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THE QUEEN'S BEDROOM

by Ledru Baker, Jr.

YOU take a pair of scales, you can pick them up at any bazaar in Cairo, and put the chance for fame and riches on one side. Then you balance them with the possibility of death on the other. Nine times out of ten, if you are like me, you will tip them just a little in favor of the first choice.

It isn't cold down here, just sort of damp. I am alone in a tomb near Cairo, Egypt, some ninety feet under the hard desert rock. Memories are flooding back at me across the darkness, dancing jerkily in tune with the flickering candle. Behind me, Queen Hetepheres lies in state. I am the only one who knows of her presence. One other man knew, but he is dead too. Notice how I said "Too?"

Funny how this hits you. Once you know you are dying, and just as soon as you get used to the idea, it doesn't hurt much. It's just a little like waiting for an interview. Here I am, you might say, in the ante-chamber of eternity, waiting for my appointment. Soon, a great shining light, a jackal-headed God or maybe a multi-headed being will come into the tomb to escort me away. Maybe I know too much about too many religions and not enough about any single one. I cannot believe, and at this moment, sincerely wish that I could.

If it hadn't been for one or two small, connected events, I wouldn't be here now; I would be in my room a bare mile away in the Mena House Hotel, where I was when the old man entered my life.

There was a light rapping at the door, and I said "Come in," in French, thinking it was the house servant. The door opened slowly and like a gnome from an ancient woodcut, a face peeked around at me.

"Mr. Andrews?" he said. His voice was high and arid like the plains of the Lybian desert.

I arose and walked toward him. "That's right. Rolly Andrews," I admitted. "'What brings an American to Cairo in this season?" A fly buzzed onto his forehead and he ignored it like a native.

He grinned toothily. "I'm Dr. Barkley. M. Durand of the National Museum told me a fellow American was staying here. Welcome to Egypt, sir."

My wheels were turning slowly, and I must have looked puzzled,

because he added, "I should have said—a brother archeologist." When he shook my hand, his grasp was surprisingly strong.

And then it clicked. Sure, Dr. David Barkley, a pretty famous old boy who was highly thought of in grave-digging circles. I invited him to sit down; good contacts never hurt any man. He smiled his way out onto my terrace and eased himself into a chair. Across the road and on the plateau the pyramids waited for the setting sun and the start of another night of silence.

When I sat down facing him, he said, "I understand from M. Durand that you are here on a buying expedition, sir."

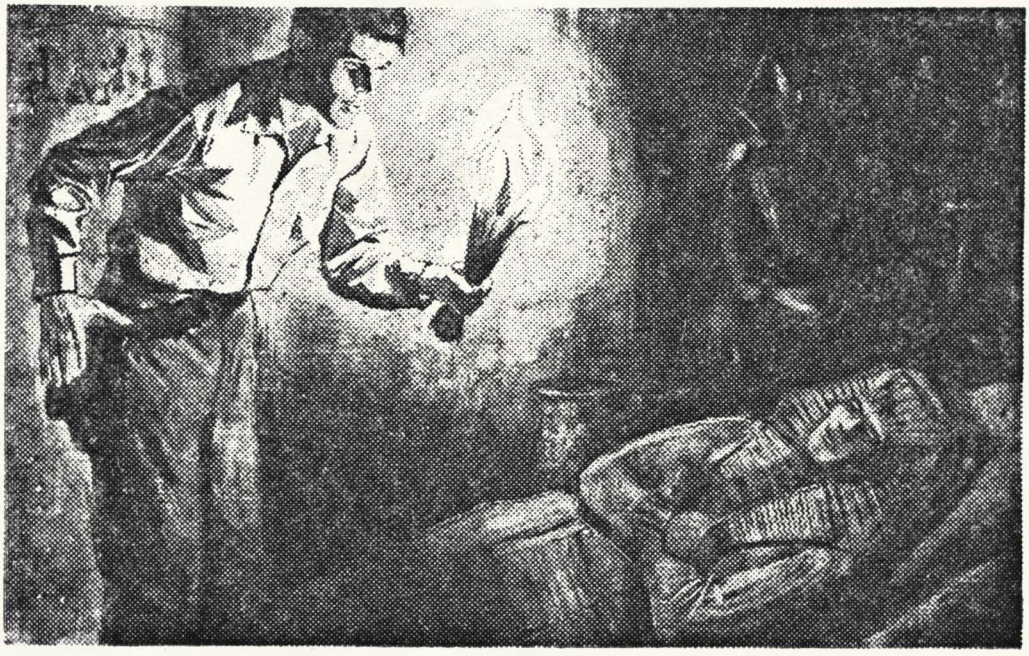
I nodded, afraid I was in for a gentle lecture. "That's right. Old 'Ink For Blood' wants a few mummys for the Egyptian Room in his museum."

"What was his name?" he asked. "Ink For . . ."

". . . Blood. Roger Simpson—he owns the World News Service. He's got more money than he can hide from the Treasury Department, so he's investing a little of it in culture for us peasants. He has men all over the world, and I'm here doing my bit."

"I see." The old man leaned forward and chuckled. "I guess Egypt can stand the loss of a few mummys. The people need money badly, and I'm glad your Mr. Ink For Blood is willing to help us. Just leave the pyramids, that's all we ask."

I laughed heartily at that. Laughs are fun once you get into the spirit of things. They don't



cost anything, and sometimes they pay off pretty good odds. The old boy must have been there close to an hour, bleating about the past. For a while it was interesting; but when, for the third time, he made a round trip and started back on the 1928 Lower Nile Expedition, I was suddenly very tired of the whole thing and wished I had never opened the door. I gently steered the talk into a blind alley. He looked confused, shook his head uncertainly and fished in his pocket for a huge watch.

"I didn't realize it was so late!" he said. "Would you join me for dinner, Rolly?"

We were in the David-Rolly stage by that time. I don't know why I agreed unless it was his apparent loneliness. To take the edge off an unpromising evening I had three drinks at the bar and about seven o'clock went back to the dining room. I stood beneath the arches and looked around. His wasted, hunched body was sitting at a table across the room. A girl sat opposite him, and I unconsciously pulled my tie straighter.

The girl's back was to me, and as Barkley arose she half turned to face me. She was about twenty-five and even though she was seated, it was easy to tell she was tall and slender. She was wearing a bright, red dress that matched her crimson lips perfectly. Her hair was dark and reached down to touch her white, bare shoulders. She looked into my eyes and must have read something special in them, because she took a deep, nervous breath, then smiled.

Barkley introduced us and I sat down in the vacant chair next to her. She was his daughter, and her name was Janice. That night they could have served me fried scarabs, garnished with reeds from the Nile and I would have paid the check without a grumble. After we ate I cast, rebaited and cast again. Each time she wriggled off the hook, but her vivid eyes kept asking for more, so I kept on trying for a strike.

Finally she laughed and leaned forward. I had trouble keeping my eyes from the deep "V" of her breasts, and her secret smile told me she realized as much. "Now, wait a minute, Rolly," she said. "Didn't anyone tell you that approach went out with the bustle?"

Old man Barkley jumped, for the first time seeming to hear our banter. "Approach—bustle! What a thing to say to Mr. Andrews, my dear!"

He was still clucking when she smiled across at him. "Dad, don't be that way! I was just explaining to Rolly how time changes all things—from bait to lines. He understands, don't you, Rolly?"

The old man looked at me and smiled uncertainly. "I just don't know what happened to the little girl I sent to finishing school ten years ago. Why when she . . ."

Janice interrupted him gently. "Believe me, dad, they nearly *did* finish me. That's why I ran away and got on my own. I've been

modeling for some of the women's magazines," she explained to me.

I started to tell her that she was a damned sight better looking than most of the models I had seen in those smart-set magazines, but I didn't. Instead, I said to him, "I think Janice is trying to say that the school was—ah, in danger of squaring the circle, David. Right?" I asked the girl.

Her eyes swept over mine, doing a re-appraising job. "Bless you," she smiled. "I see that shovels aren't the only things you dig with."

Her leg moved slowly until it touched mine. It might have been an accident, but it wasn't. Barkley resumed his brooding silence, his mind probably back on the 1928 expedition. The orchestra segued into a smoky tango, and red-fezed Egyptian waiters glided silently around the room, their lips curled in smiles, but their eyes as expressionless as those of the great sphinx. Barkley seemed to doze, and once his head fell forward sharply onto his breast. I wished to heaven he would go to bed and dream whatever ancient grave diggers dream when they sleep. No one spoke for several minutes and the silence became oppressive.

The girl's eyes locked with mine, nakedly and boldly. Finally she shook her head and said, "Have you ever been to Egypt before?"

At that word, the old man's head jerked erect. She smiled and reached for his hand. She liked her father more than a little, and I knew it wouldn't hurt me to patronize him just a bit.

I shook my head. "No, but your father's book on the Old Kingdom has been a great help. In fact, part of my thesis was based on it." The old man had written a book—I had never read it.

He blossomed like a century plant. "Thank you. That book was my life's work, but I know that a lot is lacking." He looked at Janice, then at me again. "That is why I am back in Egypt at this late date."

I wasn't interested, just wanted him to go to bed. But I said, "More research, sir?"

He thought a long second and finally said, "Not exactly. You know of Queen Hetepheres, I imagine."

"Old Cheops mother, wasn't she?"

"Yes." He looked as if he wanted to pat me on the head and give me a hundred percent for the day. "As you probably know, her tomb is located near here. In my opinion, whatever it may be worth, the place has never been fully explored. With my friend Durand's permission, I have reopened it."

He leaned forward, and his eyes were as bright as a desert bird's. "If I am right this will make history second only to the Rosetta Stone. There is an unexplained gap in Egyptian history that ends with the death of Cheops and his

mother, to take up again only after thirty years."

I couldn't see what was so damned important about a thirty-year gap in a five-thousand year old history, but it was getting the old boy hopped up, so I nodded. His hand grasped mine, it was like a claw, and the strength in his fingers made me wince. I lit a cigarette, my mind whirling, too many ideas trying to crash into it.

"I'm very happy for you, David," I said. "Your name will never be forgotten."

He leaned across the table, and his fingers dug into the white cloth. "I am not young like I was forty years ago. I need a young man to work with me—to help me. From the very first minute I saw you, I liked you, probably because you were polite and listened to an old man talking about something that happened when you were still a baby. Would you consider helping me, boy?"

That was probably what I should have wanted the most, but it didn't listen good. Who remembers the man who wields the shovel? The old man would get the full loaf of glory, and I would be lucky to grab the crust. You can't spread much butter on one of them. I glanced at Janice, but her eyes turned to look at the orchestra, and her leg moved away, leaving mine suddenly lonesome. Right then I knew there was only one thing to say:

"I'll be happy to work with you, David."

The girl turned back to me, her lips softened, and they seemed to be saying, "Thanks. Thanks for helping an old man make his last dream come true." Barkley pushed back the chair and arose. When we shook hands, I made mine just a little stronger than I should have. But I knew he was from the old school whose graduates can read a man's character by the strength of his hand grasp. I started to help Janice from her chair, but I wanted her to stay with me as much as I wanted to take my next breath.

He must have read my thoughts, then dug back into the dusty pages of his youth. "No!" he protested. "You two stay here as long as you like and enjoy youth while you can. I will see you in the morning."

He tottered away, and I sat down next to Janice. There were lots of things to say to her, but when she waited for me to speak, there was nothing I could think of to say.

She finally broke the charged silence. "Rolly, take care of dad. He really shouldn't be here—his heart."

"I'll watch him like a hawk." My hand reached over and covered hers. Suddenly as if a falling pillar had struck me, I knew why I had been intrigued the moment I first looked at her. In the Cairo museum they had a statuette of her, only it must have been made in a previous life. From her hair and cheeks and lips right down

to her smooth neck she was the total likeness of Queen Tewosret.

I was trying to phrase the compliment in the right way when she suddenly said, "Are you married, Rolly?"

"If I had a wife, would I be sitting here with you?" I said. "No, I never tried it. I couldn't ask any woman to share my life. One year in New York, the next in Central America. From opening a tomb in Assyria on Christmas Day to God knows what on Washington's Birthday."

"You don't like your work," she stated.

"Not especially—anymore. But I'm thirty-two, and I don't know anything else."

"Why did you ever start it?"

"I wish I knew. I liked to read books on things like your father was just talking about, and naturally I took a few courses in archeology in college. The first thing I knew, I had changed my Major from Business Administration to Archeology."

She smiled faintly. "From an advertising executive to a grave robber in one easy chat with the dean," she mused. "I've often wondered why dad made it his life's work. He's world-famous, but I doubt if he has five-thousand dollars in the bank."

"Was your mother happy with him?"

"My mother died shortly after I was born, but I've read some of her letters to my father." The girl looked into the darkness. "No," she said flatly. "My mother wasn't happy. There was no reason for her to be. Father was gone nearly all the year. And after mother died, I lived with relatives here and there and everywhere. I would never put up with what my mother did."

While she was speaking, I had been looking at my hands. They were already curling into the permanent shapes of those of a shovel holder. I shook my head, then said, "Have you been to the formal gardens yet?"

"I've seen them from my window. They are very lovely."

"Let me show them to you—now."

I ground out the cigarette and held my breath. She hesitated, but I don't believe she was being coy. She wasn't yet sure of her feelings for me, and she knew what would happen when we were alone. Finally she arose, and her hair brushed against my face; it smelled purple. As we turned toward the arches I lightly took her arm. It was there, and somehow it was not. It was like touching heaven, or maybe a dream. If you have ever loved, you understand; if you have not, you never will.

We descended the stairway into the night. Great white clouds were massing overhead for their march over the desert; and behind them the sky was black, creating a massive backdrop for the gardens. For the first time in my life I began to feel the power of nature and realized that there were things

which could not be purchased on the open market.

Neither of us spoke as we walked through the gardens. When we reached the outer edge we stood looking up at the great pyramid of Cheops which lay across the road and up a winding path. I took her arm again and we moved toward the thing. Resembling a gigantic symphony, Cheops rose before us, shimmering in the pale darkness. For a long time we stood beneath the great folly, then I turned to her.

I started to speak, but her mouth was waiting for mine, her lips parted, her eyes half-closed. I think maybe I got a little of her soul in that kiss, but it was an even trade. Her body pressed against mine and her fingers dug into my back. When the long kiss was over, she looked up at me.

"I have never been kissed like that before," she said honestly.

That was all she said, but I knew she was my woman. I took her hand in mine and led her back to the hotel.

Hours later we were still in my room. She kissed me softly and spoke. "It's very late. I must be leaving."

She arose, took my arm and led me to the open window. We stood, looking over at old Cheops who still reared against the sky and was now pinned down to the earth by sharp, twinkling stars.

When she finally left, I sat alone in the darkness. Before tonight, whenever anything was wanted there had been only one logical course for me to follow: Go out and get it, or get the old face ground into the dirt, trying. Time after time my feet had almost touched those elusive steps that lead to fame and riches. But each time someone just a little more clever than I had reached out, pulled me back and vaulted over my shoulders. More than once it had been the very man whom I had tried to outsmart.

And now once again, the likely passage to success, via the Barkley route, was in my hands. I knew I would not spoil things by taking a trip at her father's expense. But would I? How would I act if the chance rose before me?

It was barely dawn when the phone rang. I was instantly awake, and in the time it took my hand to lift the receiver, my mind had relived the previous day right down to the last kiss. Barkley's voice rustled dryly over the phone.

"Rolly—it's David. How are you, boy?"

I leaned back on the bed. "Fine, I was already up. Are you ready to start?"

"Anytime. I'll meet you after you have eaten. Say—an hour from now in the lobby?"

He was waiting for me in the main hall half an hour or so later. He was an almost ludicrous sight in his faded khaki clothes and over-sized pith helmet. Strapped about his waist was a canteen and small pack of miscellaneous items.

When he saw me he slung a pack of tools over his bent shoulders and waved. He was surrounded by a rabid group of natives and was having trouble shooing them away. This morning he seemed younger, more alert, and I felt kindly toward him, realizing that this was what he lived for.

Pushing my way through the circle of native servants, I lifted the pack from his shoulders. "I see you're ready for the battle," I smiled.

"If I can get rid of my friends here," he nodded. He rattled off a few decisive words, his blue eyes sparkling gently as he cursed them away. They grinned and opened a path for us.

We left the hotel grounds, taking the same route Janice and I had walked the night before. But the red sun was clearing the memories away, heartlessly sweeping them into the sand. Old Cheops was merely a pile of stones, prosaic in his ancient calm. We trudged onto the rise and gradually the Sphinx came into view.

"There's something for you," Barkley said. "For ages we humans have been trying to solve his riddle, and the answer is there for everyone to see. He's just an old fellow who has turned to stone and is now very tired. He is waiting patiently for the end of the world. If he has a spirit, it will be set free then at that moment."

He looked up at me and smiled a little guiltily. He ducked his head and added, ". . . Just an old man making up daydreams. I really don't believe any of it."

We took off on a tangent across the sands, passing near to the Temple of the Dead, cut left over a rocky plateau, then were suddenly at our destination. The steel grating had been unlocked by Durand of the museum, and the large, flat rocks had been pushed away, leaving a gaping hole at our feet. Some ninety feet down was the floor of the tomb.

In my travels I had been in many tombs, had inhaled the special odor they always emit, and usually felt a certain exhilaration, probably because I was alive in the presence of death. But this place was different. It was damp, and its smell hit my nostrils hard like an actual impact from the unknown. I had never been an imaginative person, but my skin seemed to crawl, and the hair rose on my neck as I tried to fight off a feeling of stark terror.

A scraping noise behind my back made me wheel about. It sounded for all the world like some walled-up spirit fighting for its freedom. Barkley was scraping the floor with his shovel. Until he had switched on the flashlight, the only light was that which filtered dustily down the shaft. He placed the shovel against the stone coffin in the center of the chamber, then without speaking focused the light on the far wall. His aim was accurate and the light remained steady on one spot as we walked across the room.

"This is what we came to see, boy. This is it!"

Inscriptions that once living hands had painted onto the dead rock huddled together. Words of death and resurrection made their silent, pleading way around the walls of the tomb. Everything on the positive side of the ledger that could be said about Queen Hetepheres was here painted by slave hands. We made our way around the tomb, Barkley explaining as we walked, his voice echoing about the chamber.

"The inscriptions stop at this point. Now, look closely; the God Osiris was being addressed, and they would have never insulted him unless . . ." His eyes looked into mine, and they had the snap of a twenty-year old boy's. "Nothing but some major change could have caused the prayers."

"What do you think it was?" I asked. My voice was harsh and unnatural in its hollow tone. The old grasping Rolly Andrews was returning, and my fingers clenched tightly to fight off his approach.

The old man shook his head. "I don't know, it has always been a major puzzle. It might have been an invasion, or uprising. Maybe we will find the answer today."

"But what about the coffin in the center of the room?" I asked him.

The light swept toward the empty case. It was eight feet long, less than three feet high and about that wide. "That's just it," Barkley said. "Her body was never found, and there is no evidence of robbers being here—before us," he added with a little smile.

"But the tomb was searched thoroughly, wasn't it?" I pointed to several drill holes in the wall where men had probed for hidden chambers.

Barkley shook his head. "I have studied all the reports since the tomb was discovered. It has been searched well—except one place." The light flashed over the coffin, then down to its base. *"There!"*

"You mean—under it?" I gasped.

"Exactly," he replied calmly.

I wondered how the old man expected to move the heavy stone thing, and he must have read my thoughts, because he smiled happily. "You'll see that the old man came prepared, Rolly." He reached deep into the sack and pulled out several wedges, three steel bars about four feet in length and a small hydraulic jack. As he threaded the bars together he said rather smugly, "We'll let the laws of nature help us a bit."

I could not help but grin at him. Minutes later we had the jack pressed against the base of the coffin and the bars against the near wall. I was preparing to operate the handle when Barkley lay a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"I know you want to be helpful, but would you mind? I mean —this will be the last great thing of my life—*if* we find what I hope we will. Do you understand?" he almost pleaded.

"Of course, go ahead, sir."

He grabbed for the handle and started pumping furiously. The coffin, having been rooted for God knows how many centuries seemed tied to the earth. Sweat dripped from the old man's face as he pumped more slowly. I was about to take over the job when the coffin started across the floor. Thirty minutes later it had moved four feet and Barkley examined the spot where it had rested. He brushed away dirt and sand which someone had scattered so many eras past and suddenly shouted. He pointed down with a trembling finger.

"The *Ka*—the soul!"

In the black slate of the floor was carved the symbol of the genius that lived in her body during life. Barkley screamed happily and leapt up to grab the crowbar. I felt a little like crying, because there was no doubt that he had made a discovery. I had wanted to return empty-handed to the hotel, meet Janice for dinner and have life flow on smoothly from that point.

I watched him pry up one of the stones, saw his mouth drop open and a scream of pain pass his lips. I barely managed to catch him before his head hit the coffin. I lowered him gently to the floor, and when I bent over him I seemed to hear the words of Janice as a pleading whisper—*Rolly, take care of dad. He isn't well.*

David Barkley, world-famous archeologist lay moaning at my feet, his withered body appearing to wither as he writhed in pain. I felt his pulse; it was an irregular thing, skipping beats, coming back a little stronger, then fading away, each time a bit weaker. His lips moved wordlessly, but at last he managed to gasp:

"Medicine—coat pocket. Help me!"

I thrust my hand into the left pocket first, then quickly over to the right before finding the small bottle. My fingers curled over it and I looked down at the man. His large eyes begged me for life, and I pitied him at first. But through contact with the bottle, I suddenly felt a great strength. Like a small, fluttering bird in my hand, I held the power of life or death over this wasted thing. My thoughts narrowed down into one channel as I stared into his eyes.

He must have read my thoughts, because his talon-like fingers clutched at mine and he screeched, "Help me, boy!"

I withdrew my hand, hiding the vial in my fist. "I am sorry, there is nothing I can do. The medicine is not there."

His hand jerked back and his head fell to one side then rolled back to stare at me. My fingers remained on his pulse, feeling him slowly die. It took him several minutes, and his sorrowful eyes never left mine. The pulse speeded up one final time, then stopped. I placed the medicine in the pocket nearest to me,

straightened out the old man's corpse and stood up.

As in the past, the tide of affairs had been turned to my advantage, with one difference. I knew this time nothing could stand in my way. I became the old methodical Rolly Andrews as I pried up the flat stone and flashed the light into a chamber some eight feet deep.

I saw two things through the narrow opening. The mummy case of the queen and an alabaster casket, but it was enough. Half an hour later the coffin was in place, and I saluted the floor beneath it. "Get caught up on your sleep, because I'll be back later."

It had taken more than a little will power to keep from entering the chamber, but I knew it must wait. I had to have time to view the scene in leisure, removing certain items for private sale before telling the scientific world about the discovery. Fame can be pretty wonderful, but there is no percentage in walking around as a tattered celebrity.

I left the tomb and climbed into the stabbing Egyptian heat. The first heat waves were beginning their undulating dance over the sands. To the south the Sphinx settled on its haunches to live through another day. A distance away three people were making their way up the terraced sides of old Cheops while three eternal camels knelt patiently at the base. A few minutes later I had walked down the road and entered the cool lobby of the Mena House. I had just turned toward the stairs when Janice ran across the room and called to me.

"Rolly, what's wrong?" she cried. I looked down at her without speaking. She was clutching at me, fear staining her face. "Where is he?" she begged.

I took her arm and was not acting when I said, "I am sorry, Janice. David—passed away in the tomb."

No, I wished at that moment that somehow the chance to relive the last hour might be given me. In a low voice that was barely audible she said:

"His medicine, it was in his pocket."

People were beginning to watch us as I led her to a divan by the broad window. I held her hands in mine and said, "I didn't know, Janice. But it wouldn't have made any difference. He died immediately after the attack. He said just two words as I was holding him. 'Carry on', he said. Then he —died."

As I held her in my arms, stroking her hair, a tender feeling replaced the burning desire of last night. She was a girl who needed help—help from the man who had let her father die.

"I loved him so, Rolly," she said quietly. "He was all I cared about until . . ." She closed her eyes. "Help me, I don't know what to do now."

"Leave everything to me," I nodded. "He was my friend—and

I want to help."

Without taking her head from my shoulder she asked me the question I most dreaded to hear, yet which I knew must come eventually. "Was there anything down in that awful place, Rolly?"

I patted her shoulder. "We'll talk about it later, dear."

She looked up at me. "Somehow it wouldn't seem so bad if you had discovered something. I mean, Egypt was his life and . . ."

"Of course. And now I'm going to take you to your room."

"What will you do about him?"

"Durand will help me. I'll go into town at once."

"Whatever you say," she said in a tired, dry voice. "You know best, Rolly."

I left her in her room and hurried down the hall. Deep in my stomach there was an actual physical sickness, but once outside in the sunlight the feeling left me, and I squared my shoulders to face the most important task of all—convincing Durand of my friendship with David, and above all, of my sincerity. When he first heard of my mission to Egypt which had been approved by the new government, he had been rather doubtful of me, and now I must force him to believe in me. So very much depended upon it.

He arose as I entered his office. "Ah—M. Andrews," he said in precise English. "How are you this day?"

He chose his words carefully as if he were picking his way over uncertain ground. He motioned to a chair, but I decided to remain standing. With the jolt I was about to deliver him, it would look better if I were on my feet.

I answered him in his native French. "M. Durand, I have unpleasant news. Doctor Barkley is dead!"

He raised his eyebrows, drew them together, then sank into his chair and commenced drumming his fingers on the desk top. His eyes looked me over closely, then he said, "How did it happen, please?"

"We were in the tomb . . ."

His eyebrows danced apart, then met violently. "We . . ?" he murmured.

Here it is, Rolly. Play it right. "*We,*" I emphasized. "I was working in conjunction with David at his request." My mentioning Barkley by his first name got him, and he moved restlessly in his chair.

"I see," he said quietly. "When Doctor Barkley asked for permission to re-open the tomb, I did not realize he was acquainted with you. In fact—quite the contrary."

When he motioned me to a seat again, I sat down, leaning toward him. "I met David and his daughter at the hotel. He and I took an immediate liking to each other. He finally asked me to help him—to supply the muscle power, you might say."

I paused, then said, "He asked me to carry on—in the name of

science, and Egypt."

It was his move, and I prayed that I could anticipate it and move my knight to a better position.

Spreading his fingers out before him, he regarded them thoughtfully, then said, "This is all confusing. I caused the tomb to be re-opened for David Barkley because he is—was a true friend of Egypt as well as a personal friend of mine. This is very irregular."

I pulled the chair closer to his desk and sat facing the man who had achieved a terrific importance in my life. My voice was very sincere as I said, "As a promise I made to a dying man, I want to continue. He told me what he hoped to do. Monsieur, above anything else in the world, I want to keep that promise."

"But what about your buying expedition?"

"Both you and I know that is not true science. M. Durand, I hated it, but, frankly, I had to eat, and not even in your wonderful Egypt do they give food away for nothing. It may interest you that what happened today has changed my mind completely, and I am withdrawing from my buying—expedition."

The man looked at me with new interest. His eyes were more friendly, and his mind was evidently correcting its first impression of me. For God knows how long, he sat caressing a miniature sphinx that crouched on the desk. Then with a quick gesture he shoved it away from himself and arose.

He extended his hand. "As you wish," he said quietly. "You have my permission. The facilities of the museum and my humble assistance shall be yours at any time you wish to use them."

"Thank you, sir. Now about David."

"Ah, yes. Will you go with me?"

"Of course. Are you ready?" He said he was, and an hour later we had removed David's body from the tomb and returned to town. I left Durand looking down at his friend's body, left the refrigerated room and walked outside.

I hailed a gharry and relaxed against the hot leather seat. I closed my eyes and for the first time in hours, permitted myself to relax. The bent back of the native driver swayed sleepily over the reins, and the ever-present, hurrying citizens constantly crisscrossed their ways across the streets.

The hot copper sun had passed the top of the sky and was starting its long glide toward the the desert. The birds of prey circled over the city as they had done from the moment of its founding, ever-hopeful for full bellies, praying for mass death so they could feast. The white-clad figures, mingling with the smartly-dressed Europeans, the horse-drawn gharries fighting with the limousines, the new constantly

vying with the old combined to make the city the best one in the world in which to study contrasts.

I discharged the driver in front of the Continental Savoy and entered the cool lobby. As badly as I wanted to see Janice, I knew it would be better if I waited until later in the day. After several drinks and an excellent meal, I emerged with my plans made. They were strong, yet sufficiently elastic to shape themselves to any sudden twist in events.

It was dusk; the muezzins had finished their prayers, the Faithful had arisen from the ground, gathered their robes closely about themselves and disappeared into the countless narrow, dark streets. Fifteen minutes later, I was back at the Mena House. A necklace in the window of the hotel gift shop had caught my eye, and after a few minutes of haggling with the friendly thief behind the counter, I left with it my pocket.

She was dressed in something green that clung to her body, highlighting the youth that she carried so very proudly. I pulled her into my arms, her eyes closed and she held me closely.

"M. Durand called," she finally said.

"I thought he would. I was with him most of the afternoon."

"Was there anything in the tomb?" she asked.

I looked at the wall, then into her eyes. My own were open and honest when I said, "I can't be sure, but for his sake, I hope there is. It would have meant a lot to him."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the necklace which was modeled after a treasure of the Middle Kingdom. When I clasped it about her neck, she smiled gratefully and kissed me. The next morning we ate together. Neither of us spoke much until we were smoking and sipping our strong coffee. She finally told me that Durand had called and asked for permission to bury her father in the museum ground. She wanted to know what I thought of it.

"It would be a great honor," I said. "As far as I know, only one or two other men have ever been buried there. If I were you—I would agree."

"When are you going down into the—place?" she asked.

"Perhaps tomorrow," I told her. "I want to spend today with you. What would you like to do?"

"I don't know, it doesn't matter. Anything that will keep me from thinking about father's death. I don't want to be alone, Rolly."

"Have you ever seen the Temple of the Dead?"

"No. Where is it?"

"Less than a mile from here. Would you like to see it?"

"It would be nice, I think. What should I wear?"

"Anything, but include hiking boots. I don't want any scorpions getting familiar with your legs."

We left the hotel ground hand

in hand. Neither of us spoke until we reached the base of old Cheops. Then she rubbed her smooth cheek against mine and said, "Do you remember?"

"I'll never forget," I promised. "It's a part of me."

"I hope you mean it," she whispered. "I don't know how many women there were before me, and I really don't care—very much. Just as long as I'm the last one."

I kissed her softly and tried to shrug off the feeling that I was holding a girl in my arms whose father had died in my presence, and with my help. Then I made myself remember that the past was dead and would soon be buried, and the future was bright with promise of fame, money and love. For even though David Barkley's name would be remembered, the fame is for the man who is there and ready to receive it.

I would see to it that her father would not be forgotten, it was the least I could do. But I would be the one who would be photographed and interviewed, and the least that could possibly come out of it would be a full professorship at a first-rate American college.

We walked past the Sphinx and turned toward the temple. A ramp, once well-defined and polished leads down from the second of the great pyramids in a gentle slope. Here, in alabaster crypts were reverently placed the bodies of the translators of the creed of *Ra*. Through fruitful and sterile times, wars and famines, these were the true rulers of Egypt.

Monarchs and their dynasties danced and swayed in the winds of their incantations, for through them Gods spoke, destinies of nations shifted, men rose and fell, always to the same tune of fear.

I led Janice into the temple and proudly showed her through it. As we emerged into the bright sun from one of the crypts, the sand whispered beneath our feet. The pillars and great stones that had once held up the roof, criss-crossed their oblique shadows on the alabaster floor. We leaned against one of the pillars and looked upward at the blue, cloudless sky.

Whispering footsteps rustling across the floor of the temple made me turn with a frown. The intruder, an ancient person, shuffled toward us slowly. Janice turned and looked uncertainly at the old man who might have been any age; what is a guess worth? He might have been the spirit of one of the priests. The wrinkles which time had eroded upon his face appeared to expose his soul. He stopped within a foot of us, stared up at me for some reason, then spoke.

"The future, *Effendi*? In the sands of the temple I will tell it for you!"

The spell which his sudden appearance had created was broken. Instead of an ancient priest, he was another of the myriad of grasping Egyptians who squeezed a living from the purses of tourists.

I looked down at Janice and smiled.

"Your fortune, *Madamoiselle?*" I mimicked.

"Mais oui, Monsieur, certainment," she replied.

The eyes of the old man lowered, and he motioned us toward the extreme side of the temple floor. He squatted in Egyptian fashion and gestured for me to take a place opposite to him. As I knelt down he commenced an ancient ritual. With a long, thin finger, he drew a large rectangle in the sand of the floor, cut it into four smaller ones, and closed his eyes.

In the upper left section, his fingers started tracing lines, then he suddenly announced, "You are foreign to this land. You come from across the seas."

I shrugged. "And you are Egyptian. You come from across the Nile."

He looked at me with no evidence of emotion. "I tell only what the sands say, *Effendi.*" His fingers drew more whorls, the sand scattering into tiny ridges. "You are in love," he said quietly.

I looked up at Janice who was smiling down at me. "You are correct, Wise One. Continue," I said.

His finger again patterned the sand; then as I watched his eyes, they seemed to withdraw and become nothing more than slits. His voice was low, but it echoed through the temples like a deep, tolling bell.

"You search for something, *Effendi.* It is not clear—ah, but yes, it brightens. I am allowed to know it is fame that you seek." He paused, then his voice became so low I had to strain to hear it. "You want it badly, but—even as you seek it, you fear it is not for you!"

This time I neither shrugged nor looked up at Janice, for I was afraid of what my eyes would show.

He progressed to the second square, and my nervous eyes followed his finger like a sparrow watches the circling approach of a hawk. "In the search, the sands tell me that you will lose something to find something else. I know not what it is, for the sands are quiet. But they do say that you —you . . ." He trailed off as his finger painted a mad pattern in the sand before suddenly stopping. His puzzled eyes were intent upon the drawing which had been created before him. Finally he unwillingly looked at me.

"Well, the sands say what?" I said impatiently.

He arose slowly, almost regally. "The telling is over, *Effendi.* There is no more."

My mouth sagged. ". . . What of the rest? There are still two squares left. I *demand* that you finish what you left undone!"

"I have left nothing undone, as I have started nothing," he said calmly. "What has been written here was started long before your birth. *Kismet.* And the results of them will live long after you have

been forgotten."

"What did you start to tell me before you stopped? Do you want more money than you have earned?" I shouted.

His voice was very soft as he said, "But—do you really want to know? It would perhaps be better if you never heard."

"Yes! I *really* want to know!"

He straightened up and moved a step back. "Then I will tell you, but it is futile to speak of it. The sands have written that—that unless their pattern is changed, you will lose that which is most dear to you, and it is not mortal man who can change what has been written in Time. You search for Fame, *Effendi,* and for a moment in your life, you will seem to have it in your hands. But it will not be yours to keep."

"Why?" I croaked.

"I think, American, that you will be dead!"

Janice threw a hand across her horrified face and screamed. I was infuriated and whipped a pound note from my wallet, thrusting it into the old man's face.

He ignored it and said, "There is no more to be written by the sands; your life has been lived."

The money dropped from my trembling fingers and fluttered to the ground. His eyes looked deeply into mine, and I wheeled away to face the wall. As an uncertain fear came over me, I heard his footsteps fade slowly away. I turned back and looked down at the design. The money lay where it had fallen, a symbol on the ruins of my life. I looked at Janice, recalling her presence. Her own eyes were strange and fearful, searching my face as the old man had done. She shook her head, and her hands flew to her face.

"You *do* want it!" she screamed. "You do, I can see it! You want it, and you are afraid the old man spoke the truth!"

She spun around, running from the place. I raised my hand, then let it fall to my side as she sped in the path of the seer. Then I was completely alone, shut away from all the world by the thick walls of the temple. I knelt on my knees and stared intently at what Time had written for the old man. Well-defined lines with an orderly precision about them had been drawn in the first square, converging on one spot, something like a winding stairway leading to a tower. The second one started out in a similar manner, then the pattern lost its meaning in a jumble of chaotic drawings with no sane meaning—unless Death itself is a meaning.

Very slowly I gathered the sand he had used into a small cone, gently patting it into shape, then swept my hand down in an arc, obliterating all signs. The sand scattered and fell unnoticed and the spell was broken. The old man's prophecy was dead; it had never been. It was all a dream.

A shadow flicked across my face, and my eyes jerked fearfully

toward the sky. A huge bird of prey wheeled and soared above me, swooped downward, its unblinking eyes seeming to pierce my soul before it sailed from sight like my *Ka* would when I died. I shivered and ran from the place.

An hour later I was still pacing the floor, trying to collect what remained of my thoughts. I was an American in a modern Egyptian hotel. My woman was in the same place. But was she my woman? Another woman had once shown the same look of fear and distrust as she looked at me; she had run away and never returned. I ran across the room and grabbed the phone.

"Miss Barkley's room!" I ordered.

A voice said, "I am sorry, M. Andrews. I believe Miss Barkley received a call and left ten minutes ago."

I replaced the phone and stood, staring down at it. Durand, probably the only man in Egypt who knew her, must have called. Things were not falling right; they had to be gathered up and worked over. My star was rising in the heavens, and it was too early for it to become cinders.

I went to the bar and got drunk.

The ringing of the phone awakened me early the next morning, hammering at my ears and playing a fiendish tune on my temples. I reached for the receiver weakly and picked it up. "Hello," I muttered. "What is it?"

"Janice," the voice replied softly.

As quickly as I could I sat up, lit a cigarette and shuddered as the smoke reaching my lungs. "Hello," I said. "How are you this wonderful morning?" I asked her gently.

"I called to say goodbye," she replied.

My stomach dropped and the walls appeared to fall in on me. "Goodbye!" I cried. "Where are you going?"

Her voice returned in a rush, "I know more than I did yesterday," she said. "I might have been willing to discount what the old man said as the ravings of a madman. But now I know better."

I hated to hear the answer, but I said, "What do you mean?"

"You—killed my father." Her voice was very calm.

My breath ended up something like a shudder. "I know you did, Rolly, because I saw the clothes he wore last night. The medicine was in his left pocket. You see—he always carried it in the right pocket, he could reach it easier that way.

"He was left-handed, Rolly!"

"Janice!" I shouted. "I have to talk with you!"

"It's no use, I am calling from the airport. In a few minutes I will be leaving. I just wanted you to know that at least a part of the old man's prophecy is coming true."

There was a booming of the loudspeaker, a short silence, then

two final words, "Goodbye, Rolly."

A small sob, a click, then nothing.

The phone dropped from my hand, I got sick and ran to the bathroom. After a shower, I bounced back somewhat, but I was no more than an empty husk. She was gone, and I was here. At the window I looked up at old Cheops and hated it. After four cups of coffee I felt more like a complete man, and as my cigarette smouldered in the ash tray, things became clear, like the water in the goblet.

I would re-enter the tomb, taking up where David Barkley had left off. But instead of grabbing the glory for myself, I would see that he received it. I would not let Durand mention my name, because now fame meant less than nothing to me, it had taken on a negative quality. I left hurriedly for the lobby, preparing to go into town, pick up tools, then revisit the tomb and try to pick up the pieces of my life which lay scattered somewhere down there.

"M. Andrews, may I speak with you, please?" It was the desk clerk, and I turned and walked back. "M. Durand has been trying to reach you for the last hour. You were not in your room, so I presumed you had left the grounds."

"I was in the dining room," I mumbled.

"I am truly sorry," he smiled. "Durand's call was last made five minutes past." I nodded and started to pick up the house phone when he continued, ". . . And Miss Barkley left these articles for you—and this letter when she departed."

He handed me the letter, then pulled Barkley's bag of tools out from beneath the counter. To me it was inconceivable that Janice could be capable of such irony. It was superb!

"Shall I have them taken to your room, M. Andrews?"

I touched the crowbar. "No," I said suddenly. "I'll take them with me."

". . . And if M. Durand calls again?"

"If he calls, you may tell him that I am leaving his precious Egypt soon, but first I have a debt to pay." I must have sounded a bit dramatic, because he stared at me, shrugged a Continental shoulder and turned away.

I left the burning heat of the noonday sun and descended into the musty darkness of the tomb. The damp odor swirled about me, dug its tendrils into my nostrils and clothes. I carefully placed the flashlight on the coffin, took out the tools and went to work. The coffin moved easier as I pumped the handle of the hydraulic jack back and forth. "I'm sorry, David," I said more or less to myself. It was more of a silent prayer, but I seemed to hear him say, "It's all right, boy. Just get down there into the queen's bedroom and let the world know of our

discovery . . ."

When the coffin had slipped to one side I pried up the slab, let it come to rest against the side, then reached eagerly for the flashlight. As if possessed by some perverse demon it crashed to the floor, plunging the tomb into darkness as the light shattered. I cursed, searched the bag for one of the candles, then lit it and turned my attention to the dark chamber at my feet.

I shielded my eyes from the light, saw that there was enough unused space for a leap, then jumped down. Eerie shadows danced about me as I felt the jar as my feet hit the hard rock. My heart danced as I realized that I was the only man who had been here for eras that were dead and forgotten centuries before Christ was born.

Queen Hetepheres was lying in state, her body encased in a golden likeness, her painted eyes carrying a look of supreme secrecy. Boxes and caskets of gold were within her easy reach. I touched one and as I raised the top, the hinges fell apart. I smiled, thinking how David would have enjoyed this moment, and ran my finger through the rouge which was supposed one day to re-adorn her face when she was called upon to face Osiris.

I turned to wipe my discolored finger on the wall when I saw what David had been searching for. Next to me were painted inscriptions on the wall, tracing the missing generation which had suffered oblivion for thousands of generations.

I bumped into a half-upright mummy case and barely caught it before it fell onto the next one. Three slaves had been placed there to protect her from the likes of me, and the poor devils who had died in terror would never know it had all been in vain.

From across the chamber, a sparkle caught my eye. A small casket was begging for attention. I walked toward it, removed the lid, then dipped my hands inside and cupped a handful of uncut diamonds and rubies. As they trickled through my fingers and fell to the floor I laughed softly. I would not have given a dime for the whole mess of them.

The candle flickered to a new low, then sputtered and died completely. At the same instant I reeled and stumbled to my knees, my lungs trying to get air which was not there. As I fell to the floor on my face, my half-conscious mind screamed that I should have realized that after the countless eras of being sealed up the air would be heavy and unpure, and the lighter air from above could not filter down.

I tried to hoist myself up, my legs kicking frantically to get a hold on her mummy case. Once they did, and my mouth was level with the floor of the tomb. I got three huge gulps of good air, then slipped and fell to the floor of her chamber. I lay on my back,

staring upward. The weak shaft of light from far above slanted diagonally across the wall of the queen's chamber. Then suddenly a stronger light shot down blindly, and a voice followed shouting something that lost its meaning in the echoing of the tomb.

Three times I tried to return its call, but my lips moved soundlessly. Then the light withdrew. I forced myself erect and climbed onto the mummy case again. When I forced myself to climb to the main floor, I saw a small square of natural light. I patted it, and felt like bending forward to kiss it. Then in tune with a grating noise from above, the light grew smaller, a foot, then less, and my hand clawed at it, an inch, then nothing but complete blackness as the slab once again covered the hole far above me.

For hours I sat in the darkness. Once I screamed, but there was only one answer—my own voice echoing back from the distant shore of insanity. When I tried to think rationally, it was no good, because thinking can go only so far when you constantly reach a dead end on every thought.

Then I recalled the letter Janice had written. I lit the candle again and jerked the letter from my pocket.

"Dear Rolly, I am leaving. Once I thought I loved you, but now I cannot. As surely as if you had stabbed him, you killed my father. I am not going to the police, this is between you and your God, if you have one. I have directed M. Durand to reseal the tomb. From the way you talked to him, and your eagerness to explore it further, he believes there may have been a discovery. But he is following my wishes and will not re-open the tomb until next spring. Goodbye.

Janice.

THE END

THE MAN WHO THOUGHT HE WAS POE

by Michael Avallone

". . . and the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting on the pallid bust of—" He closed the book swiftly as the shuffling figure of his wife loomed in the open doorway, the pat-pat of her slippered feet warning him. He frowned at her over his reading glasses, big horn-rimmed monstrosities of another age. Another life.

Hastily adjusting the papers on his littered desk to cover the small, rare edition of the TALES, he coughed testily. Damn the woman! She was forever snooping, prowling, prying. Why couldn't she leave him alone?

"Confound you, Agatha! What is it now? It's after two and you should be asleep."

She looked down at him where he was, closed in with old books, out-of-date furniture, reading by the light thrown fitfully from a kerosene lamp of ancient vintage. She sighed wearily with vast regret, a large, raw-boned woman too conscious of her bad choice of mate, her own nonconformation to the role of wife to the pedantic Roderick Legrande. Yet, she loved him because he was weak. There are such women.

"Roderick, come to bed. You've read long enough, haven't you? Put it off until morning."

"Leave me alone! I can't stand to be interrupted like this at odd hours when I'm reading." His words hammered at her with the repetition and fury of other nights. Other interruptions.

She leaned over him, sorrowfully, coaxing him as she might a small child. "Rod, hasn't this business gone far enough?"

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. It was the first time she had ever hinted at a difference, the opening gun of any marital hostility or divergence of opinion.

"What do you mean by that?" he croaked hoarsely.

His anger fanned her mounting impatience. "What do I mean by that?" she repeated fiercely, unable to hold it in now that he was pretending that everything was as it had always been.

"What don't I mean? You sold all our modern furnishings, made me get rid of everything I'd ever wanted in a home. And then what did you do? You fitted the house with period furniture, sold the radio and installed a phonograph that to this day I'll never know

where you got! And look at yourself. Writing by lamplight with a goosequill and dressed like something out of Charles Dickens. Good Lord! Rod, can't you see what's happened to you? This is 1957—not 1857!"

She ran down, exhausted and spent, the full tide of her anger ebbing as she saw his sickly face, bent shoulders and wasted body.

He glared up at her, a fantastic figure indeed. The exaggerated length of the quill in his bony fingers made him suddenly conscious of how it dated him as she had said. Like something out of the last century. Antique, outmoded, feeble.

The warm feel of the exquisitely bound volume concealed beneath his hand steadied him again. He sensed his bond with the past, the older, better things and pounded the desk with theatrical self-righteousness.

"Damn you, everlastingly, you infernal meddler!" He was shouting now, wildly gesticulating. "What is so wrong with my longing for the past or outfitting myself in the garment and style of a better age? What is so wonderful in all this progress that can be measured in the discordant sounds of subway trains and maudlin jazz music? Progress, indeed! Electric lights are proven artificial forms of illumination that damage valuable eyesight and as for your seeming forgetfulness of your duties and solicitude as wife, I am prepared for your apology and entreatment of my forgiveness." He paused triumphantly at the end of his stream of imposing, flowery discourse and folded his arms.

The color drained from her face. She attempted to say something, to prick his false bubble with the proper amount of scorn but no words came. Muffling a sob, she turned swiftly and swept from the room slamming the door with vibrant fury and hurt.

Grimacing, he set his teeth as the sound of her feet running up the steps of the landing to the bedroom came down to him. He cursed and flung down his feathered pen. That was modern times for you! People rushing to get someplace, setting up hideous dins, unmindful of the well-being of others. Progress was also the lowly wife telling you off and striving to rule.

The issue of his glorying in the past was lost on him. He wasn't aware of his own shortcomings, his own bigotry in things. He had gone too far back to correlate the present.

Selecting a meerschaum pipe from the elegantly carved rack on his desk, he filled it with studied pomp from the large humidor squatting beside it. Damn her anyway! Blast her for owning such a plain, coarse figure, for being unfortunately endowed with such a trite, unromantic name as Agatha. Agatha Beggs, when he had married her six years ago. Why couldn't she have been called Lenore, or Eulalie or

Ulalume—or even Helen? Poe was right, bless his fevered brow! Those were names a lover could conjure with!

His fretful mental mood caused him to fill the tiny chamber with smoke. Why hadn't she seen fit to do as he had in the long ago? Change her name, of course. He himself had been George Legrande once, born of ignorant, French immigrant parents. But once he had come in contact with the magic of Poe in the school library that had all been changed. Oh, he could tell the difference between Amontillado and Sherry all right! It was that simple. It merely wanted the devoted reading of THE GOLD BUG and THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER.

George Legrande was prosaic, unimposing, dull. The dual heroes of the respective Poe classics were not. William Legrande and Roderick Usher. The former, a brilliant adventurer of mathematical stature; the latter, a moody, impetuous scion of ancient, brooding aristocracy. He was already George Legrande by right of birth. He became Roderick Legrande by right of choice in a Providence courthouse as soon as he came of legal age. This was before he had met Agatha and yielded to the temptations of flesh from which even the most restricted man cannot escape.

The declaration of independence in name-changing was only the first salvo in his willful yearning for the time-dusted nostalgias of the days of Edgar Allan. He had been afraid to go beyond it until long after his marriage. He had worn the proper clothes, spoke with the terse urgency of the day and had given in to but a few of his odd caprices. He had only dared to collect old books, cameos, period pieces and musty bric-a-brac so that his friends and wife thought him merely a zealous antiquarian. Even Agatha had been proud of him then. Why wasn't she proud now?

He frowned with the memory of her impatience and suspicion as the home had been slowly, subtly over-run with the relics he had garnered from all the many corners of the city. Soon the new, up-to-date, in-the-time furniture went rapidly and the whole house at the edge of Ashlynne Square presented a family portrait of Nineteenth Century life.

Roderick's own job as bookkeeper for the Ashlynne Gas and Electric Company didn't interfere in any way with his trip back through time. He was pretty much to himself with his ledgers and files; to the rest of the help he was just a 'character', a still-young fellow who had a few eccentricities. It seemed there was one in every organization.

Not long after that, he was never seen without a muffler of some sort, or mittens and wore vests that were always outstanding for their cut and the gold watch with the linked chain forever

dangling from their pockets.

The lamp flickered and cast a dying gaze over the room. He smiled in contentment at the gathering gloom as it settled over his rocking chair and made blurred magic of the cabinet and the roll-top desk in the far corner. Tightening his scarf about his throat, he lurched to the fireplace and stoked the steadily crackling logs with a heavy andiron. Flame licked up at him from an opening made by the probe of the rod and he reveled in a feeling of rest, security and comfort. Why couldn't Agatha feel as he did about the old place? Wasn't it far more comfortable like this? Better than some four-room apartment where you always had to badger the janitor for steam, for hot water?

He sighed ponderously. Better indeed.

He went back to his reading of Poe's RAVEN with the alacrity of the small boy who has to put off playing with his Erector set until the guests have left. Beaming, he found his spot again.

". . . and the Raven never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting on the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door . . ."— here he flung a quick glance above the entrance of his own door. His slavery to the Poe tradition was complete. There above the arch of the threshold, stoically squatting on the famous bust of the most beautiful of all famous women, was a black, stern, stuffed raven. The imitation was complete in every detail. The blank eyes of Pallas Athenae set in the rounded, classic face; the Raven, bird of omen, black as coal, beak poised in an attitude of 'grave decorum', beady eyes glistening with message, seeming ever-ready to croak the fabulous cry of old, *"Nevermore!"*

He raced through the remainder of the poem with the speed of long familiarity and countless re-readings. At its doleful climax, he closed the book with gross reverence and went back to his pipe.

Poe was so right, he mused. Life is but a haunted dream, a dim candle, a wraith-like travail through lands of poignant memory, deep despair. Why do people blandly continue to think of empty things, unimportant theories and modern excitement?

If only Agatha——

"RODERICK!"

She was calling him from the head of the stairs with no real emergency in her tone save the loud, trumpeting plainness that he detested so heartily. He bit the end of his pipe in annoyance. What the devil did she want now?

"Yes, what is it?" he barked from the doorway. Atop the landing, her wide figure moved in the semi-darkness, one arm joining the ballustrade in blending shadow.

"If you ever find time to leave that dream world of yours," her

words rippled down on a wave of sarcasm, "will you bring some fresh meat up from the cellar?"

"Meat? At this ungodly hour?"

"Yes—I'll need the chops for dinner tomorrow and with one thing and another I may forget it at the last minute. You don't mind, do you?" There was the barest lilt of mockery in her voice.

He clattered out from the study grumpily and headed for the alcove directly under the stairs. "That infernal refrigerator! Why couldn't an ordinary icebox have sufficed?" He winced at the thought of its cost, its mammoth size, its modernity.

She leaned over the railing so that he could hear her rejoinder.

"There isn't room in the kitchen, remember? Thanks to you and your love for old houses. We barely get by with two chairs and a table."

"Go to bed, Agatha! I'll get it for you."

All the way down the rickety cellar steps, the thought nettled him. The refrigerator. It had been her only triumph over his mode of life. It was the one thing he had not been able to control when furnishing the house and she had defied him on the whole issue. They had to have fresh meat. He couldn't dispute the point. Keeping it in the cellar was a necessity due to its streamlined grandeur of size. That was what really bothered him. He still felt that she had purchased such a big model, such an ultramodern one as a flaunt to his code, his feelings, his ancient ideas.

The feeble light of the lone bulb that dangled perilously from a length of corded wire cast a wavery glow over the thing. Everything else here in the cellar was old. The refrigerator was still new, its white porcelain shoulders offsetting the incredible age of the antiques that formed its company.

Round, bulging, aged-in-the-wood barrels; a spinning wheel teetering precariously on a broken, warped base as if the next closing of the upstairs door would cause it to fall. In one corner, flanking a mountainous pile of yellowed newspapers, the faded glory of a century old painting peered out past the cobwebs and layers of dust encroaching on its scene.

He paused to survey them once again with all the fervor that had prompted his ownership. They were his links, his tracks back to the past.

It was a cellar out of the pages of ancient historians. The low, spiderwebbed rafters; the heavy, closely bunched blocks of rounded stone that walled the four sides was a torture chamber that only wanted the proper equipment to justify the name.

Forgetting his original purpose, he glided to another recess where a scratched and scarred piano gleamed out at him from the shrouded depths with its contrasting white teeth of keyboard. He ran his fingeres over the unused ivories and reveled in the out-

of-tune notes that sounded hollowly in the low-ceilinged chamber. This was his age, his era. "If Milady would be so kind. This is our waltz." A slim, dainty, powdered dream. Small, elegant feet. Not big and awkward like Agatha.

Agatha. He remembered the meat and the refrigerator, a spasm contorting his face. How he would love to be rid of both! Then he could delight in his fancies uninterrupted. There would be no prying eyes, no criticism. And some day, somewhere, he could begin anew, commence the whole romance of courtship with someone more to his tastes, his fitting mate . . . but, no, it wasn't possible . . . or was it?

A chill spread through him slowly almost cautiously as if he had it under control. Was it possible that he had been unconsciously thinking of it all the time so that the staggering suggestion did not shock him as it should have? Was that it? His thin face powered itself into his bony hands in sudden fear. Good God!

Slowly with dragging, thoughtful steps, he moved toward the refrigerator and whipped the broad door wide.

* * * * * *

"Agatha, I've been thinking—"

"What about, Roderick?"

"The refrigerator. I must confess in spite of my previous thoughts on the subject that it is performing its functions rather well. So much so that I have reversed my former attitude and shall now do all in my power to retain it in perfect working order."

"Well, it's about time, I must say! I thought you understood that by having such a thing I am able to stock up on meat products without going to the butcher's so often. I have so many other things to do around the house. The time spent on shopping for food can be used to better advantage."

"That's true, Agatha. Besides, there is the fresh meat—"

"Of course, Roderick. I'm glad you changed your mind about it."

"I'm afraid it's none too soon."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"The cooling system seemed faulty to me last night. Some sort of leak. Nothing I can't repair myself. So after supper, I'll be working down the cellar—"

"Wouldn't you rather I called the handyman from the company? There's a guarantee—"

"Oh, no. By no means. I'll fix it myself. I'm not without ability along that line, you know. So if you hear any strange noises from the basement after supper, pay no mind. It will only be me."

"As you say, Roderick."

She had been too pleased by his affability to argue the point. He had been too anxious to allay her suspicions to be short-tempered with her.

His plan was very simple. Poe

himself had pointed the way with the bizarre cunning of the master. The method was in the tale THE BLACK CAT. It was cold, it was clear, it was proper. The only difference lay in the motive. The harrassed protagonist of the BLACK CAT driven to extremes of alcoholism had killed his wife in a fit of passion while they were both in the cellar of their home. The body had been disposed of by the process of sealing it in a section of decomposed wall. But he would go Edgar Allan one better. The floor of his cellar was earthen. Thick, damp soil. He would dig deep and dig hard and no one would know of his crime. He chuckled grimly to himself. There would be no black cat buried with her to reveal his secret by its terrible squalling. And he would not boast of the foundations of his house, of the firm, rock-like anchorage that it bedded on. He had no one to boast to.

He would arrange it so that it would seem that Agatha, tired of his misanthropic life had run away in the dead of night. He was not unaware of the strange light people held him in.

"Did you fix it? You certainly took long enough."

"Yes, I did. But it was the first time I have ever experimented with a thing like that and I wanted to repair it properly." *It had taken longer digging the hole than he had thought it would. There was a good deal of rock formation under the old house.*

"I never thought one could get their hands so dirty working on a refrigerator, Roderick. You look as if you'd been ditch digging." *What was behind that remark? Did she suspect or had she just winged blithely past the truth?*

"Fact is, Agatha, I have moved the machine around a bit. It is nearer the steps than it was before. That way you can get at it more easily." *For another day or so anyway. After that it won't matter.*

"Roderick—why not clean the whole cellar up? Throw all that old stuff out? It frightens me, this fixation of yours for old things." *It won't frighten you much longer, Agatha.*

"Don't you like to remember the past, Agatha?" *Do it now, my dear. You haven't much time.*

"Not the way you do. Ugh! Old, dirty, crumbling things. Decayed furniture. Always reading that Poe person. Can't you see what it's done to you? To—us?"

Agatha dear, you have just signed your death warrant. Destroyed the last vestige of human pity within me.

Friday night came with that maddening slowness that typifies anything one waits for. Up until that point, Legrande had felt no qualms, displayed no outward signs of his inner tension, his eagerness for the little game of death to begin. He had been sober and calm when dinner time came

but once the meal began, he toyed with his food and punctuated his eating with sly glances at his watch beneath his napkin. Agatha was oddly silent herself, only speaking to ask him to pass the salt and briefly commenting on the vagaries of the weather.

He knew he was nervous, could feel it in the sticky clasp of his napkin to his fingers, the closed-in feel of his starched collar. "Bread, please," he mumbled and was amazed when he caught himself repeating the idiotic phrase so that she could hear and comply. Her full, peasant's face stared at him dumbly for an instant.

The meal wore on with aggravating slowness, stillness. His reflection paled back at him from the oval, concave mirror hanging beyond her chair. He saw the thinning black of his hair, the sharp lines prematurely etched in his cadaverous cheeks and forgot the moment's concern in self-fascination. He was really so much like Poe, he thought. The same bitter disappointed mouth, the high forehead, the eyes with lights in them. . . .

"Roderick, are you feeling well?"

He came back from the world of the mirror. "Quite well." He stole a second from his watch. Why hadn't it begun yet? It was almost time. He couldn't have misjudged his calculations. He'd never be able to carry her down into the cellar. It would have to be done down there. But first, she would have to be *in* the cellar. Unsuspecting, of her own volition, for a perfectly good reason—

"Did you like the lamb, Roderick?" she was asking. "I feel as if it was especially good tonight."

"It was, my dear," he agreed without meaning. Damnation! Wouldn't it ever happen?

BOOO—MMMM!

A muffled roar noised up from what seemed directly below the table, and Agatha dropped her fork with a squeal of fright. The dishes rattled and Roderick shivered. The sound was brief, ending as swiftly as it had come.

She stared at him in questioning wonder. "Gracious, what was that?"

"It sounded like it came from the cellar—" Masking the stab of elation within his breast, he pushed back from his chair and bounded out of the room into the hall corridor, confident she would follow out of curiosity alone, possibly wifely concern. He was glad all over, glad that the thing had begun, would soon be over.

He paused for the barest instant at the top of the cellar steps, waiting for the scrape of her chair, the rapid click of her heels. They came in that sequence and he pounded down the wooden steps, the blood mounting in his veins. It would not be long now.

He was down the steps and into the heart of the cellar before the weight of her heavy heel thudded on the first step. He had to hurry now. The scattered remnants of

blown wiring and tin can that he had set electrically the evening before were strewn chaotically in the narrow bin where he had placed them. In a breathless moment, spurred by each descending thump of her shoes, he had spread several stacks of the yellowed newspapers over the minor ruin. It had been a simple enough trick. All that was needed was some powder and an elemental knowledge of electricity.

"Roderick, what was it? What made that terrible noise?" she was demanding in tempo to her falling feet. Gradually, her body seemed to lower itself into view with timidity as if waiting for his reassurances that everything was all right.

"I can't be certain, dear. But come ahead and we'll see. Possibly the refrigerator is leaking and—"

"Oh, no. That can't be!" She hove into sight, her face bright and red in the proximity of the dangling bulb. "It sounded like an explosion of some kind."

"That may be," he had stationed himself at the door of the porcelain giant as if investigating his opinion. "But there doesn't appear to be anything of the sort. Do you suppose something fell and caused the noise?"

She drew in closer, fanning her skirts as she did so, lulled on by the private congeniality of his tone. For once they both were interested in the same thing. Something they had not been guilty of in years.

"Well, this is your sanctum sanctorum, Roderick. You would know more about that than I. Does it look as if something dropped accidentally? It would have to be something heavy of course like—say the piano." She moved over to it, not remarking that it was further out from its recess than was normal, not questioning the abnormal expanse of yawning blackness beyond it. But how could she? She had seldom been in the cellar and then only to go to the refrigerator. She certainly wouldn't dally down here for any length of time. It would be out of keeping with her professed feelings for old things.

His eyes never left her back as his hand, nervously twitching, reached slowly for the handle of the spade that poked up from its narrow stall.

"No, it doesn't seem to be anything I can see—how about you?" she murmured, and the turning loudness of her voice warned him. At the last second, his hand whipped back from its desired goal. She was facing him again.

He wondered if he was controlling his face as much as he wanted to. A roaring flush was in his cheeks at her near discovery of his plan. Pounding, pounding—

"I'm confounded if I can see what made that sound, Agatha." He coughed with a sudden spasm. "It couldn't be that we imagined it?"

Her large eyes showed her scorn. "Don't be an ass! There most cer-

tainly was a noise of some kind and I mean to find out what it was." She swept by him with her big body toward the refrigerator, her back once again turned helplessly to his murderous design. Lightning-swift, with the boldness of desperation, he swung the spade clear from its narrow bin and held it noiselessly behind him. It was now or never. He could not hold her down here much longer.

Cautiously, he tip-toed behind her as she half-crouched before her time-saver, oblivious of the terror at her very heels.

The light played on the little scene; the saffron glow of the bulb adding the touch of the unreal to everything. *No, it would not be long now.*

"I'm pleased to see you moved it as you said you would. It is much easier this way, isn't it?" *Was she saying that?* He could hardly restrain a mad giggle as he raised the spade in a high parabola of premeditated murder above his head.

"Still, I don't understand what could have made such a noise. Perhaps the mechanism has run down—*why did she have to keep on babbling that drivel? Just another second, Agatha. Hold your position. Don't move. That's it, that's it. Now, now. . . .* His muscles tensed for the killing blow and the digging implement started down as if he were driving a spike into a railroad tie—

"AGATHA!"

The cry knifed through his lungs with his overpowering bewilderment, the complete change of the tableau. Arms as fierce and as strong as the Seducers and Temptresses of old were crushing him, punishing him with their steel, bending his scrawny form back without mercy or remorse. The wooden shaft of the spade spiraled from his senseless fingers. She had whirled as if windswept at the zero hour of her life and encompassed him with the embrace of Death.

"—you crawling, slimy monster!" The words hissed out at him, close to his face on the wings of hot, furious breath. "I knew it all along! You and your petty deceits! Your stupid inconsistencies! Did you think me the complete foolish trusting wife? Did you imagine for one second that you had me deceived?"

He gagged with the pressure of her blocky hands, the overhead bulb dancing before his clouding vision like some gigantic, new species of fly. "Aga—" he choked. The blood in his skull ran riot and the pounding sensation of faintness lurched on as in a dream. Dimly, he heard an enormous click as of some mechanical thing in operation. . . .

"You would do away with me, was that it? You pedantic, morbid monstrosity! Old things, dead things, antiques! Musty diaries and decadent histories of people not worth knowing! You can have it all now, Roderick! I give it to you of my own free will! I want

the present and progress." A draft of cold air funneled up his legs in dread newness—oh, Good God!

"I've been down here before, Roderick, as you shall presently discover. Now!"

He was so sickly. He was so pale. She was so strong. She balled him up like some hateful package and threw him away.

The door of the refrigerator clanged shut behind him. The light was on. There was no meat and there were no shelves. Only room for a man. Room enough for his body.

In the awful nakedness of the interior, he hurled himself desperately against the cold walls. His hands drummed madly—her voice mocked from somewhere on the other side of the door, beyond the edge of darkness.

"You see, Roderick, I read Poe too. Remember the CASK OF AMONTILLADO, dear? The catacombs, the mason's sign and Montresor burying poor Fortunato behind that wall of bricks—"

"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, AGATHA!"

THE END

THE MAN WHO STOLE HIS BODY

by Mark Mallory

THEY must hurry! Heart action had practically stopped. There were only minutes until it would be too late. Hopefully he watched the white vehicle take a corner on two screeching wheels and jam to an abrupt stop. Interne and driver flung themselves out and brushed aside the policeman and reporter who bent over the body.

The erstwhile Doctor Blaine stood by the curb in front of the truck's headlights and looked down at *his* prostrate body. It lay there calm and pale. There was no mark upon the head, yet Blaine knew it must have been a brain injury.

In this new state he found that his eyes possessed an ability of penetrating where he willed them, something for which he had sometimes frantically wished during his medical practice. There were no fractures, spine was intact, visceral organs a bit disarranged but nothing serious; the skull, then, concealed the damage. Ah, yes! As he leaned closer he discerned a small clot compressed at the base of the brain. Yes, that would have done it. How perfectly stupid of him to have hit his head against the pointed radiator cap.

The truck driver was still sitting in his seat, stunned and white. A bystander had called the ambulance. The doctor veered away from a small crowd that pressed in.

The interne's placid face gave a jerk when he looked down at Blaine's. "Good God! It's Dr. Blaine."

"Not the bigshot surgeon?" asked the heavy-jawed driver in awe.

In different circumstances this homage from two strangers would have pleased Blaine. His associates had been stingy with their recognition.

The interne nodded, "*The* Dr. Blaine." His hands touched the wrist, heart and eyelids. "Dead!"

"The adrenalin, you damned fool! Get a move on! Trephine! You've got fifteen minutes."

The interne made no sign that he'd heard, and Blaine knew that he hadn't.

With cold horror he watched them flip the blanket over his face, load his body on the stretcher and slip it into the ambulance. As they shut the door the driver asked, "Do we take him home with us, or do we save ourselves a trip?"

"We'll take him to the morgue. In a case like this when a man isn't mangled to hamburger, the insurance company will demand an autopsy. I've heard his heart wasn't so good. Might find something at that."

Blaine's shoulders sagged. They had murdered him. Then the thought stabbed through him, "How many men have you murdered with the same attitude? Perhaps their frantic spirits stood by and watched while you dropped their wrist and shook your head. Perhaps they, too, lost their greatest triumphs by your act of negligence."

An inspiration caught Blaine. If physicians knew that the spirit was standing by ready to cooperate; if they only knew that unseen eyes followed their every move—they would put forth more effort. There would be no quickly scrawled death certificates. It would eliminate such terrible blunders of negligence as he'd witnessed and possibly performed himself. The final commitment would come only from death itself, instead, as he now suspected, often from the premature verdict of a bored young interne.

Fingers plucked at his sleeve, "Julius Blaine, it is better that you come with me now. Come, I am your guide."

Blaine shook off the hand, his eyes glued to the door of the ambulance. "It isn't too late. You can't take me away yet. I could still return."

"Yes, I know. But you heard what the doctor said."

"They can't murder me! I have work to do yet." He threw himself at the broad, white door, but the latch escaped his grasp. His fingers closed around it, and then through it. "For God's sake, help me, can't you?" he pleaded.

The voice behind him answered, "I am your servant on this journey, until we reach the Gate. What do you want of me?"

"Open this door," Blaine commanded instantly with ingrained professional authority. A cool sensation brushed his side; then the door handle dipped down and the door gaped open. Blaine tugged at the stretcher. Again his clawing fingers melted through matter. The ambulance driver ground his foot on the starter.

"My body—" Blaine ordered, "—pick it up. We shall take it with us."

The body levitated then drifted out horizontal beside Blaine, the blanket draping down a foot on either side. The ambulance roared to life and left them there. The voice said, "We cannot take the body with us on the journey. It is of the earth."

"I'm not going on any journey. We're going to my hospital. Follow me, and hurry."

As he raced around the corner, the body drifting close behind him, he made no effort to avoid the street lights. He would have preferred not to frighten the few pedestrians who scattered in panic at the unholy sight, but there was no time.

He led his body and its invisible carrier two blocks to the Jepsum Medical-Center Building. As they entered the emergency hall the Voice argued with him.

"What have you in your mind, Julius Blaine? You cannot operate upon your own body."

"No, but I can direct the operation. I command you to speak what I tell you so that whoever is present can hear it." He passed through the solid panel into the darkened operating room. His body came through after him, thrusting the swinging doors apart with the flat of its feet. "Lay it there on the table."

"Julius Blaine, this is futile. If you would only pause for an instant as others have done before you, you would realize the foolishness of clinging to this clay which you call your body."

"Never mind! Come with me."

"Listen to me," the Voice pleaded. "Have you no compassion for the shock that the living will feel if you force me to speak to them? There is a time and place for spiritual contact with the living, but the mediums must be well-prepared. If you violate the laws of human credulity you may drive them insane."

Blaine paused in his flight through the door. "A medium?" It struck home that this was the truth. How should he have felt being addressed in a similar manner? He looked at the clock on the wall. It was hopeless. There was no time to prepare or cajole a medium into contact.

From the hall came the faint bellow of the public address call-system: "Calling Dr. Tibbet! Calling Dr. Tibbet!"

Blaine suddenly addressed the Voice: "Can you hear me at a distance?"

"Yes, at any distance."

Blaine pointed at a can of ether on a shelf. "Take this to the superintendent's office." He gave brief instructions of its location, and then he briefly detailed his plan. He concluded, "It will still be a shock, but the loudspeaker will help a little. Give them something to look at anyway."

Blaine glanced at the clock again. "Go, now, and report to me when you find the transmitter. Be careful of that ether." The can of ether left the ledge and the door opened just far enough to allow its passage.

Almost immediately the voice called to him: "I have found the office. It is empty."

"Good!" Blaine replied and began dictating.

* * *

Blond, lean Dr. Ballew listened to the unusual call that resounded through the building: *"Calling any available doctor. Go to emergency operating room at once. A matter of seconds decides life or death."* The words came muffled but distinctly through the door which should have been soundproof.

Nevertheless he smiled down at his patient. "Excuse me, please. Someone's playing jokes over the public address system."

He stepped to the hall and listened to the message again. He frowned. No emergency condoned

such misuse of the microphone. Still, he moved toward the stairs, and as the words struck his ears again he broke into a trot.

It was late, so there might be no other doctors available. As he entered the end corridor the head floor-nurse fell in beside him silently.

They entered the emergency room and stopped dead when only the soft sidelights greeted them. As the swinging door swung back and forth the message in the hall ceased, and now a sharp order bore in, gushing and abating as the door opened and closed in its dying arc.

The nurse and the doctor looked at each other.

"What goes on here?" Ballew demanded crossly.

The phone rang at his side. He picked up the white receiver. "Dr. Ballew speaking."

A voice hammered at him from the receiver: "Dr. Ballew, your patient is on the table under that blanket. There is no time to explain this unusual situation. I cannot speak to you directly. If you will follow my instructions implicity you can save a life.

"The patient has died of cerebral hemorrhage in the past few minutes. The condition is still operable with some slight hope of recovery. No time to sterilize instruments. Incise and trephine at a point two centimeters left medium lower occipital—" Careful instructions flowed in short bursts into Ballew's ear, as though someone were listening and repeating them to him. The language was crisp and the vocabulary undoubtedly owned by a physician. Even so, when the voice ceased Ballew slammed down the receiver in anger and strode over to the covered body. "What kind of damned nonsense is this?" he shouted. "If this is young Petry's idea of a practical joke I'll break that fool interne's neck." He stripped off the blanket. "Turn on the table lights, nurse."

The brilliant, shadowless operating lights flared down and carved Blaine's profile into sharp relief against the blinding white. His head lay on its right cheek away from the doctor.

Ballew glanced down, started violently, then he covered his eyes with his hand and gave a short laugh. "Damned lights! Too bright at first. Play tricks on your eyes. I thought that was the House Surgeon at first glance." He uncovered his eyes and looked away to accustom them to the brilliancy. The taut form of the head nurse staring at the table made him look back.

"Doctor!" cried the nurse, "It *is* Dr. Blaine!"

"It's Blaine, all right, and he's —" Ballew's hand dropped back from a flicking examination, "dead!" But his slender fingers suddenly slipped behind Blaine's skull. They probed in the heavy shock of hair above the muddy collar.

"Nurse, there *is* an indenture

right where he described it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, you didn't hear. Never mind. I'll operate."

"Operate? But you just said—"

"Get me some instruments. Anything that looks sterile and sharp. I've got to dig right *now*."

The nurse reminded sharply, "Your hands, Doctor. You're not sterile. I'll have your rubber gloves ready when you return."

"Dammit, can't you understand English! I said *now!*" Ballew strode over to the instrument cabinet, darted his hand into it five times and half ran back to the table clutching bright steel.

As he clattered them down on a porcelain tray, the operating light suddenly faded out. Ballew wheeled unbelievingly. The nurse stood resolute, her back to the switch. "Dr. Ballew, I'll permit no such outrage. If the patient is dead you have no right to dissect without permission. If he can still be saved, then an operation in your contaminated condition would be murder."

Before Ballew could unlimber his angry tongue, a heavy, terrible voice thundered from the loud speaker in the outer corridor. *"Nurse Jennings, In the name of God and Hippocrates, turn on those lights,"* it commanded.

Her mouth sagged and her lips were loose gashes of red in the livid white of her face, as she twisted convulsively and snapped the switch. Ballew stared about stupidly.

"I don't like this. I don't," he muttered slowly. Then his fingers took command of his attention. Without the ever-present hampering rubber gloves, his fingers moved with incredible speed and precision. Before the nurse recovered enough to assist, the scalp was laid back and the bone bared of flesh.

"Trephine!"

He received the cold slap of metal against his bare palm. Then he swore. "Look at that! Rust! Simply *can't* use that. Run get another—a smaller one if you can—"

Again the resounding voice from the hall interfered: *"No, Ballew. Use that one. No time. Only seconds before it's too late."*

Ballew looked over his shoulder then down at the corpse. A grim tautness hunched his shoulders together. "Okay, Mr. X. I guess I can't infect a cadaver anyway." He carefully touched the point to the skull, added pressure and twisted.

The nurse had recovered her composure. Now she fled from panel to panel completing the necessary surgical items with which to complete the operation.

Ballew noticed from the corner of his eye as she prepared sutures. He gritted his teeth as he bored into bone. "I'm afraid we're both a little optimistic," he grunted.

Nurse Jennings, as the mysterious voice had correctly called her, didn't comment. She busied herself with the many preparations for restoring life to the newly

dead. She prepared a hypodermic of adrenalin. Then she trundled up the electric needle apparatus. Checked the pulmotor and even glanced once at the iron lung.

By this time Ballew was ready for her assistance again. In silence he finished the operation; then straightened up motionless for an instant as if awaiting further orders.

They came: "Try adrenalin first."

As he tilted up the syringe to force out the air, long-expected footsteps came to Ballew's ears. "What the devil d'ya suppose took so long for someone else to show up?" he muttered.

The loudspeaker answered his question. The voice came faintly this time, in the proper muted tone: "Calling Doctors Kelvick and Burns! Calling Nurse Foley! Report to Surgery B. Emergency!"

The footsteps shuffled to a halt a dozen paces short of the emergency room; then they retreated rapidly.

Ballew shouted: "Dr. Kelvick! Dr. Burns!" But immediately the loudspeaker drowned out his voice with its repeated call.

"Blast it! Something's completely haywire around here."

Almost viciously the young doctor jabbed the hypodermic into the colorless flesh. "I'll bring this stiff back to life for a minute if I have to *pickle* it in adrenalin. Another ampoule, Nurse."

His hands twitched nervously as he prepared the second syringeful. The needle didn't enter so cleanly this time. An insane light burned from Dr. Ballew's eyes. "Now squirm, damn you!"

A barely perceptible vibration rippled through the body of Dr. Blaine. A sudden surge of color reddened the ashy skin. A terrible rasp crackled from his throat as he gasped back life into his tortured body. Now an arm flung across his chest, his legs convulsed and his head rolled tightly from side to side.

"I did it, blast you, I did it!" Ballew flung defiantly over his shoulder, but the loudspeaker was silent.

Suddenly, like spring-shutters, Blaine's eyes gaped open wildly. A superhuman expenditure kept his hair-grip on consciousness.

"Too much adrenalin, Doctor. I won't last a minute."

"It was the only way. I—"

"Never mind. Don't talk. *Listen!*"

Blaine's voice carried the ghastly urgency of a message from the dead. He spoke softly but rapidly. "You've got to believe this, Ballew! *There is life after death!* It was I who directed this operation. Those were my words over the loudspeaker and in the telephone. But I could only speak through a medium.

"You've got to believe this and tell the whole medical world. Tell them to keep trying, even when the body seems dead. The spirit is standing by, waiting—watching—hoping. Don't let them down.

They'll cooperate. Keep trying. Don't bury them alive! For God's sake don't bury them alive like that interne tried to do to me!"

The tremendous shock from the adrenalin jerked Blaine's limbs in a violent palsy. Neither the physical nor psychic reaction was new to Dr. Ballew. He'd seen it happen before. And almost invariably the patient, if he had time to talk, told a fantastic story of life after death. Why contradict the poor devils? Let them cling to this last comfort.

He said soothingly, "Yes, Dr. Blaine, I know."

Blaine's sunken eyes pierced into his like lanced fire. "No you don't know, you fool! You don't believe me. You're humoring me. You are still as much of an agnostic as I was this morning." He sighed. He was weakening, and the collapse he'd predicted for himself was closing in.

"Very well, Dr. Ballew. Check up and see who has been sending these messages over the public address system." His chin sank back, and now his lips barely moved. "When I go this time I'll make one last try. I'll say your name over the loudspeaker—if I can—persuade the Guide—if I can—"

Dr. Ballew jerked out his stethoscope and clapped it to Blaine's heart.

"More adrenalin, Doctor?" the nurse asked quietly.

"No!" He straightened up. "Blaine is dead—"

"Poor fellow! Strange how they all come to believe in after-life," the nurse whispered.

"Yeah." Ballew stuffed the stethoscope in his pocket. "I wish I could believe them. They just get scared. Can't face the thought of the long sleep. Suppose it's only human, though. If I have time I'll probably do the same thing. I think I've got lots of guts, but when you get right down to it—"

"Doctor Ballew! Calling Doctor Ballew!"

Ballew sprang away from the table like a startled buck. The color drained from his face, as he stumbled to a rigid halt. Sweat beaded his face. His lower lip trembled.

"He couldn't do it! It's impossible!" he told the nurse.

Nurse Jennings strode briskly across the room. Ballew demanded, "He couldn't do it, could he? Where are you going, Nurse?"

She looked at him askance, a touch of contempt, perhaps pity, in her middle-aged face. She picked up the white phone and held it out to him. "Aren't you going to answer it? It's your call. Listen!"

"Calling Doctor Ballew! Calling Doctor Ballew!"

This time the doctor listened dumbly to his name.

"My call did you say?" His hands dropped loosely to his sides. Oh, yes, of course! I'll—I'll take it." He accepted the phone from her.

"This is Dr. Ballew."

There was no answer.

MR. TIGLATH

by Poul Anderson

FOG was blowing in from the Bay, thin streamers running down the streets and slinking into alleys and playing peekaboo around the tall drab sides of buildings. There was still a gaunt light from the western sun, but Harley had had trouble reading the house numbers. He drove slowly, craning his neck to see; there weren't any other cars around, nobody walking. Hard to believe that this shabby district was only a few blocks off the Embarcadero.

There! Harley pulled up to the curb and got out, methodically closing the windows and locking the door. Then, for a moment, he hesitated. The whole business made him feel silly. Martinez had told him about the shop, and Martinez knew things that Herb Caen had never heard of, but still —just how do you say, "I want to buy a bottle with a beautiful woman in it, and one with a thief, and one with a murderer?"

He lit a cigaret, cupping his hand around the match against the small wet wind. He was a tall man, dressed with studied casualness, and his face was young and square-jawed and rather piratical: which just goes to show that faces have nothing to do with character. Harley was a junior executive in a large export firm, he was competent enough to handle routine but he lacked the aggressiveness to get much further and his mental energy was channeled into colorful daydreams.

"But religion, myths, the old *Märchen* and the modern slick-paper story, are nothing but the fulfillment of dreams," Martinez had said. "Who hasn't had fantasies of flying, or being invisible, or making love to improbably beautiful women sultry on a tiger-skin rug, or defeating whole armies of bad guys single-handed? Of course, dreams also include nightmares, but maybe you're so fortunate as never to have nightmares. Now I've come across the most interesting little shop lately —"

Martinez did not work. He prowled, and he drank with discrimination, and he talked. Harley suspected that his income was from gossip columnists and from merchants willing to pay for some wide-ranging word of mouth advertising. Still, the man had his own curious integrity. He did not recommend a place unless it really had something to offer.

Words! Harley threw his cigaret to the pavement and stepped on it and walked over to the store.

Its dusty glass front was hem-

med in between two high melancholy warehouses, and was filled with bottles and cobwebs. As nearly as you could see—for the interior was dim—the bottles were a wildly tumbled-together museum, everything from dog-headed canopic jars and lustily obscene red-and-black amphorae to clay objects from peculiar ends of the world and green glass nonentities which had recently held beer. They had only one thing in common: all were tightly stoppered. The legend in the window said merely TIGLATH.

Harley loitered there a minute longer. Then, *what the hell,* he thought, *the worst that can happen is I make a fool of myself and don't come back here.* For him that was bad; he could wince at remembered gaucheries of years ago as most men cringe from remembered sins. But not too bad. He turned the doorknob and walked in.

For a moment he was blind. The air was unmoving, dusty, rather damp and chill but with a hint of musk. Then slowly his eyes grew accustomed, and he saw row on row of shelves, loaded with bottles. The bottles overflowed their racks, they were heaped on the counter, huddled into corners, forced out on the floor. From the thick dust and the occasional spiderwebs, they must have been here for many years, and yet Martinez said the shop had only opened last week. Odd.

"Good day, sir. Can I help you?"

Harley swallowed a lump of dryness. If Martinez' hints were not just some obscure practical joke, then this place held more than curios; it was a branch of Hell's warehouse. He told himself that that was ridiculous. This was San Francisco in the year of sanity 1957, when man had discarded all supernatural hells in favor of what he could make himself. Less than a mile from here, the tourists were being picturesquely gouged at Fisherman's Wharf, and—

The proprietor was very tall and thin and bald; his face was long, pale, with a high, domed forehead and a little smile. He spoke colorless General American, his suit was rather shabby, and his eyes were hidden by thick glasses. "At your service, sir," he said.

"Uh—" Harley parried for time. "Mr. Tiglath?"

"So I usually call myself. Can I show you anything?"

"Well—I was wondering—you sell bottles, don't you?"

"And their contents, Mr. Harley. Did you have anything special in mind?"

Harley started. "How did you know my name? I never saw you before."

"Ah. Perhaps I have seen you." Mr. Tiglath took out a gold cigaret case and opened it. "Care for — No, perhaps not. My brand is probably too strong for even the French taste." His first puff confirmed that; it smelled of sulfur. He waited companionably behind

the counter, not trying to hurry matters.

"Um—been here long?" fumbled Harley.

"Only about a week. I move around, you know. All over the world, for many years now. But I think I will be here for a year or two."

"Um—a friend of mine said your —your stock in trade was—useful."

"So I hope. I warn you, Mr. Harley, it is also expensive." Mr. Tiglath shrugged. "Inflation, you know. One must live."

"Look here," blurted Harley, "I've heard fantastic stories about —well, don't be insulted, but the way I heard it—doubtless just malicious gossip, but, uh, something about a white slave trade—"

"Ah, yes." Mr. Tiglath inhaled deeply and smiled. "The wildest rumors do fly, don't they? I deal in nothing of the sort, I assure you. It is impossible for me, even if I wanted to. No, a person can only be bottled with his own consent. I am merely a—an employment agent."

Harley groped for a cigaret of his own. "Just what is the story, anyway?" he demanded.

Mr. Tiglath leaned on the counter. "Let me answer you indirectly. You are a hard-headed modern with no taste for the fantastic, but let me tell you a little fairy story. It is an intriguing bit of folklore, and perhaps a useful allegory.

"A very long time ago, in the region of Mesopotamia, one of the lesser gods—or lesser demons, for at a primitive level of culture there is no real distinction—got into, ah, difficulties, and was condemned to live as a mortal man for a period of, oh, shall we say a million years. However, since it was incompatible with the dignity of his birth for him to hew wood and draw water, he was allowed to retain one small ability: that of bottling people. A man or woman put into a bottle does not need food or drink and, though perfectly conscious all the time, and I fear rather bored as the years go by, does not go insane. In short, he lasts indefinitely. However, our demon was only permitted to bottle people with their own unforced consent; he could not use magic, drugs, hypnotism, or violence, and he had to warn them in advance of what it would mean."

"Which is—?" asked Harley nervously.

"The bottle, with contents, may be sold by the demon. The person emerges when the bottle is uncorked. He is constrained to obey all the orders of his—ah—employer, to the best of his mortal ability, and to refrain from attacking the employer. The contract lasts till the bottled person dies—which, of course, may happen incidentally to some assignment; the employer is under no restrictions. Or, the contract expires and the person becomes free when the employer dies or becomes unable to give further orders. For instance, if the employer

were to enter a Trappist monastery the bottle person would be released from the geas."

"Why not say 'slave' and 'owner'?" asked Harley.

Mr. Tiglath looked pained. "Those are harsh words. They could lead to difficulties with the police. Actually, the demon would often have been in conflict with the authorities and forced to decamp. The modern skeptical age makes things much easier for him; for what patron would talk, or who would believe such a story? As a matter of fact, an obvious detective was in here only yesterday, but satisfied himself that I am a harmless seller of curios.— Even so, our demon would have to move his shop to another city or country every few years."

He stood up straight, seeming all at once to loom immensely tall. "Well, Mr. Harley, enough of idle tales. Would you like to buy a bottle?"

"I—don't know," mumbled Harley. The shock was still on him. "Let me think—" He rubbed the back of his neck, nervously. Mr. Tiglath seemed to fill the whole room.

Wetting his lips and looking at the floor, he said at last: "Uh, to continue the fairy tale, suppose a customer wanted a—a bottle with a girl in it? A beautiful girl—" He tried to laugh, but it didn't come out very well. "What about it?"

"Why, I suppose our hypothetical demon could arrange it," said Mr. Tiglath genially. "Naturally, the turnover in such stock would be brisk, but there are always possibilities. During the depression, for instance, people would have sought him as a last resort; if he were in Europe during the recent war, there would be desperate refugees—yes, yes. But as said, the turnover is rapid. No woman from old Egypt, you understand, would remain this long. Now if a patron wanted a good strong man-at-arms, there might still be some Assyrians—"

"No." Harley laughed again, weakly. "Not yet, anyway."

"Well, then—" Mr. Tiglath turned around and fumbled along the row of shelves. He regarded one urn critically, took down a vase and shook it and replaced it, then finally settled on a large, flamboyantly colored pitcher of cheap glass. "Yes. Yes, I think this might be the sort of thing that would interest you, Mr. Harley. Notice the shape, the glaze, the—"

"How much?" whispered Harley.

"Ah—shall we say—" Mr. Tiglath's eyes, blind-seeming behind the heavy lenses, regarded him for a long while; their tracks seemed to prickle. "It is a steal, but I need good will. You will come back. Shall we say five thousand dollars?"

"Five thou—" Harley choked.

"After all," said Mr. Tiglath gently, "I cannot operate on a mass basis. My patrons are necessarily few and discreet. I promise you full value for your money."

"Look here—I'm not rich. I could maybe manage one—"

"Please, sir." Mr. Tiglath looked pained. "I have my professional standards. I do not haggle."

It ended with Harley writing him a check which halved his bank account. And if it turned out to be a fraud, he thought, he'd stop payment.

Mr. Tiglath bade him a courteous good evening, and he went out with the parcel under his arm. The sun was going down, and the wind felt thin and cold.

Harley maintained a three-room apartment near Nob Hill which he could not really afford; it was furnished in the manner which tells you at once that the tenant refers to it as his diggings. When he got back, he was shaking, and mixed himself a stiff drink. On a supperless stomach, it took hold fast.

He flopped into a chair and regarded the pitcher, which he had set on a table, with half-frightened eyes. Now what?

His life hadn't amounted to much so far, he thought self-pityingly. He just didn't know the technique of seduction, he was too afraid of disease to consult a professional, and he didn't want to get married. He had his friends, who all belonged to the class labeled Upper Bohemians, but something was lacking, and he knew what it was. If the old man in the shop had been telling the truth, that pitcher was well worth half his savings, and he would return for more. But the fellow hadn't actually *said* a thing.

"Only one way to find out," he muttered.

His hands shook as he went over and touched the pitcher. It was closed with a large round cork which had in turn been covered with sealing wax; stamped in that was a curious ancient symbol which he recognized and did not quite like.

Oh, well— He got a grip on the cork and pulled it free.

Something like smoke curled out of the pitcher. Harley started back in alarm. The smoke thickened, became a quasi-solid mass, took on a flesh tint, and grew denser still. Within a minute, there was a girl standing on the floor.

She was a redhead, hair like a cascade of fire past her shoulders, a gamin face with something infinitely provocative about the curve of lips and lightly freckled nose, a figure which left nothing to criticize and no mood for criticism. She wore a knee-length dress in the style of the late 30's, and some cheap jewelry, and too much lipstick.

For a moment she just stood there, trembling. Then her curves straightened out in a prodigious stretch. "Geez!" she said. "It's good to get out of that jug!"

"I—I—" Harley grabbed his sanity with both hands and hung on. "Who are you?"

"May Simmons. I been in that thing since 1937. God, it's awful!

You don't sleep, you know. You're always awake, listening in the dark, and you wish you'd go crazy but you don't." She smiled sardonically and looked him up and down. "So you're my new owner. Well, I could'a done worse."

Harley drained his glass at a gulp. It steadied him a little; he began accepting the situation rather calmly. "How did you get in?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It happens. I got in a jam, and there was no other place to hide. Got a cigaret? And how about a drink?"

"I—look here," said Harley. "Are you really bound to—obey me—in everything?"

May Simmons nodded with a touch of defiance. "Yeah. Anything you say. It's funny. I can't explain how it feels, except if I try to do something different from what you tell me I can't." The calculation in her brown eyes turned to appeal. "I hope you don't want nothing—bad."

Harley felt like a fool, but he couldn't help himself. "Kiss me," he said.

She gave him a quick cool peck.

"No—properly!"

That took minutes. When it was over, Harley fell into a chair and gasped for breath. May Simmons smiled, a little sourly. "If you just want that sort of thing, I guess it's okay by me," she said. "I was expecting it."

"I—yes, I do." Harley shoved aside his scruples. The act of so doing was exhilarating, he was fulfilling the old adolescent dream of unlimited power over a beautiful woman. He gave her the cigaret and drink she had asked for, and watched her as she consumed them.

"You can't harm me, can you?" he asked. "I order you to tell the truth."

"I can't slip you a knife while you're sleeping, or poison you, or anything like that," she said with a touch of wistfulness.

"We'll get along," he said a bit thickly. "Now how about some supper?"

Harley phoned the office next morning and got a couple of days off on plea of illness; that ran into the weekend, so he had time for a proper orgy. It was fun. May was inclined to be sulky at first, till he told her to be cheerful, then he couldn't have asked for a better playmate.

But it was wise to order her explicitly not to give him away to the police.

And if he grew tired of her, he reflected, he need only command her to go away and never bother him again. Meanwhile, it was merely necessary to mention to a tolerant superintendent that he had gotten married.

No doubt about it, Mr. Tiglath had the goods. But now he must think the matter further out. The prices came high, but he should be able to find some way of escaping his present miserable rut, a dull job and a future that held nothing but more of the same.

A friend of his gave a party next week and he took May along, introducing her as his girl friend with an unmistakable intonation—she blushed angrily but made no fuss—and enjoying the envy in their eyes. She sat on the fringes of a conversation which was plainly boring her to death, but she sat spectacularly.

Martinez was there. Late in the evening, he followed Harley into the kitchen to help him mix some more drinks. "I see you've been to the bottle shop," he said.

"Well, maybe I have." Harley grinned and wrestled with the ice tray. "Why don't you—or have you?"

"No," said Martinez. "I'm a cautious man. Frankly, Ed, I'd stay away from that place from now on if I were you."

"Hmmm—why?" Harley scowled at the idea of a serpent in his Eden.

"I don't know." The little dark man shrugged. "A – person – in that sort of business just isn't to be trusted. I wish I hadn't spread the word for him."

"I'll make out," said Harley coldly.

"Yeh, maybe. But where does he get his slaves, Ed? Who'd willingly enter a bottle?"

"Somebody in trouble."

"I wonder—can he find enough people that hard up to replenish his stock?"

Harley muttered something and left. But on the way home, he asked May just what had driven her to Mr. Tiglath.

"I was in Dutch," she said. Her eyes were moody, staring ahead down the darkened street. The hot amber span of the Bay Bridge lights were incongruous in the background. "There was still gangsters then, you know, big time stuff. One of 'em was after me with a rod." Suddenly she began to cry. "I don't belong here! I want to be free!"

"Shut up!" Alcohol blurred Harley's tongue, but he snapped the order out. "Damn you, I told you to be cheerful."

"All the time?" she asked forlornly.

"Yes. Be grateful to me for getting you out of that mess." That was how Harley saw it.

"I'll try," she said in a small voice.

It wasn't right, thought Harley bitterly. For five thousand dollars he deserved more than this. He knew May's type, or thought he did. Fur coats, money, jewels, a car of her own— But the hell with her. If he could afford that, he could have a dozen women, and he wouldn't have to buy them out of bottles either. He was a subscriber to the American folk tale that money is necessary and sufficient to attract the desirable female. He also used chlorophyl.

He had an idea for getting money, but he'd need help. He'd have to go back to Mr. Tiglath.

A well-dressed, middle-aged man was leaving the shop when Harley got there. He had a furtive look

about him and was clutching a long thin parcel. So word was getting around.

Harley entered with an assurance he had not felt before. He knew where he stood now; he knew what he wanted, and was prepared to pay for it. A good, solid business deal, and a being as ancient as Mr. Tiglath would surely be a—man?—of the world. It was like, well, like talking to a psychiatrist. Harley had done that too, once, but quit when the treatment began to hurt.

"How do you do, sir?" The proprietor was still tall and dusty and dried-out looking. The shop was as unswept and disorderly as before, but a month had lowered the stock of bottles noticeably. "It is pleasant to see you again. I trust you were satisfied with your last purchase?"

"Yes—yes, I guess so," said Harley.

"And you would like to continue collecting, sir?"

"Look." Harley leaned over the counter. "Let's not mince words, Mr. Tiglath." It was odd, the compulsion always to use the polite form of address, even in one's own thoughts. "I believe we understand each other. Do you have competent men in *any* line?"

"Well, I have quite a variety," said Mr. Tiglath with a modest accent, "and many of them are quite able. Of course, you must realize that they are all merely human, and therefore limited and fallible. For instance, I have several brilliant philosophers whom I have been unable to dispose of for centuries, simply because no one has any use for their special abilities now. A medieval schoolman, for one. I fear they must await a rich antiquarian . . . But within their particular fields, I think I can guarantee some of them, at least, to be as able as anyone."

"Y-y-yes," said Harley. May Simmons was—competent enough, no doubt of that. He braced himself. "I want a—thief and murderer."

"Dear me!" Mr. Tiglath clucked his tongue. "Isn't that rather drastic?"

"Look," said Harley, "there's a safe in the office where I work. I happen to know that between tomorrow and Monday it will be holding about a million dollars' worth of negotiable bonds. I also know a firm in Mexico which will buy those bonds at close to face value and no questions asked. There's a watchman who sits in front of that safe all night. If he can be disposed of and the safe cracked, I'm set for life."

"I see." It might have been a discussion of the weather, as far as Mr. Tiglath's tones went. He stroked his chin. "But isn't it rather dangerous? You could get into trouble. It would look strange if you suddenly left for Mexico, immediately after the theft."

"I've figured it all out," said Harley. "That bottled man will have no police record hereabouts. He'll hide with the bonds, and I'll make sure of my own alibi for the

night the safe is cracked. I'll continue as usual for—oh, till the end of the year, then resign—tell 'em a place in Mexico has given me a better offer. That's all there is to it."

"Most ingenious," said Mr. Tiglath. "Very well thought out, sir."

"I've studied crime a bit," said Harley. "The amateur who does one smooth job, and never repeats, is rarely caught. That's probably what the Brink's holdup was." He paused. "Of course, you can keep a secret."

"I assure you, Mr. Harley, I have every respect for professional confidences. My own business wouldn't last long if I didn't."

"That's what I thought. All right, what can you do for me?"

"Let me see—" Mr. Tiglath opened a huge ledger and consulted it. The writing was not in any alphabet Harley recognized. "Yes, yes . . . I would suggest you get two men. The skilled thief is not a good murderer, and vice versa. I believe I have two men who may be just what you want." He looked up. A stray lightbeam caught his lenses with a flat blank glitter. "Yes. I would definitely say I can satisfy you. And since I like to see an enterprising young man get ahead, the price will be very moderate: you may have the two bottles for twenty thousand dollars."

"Hey!" yelped Harley.

"After all, sir, you stand to make a million. It is a trivial sum to you, but I am poor. Cash, please."

"I'll—have to come back," said Harley. "Have to raise the money first."

"Certainly, sir. I will reserve the bottles for you. Good day."

Harley had less trouble getting a bank loan than he expected. He worked for a solid firm, his own reputation was good enough, and arrangements could be made to cover the fact that he didn't have collateral. He meant to repay the loan, too, from his new home; no sense making it impossible for himself to come back to the States. He was quite proud of his explanation for wanting the money: investments he could make in Mexico. That would help make his later departure plausible.

He returned to the shop in a couple of days and put a small satchel on the counter. "There you are," he said smugly.

"Ah—yes." Mr. Tiglath opened it and riffled through the bills with long sharp-nailed fingers. "Very good." Reaching under the counter, he pulled out a squat baked-clay crock and a cheap flask of more modern design. "And here are your bottles. I trust you will find them satisfactory." His smile was a quick skinning of teeth. "Good luck, sir. Thank you very much. *Auf Wiedersehen.*"

Harley came out of the shop a little breathless. By the time he got home, he was shaking. "Gimme a drink, May," he said.

She went over to the liquor cabinet. "What's up?" she asked with

the bright artificial smile she now cultivated.

Harley hesitated. But no fear—she was bound by the bottler's geas. "I command you never to tell anyone about this," he said, and went on to expound his idea and its extreme cleverness. "And what do you think of that?" he wound up.

Her eyes narrowed a trifle. "Okay," she said at last, handing him his drink. He kissed her, roughly, and made her respond. Then he opened the flask.

A small, dapper, well-mustached man in frock coat and wing collar emerged. After the inevitable shudder and stretch, he smiled and bowed. "At your service, sir. I heard what was going on, and my compliments on the idea."

"Who are you?" demanded Harley.

"James Arlen, late of New York City, 1898, sir. I was a safe-cracker in my time, none better, and don't think I've lost my touch." He flexed supple fingers. "Modern inventions, yes, but if you could give me a book about the new locks, I don't believe there'll be any trouble."

"I'll get one," said Harley, reflecting that there were always unexpected angles. You had to think fast. He opened the crock.

It yielded a short, broad-shouldered, hard-bitten man with a shock of black hair and a close-cropped beard. He was dressed archaically, knee breeches and leather tunic and ruffed shirt and buckled shoes, with a dagger at his belt, but it did not have the effect of a costume; the sweat and grime and patches were there too. His bold eyes locked with May's, and he grinned appreciatively, till Harley told him to stop and asked who he was. Then his manner turned surly.

"Robert the Basher," he answered. "A good man o' me 'ands, back in London when Charles II were king, till I 'ad ter get inter the blarsted pot there."

It seemed like a long time, and Harley wondered about the man's accent and vocabulary. "You don't talk like it," he said.

"Oh, I l'arn, 'ere an' there. Yer carn't 'elp l'arning, when yer locked in the bloody bottle with naught to do but listen at the bloody trade coming in. I follyed along with the language, well as I could. But 'twere a bloody time to wait, sire!"

"Can you—kill a man for me?" asked Harley.

"Quick as that, sire!" Robert the Basher snapped his fingers and laughed. "Knife or garotte or bare 'ands or pistol—no, ye wouldn' 'ave the old kind o' guns no more, would yer? But I'd soon l'arn to 'andle the new sort, if that's wot yer want. I did jobs for many a fine lord, sire, an' never 'ad no complaints."

James Arlen winced. "Really, sir, is this quite necessary?" he asked.

Harley nodded. "It is. I don't want any chance of a witness.

Now, here's what I want you to do."

He had to produce maps and explain the streetcar system and some of the mores. The men would enter the plant about 2 A.M. the following night— Harley had had duplicate keys secretly made— go to the room in which the safe was, kill the watchman, rifle the safe, and walk out again, locking the main door behind them. They would then proceed to a certain dingy hotel and wait there till Harley looked them up the next evening. He would give them bus fare to Los Angeles, where they would live quietly and inconspicuously for some months; he'd send them money so they wouldn't have to look for work in an unfamiliar world. At the proper time, he would drive down through Los Angeles, meet them, and pick up the bonds. It was as simple as that.

"I see," said Arlen. "Clever, sir. Excellent. Though—" he winced again— "do we have to—have a killing?"

"I order you," said Harley.

Robert the Basher grinned and tested the edge of his knife. "That's me job any 'ow," he said.

Harley had already obtained a burglar's kit by devious means; he could get a book on modern safes and locks and some cheap suits for his men the next day. And while the job was being done, he would be throwing a party. A dozen people to swear he never left his home that night!

He broke out some Bordeaux and had a small celebration right then, to anticipate. His two new slaves tended to snuggle up toward May, and she laughed and encouraged them, until Harley ordered them to cut it out. They watched him with resentful eyes the rest of the evening, and he didn't enjoy himself after all.

The next day was Saturday and he was off. He drove down to the main library, found the book he wanted in the card index, and checked it out during a rush period—just an added precaution, so the librarian would be sure not to notice what book he had taken. When he got back, his cohorts started guiltily, and May disappeared into the bathroom, looking rumpled. Harley felt a sick taste in his mouth, and glared at them. "That's enough," he said. "Any more, and I'll make you whip each other." He tossed the book at Arlen. "Here. Start cramming."

"Yes, sir," said the burglar meekly. He brightened with professional interest as he studied. Robert yawned, stretched out on the sofa, and fell into an animal doze.

At seven they left, to hang around town till the hour for their job. Harley snapped at May to get busy making canapes, and prowled the floor with a glass in his hand. He got quite drunk as people came in and the evening went on. About two in the morning he began to shudder, and at three they put him to bed.

He woke up around noon, feel-

ing terrible. May came in, clattering a breakfast tray and laughing. "Good morning!" she cried.

"Cut that racket out!" he yelled. "I got a headache."

"You told me to be cheerful," she said.

"Not now, for God's sake. Bring me a paper."

The story was all over the front page, just as he had imagined it except that the victim's wallet was missing. Oh, well. Success and black coffee made Harley feel better. In the late afternoon he got up quite happily and called his boss' home.

"Just read the story," he said. "Terrible news. Poor old Jenkins. Who could have done it?"

"Looks like a professional job. The police say they have some clues, but you know what that means. Good thing we're insured."

Harley clucked sympathetically and hung up. In the evening, he went around to the rendezvous hotel and met his confederates. Robert sat mask-faced on the bed, but Arlen greeted him gaily and lifted a handbag. "Right in here, sir," he said. "Slick and smooth as a whistle, if I do say so myself."

"All right," said Harley. "Here's a hundred dollars. Send me your address when you get settled in L.A., and I'll make you an allowance. It won't be much, but it'll buy pork and beans; I don't want you getting drunk and blabbing."

Arlen's sensitive face frowned. "Would you mind giving us your exact, literal orders, sir?" he asked. "We won't be seeing you for months, you know, and something might happen."

Harley was pleased; it was the first time one of his slaves had shown real cooperativeness. "All right. Find a cheap rooming house down there to live in. Say you're workers of some kind, go out every day, come back, but don't actually take jobs. Don't cultivate friends either, you might give yourselves away. And put the bag and bonds in a safe deposit box."

"And, of course, we are not to speak a word of the burglary?"

"Of course not! Okay, on your way."

It was three days later that the police came.

The squad leader was wary, reserved, but there was something about his manner that prickled Harley's spine. "We're just investigating the robbery," he said. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Of course," said Harley through dry lips. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks." The detective verified that Harley had been at home all night during the crime, got the names of witnesses, and nodded; but he remained bleak. "We've reason to think somebody hired a torpedo," he said. "Possibly some employee."

Harley tried to smile, but it didn't come off very well. "I find that hard to believe," he said.

"Maybe so. We have to check on everything. Don't leave town without letting us know."

When they were gone, Harley turned furiously on May. "What could have gone wrong?" he yelled. "How do they guess—they don't! It's routine, a bluff—it's got to be!"

"Sure it is," she said.

He regarded her smile, saw the hatred in her eyes, and slapped her. "I order you to tell me all you know about it!" he choked.

The red mark of his hand grew out on her cheek. "All right," she said sullenly. "We worked out the idea between us. Arlen got you to order them not to speak to anyone about it, but you forgot to say they shouldn't write. He sent an anonymous letter to the cops, with the watchman's wallet for proof—he'd lifted that too, you never told him not to. He wrote he had info you'd hired two crooks to do the job—"

Harley slapped her again and again, till she shuddered in her chair. "I ought to kill you," he said. "I ought to kill you."

"Go ahead," she challenged. "I can't stop you. I'd like to see you get the gas chamber."

"No—" He paced the room feverishly. "They'll have a tail on me, but they can't prove anything. Not yet. Not till I go get the bonds. I have to shake their man and—No, I'll write Arlen. Make him send the bonds to—another address. We'll go out together, I'll let you off, the cop will have to keep following me. You pick them up and— No, damn it, they *can* arrest me on suspicion. They're just waiting . . . I've got it!" Suddenly he laughed aloud.

She watched venomously.

"You'll go confess you stole them!" he said. "Say you've got them hidden. Don't say where. No matter what they do to you, don't say where. They'll stop suspecting me, and when things have cooled off I can go on as I planned —" He went on laughing, somewhat hysterically.

"It—I'd get ten years at least," she protested.

"You have your orders," he said. "No, not right away. I've got to figure out a plausible story for you—"

When May had left him the next day, Harley sighed. It was an ugly business. But he hadn't much choice. Imprisonment—he shuddered at the thought. And he was getting tired of the girl anyway. Stupid, malignant creature! There'd be others later on—and tiger-skin rugs too, by God. Three slaves and one murder—it was a more humane foundation than most great fortunes had, he told himself.

He got drunk again that evening, and the next day he didn't go to work. He expected the police to question him somewhat; he would be shocked and grieved at his mistress' behavior, he had his story planned. When the detective knocked, he admitted the man with a smile.

"Hello," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I got a warrant for your ar-

rest," said the detective. "The charge is accessory to murder and grand larceny. Come along."

"But—" Harley felt as if the blood were draining from him. "But my—my girl friend—"

"Thinnest story I ever heard. I've seen 'em confess, mister, and I know when they mean it. How'd you make her do it?"

I said nothing about the tone of voice she was to use, the mannerisms, the—

For a wild moment Harley thought of a long-distance call to Los Angeles. Arlen and Robert could be made to confess—no, no, they were all slippery customers, they hated him, they—

He hardly knew it himself when he picked up a vase, crashed it down on the detective's head, and bolted out the door.

Mr. Tiglath looked at the disheveled figure which panted across his threshold. "Good day, sir," he said. "And what can I do for you this time?"

"Hide me," groaned Harley. "The police—I've got to hide—"

"So soon? Dear me, how unfortunate!" Mr. Tiglath shook his head. "Those things will happen, though. I sometimes think there is a curse on all slave owners."

Harley fell to the floor. "God in Heaven, hide me!" he yelled.

"I can only do that if you will enter a bottle, Mr. Harley. You know the terms."

The fugitive nodded hopelessly. "Go ahead."

Mr. Tiglath smiled and took up a cheap brown beer flask. "Yes, this will do," he said. "I think this will do admirably." He hummed a gay little melody as he made his preparations. "Now you know how I get most of my replacements," he continued.

Harley was too miserable to answer. The voice went on, inexorably: "The bottled man is bound to serve as long as his owner can give orders. If the owner gets killed, or jailed, or bottled, himself, he cannot give orders and the slave is naturally free of the geas. So, of course, the slave tries to obey commands in such a way as to bring disaster on his owner as soon as possible. Then many of the owners come to me for refuge . . . Now, if you will please step over here—"

Harley hadn't thought it would hurt so much. His screaming seemed to last for a thousand years.

When it was over, and he was inside the bottle, Mr. Tiglath put it on the shelf. Mr. Tiglath had taken off his glasses to polish them, and Harley could dimly see that his eyes were made of red flame. His voice came distinctly through the glass:

"I tell you this so that you will know what to do when you are finally bought. I am not an unkindly soul . . . But I fear it will be quite a few centuries, or even millennia, before anyone has reason to purchase a junior executive, and then his reason may all too probably be one you will not like."

THE BLACK SPOT

by William B. Hartley

HIS was an ordinary face with nothing about it to arouse the slightest interest. If anyone glanced at him as he hurried to and from work, it was only because he never seemed to be able to control his legs. He jerked his thin body along like a man with a limp and peered fearfully at the sidewalk, never raising his head until he reached his home or his office.

At 45 his habits were stamped in a rigid pattern. For ten years his nights had been spent in the back room of an ancient flat where the water ran rusty in the faucets and the wind hissed beneath the sills. The east window was a stone's throw from the bank of a broad, muddy river which he sometimes watched in the twilight.

During the day he supervised a gloomy room where two dozen filing clerks filed insurance blanks. His superiors called him a capable man, but they were rarely able to remember his name and the clerks in his department forgot him when they went home at night. His work neither pleased nor distressed him; and he would have found it tiresome to discuss.

He had no friends but somewhere he had a relative from whom he received occasional letters. These were placed by his landlady under his door and were addressed to Mr. Thomas Marker. He read them without interest and threw them away.

Had people troubled to look at him, they might have seen that his eyes were always tired and his face was that of an old man. But no one ever looked; and Marker kept his troubles to himself.

Tonight, as he sat reading by the window, it became increasingly difficult to concentrate. Night was a time of small sounds that pressed intrusively upon one until they could not be disregarded. A voice in the street, the rattle of a window, the distant whistle of a tug drew his attention from the book until at last he closed it and stared over the river. On the far shore a train hurled itself through the darkness, its lighted windows gleaming faintly on the black water. It screamed for a crossing, grumbled over a bridge and was lost among the myriad lights of a river town.

While Marker watched, an outburst of harsh sound rose from the cellar where Mrs. Waterman, bending stiffly before the furnace, was shaking the warped grates. Every night she attacked the furnace noisily until clouds of dust swirled through the registers. It was Mrs. Waterman's way of telling her tenants that downstairs a

poor widow was doing a man's work.

As the shaking ceased and the acrid fumes of coal gas crept through the house, Marker became aware that silence lay over his world like a dark garment. Its weight oppressed him and he began to drum on the arms of his chair. Restlessly his fingers tapped up and down, one, two, three . . . ten; one, two, three. . . . Presently his teeth began to click against their mates until, trembling, he clutched the edge of the table to stop himself. When these attacks fell upon him he always thought of poetry, knowing that if he could recall a particular verse without becoming conscious of the rhythm the spell would pass. But the lines that came to him only threw him into greater dejection.

"There is the silence of defeat.
There is the silence of those
unjustly punished;
And the silence of the dying
whose hand
Suddenly grips yours."

No, that was not it; silence with nothing to break it except the whine of an occasional automobile in the street or the chatter of feet on the pavement.

Thomas Marker sprang from his chair and taking his hat from a closet hurried into the upper hall. For a moment he paused at the head of the stairs and looked at a door behind which he fancied he heard the stiff breathing of his landlady. Then he went down the steps, counting them carefully. There were 34 steps if you omitted the floor at the landing. For three years he had counted them every day, down in the morning, up at night, yet for his life he could not stop. Once on a New Year's Eve he had forced himself to go to his room without counting the steps but in the middle of the night he had been torn from bed, shaking and sweaty, to go downstairs and count the damnable things once again.

Save for a striped cat and a man who lounged in the doorway of a brownstone flat, the street was deserted. In one direction it swung toward the river bridge, but Marker turned hastily and walked in the opposite direction. He had once been driven to counting the bars in the hand-rail and ever since he had avoided the bridge. While he walked he became fascinated by the movements of his shadow. As he left a street light, the shadow resembled that of a giant until it was distorted and wiped away by another lamp. Tonight his gait was undisturbed by the sidewalk cracks; and the cool air, rich with spicy night odors, soothed his jangled nerves. This was a night for walking; this was a night for swinging away to the edge of the world.

As he rounded a corner Marker saw a knot of people around something on the sidewalk. A drunk, he thought, and for a moment he considered turning in another direction, for drunkenness distressed

him as much as the curiosity of street mobs. But how silly it was to inconvenience yourself because of a crowd and two shouting policemen! Unpleasantness should be addressed boldly.

Marker stepped toward the crowd and tapped the shoulder of a cab driver.

"What's up?" he asked. "A drunk?"

"Drunk, nothing!" the man exclaimed. "This guy's been shot and robbed, friend; shot and robbed, from his looks."

At that moment the crowd was shoved apart by one of the policemen and Marker found himself jammed between the cabby and a fat woman in a pink dressing gown. As they swept back, they carried Marker with them until, wedged firmly on all sides, he found himself at the very front of the circle.

"Ah, now, the poor feller!" cried the fat woman, writhing in an ecstasy of sympathy.

Flat on his back with his face turned toward Marker lay an elderly man. The light from a street lamp fell on his pale forehead in the middle of which was a tiny black hole. Nothing more; just the black hole and a dark puddle under his head. Above him the other policeman menaced the crowd with his night-stick.

Marker turned and twisted desperately through the crowd. As he burst into the open a siren moaned and a police car drew up beside the lamp post.

"Good God! Good God! how awful!" Marker cried as he stumbled down the street. He wanted to run but he dared not; it would look strange to see a man running from a murder. Not until he turned the corner did he dare to hurry, but at the corner he broke into a shuffling trot which he maintained until he stood white and gasping at the door of his house. The street was insufferable and he knew that fearful visions would crowd his room, nevertheless without counting the steps he fled upstairs where he snapped on the light and flung himself exhausted on his bed.

As he lay there the scene stretched before him like a roll of film and he, the operator, watched himself fighting the crowd, hat tipped crazily over one ear, mouth distorted, eyes glazed with horror. The dead man must have been tall, for his body covered two cracks in the sidewalk and his hand, thrown above his head, clawed at a third. Marker saw how one knee was slightly raised and how his tie, yanked out of place, trailed in the dark puddle. On the chin of the policeman there was a large, colorless bunch from which bristled a cluster of hairs; and the face of the woman who had cried, "Ah, the poor feller," was laced with thin, red veins.

The sight of the tiny black hole in the white forehead gradually pushed the other visions into insignificance, gaining immense proportions until it seemed to fill the

room—a tremendous whiteness punctured by a black spot. Beside the wash stand in the corner were two glaring red eyes that disappeared when he looked directly at them; yet when he turned away they were there again, motionless beneath the street lamp that seemed to hang near his table. The room was full of a whiteness and a small black hole; it was a vibrant whiteness that took on life and smothered the two red eyes, and its horror lay in its imperfection. Always there was the black hole, small and disproportionate.

Giving a hoarse, wordless cry, Thomas Marker sprang from his bed and stared at himself in the mirror, whereupon the vision was brushed away and he stood trembling before his own pale image.

He undressed rapidly, flinging his clothes to the floor, and having turned out the light he lay on the outside of the bed and closed his eyes. Silence washed into the room until he heard only the drumming of the blood in his ears and the dry ticking of his wrist watch. In the alley a cat crunched on some leaves and poked at a garbage pail; then the whole universe became quiet. It was inconceivable that somewhere people were alive and awake, that there was breathing, loving and even death. Marker thought of some words he had once written on the back of an envelope when he had been suffering from a fever and an aching dejection. They were the words of some part of his own personality and they had been directed at himself.

"His soul is covered with green mould and in his turgid depths he is like sour vomit. At last he will die and pass from insignificance into oblivion, having lived for a brief moment like a piece of waste that has its birth, floats for an instant in soiled water and is carried away finally and completely from nothing into nothing."

Why should the whiteness fill the room again; how could there be whiteness when there was no light? Thomas Marker knew that his body was covered with sweat. He felt the bed clothes and found them cold and damp. Something moaned a long way off and he sat stiffly erect: it was only a train whistle. He sank back on his pillow but try as he might he could not get the whiteness or the sight of the tiny black hole out of his mind. For a long time he lay in agony until, wearied by his emotions, he fell into a troubled sleep.

He dreamed that he was in a great forest where the trees stood high above his head. In the dismal passages between the trees great owls with soft, smothering feathers wheeled and turned silently. No sunlight penetrated to this place yet there seemed to be a gray light possessed of a strange spongy quality: you squeezed it and it oozed between your fingers like mud. As Marker walked, his feet sank deep in some resilient substance and a cool, damp wind

touched his face, stirring the hair at his forehead.

He came at last to a clearing in the heart of the forest where he stood for a moment, not knowing where to turn or which passage to take; and as he stood there something told him to count the trees.

"But this is impossible," he said, feeling that his demon was unjust. "It's unthinkable," and the trees took up the words, murmuring "unthinkable," until the whole forest was full of sound. Marker clapped his hands over his ears and screamed, "I'll count! I'll count!" Slowly the sound receded until the forest was again quiet. After that, he counted the trees as he walked through the passageways. He counted and counted until his head was full of figures and the gray light flickered before his eyes.

An age seemed to pass before he came to a black cave that stood in a wall of pure, creamy limestone. Marker felt immensely happy. This, apparently, was what he had been searching for. With a feeling of contentment he prepared to climb into the cave and fall into a deep, endless sleep. But as he approached the entrance he was confronted by two glaring red eyes; he flung himself back and the cave resolved itself into a black hole in the forehead of a man who sprawled on the sidewalk. Thomas Marker screamed and sat up in bed to discover that the gray morning was in his room. He could hear Mrs. Waterman snorting and spitting in the bathroom; and out on the street the wheels of a milkman's cart crashed against the curb.

He rose and dressed rapidly, for the night had left him thoroughly chilled. Putting on his heaviest coat, he went into the hall where he met Mrs. Waterman.

"Why, there, Mr. Marker!" the woman squealed, "Up so early and so pale and sick looking! It must have been nightmares you had what with the yelling you done last night, poor man!"

Marker said, "Nightmares, yes," and looked at Mrs. Waterman carefully. What was so remarkable about the landlady this morning? Why must he stand there gaping foolishly at a dowdy old woman? Ghost-like she seemed in the hall shadows, a fleshy ghost in a faded wrapper. If only it were brighter that he could see her face; if only he could penetrate to the white mist that filled the hall.

Good God! That was it! How shocking, how horrible it was to realize that he was seeing on the middle of Mrs. Waterman's forehead the same black mark that had scarred the face of the dead man! It almost turned his stomach to see the old woman standing there with the ugly thing in her head, but of course it was his imagination. His imagination, disoredered by the terrors of the night, was making a fool of him. Nothing was wrong with Mrs.

Waterman's face.

"Mr. Marker!" the old woman exclaimed coyly, pulling at her dressing gown. "Ain't you forgettin' yourself?"

Turning quickly, Marker hurried to the street. Fresh air and coffee would wipe away the vision. Often he had experienced a sensation of dullness before breakfast and this idiocy, like his biliousness, would pass away after a cup of coffee.

It was a wet morning. Rain fell violently and the people he passed, leaning against the wind, concealed their faces with fat umbrellas. Marker wished he could push aside the umbrellas and examine their faces. Certainly nothing unusual would be there; these men and women were sleepy creatures mouthing the taste of their breakfasts and thinking the pale thoughts of people on their way to work. But when a howling newsboy thrust a paper in front of him Marker saw it again, small and black on the child's pimply forehead.

"Go away!" he cried. "No paper!"

Coffee was what he needed, coffee and a chance to think. Strange how difficult it was to think this morning. From a great distance he could see his own thoughts, wormlike things that crept sluggishly through his mind and pressed against his forehead until he felt that it would burst. As the back of his head grew lighter the front part became heavier until he felt that he was going to topple forward and smash like a melon on the sidewalk.

At the restaurant where he ate every morning Marker slumped over a corner table and put his hands to his forehead. The restaurant was filled with a curious white vapor through which a waitress moved toward him slowly.

"Oh, Miss," he said when at last she reached him, "Coffee, please."

"You don't look well, Mr. Marker."

Oh, the damned girl! Didn't she know what was on her forehead? Didn't she know what a horrid thing . . .?

"I'm quite well," Marker said. "Please bring my coffee."

There she went, floating into the haze at the end of the room, and when she returned the coffee tasted cold and flat. He drank it black and part of the dullness went away. As he left the stuffy warmth of the restaurant he found that his hands and feet were cold; but his face seemed to be burning and he knew that his body had become enormous. He conceived of himself as a gaunt creature who walked quietly among foolish, hurrying people, yet when he looked at them he realized that he was of normal stature. Nothing had happened to his size; he was Thomas Marker, five feet seven, blue eyes, brown hair. *"Really, Mr. Marker, there's no reason for you to worry . . . perfect health . . . just a number of mild obsessions. Rest . . . little*

vacation."

And after he had gone to the country he had found himself standing one afternoon on the shore of a small lake where the heat trembled over the water. Someone had shouted from a canoe. Then a yellow butterfly had flown crazily from one leaf to another.

That moment had been sliced from eternity. In the twilight of the same day he had seen a child who sat in a pine grove listening to a man who looked like a Y.M.C.A. director. As he stepped into the grove the child, unaware of his presence, had cried in a tortured voice, "Jack, I don't want to. How can I?" But it had been damp in the pine grove where the Y man was trying to patch a soul and Marker had hurried away. On the following day he had gone back to work.

That was what he was doing this morning. He was going to work, of course; he was on his way to the office. He bowed his head, for it was easier to look at the sidewalk than it was to see the bobbing umbrellas and the faces that rushed toward him. On every side rubbers thumped and splashed and occasionally he noticed scraps of wet paper clinging to the sidewalk. Warren Avenue was a dirty street: it was a filthy, unpleasant street.

Elevator boys were monkey saints who hoisted people eleven floors, but they had black holes in their forehead.

At the office he sank into his chair and pawed a heap of papers on the desk. They seemed to have lost their meaning. They said things in writing but they might have been written in Greek for all he could make of them. When he tried to read the top paper he found he could understand individual words but at the end of each line the meaning escaped him.

. . . escaped him. Something had escaped him and he, too, must escape from the crushing walls of this hole where the floor held the desk and the desk held the ink pot and the ink pot rested on the blotter. Rest, that doctor had said, but that had been long ago when there was no black hole to torment him.

In Mr. Preston's office he staggered a little—clumsy! Through the veil that moved before his eyes he could see Preston squatting like a plump frog before an open file. Clang! says the file. Bow to Mr. Preston.

"Certainly, Marker. You do look ill. I'm sure we can manage all right."

Bow to Mr. Preston.

"Yes, that's right. Go home and drink lots of lemon juice. Lemon juice, mind you."

It was hard to resist poking a finger into the place on Preston's forehead.

What had he done with his thing! He would get it tomorrow. overcoat? Never mind; damn the

Tomorrow he would get his overcoat.

Thomas Marker knew he was walking into light and dragging darkness behind him. Disembodied faces came toward him out of a white, swirling mist, revealing themselves in all their exciting imperfection and then passing into the shadow land that formed at his back; yet when he turned, the shadows turned with him. Were people looking at him oddly? His eyes did not seem to function properly and several times he muttered, "Glasses. I should really get some."

If only I can see it again, he thought, I'll get this nonsense out of my head. I must look at that man again. I must face the horror and conquer it. That's the only way to forget it. If I see him on his back with the thing in his head, I'll be free.

The newspapers always spoke of the place on Twelfth Street. That was where the police took them and the papers screamed about it the next day. Mrs. Granch, who worked in the outer office, stopped you at noon and told you what the papers had said.

Twelfth Street through the rain. It was easy to find because it was the ugliest building on the street.

There was a man with a flat voice who said, "They took it off this morning and shipped it to Chicago."

But I have to see the real one again. Not yours.

"To Chicago, I tell you. Was he a friend of yours?"

I have to see it again.

"Can't you speak up, mister? What do you want?"

I have to see it again.

"Why don't you get the hell out of here? Go home and sleep it off. Go on—scat!"

Flat voice.

How exciting it was to be looking for a black spot on the forehead of a dead man! Death was an ugly thing, of course, but this was something else. Death had nothing to do with it.

As he stumbled down the steps, Marker cried, "Again!" Then the mist rushed up and enveloped him.

It must have been several days later that he found himself in the Italian section of town. He had come out of a shop where he had just bought something and for a moment he stood on the sidewalk looking at the white world and a slant of yellow sunlight that reached between two buildings. Inside of his coat pocket a small parcel bumped against his side. Somehow this parcel had brought about this delightful sense of peace. It was responsible for the clarity with which he saw the ugly buildings and the Italian children who yelled in the street. Such sensations always followed a major decision in his life but what the devil had he decided?

No matter; he would go home and bathe his eyes. Perhaps the package was a present for Mrs. Waterman: a box of candy or

some book ends for her Bible.

Never had the streets seemed so quiet, never was there an afternoon so beautiful, so richly stained with sunlight. In a world of such loveliness the pain in his eyes was unimportant. Nothing mattered except this feeling of happiness.

"Somewhere," Marker told himself, "I have a job. On this wonderful day I ought to be sitting in an office looking at silly papers. Instead I am walking in the warm sun. Why have I never realized before what freedom like this could be? How foolish I've been to work when all the time I might have walked in the sun!"

At the rooming house he ran up the stairs and threw open the door of his room. Everything was just as he had left it except that now the sunlight streamed over the floor and glittered on the foot of the brass bed. A fine room! An excellent room when the sunlight filled it! Rarely had Marker seen the sun in his room, for he left too early in the morning and returned too late at night.

The package was heavy, so he tossed it on to the bed and began to unwrap it. From the kitchen Mrs. Waterman's voice rang mercilessly through the registers.

"He is white-er than the lily," she howled. "He is bright-er than the sun . . ."

An auto horn drowned her voice and a child on the street cried, "Seven, eight, nine, ten—here I come."

For a long time Marker sat on the bed gripping the little pistol. The exultation was gone and in his heart was a grinding fear.

THE END

WHITE LEGS

by Mark Dane

DAYS when there was nothing but time, he would sit and watch the legs going by. The trousered and slacked ones, the concealed limbs, held no interest for him. You couldn't tell personality with cloth over it, corduroy, or wool. Silk was fine, though. Invisible, gossamer silk that windowed the soft, creamy magnificence of Nature.

He had to see the flesh, the pale-white fullness, the white leanness, the wan stick-legs or the tanned beef of calves. The female leg, that portion which tapered down from the concealing skirt and dress, disappearing into the shoe, sandal and slipper, gripped him, held him with a passion that knew no limit. Legs to him were like some all-powerful amulet of strange power.

He had come to know that women had all kinds of legs, all varieties, and in each fresh aspect, each new, startling dissimilitude of calf, knee and ankle lay the all-consuming interest.

He had never thought himself strange because of his peculiar abnormality of eye and mind. He likened his fervor to some secret, personal hobby from which great stores of pleasure could be drawn. If other people didn't know about, didn't sense the very game beneath their feet, then it was his own esoteric, monumental gain. For game, it was.

Legs alone had fascination for him. The face, the upper structure that they upheld, was lost to him. He saw nothing but the flick of calf muscle, the rock of heel activated by a flexible knee. Beyond that—was nothing.

If his interest had been healthy, he might have been a shoe designer, or an artist, or a creator of women's hosiery.

As it was, he was only a maniac. An ingrown, unhealthy, deadly maniac.

"This dream of yours," the Doctor said. "Tell me about it. You see, Carter, I can't be of much help to you if you hide things from me. It's extremely important that a case history omits nothing. In that way, we have all the facts and can arrange them accordingly."

Carter's weak face, with its lack-lustre eyes, lifted into a ludicrous mask of injury.

"Ah—now, Doc! Don't be that way." He spread his large, strong-

boned fingers. "I'm here on my own hook, right? Why should I hold anything back?"

The Doctor laughed professionally, indicating past familiarity with an approach such as Carter's. He straightened in his leather-backed chair and splayed a neat thumb and forefinger along the slender shaft of a red mechanical pencil.

"Carter, let's put our cards on the table. You are here because your 'nightmare' is causing your wife to lose a good deal of sleep. Oh, it's bothering you too. I can see that. But I can also see that you are the type of man who'd rather eat worms than walk into a psychiatrist's office and ask to have his dream analyzed for him."

Carter's drab eyes showed admiration.

"Now that's a fact. I'm too damn busy in the office to waste—ah, spend my time at this sort of thing. But like you say, I've been driving Molly nuts with talking in my sleep and she made me come. Boy! The things that have popped out of me the last three weeks."

He tried to make it sound jocular but the Doctor wasn't tone deaf to the ragged worry in his voice.

With no show of haste, he moved from behind his broad, flat desk and went over to the window. The afternoon sunlight faded away with each lowering slat of venetian blind.

Carter stirred uneasily in the half-gloom of the private chamber. His restlessness increased as his eyes followed the physician's long, trim figure.

The man seemed to be making a tour of the room, pressing this button, turning that handle, and soon a switch clicked and a dazzling orifice of light trained itself on a large, leather couch over by the wall. Illumination came from the core of a hooded lamp that poised from an adjacent stand like some deadlier species of serpent.

Carter coughed. "I've already had my tonsils out, Doc."

The Doctor's laugh was brief and easy, to show that the joke was appreciated, that he was a regular fellow and a patient need not be afraid to tell him anything.

"Will you lie down on the couch, please? The light won't bother you."

His newest patient suddenly bridled. "Hell, you're not going to hold my hand, are you? I thought you wanted to ask me about my dream."

"I do, Carter. Believe me, this is the best way." He had seated himself in an easy chair next to the couch and motioned Carter to take his place. "We have found that people express themselves more freely, without restriction of any sort, such as they might feel when sitting up. You'd be amazed at your reaction."

With a grunt of distrust, Carter settled back on the lounge. It was soft.

"You may loosen your tie if

you like. Or anything that feels tight on you—as if it were holding you back."

He did as he was told and very shortly was startled to sense the change in himself. It was gradual and subtle but soon he felt relaxed, the blood evenly distributed in his medium-sized frame and a general surge of contentment and comfort spread through his limbs.

The Doctor's pomaded head bobbed above a black, leatherette notebook balanced on one crossed knee. His eyes burned down at the prone Carter.

"Begin at any point you like. I'll merely take notes from time to time. Perhaps, ask a question. But don't regard them as interruptions. Just follow your train of thought. Is that clear to you?"

Carter nodded. The couch idea was beginning to appeal to him. Hell, this was giving him some of the rest he had been missing with that crazy nightmare—

"Fine. Now, describe this dream to me as if you were talking to me about a movie you've seen and want to tell me about." The Doctor paused.

"Close your eyes, Carter. You'll find it helps you to think—"

He did as he was told. The Doctor's smooth voice drifted off and his chest filled with air. There was darkness, pitch, inky blackness. But there was comfort, too. Rich, wonderful comfort. He sighed and his mind seemed to detach itself from his earth-bound body and soon he was standing away from the lounge. His brain felt clear, free of any problem. Save that of his dream. His nightmare. Yet, he wanted to recall it somehow. He had to. Someone was asking him about it.

A gentle, easy voice, directly above him. Near. Each syllable dropping like a small pebble into still, deep water. Spirals billowed out silently from the center of the splash and the waves of darkness wavered and spread like diabolical curtains that would never change color.

The pebbles prodded him. No, of course not. The voice did. The voice that had given him the mental picture of pebbles.

"What do you dream?" the voice asked.

"A dream. Funniest kind of dream. It scares me and yet it doesn't. Know what I mean? When I wake up, I can hardly remember it but my underclothes are all wet and I'm soaking with perspiration. But when I'm dreaming it, I'm scared. Like a kid, I'm scared. As if the world was full of monsters and ghouls and all things like that. Sound crazy to you?"

The cool voice disagreed without force or loudness.

"No, it doesn't sound crazy. It sounds very interesting. Tell me about it." Everything in this dark world was still—when your eyes were closed. Carter heard his heart ticking like a clock wadded in cotton, way off in the distance.

"Well—it's like I'm walking, see? No particular place. Just walking. But it's no ordinary stroll. It seems as if—sure, I'm following somebody and they keep on moving away from me. Like I was on one of those treadmills at Coney Island and I can never quite catch up to whoever I'm following. But—wait, that's not right either. Don't see anyone! Unless—"

The voice probed. "—see anyone. Unless?"

"—unless it's—well, this is screwy!" There was jagged disbelief in Carter's tone. "It's not people I'm trying to reach. It's *trees*! Can you beat that? It's *trees!*"

"Trees?" Another gentle pebble stirring the pool of his thoughts. Only this time, he could hear a whisper of sound, a sibilant scratch. He grinned in the darkness. He remembered now. Red mechanical pencil. Black leatherette pad. The Doctor must be taking notes.

"Yeah, that's right. Trees. I can see a whole forest full of them. Like the outer edges of a park. I'm trying to get to them but they keep moving away from me. They seem to be moving or—walking, each separate and split up from the next one but all going the same way like a squad of soldiers." There was a brief, awful stillness. "DAMN—"

The Doctor's voice drew nearer. "What else do you see?"

"The trees aren't trees anymore!" Carter was almost breathless now. He moved restlessly on the couch, comfort and relaxation fast ebbing from him. A firm yet gentle hand pressed his shoulder and he subsided.

"The trees aren't trees? What are they now, if they aren't trees?"

A sigh parted Carter's lips noisily.

"They're *legs*! Damn it, *legs*! Legs as big as trees, ten times bigger than me! I can't see where they lead to. I can't look up that far. But, they're legs all right. White legs, long and beautiful and shiny. Like they were—that's it! They're all in silk stockings and they're moving away, fast, moving faster away from me. I'm running now but I can't seem to reach them at all. They're always just ahead of me, moving away—"

"Legs as big as trees." Pebbles falling in silent waters. "White legs that once were trees. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

Carter moaned and tried to open his eyes but the self-imposed concentration of closing them seemed to keep him from doing so. He moaned again.

"—how do I know? They were trees, I tell you and they ran away from me and changed. Changed into legs. Ohhhhh—"

A groan escaped the uncomfortable man on the couch in the dark office.

The voice leaned closer.

"What do you see now?"

"They've stopped walking! They've stopped—and I've—reached *them*."

Fear was speaking now; the oldest fear in the world, the darkest. The threat of the unknown. Carter's voice rose on a note of hysterical fright in the sound-proofed chamber.

"They're milling all around me. Closing me in! I'm trying to get away but I—I can't! I can touch them. I do. They're cold and stiff like old, wrinkled trees a thousand years old! Oh, God, they're changing! I want to get away but I can't —they're all around me now, surrounding me like bars, like— God! They're *trees* again. Big, thick trees with no leaves or branches, all crooked and gnarled —STOP THEM! STOP THEM! They're leaning over—they're falling—God, stop them before they crush me to pieces—!!"

Bright light flashed down, splattering the darkness into a million, far-flung atoms and Carter sprang erect with a muffled shout. His eyes rocketed around the room so that he blinked uncontrollably.

He stared down at his rumpled suit, seeing its disorder, feeling its sickening sweaty cling to his body.

Numbed, he sagged against the wall and pressed his senseless fingers to his eyes. His heart was tom-tomming furiously and his ears throbbed with a roaring cataract of noise that gradually receded with a fading sound like some loud locomotive rushing past a whistle stop until it disappeared around the bend of a mountain miles away.

A strong, brown hand holding a glass filled with some soupy-looking liquid came into his range of vision and he remembered where he was. He reached for it feverishly and downed it swiftly, not conscious of its taste or its leaden weight in his throat.

The Doctor was seated at the broad desk, regarding him evenly out of keen, wide-spaced eyes.

Carter struggled to his feet and heard his shoes hit the polished floor like dead weights.

"Boy! No wonder Molly thought I should see a doctor. The things she must have heard me say."

He fumbled with his tie and sat down in the chair across from the psychiatrist. Passing a nervous hand through his disheveled hair, he looked at the Doctor sheepishly.

"Give it to me straight, Doc. What do you think?"

The Doctor made a pyramid of his hands. When he spoke, his words were no longer like pebbles. More like separate, well-oiled tools that he had used many times with great success.

"Well, Carter, I'll say this. That was one of the most interesting nightmares I have ever encountered. Tell me frankly. You remember everything you have just imagined?"

Carter nodded resolutely. "I do and I wish I didn't."

The Doctor shook his head gently. "Be grateful. Not sorry. Since you have brought this dream

on consciously this time, you may never have it again. Also, I have analyzed it rather fully for you, I think." He smiled. "The combination of the two will remove the disturbance, that is to say, the source of your dream."

"I certainly hope so, Doc," rumbled Carter. "I don't want to go through that mill again. I don't think I could take it."

Carter's haggard face, still damp from his private hell, showed renewed interest and hope. Somehow, he felt better for his experience. His head was clear and the only thing that was bothering him now was his rapidly mounting curiosity.

"I'll begin as far back as your history warrants. Thanks to your wife, I am well informed on your case already. Carter, you are a very successful man. You own and control one of the largest trucking concerns here in New York. You're rather rich, in good health and blessed with three, fine children from the report. In truth, you really shouldn't have anything on your mind. Yet, you have.

"A recurrent dream in which you chase trees that run from you, which later transform into gigantic legs that stop running from you. They surround you, re-assume their tree structure and topple down on you from a great height. Is that correct?"

Carter could only wag his head dumbly.

"Well, then," the Doctor continued, with bell-clear emphasis, "that takes us to your past when you weren't so rich, when you weren't married and there wasn't any Julie, Teddy or Michael."

The Doctor paused thoughtfully to toy with some papers on his desk.

"You had a truck of your own fifteen years ago. You were uneducated but a real plodder. Day after day found you hauling produce from one city to the other. No long run or gruelling time schedule was too much for you in those days. You built up quite a reputation for yourself that eventually let you in on the ground floor of the business you now own."

"That's right." Carter's chest puffed a bit. "I had it in those days. Now, I don't know. Get tired awfully easy. But what's it got to do with this crackpot dream of mine?"

"I'm coming to that. Actually, you are going to supply that solution yourself."

The Doctor smiled at the open confusion in Carter's face but he continued with an easy shifting of verbal gears.

"Your case history of those years shows nothing unusual happening to you. An accident but nothing of a serious nature." He paused again, pencil poised like a pointer.

"Carter, how did you feel on those lonely road trips of yours? More specifically, how did you keep alert as the same endless scenery went by your window?"

Carter snorted in obvious disappointment. The Doctor's magic act had turned out to be a very small rabbit indeed.

"That's a funny question, Doc. What could I do but keep my mind on the road, watch the signs and billboards, maybe pick up a hitch-hiker here and there for company? 'Course I'd drive through lots of small towns and count the legs of pretty girls going by—"

He halted of his own volition and whistled. He had said it. Bang! Just like that.

The Doctor leaned forward, across the desk, his lean, planed face intense, waiting.

"Say," Carter slapped his thigh. "Wait a minute! I see what you're getting at. Why, hell, that's right. I remember now. Sure. I used to count the legs I'd see. You know, like sheep at night. That way I kept my mind occupied. It was a game at first but—"

"—after that you began to look forward to it, depended on seeing females' legs to keep your run from being dull."

"Now, wait a minute, Doc," Carter blurted angrily. "I'm no sex maniac. I just like to look at a girl's leg. What man doesn't?"

"Certainly. We all do. That's not what I mean. Actually, in your years as a trucker, your greatest fear was falling asleep at the wheel. Natural enough considering the demands of your profession. Can't you see your counting on seeing girls' legs was a safety device your mind used against that danger?"

Carter's eyes, his drab, lacklustre eyes mirrored an expression not usual for them.

"Okay, okay. That part of it I get. I'm no dummy. But why are they trees in the dream? Why do they run away from me? Why do they change to trees again and fall on top of me?

The Doctor rose slowly. The sound of street traffic came into the office as he raised the blinds and opened the window a few inches. The office was below street level and the rising and falling feet of passing people was now visible. Carter stared at them blankly, then nervously lit a cigarette.

"Carter, the mind is a curious thing. In protecting us by keeping our fears hidden, the subconscious creates symbols for objects or things that our waking minds do not want to recognize. Do you follow me? It is true that trees do resemble legs but your real search for women's legs in the dream is camouflaged by their taking the identity of trees.

"The rest seems easy and logical enough. You no longer drive a truck because you are wealthy, successful. A self-made man. With other men to drive your trucks for you now. But you haven't shaken your old urges off. The fixation is still with you. A form of residue from your old fear. Taking away the need for something doesn't always take away

the vicarious thrill of that need. Unfortunately, danger can be like a drug."

The Doctor smiled suddenly with the questionable warmth of a cold sun.

"Let me put it in a better way. Don't you find yourself still inordinately interested in women's legs?"

He did not need Carter's answer for in the man's eyes was bright agreement. The Doctor coughed.

"Well, we've covered symbols and your quest for more thrills. But the trees falling on you—I'm afraid that is something entirely different."

"You mean—"

"I mean that it is a conclusion, a result, a finale. I can give you no logical explanation for the climax of the dream. Since there is nothing in your history that corresponds to such an accident. Do you fear being crushed by things or imagine that something is always just about to fall on you?"

"No, no. Of course not. I'm no whachacallit. Except for this dream, I'm okay." Carter was strangely adamant on the point and the Doctor's keen mind didn't miss the inference.

"Well, Carter, I can only say this. What I've told you are my conclusions. The rest is entirely up to you and your inner man. I'm no tea-leaf reader or palmist. I suggest you may have seen too many movies lately or possibly you're not allowing yourself new interests."

As Carter's chin sagged, he laughed cordially and came around the big desk to clap him heartily on the back.

"Cheer up, old man. Go on home and forget the whole thing. Only do call on me the same time next Friday. We'll see then if I have done you any good."

The ordinary face before him brightened visibly and Carter lurched to his feet eagerly if a trifle unsteadily.

"That suits me, Doc. I am anxious to see if I ever get that whopper again."

"I don't think you will." The Doctor said it so firmly that Carter no longer doubted it. Cheerfully, he put on his overcoat and shook hands with the tall professional man.

"I'm glad I came now. Molly was so sure you could help me and you did. The last part of that dream always did throw me but like you said—" He shrugged broadly and without further word marched out of the office.

The Doctor went over to the lounge after he had gone and lay down with a profound sigh. Dream analysis, while absorbing, was a tiring thing. It demanded much study of the facts and a good deal of mental gymnastics. The things people had to tell you about their narrow little lives. Stupid, ugly confusion. Maladjustments of the highest order.

This fellow Carter, for instance. Oh, his dream was real enough

to him but the fool's real trouble was probably that he no longer made love to his wife. Just hungered after the slick, young, tailored creatures that scented up his office.

The Doctor shrugged reflectively. More often than not, this was the prime core of most mental disorders. Sex.

Sighing, he got up again, crossed over to the telephone. Magically, it rang into life as his hand cradled the shiny black receiver. He grinned at the masterpiece of timing as he hugged the transmitter to his chin.

"Yes? Dr. Harcourt speaking—"

"Dr. Harcourt, this is Molly Carter. You remember. Has my husband been in to see you?"

"Oh, Mrs. Carter. Yes, he has. But he's gone now. Just left this minute. Was there something you wanted to tell him?"

"Oh, no." The voice cracked over the wire nervously. "It's just that I wasn't sure he would go through with it. You know how men are."

"Your husband will be alright, Mrs. Carter. Just nerves, that's all. See that he gets some rest from now on."

"Thank you, Doctor. I will. I'm certainly glad you could help him."

"That's all right."

"Well, goodbye, Doctor. He'll be getting home soon so I better get his dinner prepared. Goodbye and thanks again."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Carter."

He replaced the receiver and went back to the leather couch beneath the window; he had already forgotten his own call.

Sighing, he opened his collar and studied the ceiling. His head ached with the dull record of Carter's voice. Curious dream the fellow had had, at that. Not that he couldn't understand it. The subject held fascination for him, too.

Propping himself on one elbow, he peered through the lower, open part of the window that led out to the street level.

He watched the legs going by, seeing only as far as the knee since the upper frame of the sash cut the rest of the body from view.

The trousered and slacked ones held no interest for him. You couldn't tell personality with cloth over it—

Three blocks from the Doctor's office, Carter drew abreast of a crew of laborers in the midst of pulling down one of those old wooden, telephone poles that seem to still be standing. A terrible snapping of cable, a warning cry . . . but too late. Carter looked up quickly but he was only in time to see the cumbersome, tree-like pole descend on him.

Not to get out of its way.

THE END

* * * * * *

THE LUCKY COFFIN

by C. B. Gilford

THE business about the coffin started as a joke, nothing more. So I didn't think at the time that it would affect Uncle Sim or me or the fact that I needed to inherit Uncle Sim's money real bad.

Where did the coffin really come from? That I can't say. All I know is that an old fellow in town named Jasper Grandy was about ready to die and he ordered himself a coffin from a mail-order house. Nothing fancy, just a plain, simple pine coffin. Should have been like millions of other wooden boxes made to hold human remains. But it wasn't. There was something about that particular coffin that was different. And I think I knew more about its being different than anybody.

Well anyway, this Jasper Grandy was in his seventies and failing fast. Being a provident man who'd always wanted a roof over his head, he decided now to look out for his future in the best way left to him. So he bought the coffin. He couldn't afford any of those metal affairs, so he had to settle for wood. Mind you now, just plain wood. Couldn't have cost more than a hundred dollars.

But the funny part of it was, Jasper Grandy didn't die. No, sir. He was in the advanced stages of what the doctors like to call "an incurable illness." But he didn't die. The minute the truck stopped in front of his house and the men brought the coffin in and set it down in Jasper's parlor—that was the minute Jasper started to get well. And it wasn't more than a couple of weeks before Jasper was up on his feet, walking around town telling everybody about his "miraculous recovery." That's what the doctor's called it too.

Now in a town the size of ours, people are apt to be a bit more superstitious than big-city folks. The coincidence of the arrival of the coffin and Jasper's sudden recuperation was bound to be noticed. It wasn't long before there was speculation on some sort of connection between the two events.

But not on Jasper's part. Though he didn't put much stock in the notion himself, Jasper was well aware of the things people were saying about his coffin. Being a hard-headed business man, he was not above turning the incident to profit.

There was a cantankerous old maiden lady in town named Busby, Josephine Busby. She was having a bout with pneumonia, and for some reason she wanted to hold on to her miserable old life. She sent

for Jasper. And I happened to be there because Miss Busby had asked the bank to send down a wad of her cash. Being on the brink of eternity, she wanted to complete the transaction then and there.

You should have heard the two of them haggling. Miss Busby was saying she was expecting to die any minute—and she looked it—and so she figured she'd do one last good deed and take that surplus coffin off Jasper's hands. And Jasper was saying she didn't need to worry none because he'd be needing the coffin *some* time and it didn't take up hardly any space in his parlor. Being rebuffed like that, I thought poor Miss Busby was going to expire right then. She started shaking and trembling and getting clammy-looking. Jasper bided his time.

He wouldn't deny her one last favor now, Miss Busby went on, would he? On the basis of their lifelong friendship? They hadn't spoken for thirty years. Not since Jasper had told her flatly he wasn't interested in marrying her. But Jasper wasn't one to hold grudges. How much did Miss Busby think the coffin was worth?

She'd give him what he paid for it.

That wouldn't pay him for the trouble of ordering the thing and then waiting for it.

Well, a little more then.

How much more?

Oh, about . . .

Not enough . . .

They settled for a nice round sum, one thousand dollars—cash. Miss Busby managed to scratch her signature, and I handed the greenbacks to Jasper.

And that was when it happened, the minute I gave Jasper the money and the sale was official and complete. Even before the coffin was delivered to Miss Busby's house. It happened the moment the ownership of that pine box changed hands. Miss Busby lay back on her pillow. The trembling stopped and her breathing came easier. And she got a look on her face of a woman with a future, a woman who expected to live a long time.

Well, as could be expected, it wasn't long before the whole town knew about the sale. They started waiting, and not so patiently. You never saw so many people kindly stopping by Miss Busby's house to see how the poor sick lady was getting along. The reports began piling up. She was getting along fine. In ten days—it didn't take her as long as it took Jasper—she was up, poking around making a nuisance of herself just like before, as good as new.

So it wasn't strange that people began saying that there was something different about that coffin.

. . . The matter of the coffin wasn't, however, the subject of conversation one night there when I went to call on Meg. Meg Norton, that is. My girl. Been my girl

for almost seven years. That, in fast, *was* the subject of conversation—those seven long years.

"Hello, Emery." She greeted me apathetically. Of course seven years is a long time to keep up enthusiasm. Still I sensed things were even more wrong than usual.

But I kissed her anyway, gave her the customary signs of affection. Her response was half-hearted. I knew something was really awfully wrong. "What is it?" I asked her. "What happened today that was so bad?"

"I got an announcement in the mail," she stated mournfully. "An announcement of the date of Jenny Cartwright's wedding."

"Well, Jenny's a friend of yours," I said. "You ought to be happy about it."

"Jenny is a friend of mine," Meg answered. And she was getting ready to cry. "That's the point. She's the last of my friends. I am now the only girl in my school class who isn't married."

In a flash I understood. I lit a cigar, took a few puffs, remembered Meg didn't like the smell of cigars, and let it go out.

"Well, Emery?" The tears were still threatening but hadn't flowed.

"Well what?"

"Are we ever going to get married?"

"Why, Meg! We're engaged, aren't we?"

"I didn't ask you that. That sometimes has nothing to do with it, I've found out. I asked you if we're ever going to get married."

"Sure we are."

"When?"

Why did we have to go through this routine so often? On the average of almost once a week now. The questions didn't change, and neither did the answers.

But I walked over to her, and sat beside her, and put my arms around her, and got my shoulder ready for the tears that would come. "When we can afford it, darling," I said. "When we can afford it."

The tears came, and I went on talking, trying to soothe, hoping that the same old words might turn the trick just once more. "Now you know I want to get married, Meg. As much as you do. I want a home. A pretty little woman waiting for me at the end of the day, and a kid or two to comfort me in my old age. But getting married takes a lot of money. And I'm just a flunkey at the bank. I'll admit that. Hardly make enough money to support myself, much less a wife. So that means we have to wait."

"For Uncle Sim?"

"Yes, of course, for Uncle Sim. He's got close to a million. Or half a million anyway. And I'm his only heir. So when Uncle Sim dies I'll be rich."

"*When,*" Meg echoed bitterly.

"He's past eighty," I reminded her.

"But healthy."

"Oh, I'm not so sure. I don't

think he's been looking too well lately."

"Really!" Meg brightened through her tears. "Oh, Emery, that's wonderful."

I reproached her silently, with a look.

"Well, I can't help rejoicing if your Uncle Sim has poor health," she said stubbornly. "Because if he doesn't die pretty soon, I'll be an old maid."

Yes, I thought to myself, and I'll be a crotchety old bachelor, lonely and alone. So I squeezed Meg tight, and said with all the confidence in the world, "He'll die, Meg. He'll die. Uncle Sim can't last much longer. He just can't."

Well, that just shows how wrong some people can be about the future. Of course, I was thinking of the law of averages and normal life expectancy. I didn't figure on the coffin.

But it was that darned coffin that changed everything, that made me do what I did—what I had to do.

You see, after Miss Busby got well and had the doctors shaking their heads about how it couldn't have happened, the coffin became the principal topic of conversation in every corner of the town. There were all sorts of theories about what made it the way it was, but none of them made much sense. Only one thing was certain —everybody wanted it. At least everybody who was sick, or scared of dying, or getting along in years.

I never thought Miss Busby would sell. She refused several mighty tempting offers. Like most people, she was greedy. That was her undoing. She might have kept the coffin and lived to be a hundred. But a big wad of money sometimes will make people take chances even with their lives.

Of all people it was Meg who broke the news to me. "I heard a rumor," she said to me one evening when I came to call. "The coffin's been sold for twenty-five thousand dollars."

I couldn't help laughing. "Who would pay that much money for a wooden box?" I wanted to know.

Meg wasn't laughing that night. "There's only one person in town who could afford it," she answered. "Your Uncle Sim."

Well, I don't know exactly how I felt just then. I can remember looking at Meg and seeing that she had a crushed, helpless expression on her face.

"What's going to happen to us now, Emery?" she was asking. Her voice was a little wobbly, and any minute she could have gotten hysterical. "Now Uncle Sim won't die! He won't ever die!"

I went to her and tried to take hold of her, but she wouldn't let me. "Sweetheart," I said, "surely you don't believe that silly talk about the coffin."

"Two people have gotten well, haven't they?"

"Well yes. But it was coincidence. Psychological. There isn't

any magic charm to it. The age of miracles is over."

She looked fiercely back at me, not at all convinced. When she answered, she almost spat the words at me. "You said your Uncle Sim wasn't looking too well. Why don't you go over and see how he looks now?"

I didn't like her challenging me like that. "All right, I will," I said. And I slammed my hat on my head and walked out.

It was a kind of long walk to Uncle Sim's. He lived in the big old white house on the hill, over at the other end of town. It took me half an hour to get there, and I spent the time telling myself that all this talk about the coffin being something special was nonsense and I wasn't going to let a wooden box stand in the way of my getting half a million dollars. Also I was a little mad that Uncle Sim had already spent twenty-five thousand dollars of my money for such foolishness.

When I got there, there were lights blazing in the house, which was a little odd because Uncle Sim usually went to bed early. When I banged with the knocker it was Uncle Sim himself who came answering.

"Well, look who's here!" he greeted me cheerfully. His eyes were sparkling, not weak and watery. His white old mane glistened as if he'd just applied some hair-grower. He wasn't leaning on his cane. And his wrinkled face had an awful healthy glow to it.

"Come in, sonny, come in. I want to show you something." And he had me by the arm, squeezing my biceps with the strength of a vise, dragging me inside and into the big parlor.

The rumor was true. There it was. Much as I'd heard about it, I'd never seen it. A place had been cleared for it on the big library table, and there it sat in state. It was a cheap thing, no doubt about that. Wood, with a thin, flimsy covering of black cloth and plain, black iron handles. It didn't look like twenty-five thousand dollars worth. Neither did it look like the Fountain of Youth. But I got a funny feeling as I stared at it. Something like thinking that this thing looked like a coffin but wasn't a coffin, because a coffin is intended to contain a corpse and this box refused to accept any such contents . . .

"She's mine now, sonny, all mine." Uncle Sim walked across the room and posed proudly beside his acquisition.

"Why did you buy it though, Uncle Sim?" I found myself asking in a voice that didn't sound like my own. "You weren't sick like those other people."

"No," he said. "Not real sick anyway. But I was getting little pains here once in a while." He indicated his heart. "The old ticker was beginning to give out."

I had been right then about his not looking well. No one knew how close I'd been to that half million. But now . . .

"Has buying the coffin made you feel any better, Uncle Sim?" My voice quavered, I was so afraid of the answer.

He walked over to me and poked a finger in my ribs, devilishly. "I feel ten years younger already," he declared.

"You do!" I wondered if I betrayed my horror.

"I was getting ready to die, sonny. And now I feel like I'm going to live forever."

Forever! He looked it too. Like some Grand High Lama who knows the secret of immortality. Wrinkled and old on the outside, but beaming eternal youth from within. I groped behind me for a chair arm and sat down before I should collapse.

"What's the matter, sonny?" I could hear Uncle Sim asking. "You don't look too well yourself."

I think I believed from that moment on. I must have believed. Because I could see myself getting old, older than Uncle Sim because he didn't age. And I still had that flunkey job at the bank. And I could see Meg too, with lines in her face, sitting rocking in a rocking chair, waiting for me to marry her through eons and eons till the end of time.

So I must have decided then. It was plainly and simply a matter of self-preservation. Uncle Sim's life or the stagnation and ruin of my own. And Meg's . . . If Uncle Sim wasn't going to die decently, under his own power, I would have to urge him, and help him . . . It just wasn't right or natural for any man to live forever.

Forever! That word again. Forever is an awful long time to have to wait for half a million dollars. Too long.

I remember getting up from the chair finally and escaping from Uncle Sim's house, leaving him fondling that horrible pine box. I suppose I found my way home. But I couldn't have slept. What I was thinking about didn't allow for sleep.

And I didn't think about much else for the next week or so, while my resolve was becoming hard and inflexible. I saw Meg a couple of times, but it was too painful to stay long in her company. Because she knew, all, everything. The hurt look in her eyes, like a wounded deer bleeding its heart out in uncomplaining silence, told me that she knew and realized. Just the look in Meg's eyes, if nothing else, would have been enough to inspire me to stern action.

I took to going to Uncle Sim's house oftener, hanging around as long as I could manage, and observing. The excuses I gave were interest in Uncle Sim's improving health and the fascination of the coffin.

The opportunity, as I discovered, presented itself readily. One day I found my good uncle, in the highest of spirits, cleaning out the contents of his medicine cabinet.

"Don't need this stuff any more," he chortled to me gaily. "I'm fit as a fiddle. No more pills or potions for me."

Boxes, tins and bottles were sailing with good aim into the wastebasket. I watched them go, forcing a smile, and noting that indeed my relative showed little need for any sort of medicine. He was looking healthier every day.

"Now this stuff," he said, and held up for my gaze a bottle filled with clear liquid. "At one time this was my life-saver. Had to take a spoonful every time I had a bad heart pain. Not any more than a spoonful though. Much more than that would be fatal. But sometimes I felt like drinking the whole bottleful. Glad now I didn't."

As it joined the other items in the wastebasket, I memorized that particular bottle's size, shape and label. I felt my smile become genuine. My good uncle had delived himself into my hands.

I said I'd stay for dinner. When he went to the cellar to fetch a bottle of wine, I retrieved the heart medicine from the wastebasket. I laughed to myself. Uncle and I were both in a mood to celebrate.

I joined him in the parlor, where the coffin was. This evening I walked right past the thing, serene in my confidence that it could do no further harm to me. Uncle Sim had suggested that I open the wine and pour for both of us. I was only too happy to oblige.

It was a simple matter for me, while Uncle Sim was standing admiring his coffin, stroking its black surface as he might a dog's back, to add to one of the wine glasses the complete contents of the medicine bottle. A dozen spoonsful, I estimated, at the very least.

And then we sat together by the fire, each with his wine glass, as any lovable old uncle and loving young nephew would have. I felt perfectly calm, thinking what I would say when someone arrived after Uncle Sim was dead. "He had a sudden attack," I would say, "and asked me to bring his medicine. I did. He seemed in terrible pain. He snatched the bottle from me and drank every drop of it."

And of course, I would have pressed the bottle into my uncle's dead hand. No need even to wipe my fingerprints off the bottle, for there was a perfectly good reason why they should be there.

"It's really tragic," I would say. "He should have remained under the doctor's care. But he imagined that he'd be safe as long as he had that coffin."

At the thought of being a murderer I had absolutely no qualms. I looked across at Uncle Sim, and found him gazing happily into the firelight. "Your health, Uncle Sim," I proposed. "Your health and long life."

If any toast were calculated to get him to drink with a will, that

one was it. He lifted his glass and began to toss off a hefty swallow. Then all of a sudden he was convulsed in a violent fit of coughing and choking. What he had tried to drink sprayed out of his mouth and sizzled in the fire, and in trying to rise from the chair, he dropped the glass. The red contents of it flowed freely upon the hearthstones. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the fit of coughing ceased.

I sat there, too stunned to speak or move. But Uncle Sim didn't appear at all unhappy over the accident. He was, instead, smiling a big wide smile. "You know what made me do that?" he asked me.

I could only shake my head.

"Well," he said, "an idea just came to my mind. And it was such an amazing idea that it startled me. About that coffin. You know, Emery, if there's something magic about that coffin that will keep the owner from dying from sickness, it might protect him from dying other ways too. Like getting run down by an automobile, for instance. I'll bet you I could walk across the street any time with my eyes shut and never get hit."

Never once had it occurred to me that if the coffin was a good luck charm against pneumonia or heart disease, it could just as well work against violent, unnatural deaths. But now I had it. Now it had been demonstrated to me. The poison irretrievable on the floor, and my uncle none the worse for wear.

I suppose I endured the rest of that evening somehow. My mind was numb. The sight of half a million dollars trickling out of one's fingers, just as the wine spilled out of Uncle Sim's glass, is quite a shock to the nervous system.

It took me, in fact, a few days to recover. I stayed away from the bank. I couldn't have concentrated even on the simple tasks I performed there. And I didn't go to see Meg. For I didn't know what I should have told her, or how I should have kept it from her that the whole situation was utterly hopeless.

There is nothing worse for one's morale, I believe, than an abortive murder attempt. It seems to unstring one entirely. To steel one's self to the unnatural job of snuffing out a life, taking careful aim, and then *missing*. The remorse of failure is far worse than that of success. For with success, one can at least be compensated by the rewards of the crime.

But as must always happen, even the blackest defeatism spends itself. I began to recuperate. I began to think again. And to plan.

My plans were of a different sort now, however. I no longer regarded the matter as simple. I considered the problem of the coffin at length. I did not seek for the explanation of its effectiveness in warding off death for its owner. I tried to accept that fact and

proceed accordingly.

First, however, I tried once again, more to make absolutely sure than with any hope of success. The most frequently used murder weapon, I knew, was a gun. Uncle Sim had one. One day my uncle was asleep in his chair by the fire. I took the gun out of a drawer, made certain it was loaded, walked over behind the chair and aimed it at my uncle's head.

If I kill him, I told myself, I will say I was cleaning the gun and didn't know it was loaded. If I do not kill him and he wakes up at the sound of the shot, I shall tell exactly the same story. So with a rather unusual *sang-froid* for such an occasion, I pulled the trigger.

Or rather, as I pulled the trigger something else happened. The floor lamp beside my uncle's chair was an ancient article, had tottered precariously on its defective base for years. The moment I pulled the trigger was the moment it chose to fall. The upright caught my wrist, deflected my aim, so that the bullet plowed harmlessly into the upholstery of the chair.

The crash of the lamp and the roar of the shot sent Uncle Sim flying out of his seat. For an instant he gazed uncomprehendingly at the wreckage and me with the gun in my hand.

"That was a close call," I told him, with an unfeigned nervousness. "I was going to clean your revolver for you, and I was just crossing in back of your chair when the lamp fell over. It hit my hand and made the gun go off. The bullet went into your chair. . . . I almost killed you, Uncle Sim."

He came over and patted my back soothingly, as if I were the one who needed assurance. "Don't get wrought up, sonny," he advised. "No need to think you're going to hurt me. That coffin, sonny. As long as I own that coffin, nothing can touch me. Now forget it."

Well, I wasn't likely to forget it. I had corroborated my earlier belief. I could not kill Uncle Sim. The man led a charmed like. The solution to my problem was not in murder.

I had considered, of course, merely stealing the coffin. It was a project involving considerable risk, but I did not reject it for that reason. I concluded that removing the coffin from the premises would not alter the legal ownership of said item. It would still be Uncle Sim's and Uncle Sim would remain alive and healthy.

The alternative was to destroy the thing. What destroys wood is fire. Arson was inadvisable, since our town had a quite alert fire department. I would have to smuggle the coffin out of the house first. I prepared the spot for the cremation far out in the woods. But the blowtorch I had acquired gave me a bad burn and

a worse scare in experimenting with it. Twice I hauled kerosene to the place. Once a scavenging animal got the cap unscrewed and spilled it for me. Another time I stumbled in a hole, spraining my ankle and so damaging the can that the contents seeped out. Confronted by obviously adverse fates, I gave up the idea of destruction by flame.

While recuperating from the sprained ankle, I thought of explosives. I spent two months constructing a time bomb out in Uncle Sim's tool shed. My workmanship must have been defective. One night, prematurely of course, the thing went up with a roar, demolishing the tool shed not more than thirty seconds after I had left it. Nobody ever found out what caused the blast, but the accident was altogether too close for my comfort.

I went to see Meg that same night. My hang-dog look must have been pretty plain.

"Well," asked Meg, "what's new with your rich uncle?" She had grown thin and haggard in recent weeks. Already she was beginning to look her role of spinster.

"Meg," I told her, "I don't think my uncle is going to die in the foreseeable future. Therefore I have come to a difficult but inevitable decision. I hereby release you from our engagement, so you can find someone else and get married before it's too late."

She didn't say anything. She just stared at me, getting whiter and whiter by the second. Then she opened her mouth just once, and screamed. I was barely able to catch her before she fell in a dead faint.

And then, as she was coming out of it minutes later, she was mumbling, "You can't do this to me, Emery. You've already taken the best years of my life. You've got to marry me. Your Uncle Sim has got to die . . ."

The stuff I needed was brewed, I had heard, by some sort of South American Indians. It was a long and complicated job getting hold of some. But I was patient and determined. I got it. And I got a hypodermic needle and put the stuff into it.

I was staying at Uncle Sim's house at the time. I had lost my job at the bank and Uncle Sim, not usually helpful or charitable, had grudgingly consented to shelter me. So I had the opportunity one night of sneaking into Uncle Sim's room, jabbing the needle into his leg where the mark wasn't likely to be seen, and then holding him down for the few minutes necessary for the injection to take effect. Then I called the doctor.

The doctor came and he was so amazed to find Uncle Sim, the owner of that amazing coffin, dead, that he didn't make a very thorough examination. He signed the death certificate without ever noticing the hole made by the needle.

The matter of the undertaker wasn't quite as easy. I phoned him a couple of hours before dawn, and insisted that he come right over and do all his work right there at the house. He arrived sleepy and wrathful. The promise of a fat fee calmed him somewhat, and then finally a glass of Uncle Sim's wine with a little something added put him back to sleep. I prepared Uncle Sim myself, dressed him in his black suit and laid him out in that precious coffin of his. When the undertaker woke up about noon, I congratulated him on his fine job, and he went on his way, somewhat confused but never doubting.

Then all that afternoon I let the population file by the coffin, look down at Uncle Sim, and see how dead he was. I stood by, listening to their conversation and accepting their sympathies.

"Well, there wasn't much to that coffin," more than one person told me. "Your uncle died after all."

Brushing away a tear, I replied, "There's the law of nature, we must realize. Death and taxes, you know."

There were also those who confided, "Never believed that coffin story for one minute."

I didn't disagree with them. I just shook their hands and mumbled something appropriate.

And finally there was Meg. She arrived dressed in the black she had saved for so long, and she tried her best to look sorrowful. But when she came up to me she couldn't restrain a tiny smile.

"Is he really dead, Emery?"

I winked.

"Oh, Emery, I love you so."

I squeezed her hand. "You can start picking out your trousseau, honey," I said.

We laid Uncle Sim to rest the very next morning. We put him in the big fancy vault that looked like a small Greek temple that he had had built for himself years ago. The whole town came to the funeral. It was the end of the coffin story, and they all wanted to see it. They stayed till the big iron door clanged shut, and then they all went home.

The bank, my old employers, advanced me some ready cash until all the red tape about Uncle Sim's will could be unraveled, and I married Meg right away. We didn't, I'm ashamed to say, wait for "a decent interval." We had waited too long already.

Then just the other day I went out to the cemetery and walked around Uncle Sim's vault. And there, in the calm and quiet of that peaceful spot, I heard it. The knocking. The knocking from the inside.

I suppose he got over the effects of the paralyzing drug pretty quick after the funeral, and by this time he must have had time to get awful mad. But it's his own fault for buying that coffin he's in, and I hope he realizes it.

WISE BEYOND HIS YEARS

by Claude Ferrari

GERALD GRADISMAN called in at the Police Department to convey his thanks for the swift rescue of young Anthony.

"Just routine," said Captain Knott. "The old man never bothered to cover his tracks. We just followed, made the pinch."

"Nevertheless, my thanks. Young Tony is all we have." He handed Captain Knott a check. "I want you to put that with your widows and orphans fund."

"Well, thanks," said Knott. "It's not necessary, but I can put it to good use."

"What's going to happen to the old man?" asked Gradisman.

Knott made a wry grimace. "An institution. His mind's completely gone."

Gradisman shook his head in wonder. "Human nature is certainly a constant source of amazement. Just why should an old codger pull a stunt like that?"

"Hard to say. He's done it before, you know."

Gradisman moved indignantly in his chair. "Then why in the world was he allowed at large?"

"He's only been out of prison six months. He did eighteen years for his first offense."

"Oh. I had no idea."

Knott picked up a type-written sheet of paper. "Ian Craley, born in 1882, wealthy parents." He glanced up at Gradisman. "Now listen to this, it's the kind of stuff to make a psychologist take notice. In fact, it's an answer to your question. When he was six months old, just young Tony's age, he was kidnapped from his cradle, rescued twenty-six hours later."

"Isn't that odd!"

Knott shrugged. "Maybe so. It didn't seem to affect him until 1935. He was in his fifties then. That's when he pulled this other kidnapping stunt. He grabbed Paul Monteith's baby."

"Monteith of the Argonaut Bank?"

"Right. He was caught in the act and sent up. Just six months ago he got out on parole."

"And could hardly wait to try again."

* * * * * *

Craley had waited until ten o'clock that morning. Stalking out of the park, he shouldered aside the nurse, picked up baby Anthony and disappeared through the foliage.

The nurse ran screaming into the house, and presently Mrs. Gradisman, still in her negligee, burst out on the street.

Directly opposite stood the perambulator. It rested precisely on its four black wheels, alone in the sunlight.

Mrs. Gradisman flew across the

street, satin mules clacking on the macadam. The pink cashmere blanket, the percale sheet had been snatched away. Anthony was gone.

The nurse described Ian Craley to the police. "He was like an old black crow! He didn't have any teeth . . . He pushed me away; I was so frightened I couldn't move!"

"What was he wearing?" asked Captain Joe Knott.

"Black, all black! With a fuzzy black hat, stained and dirty. A dirty old man!"

The park was surrounded, but Ian Craley and little Anthony had already passed through.

A negro newsboy had noticed him. "Yessir. He was goin' all out! Man, was he limpin' and hoppin'! Yessir. I saw the baby."

"Where did he go?"

"Down there, into Court Street."

From the grocer at the corner of Tyler and Court, they learned that the old man had turned to the right, toward the warehouses and the produce-market. Two blocks down Tyler, a woman sitting on her porch was certain that no old man carrying a baby had passed. The police established that Craley had gone to earth in a four-block area whose center was the intersection of Tyler and Blackwell.

They began a house-to-house inquiry.

At a hamburger diner on Blackwall, the waitress reported that an old man in black ate meals there two or three times a week; that he came always from the direction of Tyler, and returned in the same direction.

At the corner of Tyler and Rose Alley, a shoe-repairman told Captain Knott, "I see him once in a while. He lives down the alley: maybe in the old white house at the end."

The old white house stood at the head of the alley like a gaunt and purblind horse. The door was locked. No one responded to pounding.

Next up the alley was a little brown cottage with geraniums in tin cans on the steps. Through the screen door a moon-faced woman watched the policeman. "Lookin' for the old man?"

"Yes," said Knott. "Have you seen him?"

She pushed open the door, came out on the porch. "He came past not an hour ago. He was carrying a baby. I nearly fell off the Christmas tree!"

Captain Knott sent his men to surround the house. He knocked once more fruitlessly; then a burly patrolman burst the door open.

The ground floor smelled of dust and sun-baked varnish. The kitchen was dark and dirty, the remaining rooms were unfurnished. Captain Knott mounted the stairs.

The second-floor hall ran the length of the house, with a window looking up the alley toward Tyler Street. Four doors led off the hall. No sound could be heard from

the rooms behind.

Knott softly opened the first door. The room was empty. Dismal light seeped through a curtained window; brown wall-paper hung in tatters.

The second room was empty except for three cardboard boxes of old magazines.

The third door led into a stained bathroom.

The last door was locked. From behind came a baby's whimper.

"Open up!" said Knott in a sudden sharp voice. "Open up! This is the police!"

No answer.

Knott kicked at the latch; the door flew open.

Anthony Gradisman seemed safe and sound. He sat on the floor, on one side of a low table. On the other side sprawled Ian Craley. The table between them held three thick black candles, now guttering and smoking; a globular fish-bowl full of water; an empty card-board pill-box. There were two or three small splotches of blood.

The baby was quiet. He sat erect, his eyes following every move of the policemen. It was from Craley's mouth that the baby-noises came.

"Get on your feet, old man," said Knott. Craley started to cry —the full-throated yowling of an infant. Little Anthony laughed.

Knott said sourly, "You think this is funny, eh, baby?"

The baby nodded. Knott leaned forward; he turned to the patrolman. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah . . . Look. His hand is cut. That's where the blood comes from."

Knott looked at Ian Craley. "His hand is cut too—in the same place. Right in the palm . . . Let's get 'em out of here."

The police lifted Craley to his feet. He couldn't or wouldn't walk; his legs gave under him. They carried him down to the wagon, and he cried all the way.

"And that's the way he is now," Captain Knott told Gerald Gradisman, who had risen to his feet, making ready to leave. "He cries and howls, he dirties himself, he won't touch a thing but milk."

Gradisman shook his head. "Crazy as a bat, eh?"

"Oh, some kind of infantile deterioration. How's young Tony after his ordeal?"

"Right as rain. The outing did the young rascal good; he hasn't let out a yip since we got him back."

"A cute little nipper," said Knott, who had raised three of his own.

"This afternoon," said Gradisman, "just before I came over here, he took his first step. Two or three steps, in fact. I believe he could have made it across the room if he hadn't seen us watching him. Then the little rascal sat down and looked innocent."

Captain Knott was amazed. "At six months he's walking?"

Gradisman nodded proudly. "He's a remarkable child."

SPAN TRAP

by Sidney Porcelain

WHEN Mona Wilson commited suicide she thought she had good reasons. She had been working for the Forzia Silverplate Company seventeen years, ever since she had left grammar school; she lived in a drab roominghouse where the other roomers were not friendly; and she knew she could never make herself attractive enough to have a man want her for his wife. That she might have been able to change her life there is no doubt, but if that idea had ever occurred to Mona she had considered it too much trouble, as well as uncertain, and she was not one to trouble herself to make much of an effort.

At first, after working one year, she had been a little ambitious and had gone to night high school believing that she could advance herself enough to afford better clothes and in that way find a man to marry her. This endeavor was shortlived when she discovered that it was not changing matters any and that bettering herself, both in her employment and her appearance and personality was a long range task. The simple solution was suicide.

And so one day, after work, she had gone quietly up to her room, opened a bottle of sleeping tablets and downed every one of them as if they had been so much popcorn. And it worked. Mona Wilson died.

She knew she had succeeded the moment she opened her eyes and found herself in a small cubicle of a room, not unlike the room she had lately departed. Only, instead of a bed, she was lying on a soft-stone tablet. There were no curtains on the window, and the light that entered was a bluish-gray glow that had no suggestion of sunlight. She looked at herself and saw that she was wearing a robe of the same blue-gray color and she realized that this was her own room and that somehow the Mona Wilson of the Earth was somewhere else, and yet . . . there was the strange impression that she had not left the Earth at all, but was in her roominghouse. This was further supported when she slid open a panel and found a hall and staircase in a similar position as the original hall and staircase she had traversed for seventeen years.

But she knew she was dead: she had committed suicide; there had been nothing to live for, and so far as she knew, she still had nothing to live for. She went down the stairs and on the bottom landing she thought she saw somebody come out of one of the other paneled doors, but in the blue-gray haze it was hard to tell.

"You're up early this morning," a voice said, not unkindly, and yet,

not kindly either.

"Yes," she said. Evidently this person, whoever she was, knew her, despite the fact that Mona knew she had never been dead before.

"Well, the early bird catches the worm, you know," the voice said, and this time Mona saw that part of the haze had form, draped in a robe not unlike Mona's, but more bulky.

I thought I would never hear that phrase again, Mona thought. She wanted to escape from it as quickly as possible, but she could not leave without some comment. "Why not say," she said, "the early worm is caught by the bird."

"Oh, ha, ha!" the voice laughed. "That's a good one. You're wasting your time. You should be on permeo!"

Permeo? There was a new word. Proof that she was in a different place, that she was dead, not just doped up with sleeping pills. What was a permeo?

But Mona didn't want to encourage the woman by remaining longer, so she went out into the open and saw that the blue-gray haze came from a large globe suspended above, as though it hung from the sky, but of course it couldn't have been or she would have been able to see the cable and the point from which it hung. Yet, all she did see was the globe, apparently defying the law of gravity. And it wasn't a street below, in the strict sense of the word, it was rather a place, a plaza.

In spite of the light, much of the plaza was in shadow, a strange nebulous shadow that concealed without obscuring. She directed her feet leftward, and discovered that she was going in the direction where the Forzia Silverplate Company would have been had she been alive and had this place been Earth. But of course she would not reach the Forzia Silverplate Company. Still, it would be interesting to see what was standing in its place. So she went the length of the plaza in the way that she might have gone had she been alive; and when she considered herself approximately near the Forzia Silverplate Company, she discovered that here was a monument decorated with curious figures that wound around it in a way that seemed to portray a great journey or crusade. It was rather beautiful in a dull bluish-gray and suggested marching movement. It seemed that the figures were actually revolving around the pole or monument to its top which was well above her head, disappearing as they wound upward. She tried to concentrate her attention on one female figure to see whether she actually did move, but it was impossible to be sure for her glance was swept ever upward and around until her eyes were lost in the mystery of the out-of-sight.

At this moment a bell rang and reverberated and as the reverberations died, Mona was aware that

the blue-gray color was fading and was being replaced by a rose-pink. Everything became suffused with this rose-pink color including her own robe. Suddenly bustling activity disturbed the area and Mona could discern many robed people passing in all directions as though the bell had been a signal. She raised her head and saw that the globe above had also changed to rose-pink.

"Hurry up, you'll be late!" somebody called to her, and, uncertain that she was meant, Mona looked about for the source of the voice. Someone then grabbed her robe and pulled her along with the rose-pink river of people who were hurrying toward a satiny gate that did not open but shimmered so that they were able to pass through as though being engulfed in its folds.

Mona found herself next to a moving belt and somehow realized that she was supposed to examine the objects on the belt as they swept by in a regular but dizzying pace. This was her work, then. Much different from the Forzia Silverplate Company where she had only to add columns of figures. But these objects . . . suddenly she found herself darting her hand forward to snatch one of them, and at the same time she knew she had detected a difference between it and its fellows. Now, holding it, she saw that the object was a machine-part, the shape of a large pear, with two spiraling ridges, and the defect lay in a jutting part that made its silhouette uneven, as though the pear had a stem.

She tossed this part on the floor where it smashed and melted into the floor, itself becoming part of its polished smoothness as though it had never existed as a separate entity.

After a few hours of this work, another bell sounded on a slightly higher tone and the rose-pink faded and everything gradually became a lemon-yellow. The moving belts slowed and stopped and Mona found herself going with the crowd in the general direction of a large patio where several hazy figures sat and reclined. In the center of the patio was a high lemon-yellow dome through which music and voices issued in such a way that it seemed to Mona the people around the dome had caused them. She sat down also, feeling slightly hungry. Then suddenly the noises and music ceased and Mona felt permeated with a strong sensation of passion, then anger, then fear, and then relief, and finally love. While she heard no words spoken and saw nothing, she knew she had just experienced a short drama of which she felt a part. Also, her hunger had been satisfied. She noticed that those around her had had the same or a similar experience. One voice said very distinctly to a companion: "The permeo had a good program today, didn't it?"

So this was the permeo, Mona thought, and realized she had

known that that was what it was all along, for hadn't she been here all her life? Or had she? She couldn't quite recall. She only knew that she was not completely satisfied, and was not even curious about her existence here.

Later, after the bell had ascended the scale and the colors had changed from lemon-yellow to pale-lilac, to leaf-green, to deep-mauve, to ocean-blue, Mona made her way back to the edifice she had left when the color was still blue-gray. The same woman greeted her with:

"Home late, aren't you? Are you hungry?"

"A little bit," Mona admitted.

"Well, you're welcome to come in and share my permeo, though I must say I need a new restitutioner. I've been getting a little gaseous lately and I think it's my reception."

"No, thank you just the same," Mona told her and fled up the stairs, thinking that somehow she would have to find a way to escape this horrible place. There must be some way. Surely she could not put up with the belt job any longer, and as for that woman downstairs . . .

If only she could meet someone she could feel friendly with. The only feeling of satisfaction with living had been in the patio when the permeo had been reflecting, but somehow even that had not been complete. She had shared in somebody else's dramatized satisfaction, secondhand satisfaction. That was not enough.

Then she remembered what happened whenever she found an imperfect machine part. Perhaps if she threw herself on the floor, she too would melt into it and become nothing. It was worth trying.

So the next morning she was up early again and the woman met her with surprise in her voice: "Up early again!" she exclaimed. "You must really love your work. Or is it the overtime they pay? Isn't it awful how much things cost these days? Last week I paid 1800 calories for a midnight snack. That's a lot of energy to waste, but I must say I couldn't sleep because of that imperfection in my permeo. You're lucky you can use the one at the factorium."

"Have you ever been in the factorium?" Mona asked suddenly.

"Why of course! I worked there myself until I got too old and was in danger of slipping on the floor."

"What would happen if someone did slip?"

"Oh, don't even mention it! I'll never forget the time I saw somebody disappear without a trace!"

"Thanks!" Mona said and rushed out.

That is what she would do then. Before anybody else arrived, she would throw herself onto the floor and disappear forever. What was there to live for?

When she reached the factorium she slid through the satiny door and found the belt section

and then, with a quick glance around, she leaped floorward with a crash that upset her considerably without any other effect than a shock and bruises. Several others came to her and helped her to her feet, and one of them said, explaining everything in his remark: "It's a good thing the belts weren't working."

"I'm all right . . ." she told them.

"Come, I'll help you into the permeo room. You must be careful when you . . . Just sit here and the permeo will give you a restitutional overplay."

He helped her to a soft-stone bench and soon she felt the bruises fading from her awareness. He was sitting next to her and said, she thought, shyly, "You need someone to take care of you."

"I do," she said. "I do?"

"Yes, you do."

"Well, I . . ."

"I'll tell the monitor to have a specific assigned to you."

"A specific?"

"It will see that you don't get into any more accidents."

"Oh, no! I mean, I'm all right. I won't need a . . . specific."

"Of course you do," he said. "Anybody who falls as you did is definitely in need of a specific."

"But what about you . . . er . . . couldn't you be my specific instead?"

"Oh, ha, ha! That's a good one! Do I look like a specific?"

She looked at him and it seemed that he was rather handsome in spite of the blue-gray caste. The bell sounded just then and he became a rose-pink with even better possibilities, and because of her feeling about him, the robe he was wearing gradually became transparent.

She wondered about herself. Was her robe transparent to him?

"Tell me," she asked, "do you like this dress I'm wearing?"

Surprised, he looked at her and said, "It's a robe, isn't it?"

So that must mean he didn't have the same feeling about her or he would have noticed. She sighed in spite of the permeo, for he was a really handsome young man.

"We'd better get to work now," he said, standing. "Think you can make it?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

She stood up, too, and soon he had disappeared in the crowd; and as he left her his robe materialized, and she thought to herself that he had only been a passing fancy anyhow.

Even in this new life, she admitted to herself, she wasn't attractive to young men, for why else would he be in a hurry to leave her?

She glanced about, taking her eyes warily off the machine parts on the moving belt, to see whether there was any sign of a specific. She saw none. Perhaps the young man had already forgotten to inform the monitor. But then, behind her, she felt the approach of something that made her shudder.

She turned in time to catch a glimpse of a revolving robot shaped like a combination snowman and army tank. It emanated such a penetrating coldness that Mona decided now was the time to escape and she plunged to the floor, again a suicide as she felt herself dissolving into its surface.

She knew she had succeeded when she regained consciousness and found herself in a liquid darkness, and a liquid ooziness as well. For she was in some sort of stream and it was night, or it must be, with such blackness. The ooziness she felt was not deep enough to engulf her; she could even move within it without too much effort. She made her way instinctively toward a portion of the land where the ooze was shallower, and wriggled forward until she became aware of a current of air to the left. It was an opening in the blackness, and she thought she must be in a cave. She felt cheated to find herself here after twice committing suicide. Was there no escaping life after all?

She reached the opening at last, finding that she could do so only by creeping on her stomach since there was a structure above her that prevented her rising up. In the mouth of the cave she paused and could see that it overlooked a valley; but it was night, and only a flicker of pale light played over the fields so that she could not be certain it *was* a valley or that she was in a cave. Above, whatever sky there was was without stars or moon, and it was a rather inky blackness, not the midnight blue she was used to.

The best thing to do, Mona thought, was wait till morning so she could see where she was and determine what this new life was all about. She wasn't too optimistic about it, for she already felt restricted and dissatisfied. Why, oh why had she commited suicide in the first place? she wondered. Who would have thought that anything like this could happen to her? Well, of course, nobody knew, and so couldn't have warned her, and there was no way of going back, none. No way at all. And she wanted to go back, very badly. If anybody had managed to get back they would have warned people. Life was interminable. She had her life and she had to live it, one way or another. That seemed inevitable. Only, must it always be so unpleasantly lived?

As a flashlight of purple color threw itself across the horizon, Mona wormed her way out of the cave and down an incline at the foot of which she was stopped by a sudden noise. She waited a moment, afraid, then noticed a movement not far from a slab of rock nearby. The noise continued in a jabbering way. At the same time, Mona was aware of an odor that reminded her strangely of her landlady back on Earth, a rather musty smell like the whole rooming house had possessed. From be-

hind the rock appeared, not a woman, but a lizard!

Frightened, Mona tried to back up, but found herself entangled in her own extremities. The lizard continued to flick its tongue without making an effort to come closer, and Mona hurried past it, afraid that at any moment it would snatch at her.

She hastened over the grassy ground until she reached a glade where several beetles were scurrying in all directions. They were black, with tips of red and yellow on their heads. Mona was surprised how large they were for it seemed they came up almost to her eyes. Beyond the glade Mona saw the glisten of liquid and she felt unaccountably thirsty. She sped along the ground with no fear of the beetles who continued about their business, ignoring her.

When she reached the small lake or lagoon, Mona bent her head to drink up the water, and uttered a sudden cry, for in the water was a monster reaching its mouth up to her as if it would devour her in one gulp. Mona backed away quickly and sought a path for escaping. But the monster did not show signs of leaving the water, and in fact did not even break the surface. Perhaps it had swum away, scared by her as much as she had been frightened by it.

She cautiously put her face above the water again, a bit at a time, then screamed again, long and piteously.

For this time she recognized the reflection of herself.

THE END

DUTY

by Tristan Roberts

TANNER XIII stood waiting in the crumbling ruins of the building, his arms and legs slowly rusting into uselessness from a long lack of repair and lubrication. At first glance he appeared to be lifeless, and could very well have been, if it weren't for the faint but steady glow emanating from the small atomic power pack in his skull, and the almost indistinct humming sound of the portable radar unit housed in his chest.

Suddenly, with a grinding of long unused limbs, the robot began to move forward. He marched upon stiff legs out of the crumbling building, into the debris-strewn street, and off into the charred ruins.

Not far away, the last man and woman on earth trudged down a road, the tired wind blowing dust about their shuffling forms and through the many rents in their tattered clothing.

The man was tall and gaunt, with a heavy growth of stubble upon his shrunken cheeks. Thin blond hair hung down over his deep set, old-too-young eyes. From time to time he glanced sideways at the woman, noticing the way her slender form was bent with the fatigue of the long journey.

"It shouldn't be much further, Sarah," he encouraged, "We'll be able to rest soon."

The woman smiled at him through the tangle of hair that the wind swept across her face. Then a shadow of despondency fell across her countenance again.

"Do you think," she coughed, wiping the dust from her lips, "that we'll really find power packs this time?"

The man only shook his head hopefully, but his eyes stayed glued upon the road, as though avoiding hers.

"But," she persisted, "what will we do if we don't find any again . . . ?"

"I don't know," he finally muttered, squinting into the distance, "go on looking, I guess. There have to be some somewhere.— They can't all have been destroyed."

Just one, he thought bitterly, just one power pack, and they could begin building again.

When the central power plants had been bombed, all broadcast power had stopped, and with it all the vehicles, electricity, and heat. For a while the two of them had existed upon the storage banks that had stored residual energy, but that had run out. Then Sarah had discovered that they could still use one of the old vehicles powered with an internal-combustion engine, whose primitive motor used gasoline as a fuel. But this

machine, well cared for as it was in the museum, also broke down after a time, and neither Dan nor Sarah had any idea how to repair it. Now their last resort was to find one of the smaller power packs, with which they could power a small copter and search for other packs. From there it would not be hard to start rebuilding the civilization that they had known.

The only trouble was that the portable packs had only been used in the tightly controlled A.E.C. plants, and they had been the first and hardest hit at the beginning of the war. In the two years that Dan and Sarah had been searching, they had only found blackened and charred remains where the plants had been.

Now they struggled to the top of the last hill and stood looking down into the small valley. There, a quarter-mile away stood the remains of the Kardiac, Nebraska plant.

"Look!" Dan shouted, clutching Sarah's arm, "it's not completely destroyed."

Their weariness forgotten, they ran headlong down the road toward the plant site. Dan was the first to reach the outer fence, and crawling through a hole in the heavy wire, he extended a hand for Sarah.

"Hurry," he prodded, "hurry, the plant isn't even half destroyed. We're sure to find something here."

Sarah slipped through and together they hurried toward the nearest building.

So excited were they by their find, that they failed to hear the slow grinding noise until it had approached to within barely five feet from them.

Sarah stopped, turned, and screamed, reaching blindly for support. Dan whirled at her cry, to face a tarnished steel alloy robot which whirred toward them purposefully. In its utility tentacle it held a small, but deadly pistol with its feeding case full of explosive projectiles.

Dan gripped Sarah's arm. "Don't run," he cautioned, "it may shoot."

Suddenly the robot spoke.

"Please do not move," it grated mechanically, "or I will be forced to fire upon you."

Dan began to say something but the robot continued speaking in its flat tones.

"I am Tanner XIII," it whirred, "protection robot, experimental model, assigned to Atomic Plant #32, authorized under code V368 of the A.E.C. rule-set 18."

Dan and Sarah stared speechlessly at the big robot.

"It is necessary for me to see your Identification Cards," the robot went on lifelessly.

Dan and Sarah stared at each other.

"We don't have any I.D. cards," he croaked at the robot, "we're from outside."

"Please show your Identification Cards," Tanner XIII re-

peated.

"Don't you understand," Dan shouted, "we don't have any I.D. Cards. We don't work here."

"Last warning," the robot said, "please show your Identification Cards."

Dan and Sarah remained silent, watching the impassive robot.

"Refusal to show Cards," the robot intoned, "Section 24, Article XIV, of the watch code. I must detain you for examination by my superior officers. Please follow me."

"Should we run for it?" Sarah ventured in a whisper.

"We'd never make it," Dan answered. "Let's follow him and see what happens."

Together they followed Tanner XIII, through the ruins, till they came to a small steel shack near the center of the Plant Grounds. The grey concrete casing which covered it had been stripped partially off, baring the rusting steel beneath. The robot stopped by the open door and motioned them inside. As they stepped inside, the door swung shut with a clang, and there was the telltale buzz of an electrical impulse lock sliding into place.

Outside the robot whirred away.

As soon as it had gone, Dan made a careful circuit of the small room, testing the walls and door carefully. Finally he came back to where Sarah sat upon the remains of a splintered bench.

"It's made of solid steel all over," he announced, "even the floors. If that robot doesn't hurry back and let us out, we could starve to death in here!"

"I hope it hurries," she answered, a vague fear beginning to stir in her eyes.

Tanner XIII pressed the stud in the side of his chest which summoned the officer of the watch.

Somewhere in the ruins, the remnants of a communications set buzzed futilely.

Tanner XIII went back to his post. His duty had been performed.

THE END

DEAD END

by Mack Reynolds

YOU'LL never believe this but Emil Carraway, Ph.D., M.D., even D.D., wanted to be bitten by a vampire.

What Carraway desired above all was to achieve immortality. He'd wanted it since early teenhood and he'd been working on it ever since. That was the reason for the degrees. Ph.D., M.D., even D.D.—and, believe me, that last couldn't have been hung on a less appropriate scholar—had all been attained in his search for everlasting life.

Before his freshman year was out he had read all the standard works on longevity. At that point he was being very scientific about the whole thing. He investigated the yogurt-eating centenarians in Georgia and Armenia but decided they didn't have the answer. To longevity, maybe, but not immortality and Carraway wasn't interested in living to be a mere hundred and fifty.

He decided science wasn't the answer and began to extend his studies into the occult, into mythology, metaphysics and theology, and it was along in there he picked up the D.D. degree.

It took him no time at all to run into the vampire-wampyr-nosferatu-um-dead legends and to realize that here, at least in myth, was immortality.

It had been a thousand years since a serious, thorough student of Carraway's caliber had delved into the vampire myth. And the further he delved, and it took decades, the more convinced he became that it was more than myth.

When the iron curtain lifted to the point he could visit the libraries of Budapest, Belgrade and Bucharest, he finally found that for which he was searching.

He was seventy years of age when at last, in the ruins of an ancient Croatian castle in Transylvania, Emil Carraway stood above a crumbling coffin and looked down upon the last vampire in the world.

"What do you want?" it snarled. Its face was gray and thin, its body emaciated.

"I want immortality. I want you to bite me. To make me in turn a vampire. I want to be un-dead."

The vampire growled, "You've come to the wrong place."

"But you're a vampire! Aren't you thirsty for blood?"

"Parched!" the vampire snarled.

"But then . . . ?" Carraway didn't get it.

The vampire screamed, "I'm allergic to all but Rh-Negative, the rarest blood type of all! You're type "O". If I bit you I'd break out in a million hives!"

THE WINDOW

by A. Bertram Chandler

THE house had been there for a long time. It was out of place in that drab, suburban street, had nothing in common with the depressingly monotonous semi-detached villas—put up by some speculative builder of the Middle Twenties in a singularly uninspired moment—on either side of it. It was, I thought, late Eighteenth Century, but I could have been wrong. I'm no architect.

It was close on midnight, in winter, when I walked along that street. The old fashioned gas lamps on their iron lamp posts were gleaming with that peculiar, yellowish green light that only gas can give. Had this been the only illumination I should never have seen the house, but a full moon was riding high above the thin overcast and, in spite of the thin, chill drizzle, visibility was fairly good.

I was lost. I had been to visit an old friend whom I had not seen for years, with whom I had lost touch after the war finished. I had run into him, quite by chance, in the city. He had asked me to come to his home to meet his wife and children, to take pot luck. I thought that I had noted all the salient features along the route during our walk from the Underground station to his house and so, when he offered to accompany me back to the station, I had refused, not wishing to drag him away from his warm fireside.

And so I was lost.

I must have walked for miles in this suburban wilderness. I had tried to retrace my footsteps to my friend's house, but had succeeded only in becoming more hopelessly bewildered. I had looked up at the sky, hoping that a break in the overcast would give me a glimpse of familiar stars and, with it, some idea of direction. But all I ever saw was the silhouettes of chimneys and television aerials against the pale glow of light reflected from the underside of the low clouds. There were no passers-by of whom I could enquire the way to the nearest bus stop (but the buses must long since have stopped running) or Underground station. There were no policemen.

It would have been common sense to have knocked at somebody's door, when I first realised that I was lost, to appeal for directions. But now it was too late to think of that. The lights were all out in downstairs windows and most of the bedrooms were in darkness. Weary and miserable as I was, I was not sufficiently desperate as to consider disturbing suburban householders. Even so, it was with considerable relief that I saw the house—the old, out-of-place house—still showed a gleam of light from a side window towards the back.

I crossed the road to the gate—a heavy and incongruously ornate wrought iron affair—and, with chilled, numb hands, fumbled with the catch. It was very stiff, but it gave at last. The gate was stiff, too, and its gudgeons and pintles squealed in rusty protest as I pushed it open.

The front door was under a sort of portico, and so shielded from the diffused light of the moon and the more direct glare of the street lamps. I fumbled around, trying to find a bell push. Finally, assuming that my cold hands had lost their sense of touch, I pulled a box of matches out of my pocket and struck a light. By the brief, flickering illumination I saw that there was no bell push. All that there was was a large knocker, an elaborate affair made in the likeness of a goat's head.

I lifted it, let it fall. The noise that it made seemed unnecessarily loud. Feeling very foolish, I rapped sharply with it two or three times. I waited, then, listening for the sound of footsteps coming to the door, I rehearsed in my mind what I would say.

I knocked again.

And again.

As often happens on such occasions a certain feeling composed of both stubborness and resentment was beginning to manifest itself. I was beginning to get annoyed with the occupants of the house. After all—despite the lateness of the hour—they weren't in bed; there was still a light on downstairs. Or even if they were, for some reason, using a lower room as a bedroom, they weren't asleep.

I knocked again.

This is absurd, I told myself. *I'm tired, and I'm cold, and my feet are damp. I'm lost in the wilds of North West Greater London. I don't want much—all I want is somebody to tell me where I am and how to get the hell out of here . . .*

I thought, *the back door. Perhaps if I try the back door they'll hear me . . .*

The path round to the back was overgrown with weeds, and muddy and slippery. I cursed as a gout of near-freezing water from a deep puddle slopped up inside my shoe. It seemed to take much longer than it should have done for me to get even as far as the window.

I didn't mean to look in the window. I'm no Peeping Tom. I don't think that I would have looked in if I hadn't slipped again, falling, and twisting as I fell. When I recovered I found that I had both hands against the rough brick of the wall to steady myself and that my nose was pressed against the cold glass.

It's some sort of Lodge meeting, I thought. *I shouldn't be watching this . . .*

Around the room were candles, at least two dozen of them, each burning with a steady blue flame. And they were held aloft by men and women, robed and cowled in black. Other men and women,

their hands unencumbered, were going through the slow motions of what seemed to be some sort of ritual dance.

Then they fell back, towards the candle bearers, and I saw the altar. I saw the figure of the Horned God over the altar—and on the altar itself pale, naked flesh . . .

I stared, fascinated. It began to make sense—an insane sort of sense. The altar with the Horned God over it, the living, naked woman spread-eagled upon it . . . And it made sense, too, when one of the cowled figures produced from somewhere what I thought, at first, was a small animal of some kind and threw it down on the living altar cloth. I saw the upraised knife gleam—and then, with a sudden, sickening shock I realised that the sacrifice was a child.

I yelled out—but those inside the room didn't hear me. Slowly, making hieratic gestures as they moved, they stepped from their positions along the walls, ranged themselves so that they were facing the altar. They hid from sight what was being done.

I hammered on the unyielding glass with my fists. At last I slipped my shoe off, beat the window with the heel of it—but rubber made no more impression than flesh and bone had done. I was still hammering when the ranks of the worshippers parted to let through the tall, black-robed figure of the evil priest. He was carrying the knife in his hand still, and it was bloody. His cowl had been thrown back.

He saw me. For long seconds his burning, deepset eyes glared into mine with hypnotic intensity. It was only when his gaze shifted downwards — he seemed to be studying every detail of my clothing—that was able to study his face. It was in shadow (the candles were all behind him) — but I was able to see the silvery hair, the strong, lined features, the great, jutting beak of a nose.

He made some gesture—a complicated seeming series of passes and gesticulations. He seemed to lose interest in me and then, abruptly, turned away. The ranks of worshippers opened to let him through as he strode back to the altar.

I don't remember running back into the road—although I do remember the solid, comforting figure of the policeman with whom I collided. He must have thought at first that I was drunk—and I must have looked — and sounded — as though my drinking had carried me to the state of delirium tremens. Besides—one of my shoes was missing.

"What's all this?" he asked. "What's all this?"

"Murder!" I gasped. "There! In the old house!"

"The old house . . ." he said slowly. "The old Lodge . . ."

"You must believe me!" I cried.

"Yes," he said abruptly. "But you won't believe what *you* will see."

He led the way through the open gate, along the path. The beam of his torch picked out my shoe, still lying in the mud.

"You'd better put it on," he said.

When I had straightened up, after a struggle with the wet shoelace, I saw that he had thrown the beam of his light onto the window. The glass was opaque. I thought at first that somebody inside had pulled a blind down, but this was not so. The window, somehow, had lost its transparency.

"Come round to the back," he said. "I found out how to open this door when I was a kid. I still can."

"Have you a warrant?" I asked absurdly.

"Of course not. And if—*if*—there's been a murder I shan't need one."

It didn't take him long to open the door.

The house smelled of age and neglect. The beam of the torch fell on bare floors and walls. I heard the rustling scuffle of rats or mice in the wainscotting. But, so far as human life was concerned, the house was dead.

"Is this the room?" asked the constable.

"It . . . It could be," I said doubtfully.

It was the right size—large enough to hold a small dance in. But the thick dust on the floor was undisturbed. There was no altar—but over the fireplace, painted on the wall, was the Horned God. It was obvious that attempts had been made to paint it over—but the colours were still bright and fresh—too bright and fresh—and the eyes in the bearded face seemed to gleam evilly.

I walked to the window.

"But I can see through it," I said.

"Yes. It's one-way glass."

"They'd never heard of polarisation when this house was built," I said.

"Hadn't they?" asked the policeman. "They used it, though, in this room. It's unbreakable."

"I want to see the rest of the house," I said.

"All right. I'm getting paid for this—you're not."

At last we were out in the road again. I wasn't sorry when the constable suggested that I should accompany him to the Police Station. At least I should be able to sit down—and, perhaps, I might even get a mug of tea.

*

"So you've seen our haunted house," said the Sergeant. "It's some time since anybody has actually seen anything—although it's just impossible, even in these days, to find a tenant for it. The kids steer well clear of it, too—and usually an empty house is paradise to them."

"I hope I'm not telling tales out of school," I said, "but the constable said that he'd picked the lock and broken in when he was a small boy . . ."

"Quite likely so—but I bet he did it just once. There's something about the house that scares even children off. And dogs. And cats."

"But not mice or rats."

"They're different."

"Do you know anything of the history of the place?"

"Yes. It was built long before the tide of bricks and mortar had flooded over this part of the countryside. It was a rich man— of course—who owned it; Israel Penwarden. He'd made his money making glass, and was somewhat of a dabbler in all the arts and sciences. We do know that he was mixed up with one of those gangs of decadent aristocrats that played around with the Black Mass and such . . ."

I remembered the face of the man I had seen, the man with the bloody knife . . .

"I thought that it was an unfrocked priest who was supposed to celebrate the Black Mass," I said.

"Penwarden was qualified," said the Sergeant. "He entered Holy Orders as a young man—but his conduct was a little too much even for those tolerant times. Anyhow—you're the third person—as far as our records show—who's actually *seen* anything. Your account tallies with the others. By the way—after the first time the 'murder' was reported, we did go so far as to dig up the garden. We found bones, human bones. Small ones . . ."

"They must have been devils in those days!" I said.

"Must they?" asked the Sergeant, surprisingly philosophical. "Are we so much better now? After all—old Penwarden and his pals did their murders as a sacrifice to a God in whom they believed. Can you say as much for the airman who drops an atomic bomb on women and children? Could you say as much for Hitler's S.S. men with their mass slaughterings of Jews—men, women, and (once again) children? Are we, in this Twentieth Century, any better than those old Satanists?"

I was too tired for discussions of this kind. The hot, sweet, strong tea which at first had revived me now seemed to have made me drowsy.

"If it's all right with you, Sergeant," I said, "I'll be getting along."

He looked at the clock.

"Yes. The first train'll be running soon. I'll walk along with you to the Underground Station just so you don't get lost again." He got to his feet. "Oh, by the way—have you any objection if I pass your name and address on to a friend of mine? He's a member of the Society for Psychic Research and *very* keen on haunted houses and such."

"That will be all right," I said. "And I hope that he lays the ghost."

*

That very next evening I heard from the Sergeant's friend. I was

just settling down nicely to an evening of writing—I wanted to get a story finished and in the mail to my agent the following morning—when the telephone bell rang.

I picked up the instrument, gave my name and number.

"Penwarden here," said a voice.

For a moment I thought, crazily, of time travel, thought that the old scientist and Satanist had perfected some means of speaking across the centuries.

"Penwarden?" I asked stupidly.

"Yes. Penwarden. You've never heard of me, but Sergeant Brown gave me your name and address and telephone number. You told him that he could. Remember?"

"Yes. I remember. It was the coincidence of the names that gave me a shock."

"Oh, that. The old boy was an ancestor of mine as a matter of fact. Anyhow, do you mind if I come round to see you tonight? We have a rather interesting investigation under way—and you can help." His voice became persuasive. "It's all material, you know."

"All right," I told him. "You know the way, don't you? Russell Square's the handiest Underground Station. You get out there and . . ."

"I'll manage," he said. "I know Bloomsbury."

He hung up, and I started work again. I'd written no more than a couple of pages when I heard him knocking on the door. I got up from my work table and let him in. As we shook hands I studied him carefully. He had the great nose that I had seen upon his ancestor's face, otherwise he was most undistinguished looking. He could have been any age between the middle twenties and the late thirties—his sandy hair was thinning but his pale blue eyes were surprisingly youthful. He was carrying a portfolio.

I helped him off with his overcoat, seated him in one of the two chairs by the gas fire. I poured drinks.

"Now," I said, "what's all this about?"

"There's something odd about that house—about that window especially . . .'

"You're telling *me!*"

"What I mean," he said carefully, "is that there's something far more odd about it than mere ghosts . . ."

"They're odd enough," I said.

"Are they?" The look he gave me implied that he didn't think them so.

"I suppose that you're descended from the Penwarden who owned the house," I went on.

He rubbed his nose with his forefinger.

"There *is* a resemblance, I suppose," he said. "Talking of resemblances . . ." He picked his portfolio up from the floor, opened it. He pulled out a sheet of stiff paper, yellowed with age. He handed it to me. "What do you make of *this?*"

This was a portrait, done in

black ink. It was not a flattering one. It showed a man, his face contored with terror, holding a shoe in his right hand as though to strike with it. Certain features —not of the man's face, but of his clothing—had been emphasised—his hat, his collar and necktie, the watch on his left wrist.

"Does it remind you of anyone" asked Penwarden.

"Yes . . . It's familiar, somehow, but . . ."

"Could it be . . . *you?*"

"Why, yes! Last night . . . But how . . . ?"

"It's a long story. Anyhow, not long after my revered ancestor achieved a certain notoriety, the family left England. They went, first of all, to the American colonies. Later some of them left America for Australia. I am, I suppose, the first of the Penwardens to set foot in the Old Country for well over a century. There's money in wool, and I thought I might as well blow some of it.

"I was rather interested in tracing all the family connections and so on. I was lucky enough to find, in the custody of a firm of solicitors here in London, a box full of old Israel's books and papers. That picture of you was in it."

"Impossible!"

"It was there."

"It could have been faked."

"It wasn't. You can keep that picture if you like. Get the ink and the paper analysed. Anyhow, I found out a lot about my ancestor. He made glass. He knew Dean Swift . . ."

"What's Dean Swift got to do with it?"

"You've read *Gulliver's Travels,* haven't you? You remember the flying island, whose learned inhabitants knew that the planet Mars had two moons? *They* knew, and Swift knew (after all, they were *his* characters)—but no astronomer of that time had even dreamed that Mars has satellites. He made some odd glass—as *you* know—did old Israel. He may have made a telescope. But it's that one way glass of his that's . . . fascinating. Look at these!"

He opened the portfolio again. The first sketch that he showed me depicted a group of near naked savages attacking a large animal with primitive weapons. An elephant? I looked more closely. Elephants aren't shaggy — and the trees in the background looked to be more part of an English landscape than of the African or Indian jungle. The next one showed a marching column of Roman legionaries. The next one was of three flying things—pterosauria?—in flight over a dismal marsh. They hadn't the stiffness that such pictures usually have. I gained the impression that the artist had seen the legionaries, the mammoth and the pterodactyls with his own eyes. But that was impossible.

"Well?" I asked.

"From the outside, looking in," said Penwarden. "Your portrait, of course, was from the inside

looking out."

"You mean to tell me," I said incredulously, "that your ancestor made some sort of polarised glass that enabled him to see through time?"

"Perhaps he wasn't the only one," said Penwarden. "What about Nostrodamus?"

"Rubbish," I said. "He may have lived long before Darwin—but even in his day geologists were turning up the fossils of various prehistoric monsters, reconstructing them and explaining them away as the remains of beasts that did not survive the Deluge. After all—Noah's Ark must have had a limited cargo capacity . . ."

"What about Nostrodamus?"

"What do you mean? You mean that the window is made of *two* way glass?"

"Yes. *These* pictures—the Romans, the mammoth and the flying lizards—are from the outside looking in. What *you* saw was from the outside looking in. But that not very flattering portrait of you is from the *inside* looking *out*. And so are these."

He produced more sheets of that stiff, yellowed paper.

On the first one was a sketch of an automobile — one of the mechanical monstrosities that chugged along the roads in the years prior to the first World War.

"That was made, of course, when he looked out at this part of London before it was built up, from his window," said Penwarden. "But these others are more interesting."

The next showed what was obviously a modern passenger aircraft flying low on the approach to the airport. It was shown in some detail, even to the American flag painted on its stabiliser. It was impossible to believe that the man who sketched it had lived in a century when aerial transport was undreamed of.

"A perfectly good Constellation," said Penwarden. "Now—what do you make of these?"

"Flying saucers," I said.

He raised his eyebrows. "Come off it, man. This affair's already fantastic enough without your stirring in your own private brand of fantasy. Oh, I admit that these do give the impression of lenticulate spaceships—but you must remember the conditions in which they were seen. They could be—they *were*—no more than dirigible airships seen beam on. And in the first World War, remember, the Germans sent their Zeppelins over only by night, and the old boy will have seen them only by the glare of the not too efficient searchlights of those days . . ."

"Any more pictures?" I asked.

"Yes. But not here. I brought along only the most convincing ones."

"Just what is all this in aid of?"

He grinned. "I can see that you've heard the legend that Australia produces the world's best con men. I assure you that I'm not one. I'm just a grazier who happens to be interested in more

things than sheep. I'm interested in ferreting out all the horrid details of my family history. I'd like to find out just why old Israel did commit suicide. And I'd like even more to get the secret of his glass —and a few other things."

"You could get a piece of the glass analysed," I said.

"Could I? For a start, it would mean damaging the window. Taking even a small scraping from it might destroy its properties. Furthermore—people in those days used the *oddest* ingredients in their manufactured goods. It might well take the world's finest organic chemist a lifetime to duplicate that window exactly. Then there's the psi factor . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Can *anybody* see through the glass—or only certain people? How much did the Black Mass have to do with it all? What about the candles? (I *think* that I've been able to duplicate them. The things that went into that wax remind me of the Three Witches in *Macbeth* stirring their cauldron."

"So?"

"So it's our intention to duplicate as closely as possible—we draw the line at human sacrifice, of course—the conditions of Israel's Black Mass. We want somebody who can see through Time—and we know that you can. After all—it's all material for you."

"It'll be better material still, I suppose, if I go to jail with the rest of you."

"There's not much risk of that," he said. "There'll be some quite surprisingly big people taking part in the experiment."

"Another thing," I said. "I was in the house. You must have been in England for some time . . ."

"Almost a year," he admitted.

". . . and yet the house showed no signs of having been entered."

"It hasn't been," he told me. "I didn't want to disturb anything before the time. As I said—it may all boil down to the operation of some laws of physics we have yet to formulate. On the other hand—the psi factor may be involved." He got to his feet. "I must go now. I'll leave you to think it over. Here's my card, with my telephone number. The experiment takes place a week from now. Don't forget—a week from now."

After he was gone I tried to get some more work done, but it was hopeless. Besides, I was still tired. I treated myself to a stiff drink and then went to bed.

*

I decided to participate in the experiment. I have never been one of those holding that odd idea that "there are some things we aren't meant to know." The one thing that did put me off was a certain amount of just plain, old-fashioned fear—fear of the consequences should the police get wind of what would almost certainly be a session of obscene and sacrilegious tomfoolery. But I consoled myself with the thought that going to jail for participating in Black Magical rites is rather more

glamorous than going to jail for — say — theft, and doesn't carry quite the same stigma. I rang Penwarden and told him he could count me in.

I thought that he would be round to see me again before the night of the Black Mass, but he wasn't. He told me when he came to call for me on the evening in question that he had been very busy getting everything ready, and that one of his biggest problems had been to find an unfrocked priest willing to officiate. There were plenty such, he said, who'd have done it if it had been a plain, straightforward ritual with the intention only of paying service to Lucifer. It was the experimental angle, the scientific side of it, that put them off—it was, to them, tantamount to blasphemy.

He called for me, I say, on the evening in question. I asked him, half seriously, what I should wear for the occasion, and he told me that all that had been taken care of. We had a drink together and then we left my flat and climbed into his big, expensive car. We soon got clear of the city and were rolling at a good speed past the clean, modern factories along the Great West Road.

It was a night such as that on which I had first seen the house, but darker, the moon being past its full. I asked Penwarden if it made any difference, and he replied that he didn't think so, that his ancestor had celebrated the Black Mass at any time that was convenient to him, by day or night, and always seemed to have obtained results of some kind.

With Penwarden piloting we navigated the confusion of brick-bound channels; the drab, suburban streets, without much trouble. When we reached the house we found that there were already half a dozen cars parked in the road outside. And the building itself looked far more alive than it had done—there were lights shining from all the windows and smoke curling from the chimney.

The Australian had his own key, let us in at the front door. Dust still lay thick everywhere but it had been disturbed by the passage of many feet. There was an oil lamp—one of the modern kind with an incandescent mantle—hanging over the staircase up which Penwarden led me. There were two more such lamps in the large upstairs room where the others were waiting for us.

This room was bare, but clean. There were a couple of folding tables and a number of folding chairs. On one of the tables there was writing material, on the other photographic equipment. But I was, naturally, more interested in the people with whom we should be working.

There was a startlingly lovely girl—slim and blonde and exquisitely dressed—who would be, I hoped, the woman on the altar. (She wasn't.) There were two shaggily tweeded middle-aged females, typical lady professors.

There were three men, bespectacled, also in shaggy tweeds. There was a tall, quietly dressed Negro with ascetic features and grey, almost white, hair. There were four men who could have been senior civil servants, and with them was another man whose face I thought I recognised—but dismissed as preposterous the idea that a Minister of the Crown, even a Junior Minister, should be mixed up in an affair like this. There was a little round man with haunted eyes and a too gaudy tie and waistcoat.

There were no introductions.

"Are we all here?" asked Penwarden.

"All but the Colonel," said the slim, blonde girl in a bored voice.

"We'll start without him, then," said Penwarden.

"And lose his backing?" asked one of the civil servants. "We'd better wait."

"All right," said Penwarden. But he looked at his watch.

"What about a drink?" asked the little round man.

"After the ceremony, Father," said the Negro.

Somebody was knocking at the door. Penwarden left us and clattered downstairs. He returned with a fat man who could have sat as a model for Low's Colonel Blimp—but I don't think that even Low could have got on paper the intelligence that shone from his bleak grey eyes.

We left the room then and adjourned to two smaller rooms—the women to one and the men to another. "There's no need to undress," Penwarden told us. "Just slip the robes on over your clothing. The candles are in that box there."

"What about the sacrifice?" asked the Colonel.

"In the hamper."

"Penwarden," I said, "if you're going to . . ."

He laughed. "Of course I'm not. Look!" He opened the lid of the hamper. Inside was a white cock, its feet trussed, its red eyes glaring at us balefully. "I hope it will work. It should. After all, it was always the standard sacrifice at Obeah rites . . ."

"And still is," said the Negro.

"Good. Are you all ready?"

He went to the box and pulled out the tall, thin candles one by one, lighting them as he did so. They burned with a pale blue flame and stank abominably—sulphur and sickly sweet scent, burning flesh, roses and carrion.

"You," he said to me, "will be stationed by the window. Don't cry out, whatever you see. Don't interrupt the service. Just remember all that you see—and get it down on paper as soon as possible afterwards."

"What about the cameras and such?"

"We'll not use 'em tonight. They might, somehow, ruin the effect. But there'll be plenty of other times."

Feeling fools in our long, black cowled robes we filed out into

the passageway, each of us holding his candle aloft. We were joined there by the three women. Carrying the bound cock—which was beginning to make raucous protest—Penwarden led the way down the wide staircase, into the room in which I had seen the Black Mass served by his ancestor.

The partly obscuring paint had been cleaned away from the vivid, frightening picture of the Horned God. Beneath him the altar had been restored. One of the women slowly let drop her robe; she was naked beneath it. Ungracefully she hoisted her sagging, lumpy body on to the flat surface, stretched out. The spectacle was remarkably unaphrodisiac.

I stood by the window, looking out. All I could see was the high hedge forming the boundary of the next door neighbour's garden and, above it, the silhouette of rooftop and chimney pot and drunkenly sagging television aerial against the faintly glowing sky. There was a distant throbbing, felt rather than heard, and the winking white, red and green navigation lights of an inward bound airliner drifted across my field of vision.

Behind me they were singing, and I could hear the shuffle of their feet as they paced through the measures of some ritual dance. I felt no desire to turn to watch them. It would be a shoddily unconvincing parody of what I had already seen. But that low-voiced chant sent icy fingers rippling up and down my spine. *Latin?* I wondered. *But aren't they supposed to sing the words backwards, or something?* The cock let loose an unearthly screech, and I shuddered as I thought of its hot blood—black in the eerie blue light—pouring over the white, unlovely body of the woman on the altar. The bird screeched again.

Outside was the night. Outside were hedge top and roof top and lopsided St. Andrew's cross. The airliner was no longer in sight, must already be touching down at the London Airport. Inside were a group of allegedly rational adults playing a game that must have been invented by a vicious and halfwitted child.

But there was compulsion in the rhythm of that chant, something hypnotic. I could not understand the words with my conscious mind but, somehow, they seemed to wrench something deep down inside me, seemed to probe and twist. I felt myself swaying where I stood, put out my hands to the wall to steady myself. Outside the window the outlines of roof top and chimney pot softened and wavered. It was as though I was looking at them through flowing water.

Involuntarily I shut my eyes—then opened them again cautiously. The others, I was sure, had noticed nothing; their chant continued, its rhythm unbroken. But outside it was now broad day-

light, the sun riding high in a cloudless sky. Slowly my eyes recovered from their dazzlement. I saw that the hedge was gone, the houses were gone. There was nothing to obstruct vision. I was looking out over a featureless plain . . . No, not quite featureless. There were stumps that might once have been trees, huddled mounds that could once have been buildings. Over all was the grey, fine ash.

Sickened, I looked up—looked up to the small, circling shapes, mere specks in the sunlight, high in the blue sky. One of the specks drifted away from the others and fell, trailing a cloud of black smoke. It was followed by a second, and a third. The fourth one fell not far from the house.

The pilot must still have been alive or, perhaps, servo-mechanisms were still functioning. The ship straightened out from its dive, landed almost under control, throwing up a great cloud of the grey dust as it did so. It skidded crazily over the uneven surface then pitched forward onto its sharp nose. In the second or so before it exploded I saw that it was either a rocket or a jet and that there was a red star on each wing tip.

I looked up again. The battle seemed to be over. Slowly, deliberately, four ships were drifting down. Four ships, lenticulate, metallically gleaming. I remembered old Israel Penwarden's sketches then, and the things that his descendant had told me must be German Zeppelins . . . I remembered that old Penwarden was said to have committed suicide.

Lower drifted the strange ships. From hatches in their bellies swarmed tiny, winged shapes, circling, gliding down to the earth like sycamore seeds.

It may have been a man who looked in on us, just as I had looked in on Israel Penwarden and his fellow Satanists. It may have been; the Colonel and one or two of the others are sure that it was and that my story is reliable only up to the crashing of the plane with the red star on its wings. But they didn't see him.

It may have been a man who raised that odd, complicated weapon in one of his right hands and fired at me. (Did the window actually travel in Time? How was it that the dazzling blast from the gun shattered it beyond repair, fused it beyond hope of analysis, the noise of its destruction bringing the others crowding around me, grotesque in their cowled robes, the woman from the altar obscene in her blood spattered nakedness?)

It may have been a man clad in radiation armour, and with a pair of mechanical wings strapped to his back.

It may have been.

But men don't have six many-jointed limbs where their arms should be, neither do they have huge, crimson, faceted eyes.

MISS BARD'S LOVER

by Elizabeth Luna

MISS MARY BARD couldn't have led a more austere, isolated life had she been a hermit in a remote hillside cave instead of the proprietress of a rooming house on Twenty-third St. The roomers came and went like ghosts. She only permitted them to haunt her when the rent was due or the rooms needed cleaning. Beyond that, they didn't exist. She had but one real regret in all her solitary life: No one, no man that is, had ever shown by word or deed that he cared. She sometimes thought she would give her life itself to hear just one, anyone say: Miss Bard . . . Mary, I love you!

It was on a slushy, damp January day when the neatly-inconspicuous man answered her 'for rent' sign. As she showed the room, her eyes darted from corner to corner searching out dirt the way a bird hunts food.

"I can assure you, sir, the room is clean. Fresh curtains to the windows . . ." She stopped because the man was not looking at the room but at her. Her hands twisted involuntarily. She touched the collar of her dress, pushed at her securely-pinned coil of hair, glanced quickly in the mirror, but there was nothing about her rather-plain, long face or the severity of her high-necked dress to attract attention.

"My name is . . . Phillip Masterson. Yours?" His voice was soft but the way he looked at her gave her a feeling of wanting to escape, although she didn't know what from. His hands . . . she couldn't help but notice his hands the way they gripped the bedpost, twisting it the way a man might wring a rabbit's neck.

She went over to the window on the pretext of straightening the curtain, turning a little as she did so as to see him better.

He resembled a thousand roomers, although he was more bald than some, with carefully-planned strands plastered over the shining surface. His pin-striped suit, neither new nor old, was unobtrusively creased. His shoes, pointed like a dancer's, reflected the late afternoon sun.

"Your name?" he repeated.

"Mary Bard . . . Miss Mary Bard."

"Ah," he said, drawing a deep breath, "The room is clean, isn't it!"

"Yes sir . . . Mr. Masterson. I keep the cleanest rooms in town. You can ask any of my . . ."

"And cleanliness is next to godliness," he cut in gently. "But before I decide, one more question."

Her hands worked over and un-

der themselves. It embarrassed her to have the conversation turned toward her as she somehow felt sure it would be.

"It's about hair."

Her hands rushed of their own accord to check the securely-coiled knot at the back of her neck.

"You know how some women pretend to be what they are not, like wearing braids. Then come to find out it's not really their own. Hypocrites!" He spat the words. "That's what I call 'em." He leaned toward her. "Tell me, Miss Bard, you're not that way, are you?" It seemed as though he was almost pleading with her.

"Well no," she said finally, "If you're asking whether my hair is my own, you can rest assured . . . about the room, seven-fifty is what I ask . . . in advance, sir."

"Oh, Miss Bard!" His words were like the beginning of a prayer as he counted out the rent.

She was still thinking of him that night as she dressed for bed, going as was her custom, into her large bedroom closet and emerging moments later attired in a high - necked, long - to - the - floor gown. He had looked at her in a way no one else ever had. That part she liked. But when she remembered the way he twisted the knob of the bedstead, frightened shudders raced down her back. She even found him in her dreams, chasing her as she ran up flight after flight of endless stairs until she came to a door. Her life depended on opening that door, but his hands were upon her, pulling her back as she awoke.

As she did his room, she took special pains to have it neat, dusting the bedsprings and even along the pole where his two suits hung. A letter fell out of one of the pockets. It was addressed to a Mr. Ernest Kowalski from a clothing store and had been opened. She frowned as she put it back, turning quickly to the dresser where she arranged the hair tonic, after shave lotion, talc . . . It was all the same brand, imported from England. Much nicer, she thought, than the other roomers used. She sprinkled a little talc on her fingers, conjuring with the odor a picture of the strange young man who owned them. The top drawer was ajar. Automatically she straightened the handkerchiefs, them out and found to her dismay all new and initialed 'P.' When they wouldn't lie straight, she took that the ones underneath were monogrammed 'E.' She felt queer and uneasy as she slipped back to her own quarters making up questions as she went.

Mr. Masterson, Sir, I feel it is my right as a landlady to know. Or perhaps she should begin as he had . . . *Speaking of hypocrites, Mr. Masterson, I seem to have found one. A sheep in man's clothing, one might say. Why do you carry a letter addressed to someone else? Why are part of your handkerchiefs monogrammed with the same letter 'E' as the first name on that letter?*

But what if he got angry and moved out? She needed the rent, and more than that, he had looked at her as if she were a woman to be desired . . .

She listened for his coming. She looked at the clock at intervals of five minutes and less. She sat down to her crocheting and after doing half an edging found she had changed her count and ripped it out. She went to the kitchen and put on water for tea, then to the bread box and found the bread was moldy. She put on her coat and ran all the way to the corner grocery. When she got back, the light was on in the new roomer's room. She set her tea to brew, walked halfway upstairs, then back down, then retraced her steps and down the hall to his room. She laid her hand on the door-knob and drew it back as if burned. She felt faint and supported herself on the sides of the hall as she tiptoed down the stairs. She toasted two slices of bread and sat down to her tea. A rapping made her drop the toast and slosh the cupful. She went to answer, turning on the overhead light as she passed, opening the door a little. Scarcely realizing what she was doing, she started to shove it shut again, checked herself, and pulled it wide.

"Mr. Masterson!"

She stepped back as he came forward. She opened her mouth to frame the question but couldn't remember any of the words. She noticed how his hair was slicked in smooth, single strands over the bald spot, how his face shone with the polished look of a pale winter apple. His hands were behind him. Now he brought them out with a flourishing gesture such as she had admired in the movies, making a half-bow as he extended a box wrapped in crisp, white paper and tied with a gilded ribbon that ended in a rosette.

"Compliments to my landlady!" He looked at her as he had the day before, so that her hands strayed to her neck-edge, to her hair, to pull at her dress.

"For me?" She took the box with both hands. "Me?"

"Sweets to the sweet."

She turned the box over, studying the tie as if it were a rare orchid. "This is the first . . ."

"You're young yet."

"Oh but I'm thirty-four! I mean, almost." She swallowed hard, looking at the box, her fingers absently smoothing it. "Won't you . . . have a cup of tea? Or that is, you don't have to . . . That is, if there's something else you—"

"I haven't another thing to do besides stay here and admire a beautiful lady." He sat down carefully on the antique chair, folding his hands. His eyes, bright like a sparrow's, watched her every move as she walked back and forth to the kitchen. The chink of cups against saucers came like a clatter. The whisper from the teakettle filled the room. Each sound stood apart the way noises in the country do early in the morning: a

hound baying a rabbit, the neighbor's pump complaining.

She seated herself opposite him and indicated the cream and sugar.

She succeeded in filling the saucers as well. "Thank you," she said after a bit. "Thank you for the lovely cup of . . ." Her face suffused. "I mean for the lovely box." She picked it up and held it preciously. "Words tangle themselves up on me so." She tried to look at him but her gaze was glued to the box.

"I'm sorry it doesn't suit you," he said.

"Oh but I do . . . I mean, I really . . . Whatever made you think that?"

"If you liked it, you'd unwrap it."

"Oh yes . . . but of course." Her fingers fumbled with the tie, then slipped the ribbon so that the rosette was not disturbed. On the corner of the box, etched in relief was a woman, head bent, with long flowing hair spread fan-wise.

"Is your hair long like that?" he asked softly. "Does it cascade over your shoulders in long, shimmering ripples?"

She reached up and touched her hair giving it nervous little pats.

He slipped quietly around the low table to sit on the couch beside her. Then almost as if she had known he would, he laid his hands lightly on her hair.

She shivered, but couldn't have said whether it was excitement or fear that made her do so.

"Will you always be afraid, Miss Bard?" He stroked her hair with utmost gentleness. "Look at me please. See, I'm not hurting you." His voice was as kind as his hands. He might have been speaking to a shy, stray kitten.

She was trembling beyond her power to control as she covered her head with her own hands.

He clenched his fists. Then drew a deep breath. "You're all upset. There now. Such lovely hair! Won't you ever let me touch it?" He patted her shoulder.

She cowered further.

"Oh Miss Bard . . . Miss Bard!" His voice, so filled with yearning, made the words a supplication instead of a reiteration of her name.

When he was gone, she discovered she'd been crying. She washed her face and came back to look at the box. Tentatively, she pulled the lid off. Her fingers made fluttery, butterfly motions, touching one piece, then another. She picked up the one wrapped in gold and shaped like a heart, turning it over preciously as if it were a nugget, then nestled it back in its wrapper. She tasted one of the smallest pieces, savoring it deliberately as she walked to the mirror. Her hair fell in long loose, brown waves as she pulled the pins. She brushed it, studying her face as she did so, remembering how the kids back in school had called her 'horsie'. She bent her head so that all that showed was the long, glorious, shining hair.

To think I almost asked him

about the letter and the handkerchiefs. I really should ask him, and I will sometime, though I suppose it's no concern of mine.

The next days she spoke to herself often and severely.

Mary, whatever made you stick the sugar in the refrigerator? Never in your entire life have you put the bread on the linen shelf before. If you were hired help, Mary Bard, I'd fire you.

She went often to look at the candy. Whenever she ate a piece, she put the brown wrapper back as though an invisible sweet might still be on it. Sometimes she gazed at the box through half-closed lids for five or ten minutes before pulling herself away.

After each meal, it became her ritual to uncoil her hair and brush it until her arm ached. Although the minutes went by slowly, the days so matched each other, they didn't count.

When she answered the door one day and saw Mr. Masterson standing with money in one hand and a package in the other, she said, "Why it can't be rent time already!"

"I'm sure it's the seventeenth. Have you a calendar?" He followed her to one on a wall beneath a picture of a rosy, chubby child.

"Is this January? I mean, it is, isn't it! I mean . . . I guess you're right." She framed the words while she wrote the receipt. *And while you're here, Mr. Masterson. There's something on my mind. Your name wouldn't be Ernest Kowalski, would it?* But the words wouldn't come.

"Don't worry your head about the other day," he said. "I know you were upset."

"Yes, the candy . . ." She eyed her hands, her feet. "It was nice . . . that is . . . none of it spoiled."

"That makes me a happy man!"

"Mr. Masterson, someone should tell me. That is, I ought to know . . ." She stopped because he was holding out the package. "Why I don't . . . I . . ."

"Take it. It was your hair made me think of it." He studied her with his bird-like eyes, his head cocked slightly. "It's a tribute, one might say, to the most beautiful hair in the world."

She fumbled as she grasped for the package. It slipped to the floor with a crash. She was almost crying as she picked it up. Then his hands covered hers as he helped her free the ties. It was like the touch of electricity from her hair when she brushed it.

"Maybe there isn't enough light." He snapped the switch and the artificial light reflected the gold ornaments on the edges of the comb and the back of the brush. It caught the mirror as she drew it out, dividing it down the center where there was a long, splintery crack . . .

"Everything I touch . . ." Her voice trembled.

His hand covered hers. "It's the comb and the brush that count." He pulled them from the tissue, turning them over in his hands

while looking at her hair. "I thought to myself when I saw these, how they would gleam against your long tresses."

Mary turned the mirror this way and that. It stared up at her, cutting her face into unrelated parts.

His hands shook like from a palsy as he began drawing the pins from her hair.

"Don't . . . Oh you musn't! You really shouldn't!" She moved a little away from him. "I mean you oughtn't . . . or if you did, what would people think?"

He sat holding the comb and brush looking from them to her hair and back. Then he got up and walked with what appeared to be deliberate slowness over to the knicknack shelf, examining a frail china cat and dog facing each other in menacing position and replacing them neatly side by side. She was not prepared for the hard lines that squared his face as he turned nor for the way his eyes slitted. His body was tense like a panther about to spring.

She ran to the kitchen. "Won't you have a cup of tea?" she called back. She spattered the water as she filled the teakettle. The tea things rattled. She dropped a cup. Then forgot whether there was tea in the teapot and added some, then found there was. She half-burned the toast, put it on the tray unbuttered and was clear to the livingroom before she saw her omission, turned around, slopping tea as she went. She stood for a moment in the kitchen before returning, trying to steady herself. Impulsively she touched her hair, feeling where he had loosened it. She pulled out most of the remaining pins. *Not that I shall ever let him touch it, but it will look prettier if it's not pulled so tightly from my face.* Then she carried the wobbling tea things with the cooling tea and the cold toast and set them down on the table near the sofa.

She decided she must have imagined the tight, urgent look on his face a few minutes ago, because now he was smiling and looking at her hair approvingly. Her face and neck felt suddenly hot. There wasn't enough air in the room. She seated herself beside him but apart from any casual contact and poured.

"Cream?" she said as though she had never seen him before.

"No thank you."

"Sugar?"

"I don't use either, thank you."

"I take a little sugar." She heaped in three spoonfuls. "The candy . . ." She looked at her hands the way they twisted in her lap. "I like the comb and brush set."

"That's good."

"The mirror . . . it might be fixed."

"Perhaps."

"Your tea!" He hadn't touched it. "It won't be fit to drink . . . I mean you ought to try it."

He didn't answer.

"I could maybe brush my hair a little . . . That is if you'd like me to."

He looked up enrapt as she gently pushed the table to one side. Then, one after the other pulled the five remaining pins. Her hair tumbled.

His hands went out to her. "It's longer than I dared dream possible!"

She drew back telling herself she shouldn't let him terrify her so. He was in fact, very nice.

"I can see it passes your waist."

She half-smiled as she took the brush, pulling it against her hair until at each successive stroke her hair flew about her head and tried to follow the brush back up. "It's an exceptionally fine brush." She rubbed the muscles of her arm.

He spoke gently as if he understood the terror within her at having a man, any man so near. "I've lain awake nights thinking of your hair, how fine and delicate it is, wondering if it could possibly be this long. It's more than all my dreams." He moved closer to her. "I'm not going to hurt you." He ran first the comb and then the brush through her hair.

She involuntarily shivered.

He waited until she was quiet and then drew it through again and again, giving breathless, fluttering pats as he did so, laying his hands at the curling ends as though to measure it.

She sat afraid that if she moved, he would stop.

His own movements became more sure. He brushed with greater vigor. All the while a small smile played around his lips and in the corners of his eyes.

She was almost in a trance when she felt her hair gripped and twisted into a long, strong rope.

"Hair is one of the strongest fibers in the world," he said. "Did you know?"

"It is! . . . I mean, is it?"

"There's even a story about a girl letting her lover out of her window with her hair." He continued twisting it, letting the ends spin loose, then turning it again into a tight, sinuous, snaky rope. "Both the strongest and the most beautiful."

She sat, her head bent forward, motionless, as if her very life depended on her not moving. He drew the rope around her neck, formed a loop, dropping the loose ends through, then tightened the noose slip-knot fashion. Mary sat as frozen as a frightened bird. He tightened the noose until she gagged with tight, strangling sounds, but making no move to resist. Then as quickly as he had tightened it, he loosened the knot. Once again he took the brush. The tendons of his hand clear to his elbow were tight lines. In long, strong, powerful strokes, he brushed her hair loose and into a flying aura around her.

His voice shook. "You must be careful, Mary. Very careful! A person could be killed that way!" He brushed with vengeful motions the way some artists paint. "Oh Mary . . . Mary!"

She hardly knew when he left. The tea things lay littered about.

The broken mirror cut her reflection. She fondled the brush and comb. *Walking down the aisle, her hair flying. Here comes the bride, Mrs. Phillip Masterson . . .* or *Mrs. Ernest Kowalski.* She frowned. She put the brush and comb on her dresser and inverted the mirror beside them.

Doing her hair became as regular as mealtime. She would braid it and wind it around her head, rearrange it to a low French knot, or work out a fashion of her own, often considering her image in the cracked mirror. *I'm never going to get a new glass because it was broken when I first saw it, when he brushed my hair.* She pulled the brush through in tantalizing, flaring strokes, trying to recall the exact combination of masculinity and gentleness in his downward pull. Once she even coiled it into a rope and looped it around her neck. *A person could be murdered that way.*

Occasionally she passed him on the stairs. Always deferential, he would nod. "Good morning, Miss Bard," or "Good evening!" and tender her a slight bow. If she was going out, he held the door, standing formally at attention. She managed to be coming in and going out a great deal. So it appeared did he.

It was four days before he stopped at her door again. The rent was not due. His hands were empty. They sat across from each other. She watched his hands grip themselves. Hers worked back and forth, over and under each other.

He glanced at the antique chair where he sat. "This is a fine chair."

"It was my grandmother's."

"It looks like hand carving."

"My grandfather did that."

"And now it's yours."

"It's all I have. That, and a few keepsakes. The cat and dog growling at each other on the shelf were my mother's."

"Then you're all alone?"

"Like the last leaf." She tried to smile and make a joke of it.

His eyes were on her hair. She put her hands up to it self-consciously.

He moved over beside her on the couch. "Are you going to let me take your hair down again sometime?"

"Why, uh . . . I don't know as it would be proper."

"I hope so . . . You're always in my thoughts. When I shut my eyes I see you."

"Why, Mr. Masterson!"

"How I've dreamed of your hair! Remember the rope I made of it, what a fine strong rope . . ."

She waited for the electricity of his touch.

A tapping brought them to their feet. She put her hand to her heart, turning this way and that as though she needed a place to hide, secure like a rabbit. She went slowly to the door.

"Well, what do you want?" She eyed the grey-haired gentleman as if she hadn't seen him once a week for ten years. "Oh, the rent!"

She nearly bumped into Mr. Masterson as she turned to get a receipt.

He slipped past her into the hall, pausing a moment in passing to whisper, "I'll be back, Mary dear."

The ink blobbed and she had to write the receipt over.

When finally alone, she stood near the door listening, sometimes thinking she heard his returning footsteps. She freed her hair and brushed it. She sat in the antique chair as erect as a winter-dried weed and waited, her hands folded, her head tilted slightly. When the clock charged midnight, she arose like a nun from her prayers and stiffly dressed for bed.

Late the next day, she answered the aggressive ringing of the door-policemen, burly and bristling with authority. When they moved bell, to find two heavy-footed they left blotches of mud and oozy black tracks.

"Yes?" she said through a crack in the door.

"Miss Bard's rooming house?" The one that spoke thrust his face forward. He shoved the door wider and looked boldly at her. Neither of the men smiled.

"Why, I don't know."

"You don't know!"

"I mean . . . yes, I suppose it is."

"You suppose so?"

"Well, yes. That is . . . I am Miss Bard."

"We'd like a word with you in private." He gave the door a kick that swung it wide.

She stepped back into her own quarters. They followed, oozing mud as they came. One leaned heavily against the knicknack rack. She watched the china cat and dog tremble and made two false starts to rescue them. Then turned to the other policeman who had seated himself on the antique chair. The rear legs were wavering. All during the conversation she turned her attention from the knicknack shelf to the chair and back, opening her mouth and shutting it like the curator of a museum with children on the loose.

"So you're Miss Bard," the seated policeman said.

"She thinks she is," said the other.

"I haven't done anything," she said.

The first cop tilted back in the chair.

"Have . . .I?"

"No," the one in the chair said.

She looked from one to the other. Their faces were red. Their hair didn't show because their caps were still on. The seated cop had his hand on his revolver. The standing one twirled a hard-looking, black, polished stick. They filled the room with their size and officiousness.

"Then," she looked wildly about her, "Then what?"

"Miss Bard, have you a man here by the name of Ernest Kowalski, alias Phillip Masterson?"

"What has he . . . Oh no! . . .

I mean . . . No . . . Phillip Pasterman, did you say?" She twisted her hands.

"What was it you started to ask?" the leaning cop said.

"I don't know . . . I really don't . . . I couldn't have a Phillip Pasterson here . . . I just couldn't . . . What made you think I had?"

The seated cop tilted further. "She didn't know this was her rooming house at first."

Their four eyes drilled her.

"Whatever do you want a man by that name for? I mean . . . has he done anything . . . like taking a watch?"

"Has he done anything, Mac!" said the seated cop.

"Well," The other paused for dramatic effect as the dog and kitten threatened to fall off. "He might have murdered a few women. That's all."

Mary Bard sat down. "I don't think I heard you."

The cop rolled his words at her. "Strangled 'em. He picks females with long hair like yours. Snuffs 'em out like candles. Hasn't this man been casting wishful looks your way?"

Mary pressed both hands against her forehead. She shook her head.

"Women always say *no*!" the one called Mac said.

"Listen lady," the cop in the chair said, "We've got no time to play games. Headquarters sent us here to pick up this sex maniac. He's dangerous. We already know he's here. We just wanted to hear what you had to say. We know when he leaves, where he goes, the hour he returns. We're going to turn every room in this house upside down unless you show us which is his. We may have to call you as a witness so you'd better watch your tongue. Now, are you going to show us his room or do we get rough?" He snapped the chair to the floor, stood up. He towered above her. The odor of perspiration and stale cigarettes pressed at her.

When Phillip was near, there was a flowerlike fragrance. How gentle he had been when he had touched her, fondling and caressing her hair. He asked her to wait for him. Even a cup of tea was an expression of their love. The word had inserted itself and it gave her a start. *But why not love? Phillip, if only I could see you once more . . . if only . . .*

She didn't know she had covered her face until the cop pulled her hands away. She looked hard at him, and then at the one still leaning against the knicknack shelf. Like one walking in her sleep, she went over and gently moved the cat and dog back from the edge.

"Fussing with her doo-dads when there's a murderer on the loose!" He propped himself more heavily against the shelf.

She led them up the steps, down the hall, and knocked on the door to Phillip's room although he wasn't due for another hour, then opened the door.

The men walked in.

She stood at the entrance, her body flinching as she watched them toss through the drawers, flip the mattress, rummage.

"Not much here," one said.

But they did find the letter and the differently initialed handkerchiefs and another envelope containing various locks of hair ranging from henna to blond, to brunette to white.

"There's no doubt this is our man," said the other. He turned to Miss Bard. "He'll be here in half an hour, won't he!"

"Well, one night he didn't come in until nine. You can't always tell. Sometimes it's very late. I could . . . let you know."

"We'll wait."

One parked himself behind the door. The other stood by the window. They fingered their revolvers.

"I feel . . .faint," she said.

"Sit down then."

"I think I'm going to be sick."

The cops looked at each other.

"You can go downstairs if you'll stay in your rooms and shut the door. He's a murderer! It's a wonder he hasn't killed you already. He has nothing to lose."

She nodded.

"Maybe you'd better go with her, Mac."

"Hell, you go!"

"I think . . . I'm sure I can make it . . . alone." She made moaning sounds down the hall. She took the steps slowly with thuds. She opened the door and shut it with a loud slam, then silently opened it wide, standing there in the darkening shadows. Steps outside and up the walk caused her to draw back out of sight. It was one of the roomers. The clock marked the slow minutes with noisy ticks. She wondered how she could tell him. There would be so little time. Yet he had to know of her love and be warned. He might even escape. But the cop at the window would see him coming. They'd be down before she could speak. There was the sound of a chair scraping and careless footsteps. They were so sure of themselves, so cruel, so ruthless. She pictured Phillip being led away between them, their heavy hands biting into his shoulders. If he tried to escape they would hit him. They'd set him under blazing lights and alternately grill and beat him. Even if he had killed those women. That was past. If he hadn't, they'd never give him a chance. She could never make them know how sweet and gentle he was. How he had roped her hair around her neck, then when he could have killed her, loosened the noose. She could never make them understand, nor could he. She had dreamed there would be a man one day, and they had come to take him away.

She slipped on her coat and tiptoed through the house and out the back door, through some back yards and down the shaded part of the street to the corner. She waited. Her coat was open,

her throat bare. If the wind was cold, she didn't know it. Flakes of snow fell like jewels on her bare head. A woman and a child hurried by, their collars up. Holding herself motionless, she watched a familiar figure walking toward her, his head bent, neither hurrying nor lagging, humming a friendly, unnamed tune. He was nearly past, when she reached out and touched his coat sleeve.

"Eh, what's that?" He spun, facing her and for a moment looked at her as though he had never seen her before, his eyes hard and glittering, his mouth set in a line that squared his face.

She pulled back.

Then he smiled. "It's Mary! And what are you doing here in the cold, my dear? You must be chilled through, though I will say you never looked lovelier. The snowflakes are like precious gems in your hair. I wish it hung long and loose with these sparkling diamonds dotting the soft brown ripples."

"Oh Phillip . . . Phillip! Now it's too late. They've come for you. They're waiting in your room . . . The police, Phillip. The police!"

He shrugged. "I suppose they were bound to . . ."

"Phillip, if they take you, then I've nothing . . ."

"The rooming house?"

"You can't love a rooming house."

They stood close to each other in the shadows, not quite touching. His hands went to her hair, sliding underneath and around her neck.

"I love you," he whispered as he drew out the pins, one here, another there.

"Phillip . . . I . . . I don't care what your name is, or what you've done . . . I . . ." Her voice choked with emotion.

"Yes, Mary dear?"

"I love you too . . . I can't help it." She shut her eyes and stood trembling as he fingered through her hair. "Not here, though, Phillip . . . they'll get you."

He took her elbow and propelled her along. She hung back, so it was through his momentum that they went down the block.

"There's a policeman at your window." She led him behind two houses and to the back door. They tiptoed in. She slipped her coat off. Without turning on the lights they felt their way to the living-room. She sat on the sofa and he knelt beside her. He reached for her hair again. She made no move to help or resist but sat looking at him with both wonder and fore-knowledge.

"You'll have to hurry," she said. "I'd like you to get away."

His voice was excited, yet almost gentle. "There never was hair more beautiful, long, luxuriant, rich to touch, strong . . ." His fingers worked rapidly.

"All my life," she said, "All my life I've hoped there'd be someone. It's funny, now that it's too late, I can talk, the words coming out straight and true. I've always

known there'd be a you. I've lived for it . . ."

"And I for you." He seemed so tight with emotion that the words were almost stifled.

"I've said to myself," she went on happily, "If only a man cared for me . . . if just once I could be more than life itself . . ."

He was looping the hair around her neck now, forming the noose.

She lay back against the arm of the couch.

He bent over her.

She could feel the noose tightening. She smiled and folded her hands across her chest.

"It's not how long you live, Phillip, is it? It's what you give . . . The past few weeks, Phillip, they've been my whole life . . ." She could almost see the smile on his face, though it was nearly dark. She could feel his eyes on her. "You'll have to hurry, remember . . ." Her head fell back. She didn't know whether the words were out loud or drumming in her mind. "I love you . . . I love you . . . I love . . ." She could feel her lips forming them over and over as the throbbing pressure in her head increased and seemed to merge with footfalls thudding down the stairs . . . or was it only the pounding in her head she heard, that stopped with blackness . . .

THE END

THE FRIGHTENED

by Boris Karloff

BORIS KARLOFF, the Master of Mystery, can now be heard on your local radio station with his terrifying new show, "The Frightened." We are happy to bring you a printed replica of one of these transcribed TALES OF TERROR— the strange story of the weird man in the raincoat who also carries a curiously shaped umbrella . . .

Are you one of The Frightened? Have you ever imagined somebody was following you? Catch a glimpse of a strange face in the crowd behind you? Then that face seems mysteriously with you wherever you go? First, a flashing glance in a sidewalk mirror, a shop window. You stop for a street light, turn, and somebody darts into a doorway. There! Wasn't that him . . . pretending to adjust his shoelace: suddenly interested in lighting his pipe? That peculiar looking fellow in the raincoat with the curiously-shaped umbrella . . . Sylvester Dodge had just such an experience. Walk with me a bit and I'll tell you about Sylvester and his man in the raincoat.

Sylvester Dodge was a man like you or me. The same hopes, the same fears, the same dreams. He worked as a bookkeeper in an office and for many years he was saving for the day when he could afford his trip to Europe—Paris, Rome, London. Oh, the years and the countless hours and days that Sylvester Dodge took the subway to his Wall Street office and made his plans and built his dreams for his big holiday away from ledgers and balances and adding machines. Finally the last week of daily toil approached and Sylvester was alive with hope and desire. Anticipation thrilled his fat little body as he boarded the Lexington Avenue local. The big vacation loomed on his horizon as the salvation of a dreary lifetime. It was then that Sylvester Dodge noticed the man in the raincoat with the curiously-shaped umbrella. Something about the man made Sylvester shudder. It was a beautiful Spring day. A raincoat and an umbrella seemed like sacrilege. But it was more than that. The face of the man was a deathly white and the hands surrounding the handle of the umbrella were like great claws. The flesh of the fingers were horribly gnarled and ghastly green. Sylvester could not look at him. But even in turning away, he felt the eyes of the man boring

into his back like twin beams of awful light. You know the feeling, don't you? Someone looking at you, staring at you, eyeing you with such a terrible concentration that you want to scream or cry out—Stop! Stop! When the train reached the station, Sylvester Dodge alighted from his car like a man released from prison. He fairly bounded up the stairway to the sun-splashed street. He drew a deep gust of air and felt enormously better. The man in the subway had shocked him. But then again, you do meet all kinds of people in New York, don't you? And so Sylvester Dodge began the five-block walk to his office. The sun was out, April breezes caressed the stone buildings and people bustled along with spring steps. But Sylvester Dodge had that curious feeling I mentioned to you—someone was following him. He felt eyes peering at his back, could feel somebody's interest and attention focussed on his rounded body hurrying through the crowds. Sylvester Dodge found himself walking faster. He stopped for a street light, puffing for air—he turned —a deathly white face in the crowd bobbed like a Halloween skeleton — vanished. Sylvester Dodge whirled and raced across the street, his coat tails flying. People made room for him, wondering at the curious spectacle of a fat man running. Sylvester Dodge stopped again, a block away from his office, and flung a backward look. There was the man in the raincoat with the ghastly face, waving his clawlike hand in greeting, the umbrella dangling off his wrist. Something pounded in Sylvester Dodge's skull and the cold wind of something dreadful squeezed his heart in icy fingers. Desperately, he raced the remaining block and fell against the building wall gasping for breath. He turned slowly, fighting for his reason. But no—there was the man with the raincoat, a scant ten yards away, coming toward him. The ghastly face was smiling and the umbrella was outstretched almost as if it were seeking something. Sylvester Dodge pushed out from the wall and left the protection of the building. At that precise moment, the grand piano that was being hoisted to the office on the fourth floor swung awkwardly on its pully—the rope snapped and its great weight crashed to the sidewalk pinning Sylvester Dodge to his death. His scream of agony was lost in the roar of the city's traffic . . . So you see, poor Sylvester tried to run away from his fate and dodged in the wrong direction. All because he had the silly notion that someone was following him. . . . Well, I'll leave you here, my friend. You don't think my face is so awfully white do you? Oh, I'm sorry, I seem to have dropped my umbrella. Would you mind very much. . . . handing it to me . . .?

* * * * * *

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Lee Bowman not only believes variety is the spice of life, but he lives it. Giving up a law career for the stage, Lee appeared in movies opposite Rita Hayworth, Susan Hayward, Doris Day, and on radio-TV did all the top dramatic shows. Now Lee broadens his field still further by starring in the new radio spy-series "American Agent".

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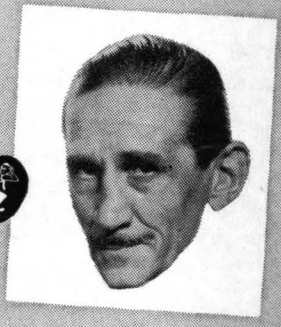

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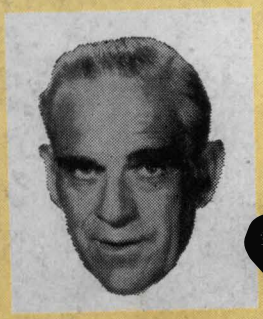

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