismissing with those few words the sweaty, sweating, scared-to-death driver.

"Geez, Mister, t'anks. Like I say, never saw him." The truckster went back into the cockpit of his machine. "Sweet Geez!," Miss Fretchett was close enough to hear him mutter half to himself. Then he drove off in the lumbering monster, and it was just the little group of three left.

MISS FRETCHETT, the mother, the father with the bundle in his arms. The old maid screamed at them again; it was the only sound in the long, still twilight street, empty except for them. "You murderers!" *And the shrill echo was taken up* and sent back into her own ears by the window-mouths of the blank-faced houses watching, row on row.

They moved ominously at her as she stood between them and the front door of their house. Mrs. Wilson came first, her big flabby fish forearms raised to brush the little woman aside . . . their faces working, both of them.

She hardly felt the impact as both of their

huge, terrible, wicked overfed bodies knocked her frailness to one side. But she heard Mr. Wilson speak and she saw the look in his eyes when he said it.

". . . besides, he's not dead, not dead . . ." his lips went back to say the words, and *there was regret in his eyes.*

Miss Fretchett didn't stop screaming at them, following them until she was finally shoved away and the big front door slammed in her face. Back in her own place she told her landlady, a phlegmatic woman who traditionally minded her own business and this time had been minding it "in the back of the house" beyond eye or earshot of the accident.

The landlady had long ago ticketed Miss Fretchett as "one of those nervous ones who likes to keep in a stew instead of forgetting herself at a movie."

"Don't take on so, dearie," had been her advice. "These kinda things happen alla time. Maybe the kid ain't hurt so bad," and she went on about her business.

No, of course, no one else had *seen.* That would be the way they *would* do it.

Miss Fretchett kept watch. At her window and, in the evening, at her closet. There was nothing. Nothing, that is, until late that night. She heard then, straining her ears; the words were clear.

She, Mrs. Wilson, said, her voice coming low but distinct through the partitioning wall, "He's bad, real bad. Don't think he'll pull through this . . . out of his head . . . talking funny things."

The man's voice rumbled, and they both laughed, peals of laughter from the house next door where a child lay dying.

He said, "Yes, this looks like it. Well, we can use that money."

THERE was a word of caution from the woman. Something Miss Fretchett couldn't make all out but about "that meddlesome old maid next door" and "hadn't they better have a doctor . . . to make things look good?"

Mr. Wilson agreed. Miss Fretchett kept listening as long as she could and then her old age and weakness caught up with her and drove her to bed.

The next day the doctor came. Dr. Finn. *That* one. He made such a commotion next door, you knew; everybody knew. Always drunk. Ask anyone in the neighborhood. It wasn't as though there weren't a nice young physician right around the block. But the Wilsons liked this one who couldn't even have been much of a man sober . . . but he was never sober.

Miss Fretchett listened in her closet, not breathing, clasping her white, blue-veined hands together. She heard the doctor join the two Wilsons in the living room; they made a boisterous threesome; the medical man's prediction of death in no way dampened the proceedings.

"Yep," the slurred voice of the physician rasped through the paper-thin walls. "The little fellow is bad. 'Pears to me he won't last much longer."

"Another drink, Doc," Mr. Wilson urged. "So he's bad, is little Harold, eh? Too bad, too bad." It went on like that, the drinking and talking and laughing in that house next door and only here, across the mortar board and plaster and wallpaper, only here did anybody care.

But what could Miss Fretchett do? How could she go to the police? To anyone. She was not so old as to be foolish in the head about those things. She would get short shrift, and other people besides the Wilsons would think she was a meddlesome old maid with not enough to worry about of her own. And after all, to society's eyes, hadn't the Wilsons done *everything?* Yes, of course. *Everything.*

Salt wetness coursed down her old wrinkled cheeks that night; so many tears that there were none left for the next night. That momentous next night when, through the wall, she heard Mrs. Wilson come running into the living room.

"He's gone," the ogress said. It was an elated voice.

"Are you sure?" Mr. Wilson replied and continued matter of factly, "I don't want to get that damn fool doctor in here one more time than necessary if—" Then Miss Fretchett heard both sets of heavy, clumping steps leaving the living room. *He* was going to make sure himself.

Miss Fretchett stopped listening. And no new tears came. For she had known at the

time of the accident that twisted, broken little Hal would not live. There was no anguish left to be felt, no crying left to be done. She was numb as she went to bed, and the numbness went deep inside of her.

There was not much for her, now, she reviewed. What a large part of her life the little golden-haired boy from next door had been. She'd thought of him as an orphan, or more—even more ridiculously—as much more hers than belonging to the Wilsons. Now she was just a lonely old woman with not very many happy memories and the small insurance envelope each quarter keeping her frail body here in this place that would have to be home forever and forever—

IT WAS a strange beginning for Harold, this meeting with the stranger. For this time he was not as sure of his surroundings; it was not the country with its soft green valley; it was not the familiar street. There was a byway, of indeterminate makeup, stretching away to distances Harold must travel.

The boy walked, and although there was an indefiniteness about just where his steps were to take him, he must keep working his legs and going onward. It was, certainly, the gloom of twilight around him, deepening, so that when he found that his friend suddenly strode beside him, he was not surprised for the stranger must have stepped out from the shadows that surrounded them both.

Harold slowed his pace, slowed it more and more until finally they were standing there, facing each other, the little boy looking up at his companion. The shadows were there too, mist swirling about them now.

"Where are you going?" the man spoke. Even though he stood close by, his cloak-muffled body and his head were far away and up in the darkness.

The little boy looked and thought. "Why . . . why I really don't know," he replied. And he didn't.

"You want to go home," the stranger said and, as usual, it was not a question but a statement. The little boy's heart leaped at the words and the thoughts they conjured up . . . but he did not know where—not for sure—where in all this world of gray gloom and twilight, where . . .

It was not back to the house there on the street, not to the country cottage, or the nearby country valley . . . no, not to these . . . to a something, a somewhere he'd never known yet.

The stranger bowed his great height over the boy.

"Come with me."

Harold hesitated. The stranger was holding out his huge hand, the little boy knew he had but to take it and they would be off . . .

Harold still hung back . . .

The stranger standing there with his head in the dark clouds made words of the little boy's thoughts.

"You want to come with me but you also want to be able to go back." The statement again.

It was so, Hal knew. It would be so easy to just take the mighty gnarled hand. But the stranger understood there was something else.

Then the pact was made; Harold reached for the outstretched arm in the growing gloom and the two went off down the byway, hand in hand now, close together, the towering one and his diminutive companion.

MISS FRETCHETT'S life closed around her. There was nothing else much to be interested in. More than old age was creeping on her now as illness sapped the poor strength left in her limbs. Her decline, as it so often happens with older people, dated from the time of little Harold's accident. To be sure, the exact end of that chapter was hazy in her mind.

She remembered that the doctor, Finn, had come, for she distinctly had seen his roly-poly form trundling down the street after she'd heard Mr. Wilson tell his wife it "was time for that now."

What had happened then, she didn't quite know. But the sounds of arguing rose louder and louder from the living room next door. Miss Fretchett was so physically and emotionally spent that she hardly registered or properly sorted out the angry words and curses that rose from next door.

One thing was clear; her memory served

up this on the spring evening of reference. The little doctor, probably more sober than usual, kept insisting over and over.

"He *couldn't* have moved, I tell you. He couldn't have got out of bed. He was unconscious, dying, I tell you." But the arguments went on. "You've hidden him somewhere," the doctor's voice rose wrathfully.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilson's voices joined then in placating the doctor who was "going to tell the authorities." There was talk then that there was enough "money to go around." An empty sealed casket could be buried, couldn't it? The physician would take care of the certificate, wouldn't he? Finally a quieter Dr. Finn left.

Miss Fretchett was no longer able to get around much. Her desire to get to the little boy's funeral was not fulfilled.

Afterward the old lady clutched with her thin fingers at the landlady.

But that unimaginative worthy had said: "What, me poke into them folks' affairs? Not on your life, dearie! Never liked them but we don't need to do business together. You're making up things. 'Sides, the talk is the funeral was a nice one, so maybe the Wilsons had a change of heart. Did anyone *see* the little fellow? Now dearie, you don' suppose people go around and pry open the coffin of those resting in peace, do you?"

THE days and months ran their course through the street, swept along by snow, rain and wind and cold and finally by the softness of spring again. It was hard to keep track sometimes, but Miss Fretchett, lying mostly abed now, knew in her old, dry bones and so-tired heart and head that it was a year ago, just.

The young physician from the neighborhood had come to see her, offering kindness and little else. After all, age is incurable. And privately, with her landlady, the young doctor doubted that Miss Fretchett would ever be very active again . . .

But this night she was active enough to pull herself out of bed. The voices from the Wilson living room were loud, angry as was so usually the case. Again the roly-poly doctor's rasp was plain. It was the eternal subject of money, and the discussion was heated.

"It's coming to me," Dr. Finn shouted, sounding more drunk than usual. The Wilsons, first man, then wife, tried to quiet the physician, and in the effort their voices rose too.

This night Miss Fretchett was active enough—although the effort was a severe one—to pull herself to the closet where she leaned against the door jamb, holding herself upright with shaking arms even as she strained her ears.

The doctor, his tongue sharpened and loosened with an extra load of liquor, was insistent. "*I want my money!*" Over and over.

Lower, calmer voices—the Wilsons—explained, soothed. There always was considerable delay in these matters. Lawyers and estates can't be hurried.

"They *got* to be hurried, or else!"

"Or else what, Finn?" Mr. Wilson asked the doctor with an ominous edge to his voice.

There was a pause for a moment and all the world seemed to still for listening. Miss Fretchett strained her trembling body closer to the thin partition.

The doctor spoke low but clear, his anger cutting around the liquor-thickness of his voice. "Or else, my buckeroos, I'm going to tell the authorities there was a bit of dirty work on the death of your son! A bit of funny business, ya know what I mean!"

The silence stretched itself out as the listener tried to imagine what was happening in that room. Then she heard the doctor's abrupt curse and an accompanying sound of surprise from Wilson.

It was the words Mrs. Wilson spoke, though, that made Miss Fretchett's senses reel. For a moment she had been thinking that perhaps there was physical violence among these three terrible people and they were fighting among themselves.

But the Wilson woman said, choked up, like a cry, terror strong in every syllable: "*Harold! Harold!*"

They all talked at once, the three. Fear talk. *How was it possible?* Cloaking the thought each had, *Harold, we three know you are dead* or should be, why we worked

so hard to see to it . . . and there you stand. . . .

"Come here, boy," Mr. Wilson managed, his voice not yet his own. "You mean you're all right! Why, after all this time, your mother and I have been so worried . . . the doctor here said you were *dead* and then, then when we couldn't find you . . ."

Words of guilt . . . tumbling, useless words.

AND then *he* spoke. Little Harold. Unmistakably, clearly, and the sounds of the boy-voice struck a dagger of terrible pain at Miss Fretchett's laboring heart.

"Yes," simply that, then, "I shall tell you about it, Father and Mother."

There was silence and then—Mrs. Wilson it was—somebody said: "Harold, son. Who is your friend there in the doorway?" Cautious, their little minds still on witnesses and the law and who would think what and do what, and with this return from the dead, the boy who had not died, something would have to be done . . . what about Allen and Courtney, Counselors, Estate Management . . . the money, The Money, THE MONEY . . . .

All wrapped up in that prosaic, tiny, impotent sentence . . .

"Harold, who's your friend there in the doorway?"

Who's your friend?

Miss Fretchett *knew* even before the little boy-voice said, "He's come to see you."

There, like that. Listened to by an old woman, very sick and old in body but not out of her mind. That was all.

He's come to see you . . .

There was the sudden, urgent, terrible clumping of heavy steps, and then the most . . . complete silence. . . .

Miss Fretchett made it back to bed but it was almost her last effort. Some moments later, her landlady came to the old woman's room. Her broad face was grinning; she'd seen something that amused her.

"Dearie, I thought you'd be interested. I just saw Doctor Finn tearing out of Wilson's and going down the street like all the devils in Hades were one step behind. Did a body good to see that drunk no good doctor run so—" and she put her hands on her huge hips and laughed.

Then she stepped closer. "Why Miss Fretchett, you all right?" Her expression and tone changed abruptly. And though the old woman had enough strength to nod slightly in what she meant for reassurance, the landlady bustled out.

"I'm going to call the nice young doctor, that's what I'm going to do. A body can see you're not feeling right," and her heavy, hurrying steps took her away into the other downstairs regions of the house where dwelled the telephone.

MISS FRETCHETT lay there, and her body began to float, slowly at first, beneath the blanket, despite her will to keep it down. There was wetness on her face as she cried for the last time—an involuntary memoriam for her own tired, drab life. But more. She had *heard* little Harold. If she could only have *seen* him, only could have found strength to go to the front of the house, to beckon to him as he went, she would so dearly have loved to see him just once more . . .

The small sound brought her eyes away from the ceiling. Her eyes that were so blurred, and it was getting dark, but there was someone . . . she gulped her throbbing heart from her throat as she saw.

"Harold!" she breathed out, gratefully.

He had come, he hadn't forgotten her. He was coming towards her.

The little golden-haired boy was indistinct but he *was* there beside her bed. "Yes, Miz Fretchett," and he put his small boy's fingers on her pale hand.

Then she saw beyond him. The tall figure in the doorway, watching them. It seemed almost as though Harold felt her seeing and wondering through his fingers on hers.

"It's all right," he said kindly with a child's vast, grave kindness. "That's my friend. Don't be frightened, Miss Fretchett. We're with you now. Don't be frightened."

Don't be frightened. How could I with you, little Hal, here now. She saw the stranger advance slowly into the room, his height almost too much for this dimension, dark-muffled in the gloom-rid room. She felt a moment of strange, vague fear.

But Harold's voice was in her ear and head and soul, *"Don't* be frightened, Miss Fretchett."

THERE was nothing the young doctor could do, but when the landlady, bug-eyed, peered over his shoulder as he was completing his examination, he agreed with her relieved sentiments, "My, young doc, she died peaceful."

He nodded. It was so. Old Miss Fretchett had passed quietly away, and the smile on her face had both the beauty of a youth so long ago gone and the peace of age so just now terminated. But the soft spring evening was just beginning for the young doctor. Strange how these things go in cycles. Later that night he was summoned by the authorities to the next house from whence Miss Fretchett had died. A policeman had noticed the front door banging unlocked. Investigation had followed.

The two in the living room were Mr. Wilson and his wife. They had died apparently of natural causes, but the young doctor was moved to recall the death he'd seen earlier. For these two had not died easily. Anguished, twisted terror was written on both faces.

Upstairs in the small bedroom was the strangest, though. A boy—yes, it was the little Wilson boy beyond a doubt, killed in an accident and buried a year ago, records said. But this night disproving the cold ledger, lying in his bed. Dead to be sure, but the same peace on his face, the same sweet smile . . . though his body was badly broken even as the records claimed. . . . And he had been dead not hours—but months. No one knew, no one could figure out beyond the shrug of shoulders, just what had happened . . .

And across town, one who did know and would be eternally, damnably worse for it, was trying to forget what he knew and had seen with drink after drink . . . to still the terrored heart, the shaking fingers . . .

To forget the memory of the live boy Dr. Finn had seen and heard again this night . . . the boy he himself had declared dead just a year ago . . . Harold.

But most of all, to forget Harold's *friend* . . . the tall stranger, standing there waiting, waiting for them, all of them.

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The Barren Field

BY YVES THERIAULT

"Cette année-ci, le blé sera beau car la terre a bu le sang de l'homme."
(This year, the wheat will be beautiful because the earth has drunk the blood of man.)

(Calloc'h)

FOR thirty days, Christina Sorenson spread her arms out and stood above the barren field that was all the land she owned, and she let the setting sun throw her shadow on the parched yellow soil. She was a tall bony woman, built like a man. Her shadow was enormous on the field, and because of the outstretched arms it was in the shape of a cross.

She moved this way and that, throwing the shadow over the whole field, the bare half-acre she had fenced with iron posts and good strong wire. And as she moved she muttered the only prayer of faith she knew.

"God will make the wheat grow," she repeated endlessly, "since the soil will not." After two weeks she knew the work had been useless and the nightly prayer became a gesture. A concession to the people in the valley, watching her toiling up here; watching her because they feared the enormous woman who threw rocks at them if they came up the path to her cabin.

There remained no alternative for Christina. The words of the old songs and the sayings of the storytellers, that she had learned as a child in the land across the sea were now all that was left to her. Did they not tell the secret of the growing wheat? But no one could say Christina had not tried the way of God first.

It had taken a year after Big Bill Sorensen's death to make up her mind about the barren field and the wheat she wanted to grow in it.

She had walked into Mort's store one day, her face grimy with the labor of fence-

building, and she had said: "I want seed wheat, Mort."

The storekeeper looked at her strangely, but he went to get the wheat.

He set the bag against the wall next to the front door and walked slowly back to his stool behind the counter. Outside was the maddening glare and the visible heat-waves, but the long, low store was cool and restful. It was littered with the goods of desert living, the barrels of lard, the sacks of feed, the bunches of spurs-straps or rein leather hanging from the rafters. Galvanized pails and cheap stetsons piled on the counter, and a row of high boots standing on a shelf near the ceiling. Mort pushed the stool aside and leaned against the shelving. He slowly rolled himself a cigarette, not touching the money Christina Sorensen had laid on the counter.

"Did you buy land, Christina?" he asked. "Did you buy land in the valley?"

She shook her head. "No . . . I'm sowing wheat in my field up there."

Mort Stevenson shrugged his shoulders and looked at Christina a long time. But the big, brawny woman with the wide hands met Mort's eyes steadily, as he searched for a meaning to the seed wheat.

"It's your land, Christina."

"Yes," she said, and she walked to the bag of wheat, lightly picked up the hundred pounds in one flip of the wrist, and went out the door.

Mort stood by the window watching her ride away on the big gelding, her long powerful legs dangling grotesquely on each side of the horse.

Through the dusty panes, he stared at her thoughtfully as she nudged the horse up the winding path full in the blaze of the afternoon sun. She was climbing steadily toward the cabin perched precariously on the ledge, a thousand feet up. The cabin, and the half-acre field below it were all Big Bill had left her when he died.

FROM the ledge, the small field came down abruptly, yielding to the slope, a neatly defined square in the jagged face of the mountain. The valley was a long narrow crevice between the high peaks. When the first gold-hungry men came to the valley, they built the town at the dry end, where the gold was. They dug deep-reaching wells for the elusive water, and named the town after Baldy Connor, who struck water on the twentieth day, and after the wells, because they saved them from death, since they did not know of the river that flowed thirty miles away. Farmers eventually found the river, and grew seeds and raised cattle, but that was later, and the men of Connor's Wells did not know about them either for quite a while. Here, around the town and under it, the soil was yellow, implacable, refusing to feed anything but sparse mesquite. As the flat valley bottom surged suddenly into a stiff slope, a hundred feet from the town's last house, reaching for the high peaks of the Mother Mountains, the dry yellow earth became granite, still more implacable, and the paths were hewn by wind and rain or the hoofs of weary horses across the face of the gigantic range.

The only soil there was on the mountain was the plot of land staked by Big Bill Sorensen as a living place, when he came from the east with the early settlers. A pocket of the useless earth hanging on the hill, clearly seen from the town below. Near in measured distance, but very far because of the tortuous path that climbed to it, retraced its steps to find better footing, then circled around boulders, to climb some more before retracing again. A slippery, treacherous road, nearly impassable to any but Christina Sorensen and the mule-footed gelding.

Often, Big Bill had spoken of the day when he would hoe the ground, and fertilize it, and bring water from some mountain spring he was going to find, so the seeds would grow. And as he talked of that, Christina would smile, and nestle closer to the lumbering giant, because she loved the seeds and the plowed fields, and the wheat that reminded her of the land where she was born. But Big Bill never got around to plowing the earth, or fertilizing it. He was looking for the gold he never found.

And often, as often as Big Bill had spoken of the wheat he was to grow, Christina had thought of the secret she knew that would bring up the seeds in the barren earth, that would save looking for improbable water, but had never told Bill what the secret was, because Bill was dreaming,

and he would not listen to her, only to his dream. So she would become silent after a while, and dream with him.

For days after she had come to buy the seed wheat, Mort watched her toiling up there in the field, carrying stones by hand, stacking them in a neat pile in the middle of the enclosure. She pulled out the mesquite and hoed the ground. Foot by sweating foot, using a hand hoe, she broke up the hard-packed earth that had been baked by the relentless sun for centuries.

As she bent and pushed the hoe into the ground; as she straightened to survey the work done and that which was left to do, Mort knew her great body was covered with sweat under the long skirt and the rough cloth bodice.

She turned the ground, shook out every stone that was in it; when the earth was ready, she sowed the wheat.

THAT first night, she stood over the field as the moon came up, and in a great raucous voice that tumbled down into the valley, and that was heard inside the houses where the frightened people listened, she sang a strange chant of her youth, of the far-away country, whence she had come, only a girl, to marry Big Bill Sorensen who searched for gold in the Barren Hills of the great Southwest.

The sound reaching Connor's Wells in the quiet night was like the howl of a wounded animal. Only the wheat seed and the God of the Mountains knew that the strange music and the foreign words asked for the kindness of the long-abandoned soil to the seed it now held.

But the second night, and every night for thirty days after that, Christina did not chant her pagan song. Instead, she stood on the jutting rock, and threw the shadow of the cross upon the sown wheat.

When the seed did not germinate after the month was over, when she saw it was hopeless to wait for a miracle, Christina came down to the valley, and went to see Mort at the store.

She stayed a long time near the counter, not speaking. Once she started to say something, but someone came in, and she was silent again, long after the customer had gone.

It was Mort who broke the silence finally. He had gone to the rear of the store, in the deep shadows where stood the crates and the cartons of goods, and as he came back to the counter in front, he said:

"Christina, did the wheat come up?"

There was no irony in his voice. Only a pity that the big woman did not understand. Her face and hands were dirty, and her long yellow hair was matted by sweat. It fell stiffly against her shoulder, framing the square, ugly face. Her lips were pale. She shook her head. "No," she said, "it didn't come up."

"This is not wheat country," the storekeeper said gently, "you can grow some at the other end of the valley, where the river is. But not here, and much less up into the hills. I keep seed for people that grow wheat at the other end, but I never sold a bag to anyone around here.

She stood looking at him, her face stupid and tired. There were lines around her eyes. Her breathing had become audible in the silent store. She was like a great spent ox after the long pull home.

"That's the way it is, Christina," said Mort. "Me, I figure never to mind other people's business. But there you are. The wheat didn't come up. You couldn't ever grow wheat up there, Christina. You know that."

"Bill said . . ."

But Mort stopped her with his raised hand.

"Sure! Bill dreamed. He dreamed often. I've listened to every one of his dreams . . ."

"He was going to find some water, a spring in the mountains, channel it down to our place . . ."

Mort shook his head and repeated: "He knew how to dream, Bill did. Why, he couldn't find water in the Barren Hills if he dug a thousand feet down. We hardly found any here, in the valley, thirty years ago."

He slowly rubbed the bald spot on his head and looked sadly at Christina.

"That's the way it is, Christina. No use trying. You're liable to kill yourself tilling that field up there, and nothing will ever come out of it . . ."

She stood up again, facing him, a foot taller than he was

The storekeeper blinked, pulled his glasses down on his nose and looked at her over them.

"I been a friend of Big Bill a long time, Christina, you know that. Helped him all I could. What's your idea, why do you want to grow wheat? Place hardly big enough to grow a cash crop, and you can't feed your horse wheat in this country . . ."

She leaned over the counter, her face close to Mort's.

"Don't you know why?" she asked, "can't you see it? It's on account of how Bill dreamed. All about the wheat he'd grow, and then we'd get a place in the valley. I grew near the green fields, and the golden fields of the ripe crops. I needed them. Bill knew that. He kept talking about the wheat we'd grow in our field. But he never got around to doing anything about it. He died, and now I've got to grow the wheat. . . ."

Mort nodded.

"You see," said Christina in her tense, hoarse voice, "you understand, don't you? Now I'll grow the wheat."

"You tried," said Mort, "and the wheat didn't come up. How you figure to do it now?"

HE HAD no sarcasm in his voice, but again the deep pity for the woman who had to grow the wheat her husband had not known how to grow.

She had never spoken so much to anyone, and Mort felt a strange feeling of fear creep up his spine as he looked at her eyes, the grim face, the hard jaw.

"Can you understand hunger, Mort?" she asked. "This is a kind of it. Or wanting to win in a fight. No matter what the fight is about. Bill didn't grow the wheat, but I will. I tried your way, and the way of the people at the river end of the valley. I tried it. No one can say I didn't try hard. There'll be wheat on my field."

She was smiling now, but Mort did not like to look at the smile. Her eyes were not smiling.

Her hand fumbled in the bodice, and she took out a soiled paper, damp with the sweat of her breasts, and she smoothed it out on the counter, so Mort could read it.

He bent and studied the writing, but it was in a language he did not understand.

"What is it, Christina?" he asked.

She snatched the paper from the counter and put it back where she had taken it against her skin. She kept her hand there against the warm breast, as if seeking reassurance.

"Bill is dead," she said flatly, "he kicked me in the face, and he beat me when he was drunk, but I never lifted a finger to fight back. That was because I loved him. Now he's dead, and I'll grow the wheat he didn't get around to growing."

She bent down over the counter and her voice whispered to Mort: "This is the secret. The paper is the secret. It tells how to grow the wheat. You wouldn't know how, but now I do. It's a terrible secret . . ."

Mort shrugged his shoulders.

"As you wish, Christina. I told you what I thought about growing anything up the mountain, or even down the valley. Maybe the secret doesn't work either. I figure that also is your business . . ."

"But I had to tell you, Mort," she said. "I had to tell you about the secret. Now you know I tried the right way. No one can blame me for trying the other way . . . Don't you see?"

She smiled again, the way Mort didn't like.

"Give me some seed wheat, Mort. I'll pay you later."

He stood undecided for a few seconds, then he shrugged his shoulders in the familiar gesture he had, and went to get the wheat.

When he came back from the hangar, dragging the bag along the floor, she lifted the heavy sack under her arm and silently walked out. He heard the horse riding away outside.

That night, Mort slept fitfully on the cot stretched behind the hardware counter. He kept thinking of the woman's smile, the paper in her bodice.

IN THE morning he saw that she was again at work in the small field, hoeing and sowing the new seed.

When darkness fell, the people of the town who had seen her come into Mort's store the day before, and ride away again listened for her chanting to come down from the hills. But they did not hear it. All they

heard was the gallop of the gelding—or was it some other horse?—through the village, long after they were in bed.

For Christina had sown the seed, and after she sat in the cabin waiting for the hour. When the hour came, she saddled the horse and rode it into town, along main street, as far as Luke's Barber shop, in front of Mort's store. She rode to the back of the building and crept inside through the unlocked back door.

She grabbed Luke before he could scream. The small, puny Irishman who had come from the East to open the barber shop years ago could not fight the big woman's tremendous strength, and she gagged him securely before she trussed his hands and feet.

The she carried him outside to the gelding.

Only one person saw her. Mort had heard the gelding ride into the village, and he had seen Christina leading the horse behind the barbershop for he had stayed at his window, watching the mountain uneasily, and the strange woman who tilled its soil. Later he saw her emerge from the back with her burden, and ride away into the night. And Mort, after that, could not sleep at all.

Christina frenzied the gelding with her stirrups, and the horse almost flew up the path to the lone cabin.

When she got there, she threw Luke on the ground, took a length of rope from her waist and passed it under the shoulders of the man. He moaned under the gag, and writhed, but she paid no attention to him.

Then she tied the rope to the saddle of the gelding, and led the horse, dragging the man on the ground, to the field of new-sown wheat.

There she knelt beside Luke and ungagged him.

"You want to know why you're here?" she said. "It's you or someone else. You're here because of the wheat. There's got to be wheat. I spent twenty years with Bill, waiting for him to grow wheat, but he didn't. Now he's dead. I can't go. I must stay with him here. So I'll grow the wheat. I may not grow a lot of wheat. Maybe only this crop. But it doesn't matter. It's a fight I got to win. A fight with the soil, and maybe with God. I have a paper here . . ."

Luke saw the contorted face of the woman as she bent over him, and her eyes. He was shaking violently. When he tried to speak, it was only a ghoulish croak that came from his throat.

She didn't hear him. She was unfolding the paper she had taken from her bosom.

The moon pushed some clouds aside and came back to light the scene. The jagged rocks of the mountains stood out in the eerie light, and long shadows striped the flat valley.

"I don't need a light to read that paper," said Christina. "I know every word by heart. Long ago, in my country, I learned the secret that makes wheat grow. I listened to the songs of harvest time, and in winter I listened to the storytellers night after night, sitting near the fireplace. And they all said the same thing, they told the tale of the Wheat God who knew how to make the grain grow anywhere, even on the rocky slopes, even where seed could never live. It's written on this paper, Luke. Listen, then you'll know why you're here."

She bent close to the small man on the ground.

"This year," she read, *"this year the wheat will grow and be beautiful because the earth has drunk the blood of man."*

And then she threw back her head and laughed a horrible laugh that hit the high rocks and echoed and moaned against the hills. Luke started screaming, a thin sound that rose in the night air when Christina's laugh had stopped traveling along the face of the mountain and into the valley below.

"My wheat will grow, Luke!" cried Christina.

She took a knife hanging from the horse's saddle, and bending down she cut the ropes binding the feet of the doomed man, carefully slitting the trouser leg. He tried to wriggle out of the shoulder ropes, every motion desperate, but the gelding moved, the rope went taut again, and he was powerless with his hands still bound.

Then Christina searched with her finger for the arteries on the legs, and in a sure stroke slashed them open.

Blood gushed out into the hoed earth. She ran to the horse, swung on it, and led the animal around the field, yelling her chant of triumph, reining the horse that the

smell of blood made nervous. Dragged behind, Luke yelled with her, but it was in pure terror while his blood drained out, drenched the earth and the sown seed. Soon, his screams were fainter, and then they became a moan. Finally they stopped completely, as Christina turned the horse for the last time over the field.

Luke was quite still, horribly pale under the cold moonlight.

MORT heard the chant and the screams as he stood with the others in front of his store. They could not see the cabin in the darkness. They could only see the new fence reflecting the moonlight, up near the sky. But they couldn't see the cabin nor the field, only blurred shadows.

All evening Mort had watched. He was reluctant to clash with Christina, so when he saw her riding away with Luke, from his window, he didn't go out, didn't try to stop her. Instead he waited until she had gone up the path, then he went out to round up a few neighbors.

They were organizing the posse, debating on why Christina should kidnap Luke when they heard the hoarse singing and the screams they recognized as those of the barber. They went up to the cabin, pushing the horses as fast as they could go on the dark, dangerous path. As they rode, Mort kept thinking of the paper with the strange markings Christina had shown him. He had not thought of Death, not in the plain unescapable words before, but now he did. He did as he recalled her words and her smile.

Halfway up, the screams became gradually fainter until they stopped.

They found Christina Sorensen sitting inside her cabin, near the stove. She had lighted a small fire against the chill of the night, and she was rocking there, a wild look in her eyes, her mouth set in the grim smile.

"Where is he?" asked Mort as he walked into the cabin. "Where is Luke?"

Christina rocked contentedly and smiled at Mort.

"That was the way," she said. "The paper said how to do it. And I had been told of the strange way when I was a child. Now I'll get the wheat. That's all that matters."

The cabin was small, but of hewn logs. It was furnished with a table and two chairs, a dresser near a window, a wide cot in the corner.

There was a shelf next to the stove; the water pail stood there. The walls were bare. There was only a small picture of Bill tacked above the water shelf.

The men drew into a circle around the widow Sorensen. They had known what was in her eyes and now they were frightened.

She rocked in a steady rhythm, smiling at Mort.

He slapped her across the face, but she didn't move. She just wiped the blood that appeared on her lower lip.

One of the men walked out, and they could hear him going into the shed.

"He'll find him," said Christina suddenly. "You don't have to slap me anymore, Mort."

They heard the yell, and when the man came in, he was dragging Luke's body. He let it drop at Christina's feet, the small, slight body of the bled man.

"He's dead?" asked Mort.

"Yeah," said the man flatly.

"Quite dead," said Christina.

She had not stopped rocking. Now she was smiling again.

"He bled to death!' said Mort.

They looked at each other, then at Christina.

"Blood," said the woman, stopping her rocking suddenly. "Blood. It was said on my paper that the wheat will be nice if the earth has drunk the blood of man. Look for nothing else . . ."

THE man who had found Luke ran out of the cabin, into the night, and he ran to the field below the cabin, and they heard his cries of disgust, and he ran back shouting curses, screaming at the mad woman.

"Goddam it, she bled him to death, all over the field! It's all wet with blood. It's Luke's blood!"

Christina spread her hands on her wide lap. Now she was rocking again.

"I told you to look for nothing else," she said.

They brought her down to Conner's Wells, and she didn't resist. She came si-

lently, her head high, that strange smile still playing on her lips.

By morning, every one knew of the horrible death at the widow's cabin, but the sheriff had posted guards at the jail door, and no one tried to take Christina away, although the feelings ran high in Conner's Wells.

For a week, the trial of the woman dragged. For a week, the widow sat in the box every time they called her in. She sat there and repeated the story of the earth that must drink the blood of man to feed the golden wheat.

She offered no defense and did not accept the lawyer the court offered her. Not once did she flare up in the terrible bursts of violence they expected of her.

Once she bowed her head and they could see tears running down her cheeks. It was when they mentioned Big Bill Sorensen, whom she had loved enough to stay here and *make* the wheat grow where it would not, instead of going to the places where wheat grew year after year and where she would have been happy.

The judge called a recess when he saw her cry, but when they reconvened, she was as calm as she had been before breaking down.

At the end of the week, the jury called her guilty of murder, and she was sentenced to hang in the courtyard, two months later.

For two months, the people of Connor's Wells slept very badly. Every night, as dusk fell, they could see Christina, in her cell window, her arms stretched out in the form of a cross, looking at the field of sown wheat up against the mountain. And there she would chant her savage incantation, the words foreign to their ears. But they recognized the sounds that had kept them awake before, the sounds she had made high on the hill when Luke was bleeding to death.

ONE dawn of a clear morning, she was led to the scaffold they had erected during the night. All the people of Connor's Wells were there, lining the prison yard, standing on the wall, and those that couldn't come in were on the roofs of nearby houses. And the woman walked firmly up the thirteeen steps, and she stood on the platform, facing the mountain beyond, the cabin that the rising sun showed clear and brown against the granite slopes, the small field. . . .

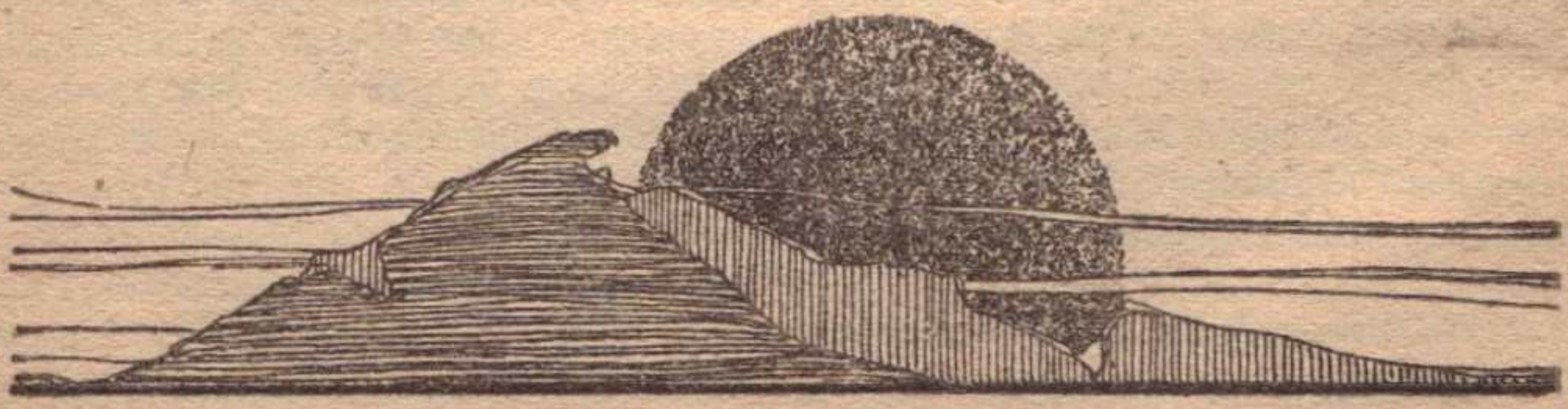
When the hangman held the hood over her head, and the sheriff asked her if she had anything to say before she paid for her crime, she pointed to the field and her great animal laughter shook the courtyard.

"Look!" she yelled, "Look up there, in my field! The wheat is growing!"

The hangman let the hood fall, and quickly secured the knot.

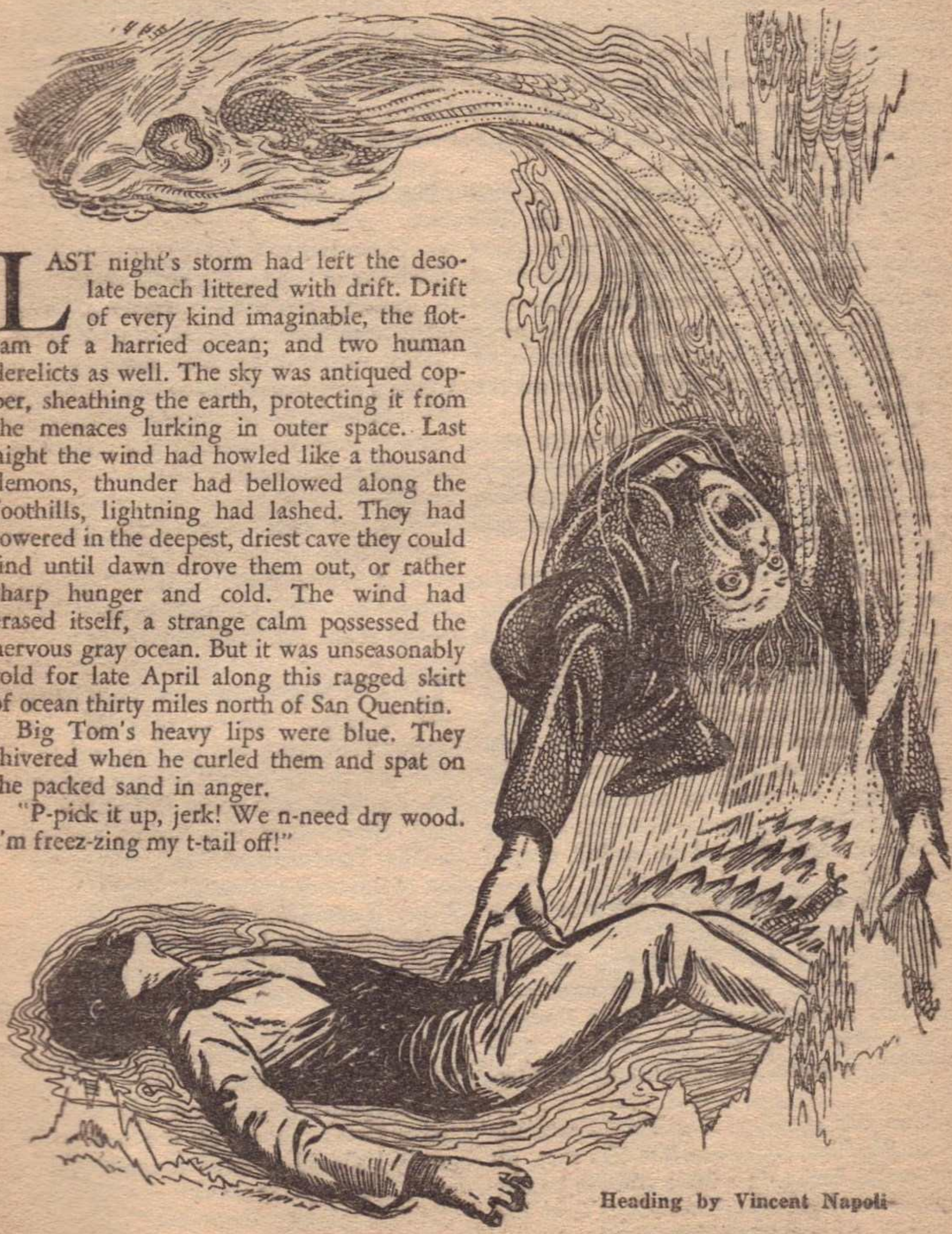
Then he kicked the trap open and the huge body fell, but they could hear the horrible laugh until the rope snapped her neck seven feet later.

And while she swung between the scaffold posts, the people turned and looked at the field up there above them, and they could see the wheat, the green stalks already strong in the morning breeze, a bright patch in the dreary yellow mountain as the sun played upon it, making it clearer than it had ever been, nearer. . . .



Skydrift

BY EMIL PETAJA



LAST night's storm had left the desolate beach littered with drift. Drift of every kind imaginable, the flotsam of a harried ocean; and two human derelicts as well. The sky was antiqued copper, sheathing the earth, protecting it from the menaces lurking in outer space. Last night the wind had howled like a thousand demons, thunder had bellowed along the foothills, lightning had lashed. They had cowered in the deepest, driest cave they could find until dawn drove them out, or rather sharp hunger and cold. The wind had erased itself, a strange calm possessed the nervous gray ocean. But it was unseasonably cold for late April along this ragged skirt of ocean thirty miles north of San Quentin.

Big Tom's heavy lips were blue. They shivered when he curled them and spat on the packed sand in anger.

"P-pick it up, jerk! We n-need dry wood. I'm freez-zing my t-tail off!"

Heading by Vincent Napoli

Spawned from the sky bearing improbable properties to change the lives of men....

Bony little Aino shivered, too. But he said nothing, he only hunched closer against the wet, smelling sand, staring at a chunk of drift in front of him, clutching some others to his scrawny chest.

The piece of drift was half-poked into the sand, as if it had been flung there like that. It was about ten inches long, flat, bleached and smooth. It was like all the other chunks of drift along the beach, half-rounded by gnawing waves, serrulated in curious rows so that you might almost imagine it had writing on it.

Big Tom Clegg scratched his paunch where his cowhide belt divided him. His wide stubbled face darkened when Aino didn't answer him right away or do what he said. Then his foot went out. Aino toppled. He almost touched the curious piece of drift. He would have had he not dropped his load and plunged his hands against the wet sand.

"I said pick it up!" There was that ominous quantity to Big Tom's command which had heretofore caused Aino to respond like a well-trained hound, back in the iron cell they'd shared for three years.

Aino Halvor was weak physically. Perhaps he was born to obey somebody stronger than he. Perhaps something in him demanded that he take orders from someone more able to bargain with life than he was. Tom Clegg had appointed himself that somebody back in San Quentin, and since their release eight days ago had continued to demand servility as his right by reason of superior physical strength. But now, for the first time in three years and eight days, Aino hadn't obeyed his order.

"Pick it up!" Big Tom's voice rose warningly. He set down his load.

Aino turned and looked up. His thin pocked face turned white. His mouth—it was like a careless gouge out of slovenly turned clay — gaped and showed little overlapping teeth. His eyes leaped with terror.

Aino was afraid of Big Tom. Especially when Big Tom looked at him like that, his left eyelid drooping a little and his pendulous lower lip pushed out. Big Tom had carefully nurtured this fear, punctuating it with generous samples of what would happen to Aino if he didn't do what Big Tom told him to.

Aino's fearful eyes whipped back to the piece of drift in question. He whimpered like a puppy, but he didn't touch it.

Big Tom's hand lashed out.

Aino rolled across the sand almost to the ragged line of wetness which the surf claimed. His eyes were fearfully open. There was blood on his face. He made no move to wipe it off. He didn't move at all, only waited, until Big Tom crabbed across the sand to him and yanked him up on his feet. Big Tom shook him as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Why the hell didn't you pick it up like I told you? Why the hell didn't you, eh?"

He kept repeating this over and over, as if it were something past all understanding. After awhile he let Aino loose so he could catch a breath and answer him. Aino gulped air and swabbed a furtive hand over his cut mouth, as if his bleeding was something he should be ashamed of.

"I—"

"Spit it out!" Big Tom's left eyelid drooped.

"It's not a chunk of drift," Aino muttered. "It— It's got writing on it. It came —out of the sky, in the lightning."

BIG TOM stared at him. Then he started to laugh. This was rich! Here he had been scared Aino was getting next to himself, was going to stop being a sucker, that he, Big Tom, was going to lose his slavish tool. Aino might be a shrimp and a jerk, as Big Tom continued to remind him, but he could read and write. When they panhandled on Third Street in Frisco it was Aino who copped the handouts. He looked sick, hungry. Big Tom got only cold stony looks as they hurried past. Those looks said, *why don't you get a job, you big ox.*

"I suppose you got that out of those damn books in the stir library," Big Tom jeered, in sadistically good humor again. "I knew I shouldn't ought to left you read so damn much. I should of knew it would drive you nuts. That's what books does to people, don't you know that, jerk?" He walked back to the white piece of drift. "Want to see me pick it up, shrimp? What am I

supposed to do? Drop dead if I pick it up?" He grinned.

"Don't—" Aino's narrow teeth nipped his lipless mouth.

But there was no use telling Big Tom. *Big Tom had never heard* of Charles Fort or thunderstones. He'd never heard about the terrors that lurk in the wind and the storm, about *Them* outside. . . .

Big Tom chuckled as he reached down and pulled up the flat piece of drift. "See?" he jeered. "You thought it was going to kill me. You think it's some kind of a—a magic thing, a god even. Is that what you think, jerk?"

He walked over and pushed it in Aino's face. Aino jumped back, whimpering. Big Tom roared.

"Still think so, eh? *Why?* Answer me that! What makes you think it ain't just another chunk of drift out of the sea, eh?"

Aino's eyes approached the thing in Big Tom's hand timidly, but once there, they clung, pupils dilating. His mouth curved and then he spoke, with a new dignity.

"It isn't drift, Tom. It came out of the sky, not out of the sea. It came down in the storm. Somtimes *they* send something down, or come down themselves in different shapes. Charles Fort calls the things from outside thunderstones. He knew about them, but he didn't know that—"

Big Tom interrupted with a snort. "So now you're smarter'n them guys who wrote them books, eh? Think you're pretty cute, don't you, jerk? Pretty smart, eh?"

"No, Tom. I just know—"

"Look at it! It's only a hunk of seadrift!"

"It has writing on it."

Big Tim squinted. "Call that writing? Hell, I can't read but I know writing when I see it. Where's your letters?"

AINO didn't try to explain. He didn't bother to tell Big Tom that there were books in many languages and that some languages used different phonetic symbols, and that if something came out of the sky and had writing on it. . . .

"That's from being in the sea so long," Big Tom snorted. "It's the wood grain. Anybody with brains can see that. Make good firewood."

Fear and worry crossed blades in Aino's mind as he gathered up his load of driftwood. On their way back to the cave his fears spilled out in words.

"Tom, you aren't going to try to burn It!"

"Ain't I?" Big Tom grinned. "Just stick around!" His heavy shoe squashed a rubbery rope of kelp.

"You can't, Tom!" Aino cried. "It's not—what it looks like. It's *alive*—like a god."

THEY walked on along the black curve of beach.

"You're wacky, Aino," Big Tom said. "I knew it would happen, reading all them books. What makes you say a dumb thing like that, anyway?"

Aino hesitated. "It—it talked to me."

"Oh, it just opened its mouth and talked to you!"

"It talked to my mind."

Big Tom whirled impatiently. He had had enough. His lips curved in a sadistic grin as he shifted his load of drift and tossed the thing Aino was so worried about down at Aino's feet.

"Kick it!" he commanded Aino. "Kick it to pieces! See if there's a god hid inside of it. Go on! Kick it to pieces before I kick you to pieces!"

Aino shivered, but there were beads of sweat on his face. "Don't, Tom! Don't make me touch it!"

Big Tom crowded in. "If you don't you know what'll happen to you." Over the droning of the sea his voice cracked like a whip.

Aino fell whimpering to his knees. He stared at the object they had found. He stared. Wordless syllables rattled in his throat. He looked up at Big Tom. Big Tom's face was merciless. He was annoyed, impatient, and plain sore. His was the anger of a common animal man who has had his limited intelligence outraged, who must have a retraction or he will smash something.

Aino's eyes rolled. Behind them the ocean sighed wetly. Overhead in the coppery sky a gull dipped, bleated, and went on. Around them was nothing but desolation. Aino looked down at the thing in front of him. Then, reverently, he bowed his head and touched it with his mouth.

AFTER he had beaten and kicked Aino until his limbs were worn out, Big Tom jerked him back on his feet and pushed him ahead toward the cave. He made Aino carry the thing. Aino stumbled ahead, his legs like rubber. The sky and the sea and the desolate beach were nothing but a crazy blur to his swollen eyes. But he strained and kept going until they reached the rocky entrance to the cave. Then he flopped. Driftwood scattered, but he held It fiercely against his skinny chest.

"Get up!"

Big Tom kicked until he clawed at boulders and managed to gain his feet.

"Go on back to Bolinas. Get something to eat while I build a fire. Get going!"

"I have no money, Tom."

"Gee, do I have to tell you everything? Panhandle it, or swipe it. Only make damn sure you bring me back something to eat." When Aino weaved away, he grabbed his wrist. "And make damn sure you come back, too, because if I have to come after you, so help me, I'll kill you. Think I'm fooling, eh?"

"I'll come back, Tom," Aino gulped.

It was near eleven by the time the wide curve of familiar beach met his sight again. He limped across it toward the sea-lashed rocks and the cave. His back and his legs ached where Big Tom had punched and kicked him. His sallow face was bruised and purple with clotted blood. But the sun was warm on his back. He kicked little spurts of half-dried sand ahead of him with each step he took. Aino felt good.

Funny how some days you struck things just right, he mused. Like this morning in Bolinas. Everybody was nice to him. They smiled at him and were friendly. He had already had coffee, two cups, and a bear claw with frosting on it. He wouldn't tell Big Tom about the coffee and the bear claw. Make him sore. The big sack he carried had plenty of food for them both, enough to last two days. And he hadn't had to swipe it, either. Big Tom wouldn't be sore when he saw all the food Aino had brought back with him.

He looked up at the coppery sun and hurried. Big Tom's reactions were sure to be tempered by the lateness of the hour and the emptiness of his stomach.

"Beans!" Big Tom snorted, peering critically down into Aino's store sack. "I'm sick of damn stinking beans!"

Aino hastily dug deeper and produced two cans of Spam, and one of pressed chicken.

"Where'd you swipe these?" Big Tom asked, more mildly.

"Grocer gave them to me." Aino displayed his narrow teeth in a self-conscious grin. "He said I reminded him of somebody."

"Bugs Bunny?" Big Tom grinned and spat as he flicked open his pocket knife. "Never mind. I know you swiped 'em. Heave some wood on the fire. Let's get at it. My belly thinks my throat's cut."

THEY wolfed down their meat and beans in silence. Aino wanted to say what was bursting inside him. But he thought better of it. He wanted to say, *I didn't steal anything. I didn't have to. Everybody was swell to me. Not like a vag who just got out of San Quentin. Not like I was a vag, but real folks. . . .*

He ate with relish. This seemed to be the most satisfying meal he had ever eaten.

Belly filled, Big Tom yawned and slid his rump down and slept. But Aino just sat by the fire and thought. His mind was filled with all kinds of thoughts, new ones, thoughts he had never had or dared to have before. His mind stretched out into the future with a calm sense of well-being. Things were going to be different from now on. He didn't know how or why, but they were. He continued to feed the fire and think until Big Tom hawked and coughed himself awake.

"I just remembered something," Aino remarked cheerfully.

"Did, eh?" For Aino to make a statement like that on his own was unusual. Big Tom wasn't sure he liked it. What was coming over the jerk?

"That box we found yesterday down near Stinson."

"What about it? It's only a kid's tool box washed ashore."

"We should open it," Aino said.

Big Tom frowned. "It's probably got some kid's stuff in it."

"Mind if I open it?"

"Help yourself." Big Tom cleared his throat and spat. "I tried for an hour yesterday to open it. It's only nailed shut and the nails are rusted solid, that's all. We got no hammer, nothing to pry it open. But you can do it, sure."

Aino bent down, stepping to the low cave corner where Big Tom had heaved the flat oblong box yesterday, when they took shelter from the gathering storm. Big Tom watched him with derisive eyes. The box was sodden, heavy. When Aino started to lift it Big Tom grinned. Aino's arms were like spindles. But to Big Tom's astonishment Aino lifted the box easily, carried it over by the fire and set it down. As if it were full of feathers. Then, to his further amazement, Aino proceeded to open it without difficulty. He seemed to know just how to do it, to sense where the weakest part of the nailed-down lid was. He pried a sharp stick under it and lifted the lid off with scarcely any effort.

Big Tom watched, and his left eyelid drooped. He identified this with the books Aino read. Big Tom hated books. They represented a threat. Aino was showing him up, doing something he couldn't do. Big Tom didn't like it.

"Well?" he growled. "What's in it? A toy gun or something?"

"No," Aino said. "It's full of money. Full of old coins and jewels."

FIRST Big Tom couldn't grasp it. He couldn't assimilate this fact, that this box that looked like a child's tool box nailed shut and heaved into the sea, contained a fortune in gold coins and jewels that gleamed with colored fire when you rubbed the sea-scum off. His mind could not easily manage such heights. He tested the coins and the pieces of fire with his teeth and his mind was squeezed into a corner. It had to accept the fact that Aino and he—two vagrants with shady pasts—between them possessed a great fortune.

"Where'd it come from?" he demanded, shoving Aino aside and hovering over the open box.

"Who knows? It could have come from China, or from Persia, or Mu." Aino's slate eyes wandered beyond the mouth of the cave, to the far horizon. "Maybe even further."

"We got to get busy and hide it, bury it, or they'll come and take it away from us."

"They can't," Aino told him. "Nobody can touch this treasure. It's ours. We found the box floating in the surf. That means no one can claim it. It's treasure trove, by law it belongs to us."

Big Tom started to refute him, but something in the little man's voice halted his blusterings. It was as if Aino, standing there looking at the horizon, were looking into the future, seeing what must be. Aino's words held conviction. This thing was true. They had found this treasure in the surf and nobody could take it away from them.

Then, after this solidified in his mind, Big Tom Clegg became what Big Tom Clegg was. Big Tom was by nature a scoundrel and a thief. Aino was a thief, too, but through necessity, because he had been told to be one. You could blame it on environment, or on the system, or on hunger. Actually, it was because someone way back had told Aino to be a thief. It was in Aino's make-up to serve somebody. Now Big Tom's cupidity and lust went to work.

This treasure, it was theirs. But Aino didn't matter. Aino was a jerk. So the treasure was *his*. Aino was handy, sure. He'd served Big Tom well in the past three years. Come to think of it, Aino first saw the box, bobbing up and down in a foaming eddy between two jutting rocks near Stinson Beach. It was Aino who found a stick and poled it in, Aino who suggested they take it along with them, in spite of the rumbling skies and windy guests of rain. But Big Tom didn't need Aino now. This fortune would buy him other servants, better ones.

Big Tom ruminated and gloated over the box. He ended up deciding that Aino must never leave this cave. This desolate outscoop in the rock would be Aino's last resting place. There was nobody to worry about what happened to Aino. . . .

It was night. Outside the sea drummed. Framed by the jagged rock, the sky had faded to brushed charcoal gray, with only the faintest thread of luminescence to distinguish it from the far-away ocean. That

far-away ocean seemed to have no connection at all with the savage breakers that pounded closer and closer with the incoming tide.

Aino slept like a child.

THE fire was nearly gone. Only a few darting tongues of flame were left to etch the craggy cave roof over Aino's head, to shimmer on the flat closed box between them; then, as Big Tom held vigil, wiping a covetous hand over his wide lips, these needle-flames died and only the glowing memory of fire remained.

He couldn't see Aino. That was bad. Big Tom frowned into the darkness. He must have light to do what he meant to do, just a little light. But there was no more wood left. He didn't want to leave the cave to find any. Aino might wake up. Besides, he wanted to do it *now*. He wanted to go to sleep tonight knowing that the treasure was all his.

He squinted, trying to see Aino lying there in the deep shadows. He couldn't see him, but he saw something. What he saw glowed with a faint luminescent whiteness. It stuck partway out of Aino's shirt.

Big Tom grinned.

It was the piece of drift they had found this morning, the one that had got Aino all worked up, the chunk of wood that brought Aino his beating. Big Tom grinned wider, remembering how Aino had humbled himself before it. What a jerk he was!

Big Tom had forgotten all about it until he saw it there, sticking out of Aino's shirt. The jerk must have carried it around with him all day, hidden under his shirt so he wouldn't see it. Now, while Aino slept, it had fallen partway out invitingly.

This was rich! Aino thought it had magic in it, that it was a god. Now this god of Aino's was going to light his way to heaven.

Big Tom moved like a cat. His hand scuttled over the closed box, then snaked across Aino's pigeon chest and grabbed back the piece of drift. Big Tom grinned as he tossed it on the glowing embers. For a minute he crouched by the fire, clenching and unclenching his cold-stiffened fingers for practice. He watched the white piece of drift smoulder and smoke. Then a tiny flame sprouted, mirroring twin flames of red murder in his eyes.

Outside the incoming tide drummed louder.

Big Tom heard Aino stir and whimper. He turned and made ready. Aino's hands were fumbling over his shirt. He was hunting for the piece of drift. When he opened his eyes Big Tom gave a low growl and plunged forward.

His blunt fingers closed down on Aino's throat before he could move or scream. His thumbs pressed. It was so easy it wasn't much fun. If only Aino would fight back a little, but he didn't even squirm. He just lay there, his eyes bulging. The pressure on his windpipe made it look as if he was staring behind Big Tom, staring at something that terrified him.

Big Tom was almost tempted to turn and see for himself, but he had a job to finish. He pressed harder. Then his fingers loosened and he let out a scream that echoed from the cave walls and funneled out hideously across the sea. Smoke was pouring from the fire behind him. He couldn't see, but the smoke had arms, tentacles, and the tentacles were around his throat, choking him. He couldn't see. He couldn't even see any longer if Aino's eyes were bulging. The smoke was a black pillar, a pillar of whipping snakes. The snakes wrapped themselves around his throat.

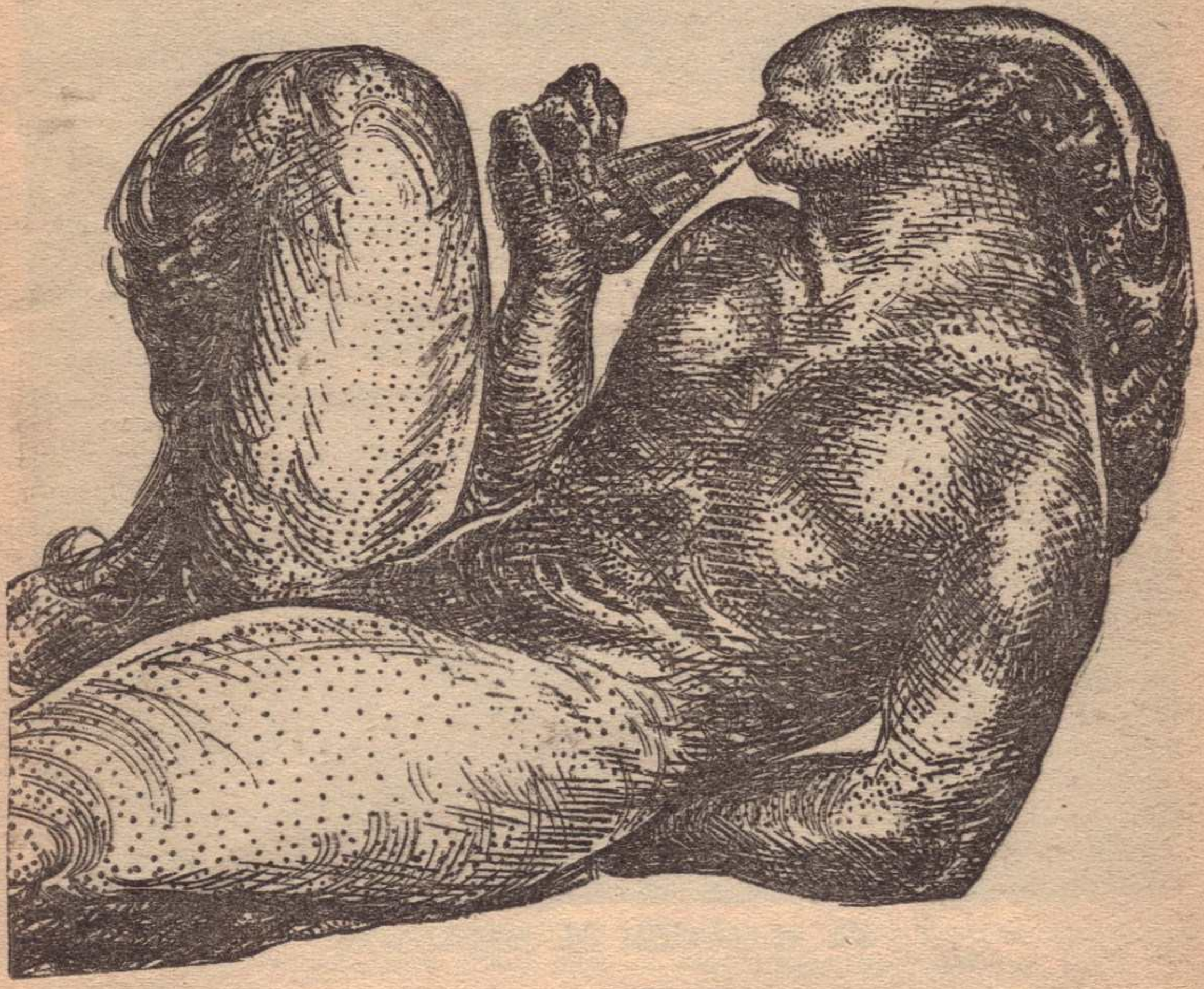
He screamed and backed away. He fell across the fire, which leaped up hungrily. . . .

THERE wasn't much left of Big Tom. Just some indistinguishable bones. It might seem that some itinerant had camped in this cave for the night, that he had overheated his fire, then had been overcome by the fumes and, trying to get out had stumbled into the fire and been burned to death. It wasn't too plausible an explanation, considering the condition of those bones, but it might suffice. Or were they human bones after all?

Aino looked gravely down at the charred mess for a long moment, then he fished under it carefully for the piece of drift. It came out white and whole as ever, as cool and smooth to his touch as fine silk. Aino caressed it with reverence. He bowed his

head to it, and put it back under his shirt, his face luminous with humble pride.

He turned. Oh yes, the box. He nudged open the lid with his foot. A wry smile touched his lips as he looked down at a tangled mass of rocks and mud and feline bones. Some imaginative youngster had given his dead cat a sea burial. Aino faced the drumming tide. He squared his thin shoulders and stepped out of the cave. He walked rapidly down the lonely beach. Born to serve, Aino had found a new master.



Forest God

By DOROTHY QUICK

KEEP out of the forest
Harken to advice,
For those whom Pan caresses
Never see him twice.

Those who know Pan's touches
And those who feel Pan's kiss
Know that there is nothing
Ever to equal this.

Those who hear Pan's music
And look into Pan's eyes,
Will always hear his laughter,
Will always be too wise.

Still it's worth the risking
Loneliness and pain,
To have the hope to cherish
Pan might come again.

Terror Under Eridu

BY MALCOLM M. FERGUSON

"BY ALL that is holy I urge whoever reads these words, get out at once. Leave the Temple of Ehpor. Do not delay. Take this writing with you and read it outside. Then you may return if so utterly, abjectly misguided. Stranger, a dying, doomed man urges you thus, in a matter which transcends life or death—yours or mine. Go at once, and only open these pages out of doors. . . .

"I can only hope, stranger, that you have obeyed my injunction, and what I have to

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

Beware of the lidded gastropod guarding the inner chambers and their terrible secrets!

say reaches the outer world in time. Maybe it will reach the eyes of someone possessed of a genius great enough to help, for my distracted mind cannot.

"The floor of the front chamber of the Temple of Ehpor, I now know, is a sentient thing, its surface resembling a gigantic doorbell-pushbutton, though involving no mere batteries and alarms. *It is a part of a living creature.*

"Mind-staggering nightmarish thing! Oh, horror, horror beyond conjecture! By what madness could this be brought about that the lidded mouth-foot of a gastropod of unheard-of size be guardian for the inner chambers? It is the crowning horror, for when I won my way back just now to this front chamber I thought marvelingly, that I had escaped. But my light showed the small outer doorway even then being blocked by the oozing, sidewise-canting rise of the floor, leaving me confined, a prey. For I will never return to the depths below the temple.

"Already the rising lid or operculum reveals the creature beneath. I thrust this with my notebook at the feet of Ephor. Not alive will the snail-thing engulf and consume me. Heed well the notebook; it matters. I no longer do. Samuel Wheelcraft Chard—31 December 1913."

Thirty-five years later Major Jeffrey Lemperley, standing before the Temple of Ehpor, turned to Theodore P. Marsh, his co-leader of the Apthorp Fund Expedition exploring the ruins of ancient Eridanus.

"Well, this is idiocy. Do you suppose this Chard bozo was trying to throw a scare into us? And if so, why?"

"He might be a nut, I suppose. Or a practical joker. Apparently he either left after writing this, or was done in by person or things unknown. Surely he never reported his discoveries or the institute would have them in its files."

"We may as well read his notebook while we're here. By the way, did you notice the floor?"

"Yes, Ted. It was gray and all of a piece. Don't you remember I remarked on it? I couldn't see how it had been put together without fissures. Come to think of it, it did seem slightly resilient, like cartilage."

"Hmmm. Perhaps this Chard fellow was already stirred up by something else, and suggestion readily became reality for him. Just one look at the statue of Ehpor might do it. Maybe, too, he knew more than we do. Nebo and Nergal and Marduk and Ninib I knew, but Ehpor, no. How alien, primordial that statue seemed, how slimy were its basalt lines. But the notebook, Jeff."

The notebook of Samuel Wheelcraft Chard:

Eridanus at last. Here in a waste of sands was once the seaport of the Euphrates. Eridanus that gave the river its bygone name, Eridu, and even the stellar river now swinging wide above my head. Eridanus of Chaldea, whose gods were great. Tsoub and Nod and the deathless Ehpor.

How far from us were these spade-bearded men, richly living, richly accoutred, accounted magicians in the days of Biblical Daniel.

The sealing of their sorcery was reputedly ever perfect; a remarkable thing, for such secrets are ever blabbed about, as hard to confine as open ground-water. And that is why I came here, a one man expedition, a Peer Gynt puzzling this problem. For I do believe that the Eridanean Chaldeans had a power of sorts; perhaps imperfect, capricious, set to do some things and not others, tricky, part "deus" and part "machina."

Before the Temple of Ehpor is an old sand-and-wind-weathered sign in Arabic, invoking an injunction from Al Koran not to meddle hereabouts. Taboo. Bad medicine. Verboten. . . . How weird the temple looks in the starlight, long and lean, like a coffin on its side. The only doorway is in the front, no bigger than a house-door, built low, near the west corner (was it for astronomical reasons that the Chaldeans faced their temples north, one wonders?) reminding me of the passageway that snakes sometimes make or find to winter in a coffin—having heard of a baker's dozen so found in my native New England. But these are chideworthy, childish, morbid thoughts, and I don't want to add to my trepidations at tomorrow's exploration of the Temple of Ehpor. Enough for yesterday and today discovery of the temple, examining of the exterior, and clearing away a century or per-

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haps a millennium of sand from the blocked doorway, whose cornice alone appeared. Possibly something in the blind face, the odious decorations on the cornice and of the walls themselves had caused the unknown Arab to erect that sign.

I'm taking this notebook, my pistol, plus a miner's headlight equipped with batteries mounted at my waist to last forty-eight hours of usage. I can imagine circumstances under which it would be damnably unpleasant to be without a light. . . . (Later:) My God, what I have been through? Can the body be caught in the mind's nightmare? Or could I become mad by passing through the doorway of the Temple of Ehpor—caught in a madness new and strange to the set of my mind?

YOU who read this must have penetrated to the statue of Ehpor, and your flashlights limned its horrid ebon, obese form, seeing (with but a dread foretaste) the image of this slimy riser from some unguessed primordial fen.

Yes, all about you is desert now, but underneath—underneath a Euphrates channel seeps—through a muddy "cavern measureless to man, down to a sunless sea." A sea and a sea's edge alive with remnant creatures which remember other suns, and abide their coming again! Yet how fearful, dangerous, inimical to man is their abiding

None of this I knew when I gazed upon Ehpor, wondering at the minds that had devised such a creature—a man-dinosaur, I called him, combining the brutal power of Tyrannosaurus rex, a cranial capacity as big as man's, bigger, even, being to proportion, plus the dark skin of an amphibian. The heavy, stubby tail confirmed my classification—as an anomaly. Yet how could the Chaldeans have seen a dinosaur to base their absurdly imagined mutation upon?

After about twenty minutes in the temple's main upper chamber I descended the rock-encased stairway leading from Ehpor's right. At a level twenty feet lower I found myself in a room with three doorways—right, left and straight ahead. I chose the one before me, and found myself in one room of at least several, proving to be a sort of museum, scarcely furnished. Here my miner's lamp singled out, on pedestals, two statutettes which looked African, and beyond them were strangely adapted scale models of simple machines—pumps, a lathe, hoists. Next a metronome and a crystal ball. Last of all, an escapement wheel. Good Lord, my mind cried out, such devices could not have been known in Eridanus!

Then I thought of the African tribes which inhabited tombs, of hermit crabs occupying periwinkle shells, and of other creatures that pre-empted habitation already made. Under the present circumstances this thought was thoroughly disturbing and repellent to me, full of implications I could not hope to grasp. And rising out of the perplexity, another. Why had this collection been put together? Was it a haphazard, magpie gathering, or did it have a logical reason? Impossibly modern it was, yet so far wholly in keeping with the ancient scheme of the building.

I went on from one room to another and found always more irregularly-shaped rooms in all directions. I was becoming fearful that I might get lost, a fear accentuated by the total absence of light other than that of my own miner's light, when I found a blank wall in front of me. This relieved me by limiting the area I might get lost in. I therefore explored the room to my right, continuing rather than retracing my way. This was empty to my glance. It, too, opened only on two sides plus the third doorway in which I stood. The opening to

my right was a descending staircase. Making mental note of the number and direction of rooms I had traversed, I went toward the chamber ahead. It was totally filled with spidery filaments, centering around a six foot cocoon, which was held suspended from the floor.

Great heavens, was my mind playing tricks on me, or was there a weaving creature there even then? I could not know, for the sudden confronting of the web and its overwhelmingly large cocoon so occupied me that a scuttled retreat of a creature the size of a human head over grown with hair —such a figure could have existed either in my harassed imagination or in the reality of an uncertain miner's lamp.

I don't know which is more nerve-racking, a miner's headlamp or a hand-held flashlight. The former looks where you do, and can't see from the corner of its round eye. The latter probes nervously with increasing rapidity so that one soon is unable to tell what he has seen and what has deceived him, or yet looms darkly, in his light's fitful progress.

In turning from that fearful room my light caught something I had not seen before. I don't know why I didn't faint.

Four men stood, leaning slightly, against the wall. They were dressed in modern costume, though with different modifications (as if for climate, time of day, occupation and so forth). Each stood with ghastly stiffness, and wore a card. A line of English amidst the hash of alien markings stood out as my miner's light leapt frantically from one to another:

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(Editor's note: As Samuel W. Chard could not have known, each of these four prominent men were reported to have vanished from the face of the earth or from ocean-going steamers during the year 1913.)

And now from the rooms which I had come I could hear a measured tread. It was coming nearer. Crazily, I plunged down the staircase, deeper. I fled down two flights

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in panic haste. Down below I could hear the slow splash and slap of water.

I STOPPED, turning like a trapped rat, my pistol in my hand. A single-celled room opened off the staircase. In it, incredibly, was a modern, freshly-made bed, and on that bed's white scented counterpane a freshly-cut red rose. But as the steps continued on the staircase I turned down once more.

Had some other explorer tumbled on my trail, I wondered, my mind seeking the unlikely "natural" explanation. Desperate, determined, I refused to be driven further by the approaching footsteps, to be hustled ever deeper until I met other dangers, or at least the hazards of strange footing. On reaching the next level I probed with my headlamp.

I saw then that to stand and meet whoever or whatever approached was indeed my best chance. For ahead of me at the end of a hallway was a subterranean river's edge. A doorway led off to right and left, that on the left having the appearance as I glanced hastily, frantically, seeking reassurance that my back would be protected from I knew not what—like a library.

I pointed my drawn, cocked pistol at the stone staircase. My hand shook as I waited the long moment between sound and sight, realizing that my light would warn the newcomer, removing any advantage I might hope to seize. Sandals of antique mode appeared, opposite my sights, followed by a chunky, gowned figure. But when at last the face came in view my pistol fell from my shaking hands.

The man was blind.

Ordinarily blindness evokes my sympathy. Yet coming here it augured much of the fearful, of horror. The man was short, of a square powerful build, with red hair. His skin was totally devoid of color.

I had drawn in my breath, and held it now as he approached me. I turned, silently, following him with eyes, pistol and miner's light until he had passed within arm's reach of me, and had turned along a walk that followed the river's edge. It was like a mad dream come alive. Somehow I felt he

would turn suddenly while I watched, and seize me. Yet he had kept on.

Blind he could be, and pale from a sojourn underground. Blind and pale and underground, too, are the dead, my mind thrust up at me, frenzied by the encounter. And the thought, once said in my mind, would not be still.

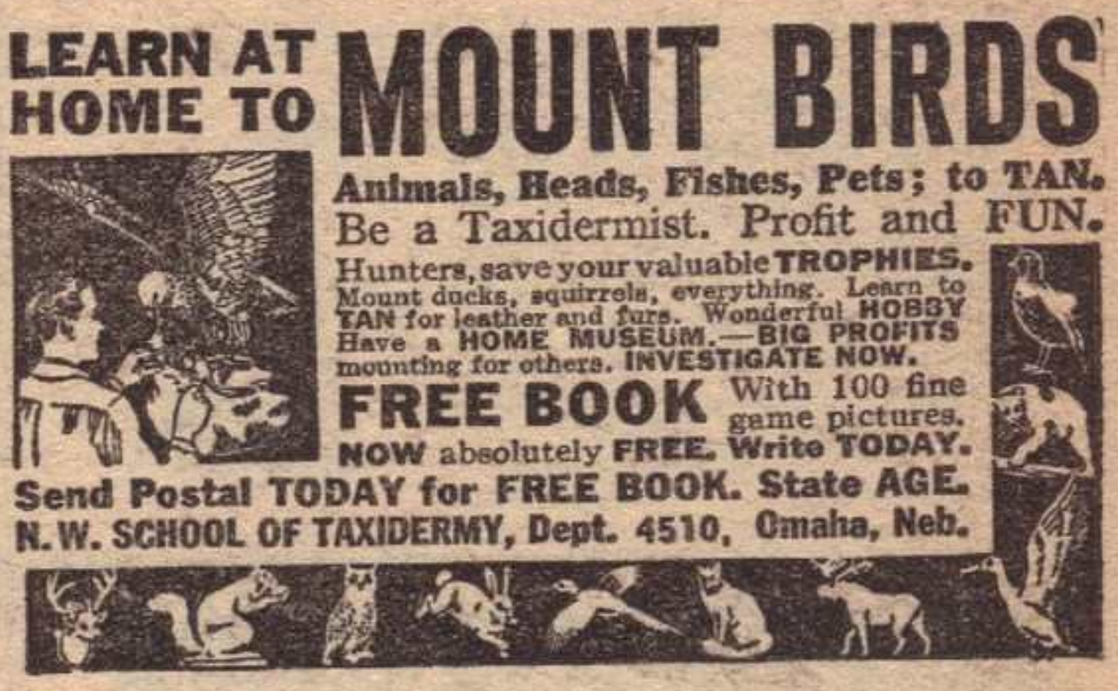
But whether living or dead, or either-neither, here was a component of a cult utterly alien to our race and to all else on our planet. The bizarre museum; those immobile figures outside the web-and-cocoon-filled room; the very fit of these features to this labyrinthine structure which outdates recorded history, all point to a mad, mind-staggering scheme beyond our experience.

It is hard to explain why I did not then run at once back up the stairs and through the terrible series of chambers to leave forever the Temple of Ehpor. Could you understand that I was afraid to? Flight is coupled in the mind with pursuit, and with panic which increases the jeopardy. One imagines, and sometimes meets in flight, sudden assailings and encounters from right and left (What an unnatural thing a crumpled newspaper is to a horse!). I had neither the strength nor the nerve left for such sudden encounters, though daring more, really, barring panic surprise.

But I will not explain what I did; I'll tell it.

Reassuring myself with my Cyclopean headlamp, I saw that the room was indeed a library, a polyglot affair including bound books in languages in incomprehensible dislocation of time and reason. Some were in English, I tell you. The room appeared empty.

I had noticed reflected light on the river, to my left, upstream, and from this, conjectured that not all here were blind. I had been careful, after my initial probe, not to send my light beams out across the river. There being enough light to see by, I switched off my headlamp, got down on my hands and knees, and with my pistol in my right hand crept to the doorway leading to the river. This put my head at an unexpected level, gave me more solid footing plus an instinctive reassurance, for I was trembling



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badly. Of course my back was vulnerable to attack if I had been detected, I was painfully aware.

WHAT I saw made me almost forget myself. A score of men—creatures, rather, in the aspect of men,—were standing, some holding torches. All except two were identical in build, and in unnatural stiffness, with the creature who had passed me. The other two were a man and a woman; he, tall, black-bearded, handsome, in a modern suit of clothes, yet with a sort of fez, sandals, accoutrements. . . . She but slightly shorter, beautiful in a daring dress of unconventional cut.

Slowly, as I watched, the balance of a large water-clock tipped, and the ascending beam struck a gong. The sound caused a stir in the air as a dozen pair of wings flapped. Bats, I thought. No; they were too large, and had tails. Pterodactyls, I now believe.

The bearded man began an incantation, standing on a raised dais, while she, on another, stood statuesque ten feet away, and circling both in one ring were the torch-bearing automata, whose heads were now concealed by cowls. He addressed the river, pleading, acting out a drama that was incomprehensible yet wholly terrifying.

Music began. Wailing, whining, and rumbling, with a cadent *pull* to it, evocative. And with it, she began to dance.

Then I saw the head. And seeing it, the human figures shrank to insignificant cavorting and exhorting puppets. There, neck-deep in the murky water was the head of Ehpor!

Living. The shoulders emerged and then the squat black torso on heavy, human-like legs. Rising from the muddy waters he came and squatted in the place between the male and female idolaters. And there were whisperings, gutteral ribaldries, lalling syllables and profane-seeming phrase between the three, instructions of horrible import.

Then I pointed my pistol at Ehpor and fired. A pistol is a poor thing at sixty feet. Yet I think there was a start of brackish blood from the creature's side as he stood toweringly erect like a monstrous amphibian ape, raging.

The three—and I too somehow—stood transfixed. But the male idolater, first to move, seized a torch and ran, not around the arc of shore towards me, but to a top-heavy spirate pillar, and to it applied the torch's heat, while bawling directions, polyglot and profane. I turned on my headlamp and fled, empty, smoking pistol in hand.

The rest you know. My arrival upstairs to discover the ghastly animate upheaval of the floor. Surely the idolater's torch heat had touched a nerve; and the gastropod winced awake, aroused.

I write this with my miner's lamp turned on, and my loaded pistol cocked in my left hand. I presume that the search for me was delayed by the urgency of appeasing and perhaps ministering to Ehpor (badly wounded, or thoroughly angered at a suspected trap, dare I hope?); possibly added to this assumption that I, strange interloper, was one of the four figures outside the cocoon room come unpredictably to life, and would not know the way to the blocked exit. But this is conjecture, much remaining undiscovered in the vastness of this castle subterranea. I fling this notebook in the lap of the stone Ehpor, avoiding the engulfing maw of the gastropod, now fully open. Perhaps before I die I will shoot the idolater who has renounced and betrayed the human race. I can hear them below me now. . . .

Note by Jeffrey Lemperley, Major, U. S. Army: At the foot of the flight of stairs on the left and right are empty chambers. Straight ahead are stone blocks weighing perhaps a ton each, skilfully set in. Whether recently implaced or part of the original solid foundation, we cannot say. The stones are of ancient quarrying, apparently. This limits the extent of the Temple of Ehpor, barring secret passages, of such cunning contrivance that we haven't found them.

While we brand this a fiction, we are sending it out with our reports by today's courier. We are photographing the statue of Ehpor, and studying some of the friezes, which have novel aspects, but after that we will look for something more interesting, especially, relating to Marduk or Nergal, Nebo or Ninib.

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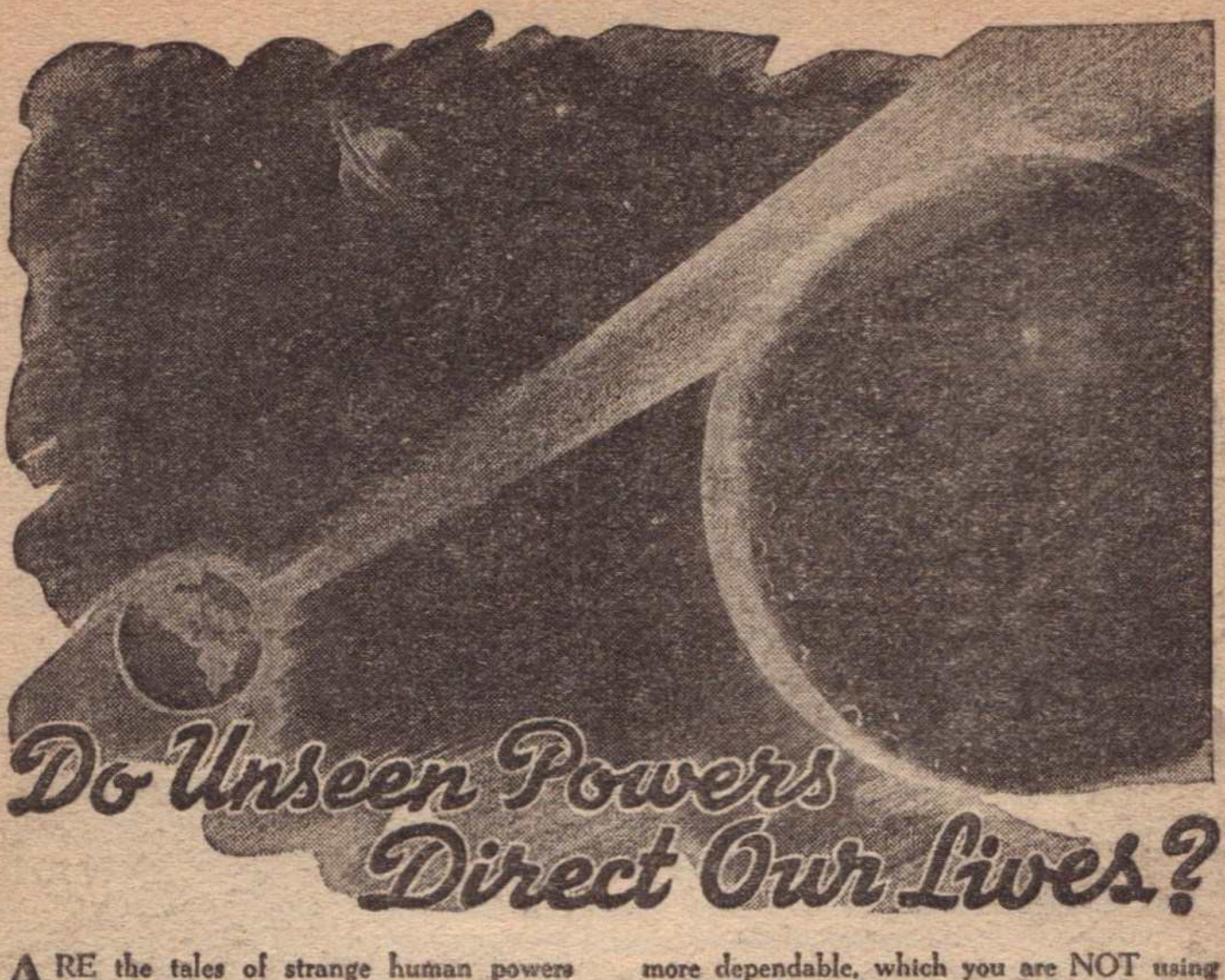

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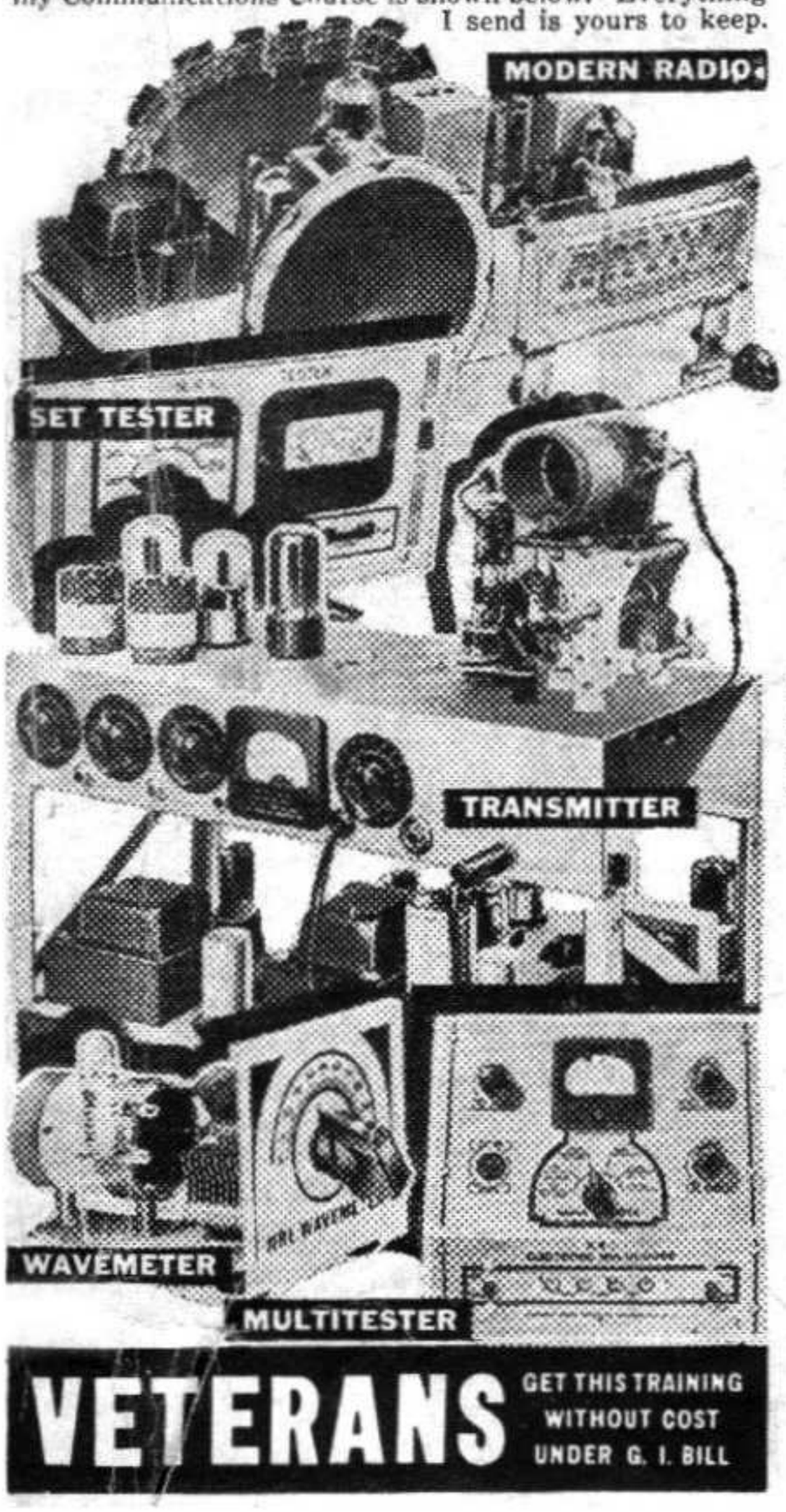

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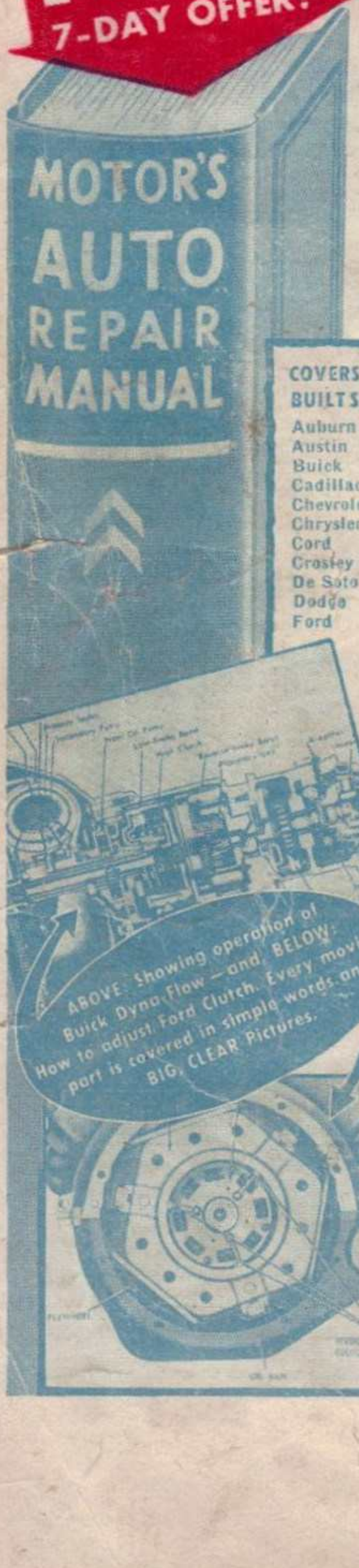

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