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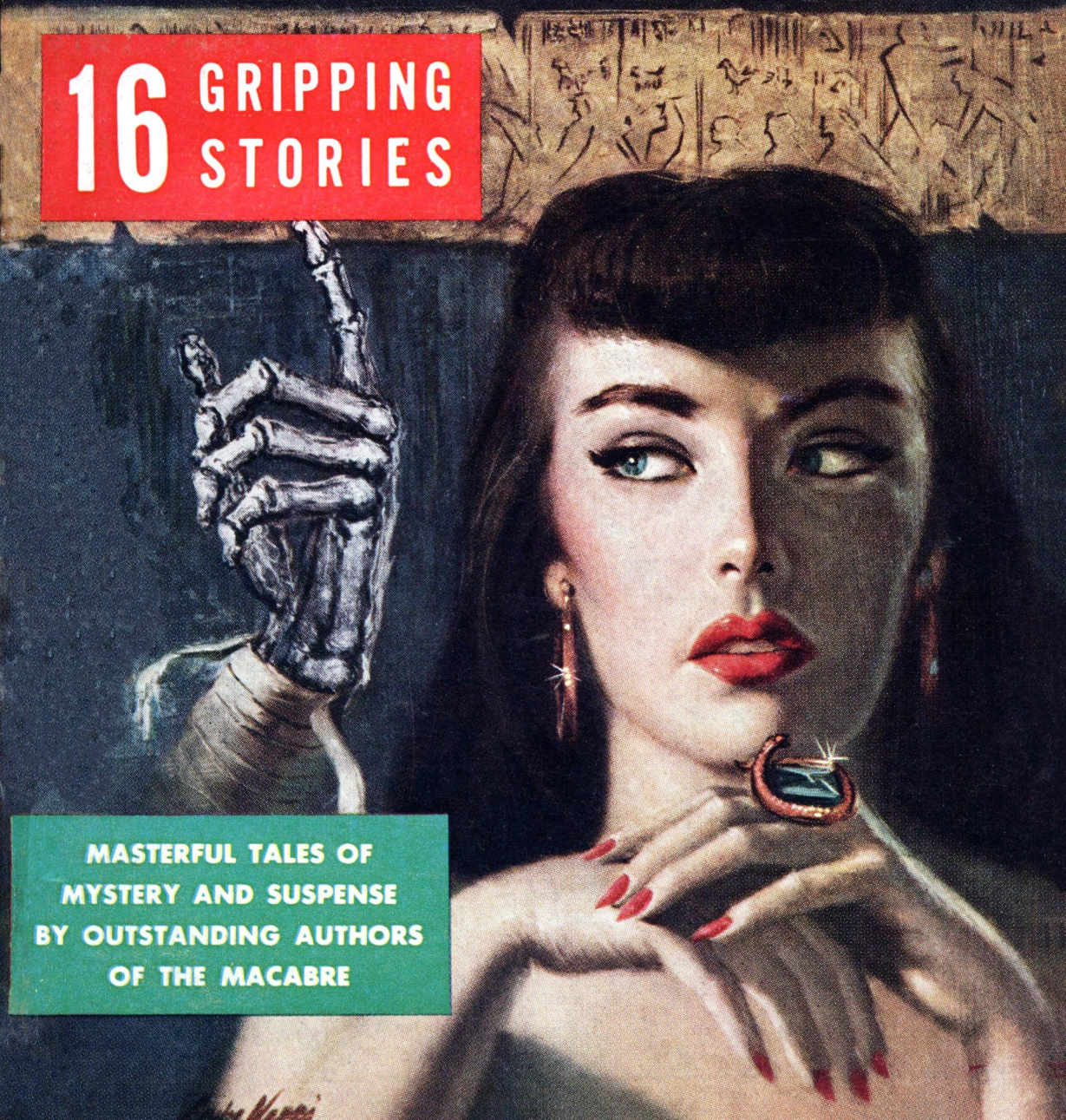

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TALES of the FRIGHTENED

VOL. 1 **NO. 1**

Contents

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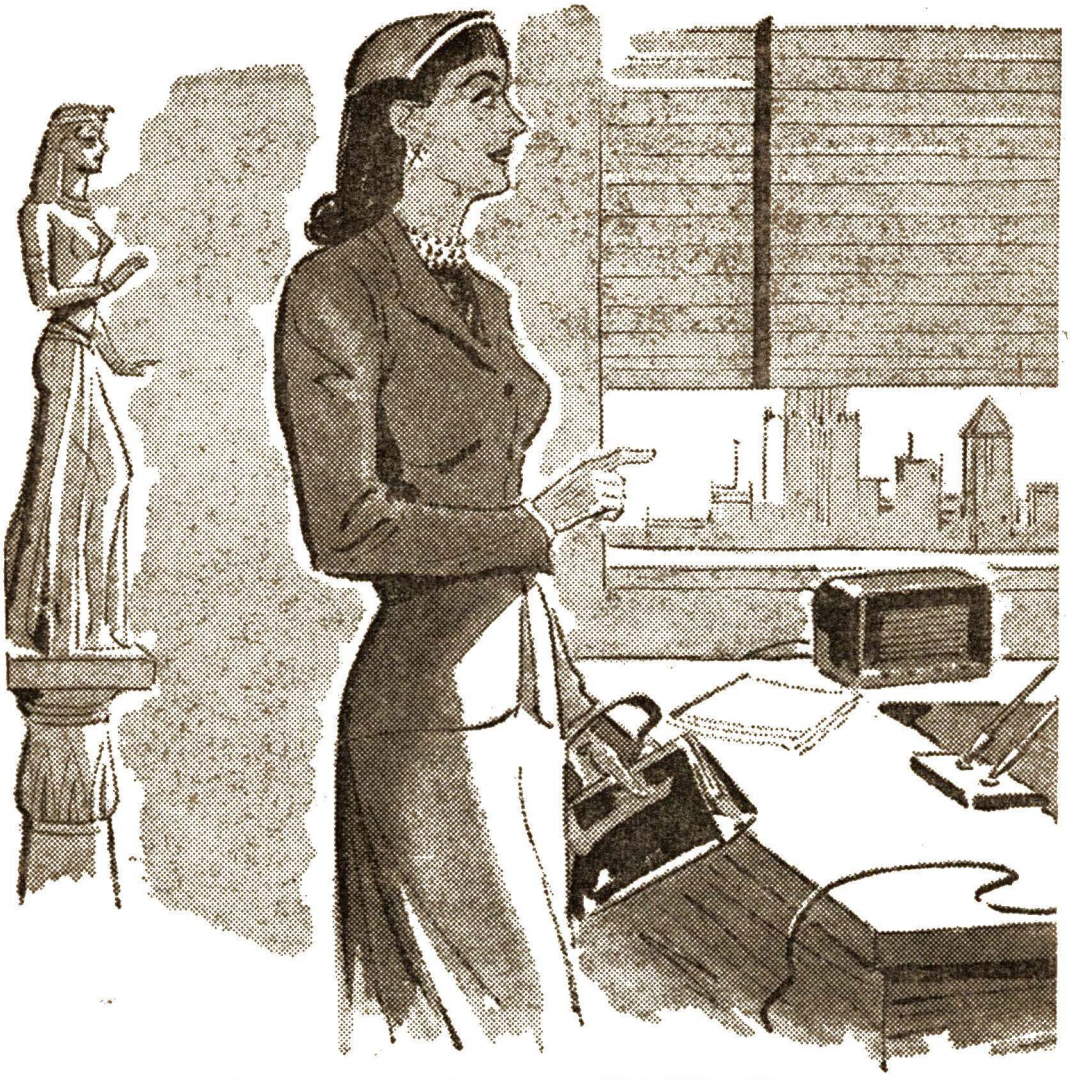


THE CURSE OF CLEOPATRA

TANOPSIS, HIGH PRIEST TO THE QUEEN CLEOPATRA

OH, would that she could sleep. Would that we both could rest in the burial place of our fathers. The numberless years have drifted by; the decades, the centuries, the eons of troubled time. Must we stalk the hallways of Time without end? Must we forever be doomed because of my unwise oath on the day of the death of my beloved Queen? How could I know that Osiris, the creator, would include me in that lamentable curse? Yea, I uttered the unholy words. It is my penance for my terrible blasphemy.

But the demands of Her who was my Queen have been excessive. The blood I have spilled in her name because of the monstrous token of that Roman knave Antony. If she had heeded my words and

by Michael Avallone

not given herself to that poor pawn of the tyrant Caesar, all this would not have come to pass. But a Queen of the royal blood who steps down from her exalted position to truck with commoners can expect no asylum from the spirit fathers of the other world. The Book of the Dead is just and sound. But why was I, Tanopsis, chosen to share this dreadful shadow life with Her who was my Queen?

The ring. Will we ever find it? Will She place it once more upon her revered fingers so that she may return to her final resting place in the sands along the beloved Nile? And will I, doomed to walk with Her, ever know surcease from this curse of centuries?

I see them all now. The faces of the mortals who have died under my stone knife in pursuit of the ring. But always it has eluded us. The improvident Gods seem to mock our efforts. Why can we not

find it? Rome, London, Asia, the great countries of the world. But always we are too late. Ever does some other hand hold that precious prize before us and to the second when we trace the ring to them, it has passed on to other hands. I grow weary of this repetition of history. Death walks with us. I, Tanopsis. And Cleopatra, She who was my Queen.

And now the calendar and time have run out on us. The sands have shifted endlessly in the glass but the final hour is poising. The day draws near for the prophecy. The 27th of October in the year 1956. Fulfillment or Failure. Final Sleep or Endless Unrest. Which will it be?

I weary of this trial by ordeal I say. The hunt has brought us to America. These feet which have known the floors of the desert, Spanish galleons, battlefields and the dusty trails of antiquity now know the stone floors of this Manhattan. And now the search has brought us to William Rameses. I wonder if he knows that he is the descendant of Egyptian kings? His face—it is fairly the image of my own. He has graced the sarcophogus masks of our tombs. But does he know? How can he? Yet, the ring is fated to pass through his hands. It must. And then we will have it once again. If only before the fatal and final hour passes.

I am weary.

I have done all I can.

I have removed the girl who sought the job that she who was my Queen had to have. Now she is near William Rameses. She will know when he first learns of the ring. Already he has begun to feel the strange witchlike power of the Mistress.

I hope there will be no more deaths. I grow wearier.

I want the sleep of my ancestors. The blessed sleep. For myself. And Cleopatra.

Hear me, O great Osiris. Weigh my heart, Anubis. Embrace us. I, Tanopsis. And Cleopatra. She who was my Queen.

I, William Rameses, am going to tell you the whole, incredible story of my relationship with Lucille Nile. It's a fantastic tale, so much so, you may doubt my sanity. Perhaps If I tell you the whole thing from the day she first walked into my office, I can give you some glimmer of this moonlight madness that is ruining my life.

And that weird ring. Cleopatra's ring. Talk about misfortune accompanying well-known jewels. They all pale by comparison with the ring of a dead Egyptian queen. But is she really dead? Well—let me begin at the beginning. I'll leave the conclusions to you.

To begin with, Lucille Nile always laughed when I told her she looked like Cleopatra. Called me a romanticist, an idle fictioneer. Even an old fool. She should have been flattered yet she wasn't. At

least, she never showed it. It was difficult to understand her indifference let alone endure it. She was young, she was vibrant; she was a thousand diverse moods. And her name was Lucille Nile.

I tried to analyze her lack of response on the matter but I never got beyond her laughter. She had a rich, liquid laugh that flowed full-tide—deep. It was laughter that can only come from inside; the kind that always suggests some hidden spring; some secret storehouse where different things were thought than what was said. Picture Cleopatra laughing at some fawning Roman's compliments. That was Lucille—laughing.

But I digress. Let me tell you how I met her.

She came to me one day from the employment agency at a time when I needed a capable secretary and general all-around Girl Friday. Running a business office efficiently is a near impossibility without such a girl. FIRM FIT FOUNDATIONS, INC. had never been without one.

I was getting on in years and had lost that youthful drive which used to propel me from my desk, rooting up ad men, meeting buyers and the like. I needed someone badly now because Miss Slocum who had put up with my rigorous routine for five long years had suddenly turned up one morning with the startling news of approaching marriage. So I had placed a rush call to the agency and when I saw the superb creation that walked into my office that October afternoon, I was glad I had.

She was literally stunning.

I pretended to be busy with some official papers on my desk after the fashion of a successful business man and let her stew awhile. I watched her keenly above the very edge of the sheets in my hands.

When I got a full look at her, the papers seemed to flutter from my fingers. The reverse had happened that abruptly. My attention was riveted by the resemblance that has always been, to my mind at least—astonishingly exact.

She was calm. In fact, the position of her small, elegant figure in one of my expensive Falco chairs was queenly. There was none of the eager-to-please, on-my-best-behavior evils that so stamp the newcomer seeking employment. None of that. There was something arch about her, a quality difficult to define.

Her attire was no less unconventional than any American working girl today. Tailored with a smart economy of style that rings of making ends meet and scrimping on luxuries. Yet, she wore it all with an extreme dash, a royal smartness. No, it wasn't her clothes but she herself who gave off an aura of something subtle and fascinating.

Her eyes. They were two round unblinking pools of limpid black

widely spaced in a high cheeked face that tapered down to a classic oval with a firm little chin slightly clefted. Her nose was very strong for a woman, with the barest traces of hawk in its poise. Her red-lipped mouth was full, inviting, sensuous in impact. The whole expression of her face despite its naked emotion was one of extreme candor. She was small and even the sharp sobriety of her garb could not hide a definite compactness, fullness of form. It is enough to say that she made me feel exactly as Caesar must have felt when Cleopatra first rolled out of her rug in his quarters. Old, tired and somewhat foolish.

"Uh—yes," I began lamely, totally at a loss and completely forgetting what had brought her to my office.

Something stirred in those eyes and the faintest suggestion of a smile curved her mouth corners.

"Mr. Rameses? My name is Lucille Nile. I came in answer to your call regarding a personal secretary."

The familiar words, the stock business form—but what music her voice made of them! She seemed to purr in a kind of liquid-syrup smoothness. Nile! I supposed that helped as much as anything else in my constant thought associations of Lucille Nile and Cleopatra, the almost legendary daughter of the Nile. Strange coincidence.

I coughed, confused at her effect on me and utterly conscious of her beauty, a scant few feet away.

"Oh, yes, Miss Nile. Glad you could come. I—uh—spoke to our Mr. Reeves about you. Your reputation precedes you."

"Yes?" She said it with the richest of nuances.

"Yes." I rushed on, eager to hold my crumbling *savoir faire* together. "He tells me you are efficient, highly capable and extremely fit for the job." The truth of it was I had heard no such thing from Reeves. I'd been so upset by Miss Slocum's quitting that I had merely yelled at the fool on the phone that I wanted another secretary right away and hung up. Looking at Miss Nile, I just couldn't imagine any other kind of recommendation. Or if I could have, I didn't want to. It's risky business asking a Dream for qualifications.

She smiled at me and her lips parted to reveal teeth that were bone-white and amazingly pure. "That was very kind of Mr. Reeves. I shall do my best to live up to his faith in me."

"I'm sure you will, Miss Nile," I expanded. "He doesn't say that about everyone or just anybody at all. You must be a rather special sort. Tell me. Do you like being a Girl Friday to an old business man like myself?" It wasn't what I really wanted to talk about right then but I had to be polite. After all, I didn't want her to think I was just an old fool who fancied himself still attractive to women.

She nodded with slow majesty.

"Yes, I do. It is always interesting to belong behind the scenes of a big organization. So much activity and drive. Rather like being the power behind the throne."

The remark and general tenor of her conversation was certainly strange. It just wasn't the customary dialogue of a mere secretary.

"We need power around here," I boomed good-naturedly to show her how I meant it. "Women keep us busy, bless them, with their demands for something newer and better to hold together what God gave them in such varying quantities."

Her head arced back and abundant coils of black hair danced on her shoulders.

"I never thought of it that way, Mr. Rameses. That is very good. Worthy of a philosopher." She laughed in a low, throaty way and the creamy white of her skin enthralled me.

I watched her, more bewitched than I had been for a long time. She seemed so friendly and everything was so informal that I couldn't wait any longer. I had to mention it to her.

"Uh—Miss Nile. This may seem curious to you but—I can't help wondering. It strikes me so plain, I mean. Did anyone ever tell you how much you look like Cleopatra? Why, even your name—"

I stopped red-faced. I had to because she was laughing. Rich, liquid, flowing laughter. I realized even then that she was not joining me in a joke. She was laughing *at* me. The scorn in her tones was unmistakeable.

The phone rang and I reached for it gratefully, aware of the awkward position my remark had put me in. Her laughter had subsided but her lambent eyes were still on me, alive with a subtle humor, a veiled mockery.

"Yes, what is it?" I barked into the transmitter, taking out my sudden anger on my caller whoever it might be.

"That you, Mr. Rameses? This is Reeves. Down at the Agency. Now, look, Mr. Rameses, it's not our fault about that girl you wanted in a hurry. You see, we get awfully pressed down here sometimes and—"

"What are you raving about, Reeves?" I roared back at his whining inferiority. "I am well satisfied—"

"We know you appreciate rapid service, Mr. R." rushed on Reeves. "But this time we couldn't accommodate you as fast as we'd have liked to. Fact is, the girl we had planned to send over has disappeared. Now if you could wait until morning, we'll arrange for a replacement. Don't know what could have happened to the other girl—"

I didn't hear the rest of it. I didn't know what to say—or think. I kept staring at the beautiful creature sitting on the other side of my desk, in one of my chairs, with her legs gracefully crossed, her

arms folded, her head held high like some regal being. Like—

"That's all right with you, isn't it, Mr. Rameses?"

I got my voice back. "Never mind, Reeves. The job is no longer open. It's been filled. By someone —completely satisfactory." I hung up.

"Well, Miss Nile," I said. "When would you like to start?"

She smiled. "Whenever is agreeable with you, Mr. Rameses."

For some disturbing reason, she was unreal to me then, sitting here in my office. It was as if she had dropped in from nowhere, unseen by any one else, with no one to properly identify her. Her mounting unreality would not be dispelled by the employment form she would have to fill out, either. I somehow sensed that much. Because that was exactly how she made me feel. It was peculiar—to say the very least.

"Right away if you like. There's lots to do. Miss Slocum, whom you are replacing by the way, left things in good order but it's all piled up these last few days."

"Good." Her head bobbed approvingly. "I want to be of help right away. That will make me feel that I am needed."

She glided across the rugged floor and peeled off her three-quarter length coat accomplishing the commonplace act with a grace too little seen by the American eye. Her style struck me then as being decidedly of another generation. Old World.

I reached into a side drawer of my desk for some stenography equipment for her when I noticed her breathless halt beneath the base of the four-foot high statuette of Cleopatra that was handsomely mounted in a cleverly designed wall niche at the southern corner of the room. It was the only encroachment of my expensive hobby on my business life. The niche was so arranged that not all of the visitors to the sanctum sanctorum of William Rameses could see the figure of the most famous temptress of them all.

Miss Nile murmured, "It is beautiful, Mr. Rameses."

I came around the desk, glad she had seen it without my showing it to her. It was, in a small way, a bit of a triumph. The sting of her laughter was still with me.

"Like it? It's genuine. Not a modern reproduction. Picked it up on one of my trips abroad. Cost a fortune in European money—and American too."

She peered at me closely for the first time. "Egyptology is your hobby? An ancient civilization such as that?"

"Why not? It's damn fascinating, Miss Nile. Romantical, appealingly mysterious. Keeps the blood in me young."

Miss Nile looked up at the inclined head of the stone lady and it was quite as if she were staring at a cut replica of herself. "She was beautiful, Cleopatra."

"'The best thing in Egyptian history, Miss Nile. Or Roman for that matter. Break down, Miss Nile—" I was exhilarated that she knew the name of my hobby, my extravagant madness. "Don't you think you strongly resemble the lady?"

Her intoxicating laughter filled the office again. She swayed on her spiked heels and tilted her perfect face toward me. "Mr. Rameses, you are naive. Cleopatra indeed! Why not one of your movie queens or Venus or Pallas Athene? I'm afraid you are a romanticist."

I smiled at her fresh charm.

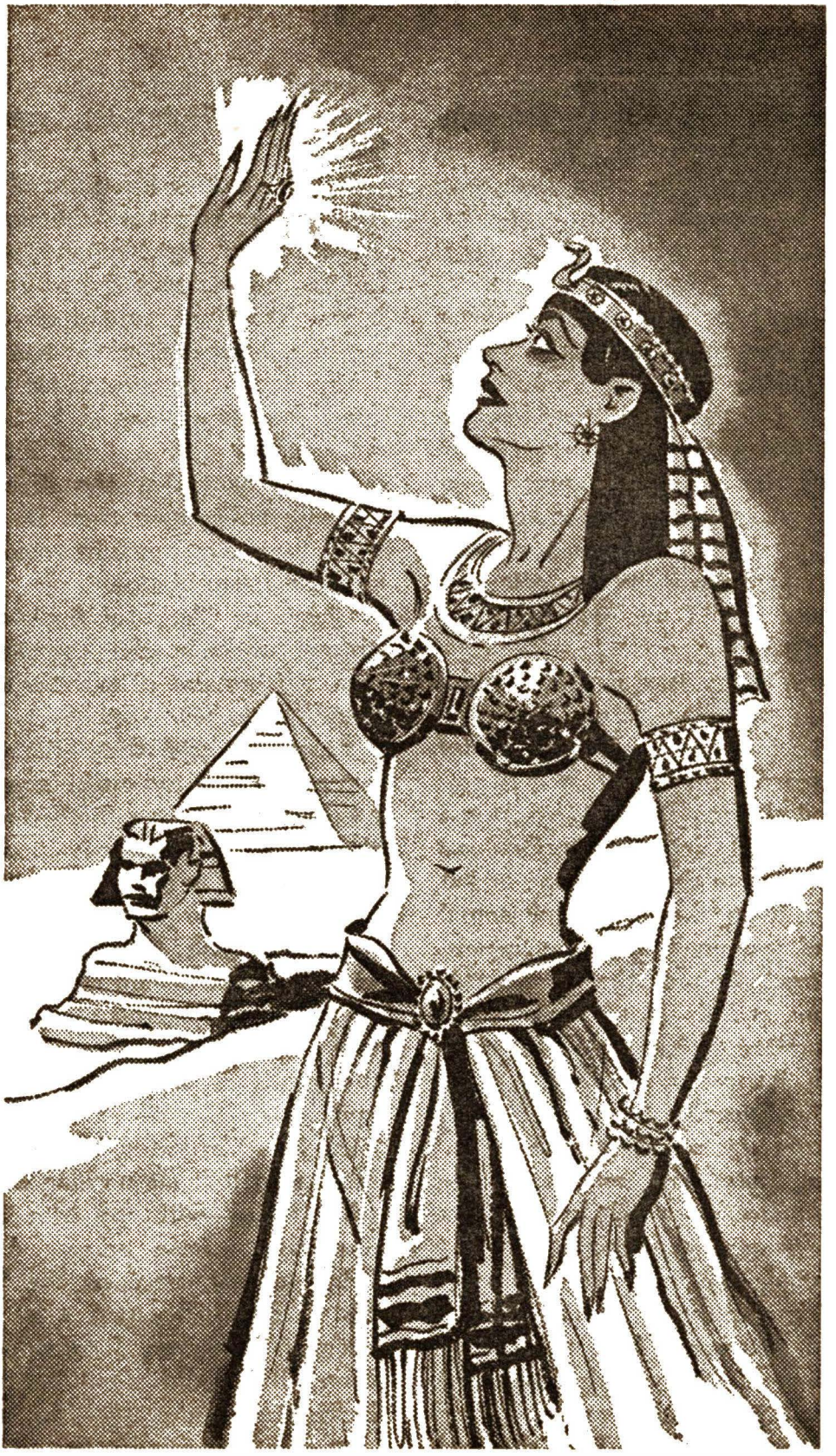
"As long as you don't think I'm an old fool. It's in the blood, I suppose. I've traced my family name all the way back to the year One. I still suspect the Rameses name hung somewhere on the tree of pharoahs."

Suddenly, her lips parted. And a soft low babble of words poured forth. I looked at her questioningly as if I hadn't heard her. But she merely threw back her head and laughed again. Then she sobered and said, "Excuse me. It's just that being compared to Cleopatra amuses me."

I grinned in spite of her mockery. The affairs of FIRM FIT FOUNDATION, INC. no longer troubled me. I not only had a beautiful secretary but an erudite one. A younger person to share my hobby with. There was an undeniable other side to Lucille. Nile and I meant to find it out regardless of her polished, refined, career-girl mould.

In the succeeding days that followed, she proved to be all that I had thought she was. She was of invaluable assistance and business seemed to move agreeably ahead since the day she began work. No filing task was too exacting for her and she revealed an amazing understanding of the brassiere line that was put to profitable use in the art and promotion departments. She possessed an innate knowledge of what the modern woman was looking for in foundation devices and pretty soon I was faced with the notion that I had come upon someone very special indeed. I was sorely tempted to use her as a model for our sensational new NATURE BRA but when I realized this would take her away from my immediate office, I rejected my own proposal however gloriously she would have benefited the selling campaign of our latest product. She had firm, upturned breasts of almost sculptured magnificence but I wouldn't spare her. Or my own pleasure, for that matter.

You may wonder at my fixation about her and my strange behavior regarding the unusual aspects of her employment but I feel I can explain it away by repeating that I was, and still am, a fervent Egyptologist—which covers a multitude of sins. Since childhood, the romance of Old Egypt with its Sphinx, its mighty pyramids jutting from the ancient sands, its tales of conquests, passion and magnificent



pageantry has held me as few things can. I was forever entranced by the story of the Nile and its civilization in the sand that rose and fell before the onslaught of Time. I had learned all I could about the Pharaoahs and their fabulous lives but I had never ventured past the Cleopatra myths. I had halted there and reveled as I had at no other point in my hobby.

Cleopatra fascinated me with her magic, her immense power at so early an age in her life in so powerful a country. Her name was the heady perfume of my Egyptological research and I was powerless before its spell.

Egyptology is a wealthy hobby and in the latter years of a successful business career, I had spared no expense in pursuit of it. I collected all sorts of rare books, dated curios and authentic bric-a-brac pertaining to the lore of the fabled land. Even the luxury of actual travel was not beyond my means. I stood before the inscrutable Sphinx and imagined it asked me a question; I halted in the mammoth shadow of a towering Pyramid and smelled its musty history; I gazed across the expanse of limitless desert and envisioned the days when many-columned monoliths rose challengingly into the scorching sun. I pictured the pomp and pageantry of Mark Antony's royal entrance into Cleopatra's stronghold; I boated down the storied Nile and dreamed of her Golden Barge and how she had wooed him with her beauty, her extravagant charm, her scented body.

So you see, the Daughter of the Nile was as constant with me as my arms and my legs and when Lucille Nile brought her exotic person into my office, the astounding resemblance hit me as if I had always been waiting for a duplicate queen to come along. I had. Do not confuse it with love. It was only a dream that the dreamer wishes would come true. If only once, to justify the long years of unfulfilled expectation.

Cleopatra. Cleopatra. Spoken by Antony or even the commonest man, it is a name of extreme loveliness.

From the day that Miss Nile began working for me, I suppose I was a completely enthralled man. No device was too far-fetched for me to get her in my presence. Like a jeweler who has encountered some new and fabulous gem, I wanted to see her up close, watch her slightest movement, study her every facet. Perhaps it was senility, the youth of old age. Who can say?

As I had expected, her employment card told me nothing except what I saw with my own eyes. She was a woman, unmarried and living in Manhattan on the West Side. Beyond that, she was Enigma. However, I intended to learn all I could about her. Collector-like, I was avid for every particle of her wonder, her novelty.

I never mentioned the resemblance to her again. Her laughter had made an odd impression on me. It had a quality that both confused and troubled me. It is difficult to explain a laugh that confuses you, I'm afraid.

One day on the pretext of dictating a letter that could easily have been put off until the following day, I kept her a bit later than usual. My curiosity was enormous at this point. In addition, something had come up. Something so unpredictable that I could scarcely conceal my excitement.

She was folding her steno pad and getting ready to leave when I checked her.

"Uh—Miss Nile. One moment, please. Know anything about rings? Rings for the finger I mean."

Her answer was surprising.

"Quite a bit, Mr. Rameses." She fairly purred and little, sparkling lights burned in her deep-set eyes. "It is one of my foolish notions. I have rather an excellent collection of my own. Why do you ask?"

I was overjoyed that she had such an interest in rings. It was making my intended suggestion that much more natural.

"Glad to hear it, Miss Nile. You see, I have an appointment with a Mr. Samarko who deals in curios. Has a shop on Fourteenth and Second. He knows my passion for Egyptian oddments and has helped me get some of the stuff I have now. I'd be a fool to pass him up this time." I paused to keep the excitement within me controlled. "Samarko claims he has managed to get his hands on a ring *that actually belonged to Cleopatra!*"

Miss Nile's oval face underwent a curious change; a shadow darkening the cream of her countenance.

"How can he prove such a thing? That was thousands of years ago. No one could say with certainty who it had belonged to!"

I laughed at her skepticism, however righteous it might be.

"You don't know Samarko. The man's an absolute wizard. Agents and spies all over the country. Both here and abroad. Nobody knows why he locates on Fourteenth Street even though he claims the drabness of the district is the proper setting for his antique shop. Best thing about the fellow is that he's given me the necessary proof on every one of the items he has procured for me. Don't know how he does it but he does. The man's a genius in his profession."

"But what sort of proof can the man possibly give you on a ring?" She was curiously persistent on that point. Her fine head was bobbing with her own conviction. "An inscription can be easily scratched on the band at a much later date—"

"From Mark to Cleo with all my love?" I threw my head back and roared with delight. "Nothing like that, Miss Nile. Samarko's proofs are of a more definite nature. But why not come along and see for

yourself? I am anxious to see the thing. Whatever it is."

Lucille Nile nodded. "I am too, Mr. Rameses. Very much so. Very much indeed."

I followed her graceful figure out of the office, once more convinced that she was a rather extraordinary girl. The coincidence of her resemblance and the discovery of the ring was not lost upon me.

Samarko's shop, deep in the environs of a narrow street that was fairly littered with shops of a similar sort, had a clapboard sign fronting its colorful facade. Against a white field of paint, the exotically burned-in-the-wood letters SAMARKO'S guided us from Third Avenue. Miss Nile literally decorated my arm and as her privileged escort, I basked in reflected glory, fully aware of the backward glances accorded us by people we passed.

I felt like some courtier handing a Queen down the marble steps of a palace. Even the aged, worn stone-walk that led down into Samarko's curio shop did not dispel the illusion.

Jerol, Samarko's youthful, fuzzy-haired assistant was hang-dog at sight of us. One unbelieving stare at my dazzling companion and he was hastily rolling down the cuffs of his clerk's jacket and running nervous fingers through his luxuriant hair. Miss Nile flashed him a smile and won him over on the spot. He could only mumble something incoherent and wave us on through to the rear of the ornament-filled establishment, with one sweep of a sleeve still unbuttoned. He very nearly toppled an Etruscan vase doing it.

I had been to Samarko's place of business too many times to give his stock a second glance but Miss Nile paused at more than one piece of intriguing merchandise to murmur something that expressed either curiosity or genuine delight. Her interest was so spontaneous that I found myself silently exultant that we seemed to share a common interest.

A black onyx bookend in the form of a Roman chariot drew a remark from her that puzzled me at the time. The bookend was a skillfully wrought bit of workmanship but I knew this piece for the clever imitation it was. I had never wanted arty reproductions. Only the real things. The items that ancient, long-dead hands had lifted and held in their own era.

But Miss Nile's comment was startling.

"No true Roman would have rode such a contraption, Mr. Rameses. The entire assembly is incorrect. If the shaft were that far forward, the horses would never have managed."

It was a criticism that could only have come from an expert on such things. I had been fooled myself when I first saw it but Samarko had cautioned me against his own duplications. I was one of

his select customers and he had not desired to dupe me.

"These things are for the walk-in trade, Sir," he had glibly remarked. "A man such as you wants only genuine antiques."

We had reached the end of the maze of commercial antiquity and came into the small clearing that housed a time-battered roll-top desk, a staggering pile of newspapers and sundry magazines, a four-drawer file that leaned dangerously and—Mr. Samarko himself.

He arose from his position directly behind the desk. He was a mountain of fat, rounded, compressed human oil that had long arms for piping that oil and a small hump of head that controlled its flow with pure native shrewdness. His wary set of small black eyes were ever focussed on what Americans liked and what they liked to hear. He was a great showman for a businessman and he never disappointed you.

How could he? He was exactly what you expected to see in a man selling curios from all over the globe. Long, draping pantaloons hid his fat legs and his head was the only thing that separated a rich, maroon Arabian vest from a red felt, flat-topped Egyptian Fez complete with jaunty tassle.

His ready smile widened as he beheld Miss Nile and his black little eyes disappeared in the rolls of flesh that packed his dark brown face.

"Ah, Sir!" he wheezed in his soft, oily foreign voice as he waddled to us, arms extended. "You have brought an antique yourself. A genuine thing. For Beauty is the oldest prize under the stars and the most lasting. A real pleasure, my Lady."

He said it in capital letters. He said everything in capital letters.

Miss Nile made a slight bow and I marveled once again at her instant effect on males. Surely, that alone put her on a plane with her fabled prototype.

"You are very kind, Mr. Samarko," she intoned throatily. "Very kind and properly cast in your role."

Samarko's round head rocked on his huge shoulders and the Fez's tassle swung like a pendulum. He rubbed his fat palms.

"Ah, Mr. Rameses, Sir. She is a pearl indeed."

"Quite so, Samarko," I cut him short, eager to get on with the purpose of our visit. "What of the ring? You still have it I hope."

"Sir, what I promise I do not go back on. I am not the foolish tide that listens to the fickle moon. The ring is here. It only awaits your approval. And my Lady's." I wasn't blind to the meaning of his last remark. A beauty like Miss Nile would cause people to think a lot of things.

Samarko waddled behind the roll-top desk and with a great sigh stooped to open one of its many drawers. I found myself watching

my secretary closely.

She was just opposite me, waiting expectantly as was I, yet I sensed a tension in her, a halting of her very life's breath. As if the next few seconds alone would be a crisis in her life. In our relationship. She scarcely breathed at all and her wide eyes were leveled directly at the fat merchant's doubled-up bulk, half-hidden by the crowded top of the desk.

"These are the few delights of my profession, Lady and Sir," wheezed Samarko as he struggled erect, one fat fist closed around a square metallic box. He made a great ceremony of placing it in front of us, clearing a section of his desk with one flourish of a silken arm.

"—uncovering the treasures of the historic past comes only a few, rare times in the dealer's career. For the true collector, it is even a stronger opiate. So—"

He rubbed his fingers in a gloating preamble and I caught myself leaning forward unable to check the excitement that raced through me. Think of it, a ring *actually worn by Cleopatra.* I had forgotten Miss Nile entirely.

The square box was embossed, trellis fashion, with a motif of interlaced, grotesquely designed serpents. Samarko's heavy hands descended on the box briefly and came apart leaving the thing opened.

Something glittered, reflected the light of the bulb overhead.

I gasped. A slow, startled moan emanated from Miss Nile.

There it was. A circle of perfection. A bauble of magnificence. A token of majesty out of the dead past, the bygone glory.

A ring. A beautiful ring. Emeralds flashed and caught the light in a million varying shades. First white, then red, then blue, then white again—

Its size was enormous. If Cleopatra had worn it, a single finger wouldn't have been large enough to hold it. Only two of her fingers would have sufficed.

Miss Nile reached down slowly and picked it up. Swaying back on her high heels, she held it up to the light with one perfectly tapered hand. "It is beautiful," she whispered. Her voice had a peculiar throaty catch to it.

The ring was just that. Shaped in the form of an asp, connecting its serpent head to its final coil, it was an amazing piece of jewelry. The entire circumference was a belt of multi-colored emerald chips that sparkled and flashed with each movement of Miss Nile's hand. The center stone was larger than a postage stamp and as thick as a slice of bread. It was Old World beauty, seemingly new and yet ancient. There was a definite aura of antiquity about the ring. It was not difficult to imagine it on Cleopatra's hand. Or on Lucille Nile's for that matter. The ring itself had bridged all time, and all conventions.

Samarko's cheeky face showed

his pleasure at our reaction.

"Is it not a rare specimen, Sir?"

"Damned if it isn't, Samarko! How about you, Miss Nile?"

She turned at my question, still revolving the ring between her fingers. The fires in the many stones of the ring only matched the deep glow in her beautiful eyes.

"I had never expected to see it. There is an inscription on the inside of the band."

Samarko's tiny eyes became slits. "The Lady has excellent sight. I could only discern the words with my jeweler's glass."

"What does it say, Miss Nile?" I'm afraid I shouted so excited was I.

She paused and in the momentary silence, the whole shop seemed to wait for the words rolling back from the relentless grave of Yesterday.

"'*To my Egypt from my heart —Antony*'" The message came out like something holy. Like litany. She had uttered the words with memorial dignity. She returned the ring to the cushioned square box.

"Ah, the Lady reads my native tongue. And superbly."

I scarcely heard Samarko's compliment. The translation had delighted me far more than you can imagine. It was like finding an unknown love letter from Josephine to Napoleon. I was ecstatic. The ring *must* be authentic.

"Samarko, this is past all belief. Do you realize what a find this would be? Prove it to me, man. Prove it!"

"Yes, Mr. Magician," my exotic secretary added. "Where is your proof?"

Samarko sat down grandly and motioned us to do likewise in the armchairs reserved for visitors. When we had seated ourselves, he eyed us keenly and splayed his meaty hands.

"I can well understand your—ah—concern. Inscriptions are not difficult to forge. In a business such as this, such tricks are often employed to raise to the sky the value of a trinket. But see for yourself, Lady and Sir. These emeralds are exquisite. The ring itself is a fortune."

"Agreed." I nodded. "But its words make it a fabulous relic. Don't you realize, man, that it's a link back to Egyptian history?"

"I do, Mr. Rameses, Sir." His Fez tassle shook at me. "I do. I am fully prepared to present for your inspection a *dossier* complete with names and places and dates concerning the acquisition of the ring and its strange history. To which, let me add, I am the last entry."

I was impatient for him to continue but Miss Nile suddenly lay a gentle, restraining hand on my arm. Samarko was not a man to be rushed. He was enjoying his momentary power immensely and he wasn't going to lose a drop of his intrigue if he could help it. He was a man to linger in the garden.

She had somehow sensed his

character and I shot her a grateful look. She was watching Samarko intently, her ivory teeth resting evenly on her full lower lip. The atmosphere of the little back room was charged now with something electric. Something dynamic.

"Cleopatra was a beautiful woman, Lady and Sir," Samarko began somewhat facetiously. "Egypt sang of her beauty and erected monuments to her tastes. No work of art was too enormous or too costly to commemorate the most famous, the most prized of Egyptian daughters. She was perfumed, bathed, adorned in all the glories of the day. When Mark Antony fell under her spell, he showered her with the gifts of his land and hers. This ring before us is one of those gifts. Proofs you ask?"

He pyramided his fingers.

"What further proof than this story I shall tell you? It is not the story to be qualified with statements of sworn witnesses or the testimony of the living. For all of this is nearly two thousand years ago."

"Get to the point!" I snapped testily.

He smiled back at me making me ashamed of my abruptness.

"Ah, Sir. Bear with me. You also, kind Lady. For your beauty is like that of Her who wore this ring."

Miss Nile smiled and Samarko bowed from the waist in his chair.

"When Cleopatra allowed an asp to suckle at her breasts and died, all Egypt wept with Roman mankind. Sealed in her tomb, she was surrounded by the most lavish of her possessions. Among them was *this.*" He poked a stubby forefinger at the ring where it lay glittering in the metallic box.

"That still leaves it with her in her tomb about two centuries ago, Samarko," I reminded him before he could continue.

"Mr. Rameses, Sir!" He reproved me gently but firmly. "Her crypt was rifled and looters carried away her treasures."

"That makes it worse," I groaned, convinced only that the ring was simply a very expensive duplicate of its fabulous original.

Lucille Nile stirred. "Let him go on, Mr. Rameses. He hasn't finished yet."

He beamed at her. "The Lady is as always—correct. I have managed to trace the many ownerships of this ring all the way up to the present time. To this very minute. I have the papers here. A veritable book of murder, theft and grand degeneration. A story as old as the Bible. Brother killing brother, wife betraying husband—all of this for the priceless article once worn by Her who was many things to many men." He reached down into the drawer again with rodent noisiness.

The whole thing was fantastic. One lie, one incorrect bit of information, the tiniest loophole and all of his facts would be built on sand. The sand of uncertainty. I had one

more argument.

"You mentioned something else in reference to the ring. Some sort of hokum connected with it. What was that all about?"

I was eager now to trap him in some lie. As much as I wanted a Cleopatra possession, I was first and last, a realist.

Samarko's gimlet eyes burned back at me above an encyclopedia-sized bound sheaf of papers that he had brought forth from his drawer. He rested a fat hand on the pile.

"It is all here, Sir. How Cleopatra can not sleep without her love token in its final resting place. On her hand. How she stalks down through the dust of centuries, ever searching, ever seeking the ring that was stolen from her dead fingers. How she cries, the Tears of Time, for that which is gone from her. The *dossier* is exact in all detail. A camel driver in Cairo tells here how he saw her royally robed figure stalking through the sands on one clear night on the outskirts of the city. There are many such reports. All of a similar nature. And they all deal with the curse."

Had this not been so seriously stated or so believingly put forth, I would have burst out laughing. But I couldn't. Samarko's brown face held a silent, deadly conviction that had communicated itself to me. Miss Nile was oddly quiet too. The dealer had a theatric persistency of demeanor that was impressive.

"See here, Samarko. That's rot. What curse?"

He shrugged his big shoulders expressively.

"As you will, Sir. But the legend is here. When one item is looted from the sacred tombs of Egypt, the dead one cannot sleep. It was thus ordained by the High Priest of Cleopatra's time. The Priest's name was Tanopsis. And he was a Pharoah in his own right. So Cleopatra will not sleep until the ring is returned. Or else—"

"Go on," I whispered. Samarko's mood was contagious.

Samarko's smile was deadly. "If she does not get her ring before the 27th of October in this calendar year, and before the full moon disappears into a morning sun—she is doomed to walk without sleep for eternity."

I could feel Lucille Nile shudder alongside of me. I suddenly remembered something.

"Samarko, you're a genius for effect. You know damn well this is the night of the twenty seventh!"

His smile was colder now. "Be it so. But if Cleopatra does not sleep then the chain of death continues with each ownership of the ring. Such as the tailor in the last century, the merchant in 1421, the Swiss watchmaker in 1702, the seaman in 1833—it is all here, Mr. Rameses. I tell you this, Sir, to forewarn you in all faith about the ring before you take it for your own. It is a cursed object. And with its purchase you also buy yourself the

curse of Tanopsis, High Priest of the Pharoahs of Egypt. . . ."

I was reaching for my pen and checkbook when Lucille Nile suddenly laughed. Her laugh—I mean. The deep, vibrant, full-chested chuckle that came from within. The sound rolled through the room and everything else stopped. I saw Samarko shift his bulk a trifle angrily. I turned with a stifled oath.

Miss Nile was lifting the sparkling ring from its metal box. Her manner was something that cannot be successfully described. She was completely detached from me, from Samarko, from the shop—everything. It was as if she were a woman alone in her boudoir looking for the first time at the secret power of the new gift from her lover. Every atom of her, every angle and curve of her compact form was inclined toward the flashing object in her hands.

With a deft, fluid motion, she slipped it over the second and third fingers of her left hand. Even from where I sat rooted, I could see it was a perfect fit.

She turned and the triumph that blazed in her deep-set eyes had the majesty of ageless sovereignty. I knew then what I had always known, always suspected, deep down.

Samarko swayed to his feet, his Fez askew, surprise mottling his face. "Lady, I do not understand—"

Suddenly a shadow lengthened across the floor and a low, humming, chanting sound filled the room. My gaze swung from Lucille Nile and Samarko toward the doorway leading out to the shop.

There was a tall quiet figure standing there. Fully six feet six in height. I saw a dark suit, a Fez and then the face. A stern, brown, graven face that I had seen so many times on Egyptian tombs. The face you see on coins.

But the figure was beckoning with one imperious finger crooked in the direction beyond my shoulder. Where Lucille Nile was standing. I whirled with the chanting sound filling my ears.

For that split second, that clock's tick between madness and reality, my gaze swung from the figure in the doorway toward her. And Samarko.

I saw Samarko first.

I saw his brown cheeks cloud over, puff out and his eyes tremble with something seen. He sagged and fell back into his chair like a toy dummy before I could reach him.

"Miss Nile," I blurted. "What's going on here—?" I whirled on her angrily and—spoke to nothing. *She was not there.* And the rhythm of the unknown chant had faded into nothing.

Stupified, I plunged out into the shop. But Jerol by the only door leading out was busily wiping the glass of the door. I had my answer and rushed back to Samarko.

The far wall that had been blocked by Lucille Nile's chair and

body was now visible to me. She couldn't have gone by me without touching me.

It is easy to say, far easier to read. But have you ever seen a person vanish completely in the flicker of an eyelash? Two persons?

I revived Samarko by pouring water in his face. He came to, spluttering, fearful. His eyeballs rolled; he clutched at me with frightened fingers.

"Mr. Rameses, Sir! One moment she was there—the very next—*she was not!*" He stopped and breathed deeply, his flabbiness shaking like jello that has fallen from its serving dish.

"The ring is gone, Samarko. So is she. Utterly gone."

He blanched and his mouth dropped.

"Do you imagine—is it possible—the curse—was she—?"

"I don't know, Samarko. I don't know."

So there it is. All I have to report about the disappearance of Mr. Samarko's valuable ring. There is no fraud or chicanery involved here. I have known Mr. Samarko for many years and vouch for his honesty in this matter. I fully realize my story is incredible but the ring disappeared exactly as I have reported here.

Yours sincerely,
WILLIAM RAMESES
President,
Firm Fit Foundations, Inc.

Type that up, Miss Henderson and send it off today. Address it to The New York All-Risk Insurance Company, 359 East 28th Street, New York, New York. . . .

THE MALIGNANT JEWEL

by Sidney Porcelain

PALPO found it amidst the rubble of a gutted house. The house was one of many which had been disemboweled when the Nazis retreated before the Allied advances. Palpo had passed along that street daily on his way to the office of the Military Government where he worked as a porter. Strange that he had never noticed it before.

He bent and picked it up, a wonderfully blue gem suspended on a gossamer chain. Valuable! He shoved it hastily into his pocket lest it be seen, though he was alone. The rainbow fire flashed for

a moment and was gone. Even that fleeting glimpse burned in his memory.

A blonde braided head passed his eyes. Fraulein on a bicycle. Had she seen? No. She pedalled on, bare legs and low-heeled shoes.

He walked rapidly to the Steinhaus where the Military Government had set up its headquarters. Oh, for the day to be through so he could return to the privacy of his room, where he could take another look at the jewel! It must be worth—

"Palpo!"

Disgustedly he saw his friend Kala approaching. Better not to tell him. Say nothing.

"Beer tonight, yah?"

"What? No." I'm tired, very tired. "Going to bed early tonight. Need some sleep." When transportation is improved I can leave here, get away from all this, and I'll be rich! "Was awake all last night."

Kala laughed and slapped his shoulder, said something about old age, his own face close, knitted with cells, thick moustache threaded with silver and grey strands. His teeth yellow with black empty places between.

"Must get to work. Late." He quickly escaped from Kala and Kala's penetrating humor. He might see, guess.

That afternoon Palpo, dodging people, ran to the partly bombed house where he slept. Once locked in his room, he took the jewel from his pocket.

It was indeed beautiful: Held in the sunlight, it's many facets sent shimmering color against the white walls and over his bare arm and hand. Ah, it was a wonderful sight to enjoy! There was not much of beauty in this world.

He prepared a little box for it, lining it with cotton. Then he let the blue stone sink into it as if in a downy bed. How gracefully the chain knelt down beside it, forming a tiny silver puddle, like a faithful dog sleeping beside its master! Ah, to serve a master as handsome as that!

Palpo sighed and reluctantly put the jewel away, saving the pleasure of gazing upon it until tomorrow. Lying in the darkness he planned a hiding-place. It would not do to carry it on his person. The American soldiers stopped him in the street. "What have you got in your pocket?"

"Nothing, nothing!"

"Search him!"

Palpo cringing, rough hands turning him this way and that. The box! They have found it! Taken it!

No! The blackness came back to him. I must hide it. Where? In my room. Surprise raid. Soldiers throwing aside the mattress. "Any weapons?" The floorboards. "What's this box? Ah!" Gone!

Or the citizens b r o w s i n g through the ruined streets, soft and silent. One has crept up the stairs. Here's a room! Something in here

perhaps. And deft fingers sliding through his belongings, oval nails like vapid eyes, seeking, seeking.

I must be clever. Sleep.

He awoke, startled to find daylight in his room. The gem! Where is the box?

He found it where he had put it the night before, in the toe of his shoe. He lifted the box-cover and removed the jewel with tender fingers. Oh, what was wrong? It looked dull and lifeless. He held the chain and the deep-blue stone slid out of the box, dangling in the air. Something stirred within it, lights began to flash, bluish-white lights that suddenly suggested other colors. It had been sleeping, that was it! Now it was awake and dancing.

His unbewitched ears heard a step on the stair. Somebody. Hurriedly he replaced the gem in the box and slipped it into his pocket. There was a heavy, imperative knock on the door.

Who? Key. Nothing. Just Kala. No soldiers. No returned Nazis to claim the jewel. Kala, loud and peppery. What an annoyance!

Palpo sat on the edge of his bed and drew on his shoes, body bent, head down, muttering replies to Kala's remarks.

". . . and vomited! What a night! You missed it."

Palpo, fully-dressed, stood up.

"You're up early."

"Up! Didn't get to bed!" Stupid laughter. "Feel fine. I'm not getting old like some people I know!"

Hard finger poking his rib. That hurt. Why does he have to bother me? Why doesn't he go home?

"Long day ahead of us."

"Look," Kala touched his shoulder. "Make an excuse for me. I'm taking off today."

So that was it. His eyes are looking around room. Does he suspect? Taking day off to search? Good thing it's in my pocket. I'll carry it today, take a chance.

"All right." Let him look, then I can hide it later, when he's through.

"Aren't you going to lock your door?"

"What? Oh, yes, yes. Thanks. Almost forgot."

Key. He's not interested in my room. Just a pest, loud.

Palpo and Kala descended the stairs. Work today and tonight I'll look at the jewel again! Tonight!

Days passed before Palpo observed a curious thing. The jewel was growing! He could not be mistaken. Every day he removed it from the box and studied it. Every day he thought about it, yearning for the afternoon to come so that he could examine it. The setting sun bathed it in a warm fire that lasted long after the sun had gone. And so he could not be mistaken. The stone was larger. It was now flush with the sides of the box whereas at first it had been surrounded by cotton.

O magic gem! That night Palpo wept tears of unendurable joy. There was no telling what good

fortune lay ahead!

He began to talk to it as though it were another person. Shunning Kala, by-passing the beerhall, he would hasten to his room and relate to the jewel the happenings of the day.

The sides of the box bulged under the pressure of it. The blue stone had grown a third larger. Palpo no longer wondered. He held it to the rays of the departing sun and allowed the jewel to splash color over the drab walls, spreading over his tattered quilt to make it a robe of beautiful texture, transforming his hovel to an enchanted palace.

And later he fashioned a larger box for it because it had grown the size of a turnip and its chain was as thick as a wedding band. Why, the chain alone could buy Palpo a life of comfort. But . . . if he should sell the chain, he would then lose the value of its future growth! That would not do. He would keep it and the jewel.

It seemed that because he had discovered its secret, the stone grew more and more rapidly. Soon it was necessary to leave it behind his door covered with an old sheet because it was too heavy to move. He could sit upon it, see his reflection in its planes, embrace it. And what beauty!

Kala prodded him with unanswered questions. Why did he rush home every night? Was he ill? Why did he talk to himself and stop listening when others spoke?

Palpo chuckled. Kala and the others thought he was going mad. Little did *they* know!

Then one day Palpo came home and couldn't open his door. Something shoved against his pressure. He managed to push his head through the opening and saw that the stone had grown so large that it completely filled one end of the room! When would it stop growing? How could he prevent its being seen by others?

He removed the hinges of the door, and managed to get into the room. With great difficulty he tugged the stone toward the window, and then he replaced the door, locking it securely. What a problem! He stood looking down at the jewel. What could he do with it? It was as beautiful as ever but too big to enjoy. No longer could he dangle it and watch the rays of the sun sparkle through it. It was too clumsy! It's facets were so large they sent solid sheets of color across the room, not tiny specks. And if he looked deeply into it, too long, he became dizzy and weak.

He went to bed. His dreams were troubled and disturbing. Soldiers saw his sheet from the window. "Sniper! Covered machine-gun!" they cried out, and sent ammunition up, exploding . . . fire . . . he was shot! He was burning alive!

He awoke in the morning to find that the jewel had nearly doubled its size during the night. He could

not move the bed, and the chain formed such a tangle that he could not get to the door. He had to stay home from work. Perhaps Kala would make up an excuse. If Kala would only come! Together they might move the stone.

But Kala did not come and Palpo lay on his bed in terror because the stone continued to grow! The silver chain coiled larger and larger about him, and the jewel loomed higher and higher, to the ceiling, cracking the bricks of the window and the wall.

And when the shadows gathered indicating that the day was over, Kala knocked on the door and shouted inside, but Palpo was too weak to answer. He lay, sweating, listening to Kala's retreating footsteps down the stairs. Help me!

Then from outside, silence. A link of the silver chain dug into his throat, another link crushed his body. His hands pushed against it vainly. An awe-ful force pressed against him; his thin, fleshless fingers writhed, and suddenly went limp. There was a great cracking noise as the seams of the room gave way . . .

THE GLASS THREAD

by Elsie Milnes

MARCH 7 Someone tried my door again last night. Chang must have heard it too. I heard him squawk and flutter in his cage on the landing. I hate him, always perched out there in the dark hall, on "night's Plutonian shore"—like Poe's raven, sitting outside my chamber door. (Why couldn't Peter have brought home a watch-dog instead of that mangy parrot!)

MARCH 9 I hope no one finds this notebook and reads it! How could I make anyone understand that I hear the footsteps of Death seeking me in the night. Death has a thousand faces and I have glimpsed them all. Which face will it wear when it reaches for me? And how can I sleep while it tries the doors?

MARCH 10 Peter laughs at my nervousness—though I haven't told him the cause: Will death wear the face of Peter? Is it he who tries my door? I'm glad I finally insisted on separate rooms. It's much nicer here anyway. Used to be my room when I was a kid. Sort of a nursery. Even has its own bath, still decorated with polar bears. A lot of my old dolls and teddy bears are still huddled in the closets. And all the wonderful things I made at camp. I wish Mama and Papa were still alive—

MARCH 11 Arrived late at the office again. Can't drag myself out of bed anymore. Breakfast has become a thing of the past. Peter, wolfing his ham and eggs, as usual, says I don't drink enough. (His panacea for everything!) Nothing ever bothers him. Not even a hangover can find its way through that pumpkin head.

MARCH 13 Went to see Doctor Meloney on my lunch hour. He gave me something for my nerves and suggested that I continue with these notes. I shudder to think of anyone finding them. Imagine me, Linda Cottrell, keeping a diary! But with my penchant for the written word, I may write my way out of this deathward maze. Ariadne with the written thread! The overall picture may form a pattern that we can recognize. But where will the thread lead me? I think we are both aware it will lead to Peter, but the doctor didn't say so, openly. He asked me about Peter's war record. I had to admit that he was almost discharged as a psychoneurotic because he drank too much,

though finally they were able to discharge him on healthier grounds. He walked into a booby trap, tight as usual, and was almost blown to bits. Had he been sober, he would have recognized it. But as it was, he escaped with a fractured kneecap that has left him with a limp. It doesn't bother him except in damp weather when he gets nasty and sullenly drunk—which is most of the time this season of the year.

MARCH 14 Took Doctor Meloney's medicine and slept a little better last night. Took some more in the morning. Got very sick at breakfast, though, and had to leave the table. (I couldn't have taken the wrong stuff by mistake.) When I looked up I found Peter watching me rather intently. He said nothing, but his eyes looked strange behind those thick glasses. He seemed to be holding his breath. In the horrible silence, Chang's fluttering sounded like the Walls of Jericho. I don't remember how I got to my room, except that Chang screamed at me as I passed by. I threw myself on the bed and locked the door. The bed rocked like a boat in a storm and I had the shocking sensation that I had indeed wandered too far from shore. Oh, God, would I never again know the meaning of peace? Chang's scabrous voice squawked down the hall —and it sounded weirdly like "Nevermore."

MARCH 15 Still sleeping very badly. At 3 A.M. someone tried my door, very very quietly. It *must* be Peter. It can't be anyone else. We have only three servants: Drake the butler, gardener and handy man; his wife Nora, the cook—and their daughter Nelly, the housemaid. And they live over the garage.

MARCH 16 Feeling a little better. Got to the office late again. Desk stacked up with Conference Reports, blithering Memoranda, Work Sheets, Time Sheets, Telephone Messages, Roughs from the art department, Proofs from production — all "very urgent" — and fantastic "suggestions" from the client that could never be carried out in this agency or any other. But the boys with the toothpaste smiles and Brooks Brothers suits will hasten to assure them that we will "try our best." Formula, Pap, Double Talk. Surrounded by writers who will never be allowed to write. Artists who will never complete a drawing. Account Execs with their sharp little knifes, hacking, always hacking a safe middle path through this plush and gilt jungle. The sartorial middle-men. Masters of double-talk. All this with the machine-gun pounding of typewriters. And with no bullet-proof (or knife-proof) vest! All this genteel mayhem guided by the pontifical e d i c t s and significant nods of "The Board," the clan of morticians who make us one big "happee familee." The corpse-washers. I have all this and Peter too!

MARCH 18 Took a walk around

the grounds after dinner last night, when a window-box came crashing down from the second story and missed me by an inch! ! Where now am I to be safe? ?

MARCH 19 Had the lock changed on my bedroom door this week-end. The locksmith came up from the village and finished the job just before it started to rain. I locked myself in with the new key and spent the remaining daylight hours on the window-seat . . . thinking . . . watching the rain-washed landscape. How very dismal it all seems, like a prehistoric forest on an ocean floor. All wet and cold and grey . . . sodden with a sad, tired resignation. It hasn't changed much with the years. I know now why Papa sometimes called this Wuthering Heights. It seems only yesterday that I was a little tyke running through these Tudor halls . . . halls without Chang, without Peter, without that creeping sound of Peter's dragging limp, without the fear and the watchful waiting. Whatever it is that lurks, ready to pounce, had not yet found its way over the moonsoaked hills. This was a lovely wonderland then, filled with misty organdy dresses from Paris, glittering hair-ribbons and seafoam laces. Christmas trees and Yule-logs. Flaming plum-puddings and sugar-castle birthday cakes as tall as a child could reach. Meringue hats with plumes and tulle. And dear Mama with her famous collection of fluttering fans. Oh, God . . . Mama and Papa and the others . . . all of them . . . somewhere on the ocean floor . . . a swaying forest of the dead. That accursed Titanic . . . how I cried and begged them not to go! If only they had listened. If only . . .

MARCH 20 Rain . . . rain . . . howling wind and rain.

MARCH 21 Sunday night. The rain has stopped. Tried to tackle the work I brought home, but yesterday's mood still has me in its grip. I can't seem to throw it. It isn't fear, exactly. It seems to go far beyond that. And I haven't been able to confront Peter. How can I? How can a woman explain to her husband that she has become terrified of him? That six years of marriage have been only a stumbling block. How can she point to the obvious fact that he has married her for her money, for her house . . . how . . . how?

MARCH 22 Saw Doctor Meloney again. Told him everything and brought the liquid sedative to be analyzed. He told me to do without medicine a few days, until the toxicologist report arrives. Peter wanted to know why I stopped taking the medicine.

"Why?" I screamed. "Why? You saw it was making me ill!" And I couldn't resist the barb. "Or perhaps it wasn't the medicine alone—!"

He reached for his cane and turned to me. "No, perhaps it wasn't," he leered. "Perhaps it wasn't." And he limped away, leav-

ing me, aghast, to wonder what kind of a monster he could be. I shall fix my own dinner on a tray from now on and eat in my room. Boiled eggs and canned things which I shall open myself.

MARCH 23 Toxicologist's report was negative. The doctor wanted to know how I take the medicine.

"I take it before going to bed, as you prescribed, and again at breakfast. I have only black coffee these days, so I take the sedative in water," I told him, "and then I gulp down the coffee to kill the taste."

He nodded. "Take it in your room from now on," he suggested. "Also, I think it high time you discussed a separation of some sort with Peter. It's insane to go on like this."

MARCH 24 Up most of the night again, thinking about the doctor's advice. It seems obvious, I suppose, to an outsider, that I "discuss a separation." But what will Peter do if I come right out in the open and demand that he leave? Wouldn't that precipitate the very thing that I dread? Why should I force his hand? How do I know what his next move will be? Or from what direction it will come. Surely, I am an equal match for that pumpkin head! He's sure to tip his hand sooner or later.

MARCH 25 Had a bolt put on the inside of my bedroom door—and I take the new sedative in my room now. I have found an excellent hiding place for both this notebook and the sedative. A loose baseboard behind the old toy chest revealed a secret cache of childhood relics, too precious at the time for my cousins' plundering hands. Imagine—all these years it safely held my Indian camp and Girl Scout treasures! A beadloom with an unfinished Indian necklace, an Audubon Bird Book, a box of petrified bonbons, and last but not least, a heavy bladed steel scout knife. It *is* a wicked looking thing, and exactly what I need right now! I was almost terrified of it at first, and then I recalled the reason. On one of my childhood visits to Camp Muskogee, I awakened to find a copperhead coiled up beside me!

I was petrified with terror and then I remembered the knife nearby. I inched slowly toward its handle and swung quickly to the snake, plunging the blade into its neck. The counselors wanted to give me the snake as a trophy, but I wanted no part of it. Everyone, including my snooping cousins, wanted the knife that had killed the copperhead. That's how I came to hide it. How strange that I had forgotten it. Especially when it may again stand between me and a killer.

MARCH 26 I always get depressed at this time of the year, not only because of the gloomy weather, but because it was about this time that Mama and Papa walked out of here for the last time. This is a particularly bad time for me.

Why did Peter have to choose this memorial month to point the finger of death at me? Why couldn't the monster have given me a sporting chance? Yet perhaps I've had it. All my life, since their death, I've known I had to beware the Ides of March. It was inevitable, I suppose, that I too meet my Brutus. If only, though, it would stop raining . . . if only the wind would stop its wailing and howling. If only I could turn back the clock . . . the calendar . . .

MARCH 27 Had to see Doctor Meloney today—for no other reason, I guess, except to talk. He was wonderful. He never asked me why I came—just talked. "Remember this, my dear," he said in parting. "It's the most difficult thing in the world to kill a fellow human being—and get away with it, which, I imagine, is the usual incentive. But in your case, Peter would be arrested immediately. There'd be no other suspect, no one else to benefit by it. If he has any such intentions, rest assured that all the usual methods have been denied him. He can't stab you or shoot you or strangle you. And neither can he poison you. He knows you've consulted me about getting sick—so you see there's nothing left for him—if he wants to live himself."

I had to laugh. "You're wonderful! I feel much better now. Did you know that I keep thinking of you as Doctor *Melody*?"

He smiled and said I mustn't let my imagination run away with me. Things seemed almost rosy again—until I got off at the station and went into the Briar Market to buy my dinner.

Old man Hawkins waited on me, as usual. After he had packed my order of canned and bottled things, he handed me a glass jar of white powder. "Yer husband forgot this when he wuz in this afternoon. It's a bug killer for his spring gardening. Reckon his sister Agnes will help him with that. Got a green thumb, that woman has—"

I gasped and said nothing. I took the jar and my package and found my way, somehow, to the station wagon. At the side of the hill I stopped and threw the jar down the ravine. Bug killer or wife killer? ? And Agnes? Was she in this country again—perhaps in the village? Or maybe—I stepped on the accelerator and sped to the house. I flung open the door and confronted him.

"Is your sister Agnes here—in this house?" I gasped.

He stared at me for a moment without answering. "You threw her out once—remember?"

"That wouldn't prevent you from sneaking her back here behind my back!" I snapped. "Why doesn't she stay in Haiti with the rest of the zombies?"

"She'll do as she pleases! And if she happens to be a nurse stationed in Haiti, that's none of your business!"

"This is my house and property and my money that runs it! As if you and your sister didn't know! I'll not have her here! Why did Mr. Hawkins think that Agnes would help you with the garden? And since when have *you* become so interested in gardening?" I demanded.

"You go to blazes!" he yelled, turning red. "And keep my sister out of this!"

"*You* keep her out—or I'll have her arrested for trespassing! I'll have no part of her or her voodoo—"

He turned pale, held to the chair for a moment and then limped away.

I was too upset to eat. I took a glass of milk to my room and locked myself in. I remembered my interview with Doctor Meloney and consoled myself with his assurances. Despite the earlier upheaval, I slept quite well, until dawn, when Chang awakened me with his squawking. I can't imagine what disturbs him at such odd hours.

MARCH 29 The neighborhood dogs have set up an awful howling these last two nights. It must be the moon.

MARCH 30 Hawkins talked to me about some new soil conditioner when I was in the store tonight and then casually dropped his bombshell. "Agnes sure got a wonderful suntan. Makes the rest of us up here look like ghosts. Think I'll get me a sun-lamp," he drawled.

I kept my eyes down and fumbled in my bag so he couldn't see my face. "Sun lamp's all right," I said, "but nothing like the real thing—"

"Yup," he nodded. "Wish she could bottle the stuff on her next trip." Then he laughed. "Hear tell them Haitians can do all kinda strange things. Even raise the dead and make 'em walk! Zombies or somethin'. Got somethin' to do with ordinary table salt, ain't it, Miz Cottrell?"

I laughed, a little more shrilly than I intended.

"You know more about it than I do, apparently, Hawkins!"

"It's Voodoo, Mr. Jeremy says, like a religion." Then he chuckled. "Don't believe none of that rot, of course. Plum crazy! But it makes wonderful radio programs!"

I left him chuckling. I was too shaken to think. I almost drove into the ravine on the way up. All I could think of, for some reason, was a biblical sounding phrase, *O Lord, help thou mine unbelief.*

MARCH 31 Lay awake until 2 A.M. and must have fallen into another nightmarish sleep. Dogs were howling somewhere in the murky background of my dream. I have never heard such dismal, mournful howling. It seemed so real—and so did the lone, dark figure that lurked in the shadows near my window, calling to me in a soundless voice. I wasn't afraid of this nocturnal siren and I wanted desperately to join her in the gar-

den. It seemed so peaceful out there, among my childhood flowers, and the beckoning voice held an hypnotic lure. I wanted desperately to go, but something held me back. Some tiny inner voice, gasping from some unexpected quarter, warned me not to go—that I would never come back.

I woke in a cold sweat. The dogs were really howling!

APRIL 1 I said nothing to Peter. I have stopped the pretense of going to the table. Nelly gave me some black coffee in the kitchen and remarked how thin I was getting. And how rattled, she might have added, seeing the way the cup shook in my hand.

Caught the 7:45 for the office, though I might have been riding in the Korny-Krunchy factory itself, for all I knew. Somehow, I had been able to dream up several good slogans—and they in turn gave me good copy leads. From there I grasped at the gimmicks, and before I realized it, I had a beautiful campaign outlined in every detail.

I cornered Florina right after lunch, in her pink and gold office, and marveled secretly, as I always did, that the silly pink decor never revealed any of the rivalrous knife marks that always seemed sharp enough to be visible as we were ducking them. How many had I dodged in all these years? And how many had found their mark? Our egos would always be scarred with them.

She sat there, fat and omnipotent, like a sloe-eyed Buddha, puffing at the eternal cigarette as she looked over the roughs.

"I like it," she said. "Needs more sell—but it's fine for a beginning. Fresh, anyway."

Elated, I sat back and started to talk. And that's when it happened. After five minutes "selling" my campaign—in the middle of a sentence — *my mind went completely blank!*

We stared at each other in the gaping silence and I'll never forget the look on her face. I fumbled and said I had had a sudden, stabbing pain in the head and asked to be excused. Back in my office, I looked at the carbons and stared. I couldn't remember any of it—not a word! It might have been in Sanskrit for all I knew. I sat down trembling, and bit my lower lip to keep from screaming—for into the cloudy silence came a soundless wailing, like the distant howling of a dog.

I don't remember the ride home. I ran into old Drake on the grounds with his gardening tools. I had never seen him so angry. "I swear I don't know what goes on 'round here these days," he muttered. "Someone keeps tramplin' over these azaleas. Think a body would have more respect—" he scowled.

I stared. The azaleas were directly under my window. I came closer and saw where someone's feet had crushed them. The nocturnal siren, then, was not a dream,

not a figment of my nightmare! It was real, then, like the wailing dogs! Had I not awakened to their funereal howling?

Fixed a tray and locked myself in. I thought of buying a gun—but the hunting knife will have to do. Besides, I would have to go to the police and submit more substantial evidence. They would only laugh at me. They know nothing of preventive measures. No legal provision for that. But they'll be glad to come in and tramp over the house *after*— A lot of good that does the victim! I tried to console myself with Doctor Meloney's rational thinking. Peter would be the only suspect. He couldn't kill me without ultimately killing himself. *'Rest assured that all the usual methods have been denied him.'*

But what about the *unusual* methods? ?

APRIL 2 I was determined to spend the night awake. I had Nelly fix me some black coffee. To while away the hours I looked at the Audubon Bird Book and tried to work the old Indian bead loom. I kept the hunting knife within reach, and my ears pitched for the slightest rustle outside my door.

At two A.M. I turned out the light and sat back in the dark. Moonlight flooded the room with a silver-green glow, like a cold ectoplasm from another world. Everything in the room came alive, watchful and tense with waiting. At ten after three I saw the handle of my door being slowly turned. And then it stopped. I tensed and waited and then ran to the door. I pressed my ear to the panel and heard only a whisper of sound as it died away near Peter's room.

I ran to the window and peered down into the garden. No one was there. No one that I could see, that is. But *something* was there. Something in the quality of the light and the shadows—something in the electric silence—as though someone had struck a harp string and the vibrations had been caught and held in the air.

I took the knife and held it poised in one hand while I quietly opened the door—just enough to see. Perhaps my Plutonian visitor waited in the dark hall for me. After all, no one knew I had the knife. But there was no one and nothing.

Only some white powder on the floor outside my door. And Chang, like the Raven. "Only this and nothing more."

!!!!!

APRIL 3 Wanted desperately to see Doctor Melody, but didn't have the nerve. Instead, I will tear out the pages of the diary and mail them to him in a few days. He can see for himself what has been going on around here. If anything happens to me, he'll know what to do. He has told me repeatedly to quit my job and to take a trip of some sort—anything to get away from this house. And with my usual stubbornness, I've tried to tackle this thing, head-on. And alone.

What an idiot I've been! I'll try to get all the rest I can this week-end and I'll leave on Monday, if I can get any kind of reservations.

I never thought I'd be driven out of my own house—out of my childhood room. But I can't make Peter go because of some silly community law, on which he is suspiciously well informed.

APRIL 5 The dogs were howling again. I know, now, without looking, there are fresh footprints in the garden.

APRIL 7 Have an excruciating headache. Can hardly think.

APRIL 8 Went to the optometrist in the village and had my glasses changed. But the headaches are worse, if anything. It can't be mere exhaustion. I've had plenty of rest this week-end. It was very quiet. Someone killed the parrot.

APRIL 11 Tore the pages out today—up to this point—and mailed them to Doctor Melody.

* * *

APRIL 14 I still don't want to go —but I guess I shall have to. I have never hated anything or anyone so much as I hate Peter!

APRIL 17 Headache headache headache . . .

APRIL 19 My heart seems to have moved up to my head . . . pounding pounding like an anvil chorus.

APRIL 20 Still no better. Too bad I can't sell the movie rights to my nightmares! I dreamed I was Alice in Wonderland, in a misty place with fuzzy clouds moving across my footsteps, obliterating my tracks while I walked backwards into Time. Again there was a small, warning voice telling me not to go on, that I may never find my way out of the labyrinthian maze. And no one may follow to bring me back. Ariadne again!

But somewhere else, it seemed too late. Ariadne's thread had turned to glass!

APRIL 24 Headache headache howling dogs. The glass thread has broken and powdered into a blinding mist.

APRIL 26 The blinding mist is a wall of pain. I can't see. And can't find my glasses. The phone is out of order too. Can't call—

APRIL 27 Heard quiet hurrying footsteps in the hall. Not Peter. Not servants. Who?

APRIL 28 It was Agnes! I knew she was in this house. I heard her berating Peter. "What are you waiting for?" she cried angrily. What indeed, I wanted to shout. But didn't have the strength. If only I could call Doctor Melody. Anyone—

APRIL 29 Servants were dismissed. Saw their departure from my window.

APRIL 30 I'm afraid—

MAY 2 I keep listening through my door. Agnes wants Peter to do something he wants to put off. But I can't hear too well through the door. How long can I hold out? I can't remain barricaded here forever. My food supply is running low.

MAY 4 Agnes wants Peter to break

down my door. And then?

MAY 7 Sneaked into the kitchen today when *they* were in the carriage house together. The pantry is big enough for an army to hide in. I always liked the pantry. Mama's cookies— On the way back saw fresh white powder at my door. I must have trampled it as I dashed out.

MAY 9 Nightmares . . . a misty black hell . . . night without end . . . always and forever night without end. Ariadne walking deathward with the end of a broken glass thread clutched in her hand.

MAY 10 Day that I have loved, the night is here.

• • •

Someone is trying to break down the door. "Linda! Linda!" he shouts, "this is the end, d'you hear?" And he crashes into the door, making animal sounds in his throat. Then a long choking silence. Now, at last, he's gone limping away. But he'll be back.

• • •

Sneaked to the kitchen again. But I couldn't find the chocolate cookies and stayed too long. *They* came hurrying in with another man. The woman is a nurse. Someone must be sick. The man with the satchel looks like a doctor. They didn't know I was in the pantry listening to them. I don't like doctors and nurses—but I hate the bad one with the thick glasses and the stiff dragging leg. I'll bet it's a wooden leg and he's a pirate. He's the one who tries to break down my door. I know his voice. I hate him. I hate pirates. Wish I could get his cane and see if there's a sword in it. Must be.

They were talking about the one who was sick. Someone who killed a parrot. Someone with something called paranoia—or *para* something.

"That window-box was an unfortunate accident," the doctor said, "and with her persecution complex, she was bound to misinterpret it in terms of attempted murder. It was no one's fault and it couldn't be helped. But it wouldn't have mattered, anyway. If it hadn't been that, it would have been something else. And the stomach sickness was all psychosomatic. A justification, as it were."

The pirate looked drunk. "Still walks in her sleep," he said. "Tramples down the azaleas and bays at the moon like a sick hound-dog and sets all the neighborhood dogs a-howling."

"Every night?"

"I think so," the pirate sighed. "I was never able to sit up all night, so I sprinkled powder at her door. Most of the time it was trampled."

They went out to look at the azaleas and I ran to my room and locked myself in.

• • •

Wish I didn't feel so queer. My head feels like a piece of fluff and my ears keep buzzing as though I were under water . . . drowning. Why should I think of

drowning?

* * *

The pirate is banging at my door again, shouting, "Linda! Linda! Open the door!"

I was ready for him this time with my hunting knife. I listened to his panting, and when he least expected it, I pulled back the bolts and he came crashing into the room, flat on his face! But he stopped his shouting—very quickly. Was he ever surprised!

* * *

It's very late. It's very dark and there's a full moon. I'm very tired and wish I could sleep. But someone keeps hammering at my door. I *know* it's not the pirate. I tried looking at the bird book and working the Indian bead loom, but I'm running out of beads.

Can't sleep anyway with all that banging—may as well clean up this room. Everything is covered with crumbs and grease stains. I don't know where to put all the empty cans and cracker boxes. And where can I put *him*? He's too big to fit in the secret place with the hunting stuff. And I'm tired of stepping over him when I try to sweep.

Wish I could think of something else to sing besides that same Mother Goose rhyme:

Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater,
Had a wife and couldn't keep her.

Wish I may, wish I might have the wish I wish tonight. Saw the north star. Wish Mama and Papa would hurry home. Wait 'til they see this dead pirate with my knife sticking out of his throat.

INCIDENT IN A FLYING SAUCER

by James Harvey

IT was positive now. There was such a thing as a flying saucer.

It slid rapidly through the brisk London air and passed over the English capital time and time again frustrating air force jets.

To the dismay of the police force, the civilian population insisted on watching the saucer as it hovered over the city. Unfortunately, three Londoners were drawn into the flying saucer by an invisible force.

When this maneuver was completed, the saucer disappeared.

Reggy Farnsworth, from inside the saucer, saw London fade away through a large porthole at the bottom of the bare, smooth room he found himself in with two other people. They watched in silence as they saw the outline of Britain take shape beneath them and drift out of sight like a piece of green paper on a kite line. Finally, the Earth itself became a ball of light and it too bounced off into black space.

Reggy then looked toward his shipmates. They were a young Cockney couple even younger then his twenty two years. He felt protective towards them for some reason. Perhaps it was the fear in their faces. "Let us, above all, keep our heads," Reggy told them sounding a trifle like Churchill during the blitz.

A voice boomed into the room. "Welcome, Earth people. Be proud. You have been selected amongst millions."

"Selected for what?" Reggy managed to ask.

"To procreate," the voice said with a leer in it.

Mert, the pretty little red head, looked pale. Her husband had to hold her to keep from fainting.

"I am taking you back to my planet," the voice went on. "It is in another solar system and we will reach it in ten days. We are an old civilization, two million years more advanced than yours. But the trouble with old civilizations is they reach a peak and then disintegrate. We need primitives like yourselves to refresh our blood line."

Mert gasped.

"And you, my beautiful young woman will be our new Eve," the voice waxed sensual. "But wait, I will join you . . . now."

Mert took out her hat pin and held it like a ready dagger as she would against a pair of roving

hands in a cinema.

Obviously, the creature wanted to mate with the dainty girl. Reggy thought of the American films about Science Fiction that depicted a situation they now found themselves in. These were pictures where a monster had to be dealt with. In all cases the monster went lusting after the woman. When the Beast From 20,000 Fathoms rose from his depths off he went looking for what all young men look for on Saturday nights. There was The Creature From The Black Lagoon who sat at the bottom of tons of water and whose bestial passion was aroused by the sight of a young woman in a one piece bathing suit. The Thing, It, Them, The Man In The Moon and The Man From Mars all went hulking after the prettier females of Earth.

Now this, whatever it was, wanted a decent English woman to . . .

A section of the wall slid back. There in the light stood the monster. It was a loathsome thing with a huge head propped on a half a dozen tentacles. It was sickly gray in color with green specks running through it.

Mert almost swooned again but managed to stand up.

The monster slithered into the room, its five eyes scanning Mert. "Hello," it said in its foghorn voice. "I see you are alarmed at my appearance. It will take some getting used to, but you'll get used to me."

It crept around the three, gazing at them in silence. At last Reggy managed to gasp; "Be a good chap and take us back will you?"

"That is out of the question!" the monster boomed. "We need you pretty savages for our race."

"See here," Reggy complained. "You needn't be patronizing simply because you are two million years advanced."

"Ah, spirit," the monster said smacking its ghastly mouth with its purple tongue. "We need that in our blood once more . . . that's why we need your woman."

Mert fell to the floor. Even grit has its limits.

Reggy couldn't blame her. The monster was not only ugly but it smelled like the Thames at low tide. And such a thing expected Mert to . . .

Reggy felt ill. He exchanged a look with her husband, Harry. They had the same thought at once. A Fate worse than Death was one thing back on earth, but in this case Death seemed to be the only civilized course to take.

"You will not kill the woman!" the monster shouted.

Reggy and Harry looked at each other in surprise.

"Yes," the monster said. "At our stage we can read minds. But be assured. The woman will serve her purpose without your interference."

"But," Harry pleaded. "She is such a delicate girl . . . she couldn't . . . I mean . . ."

"She must," answered the monster.

"You're not even a human being," said Reggy remembering his biology.

"Oh but I am," answered the monster. "You see in me the results of evolution from your stage to two million years hence."

Reggy, being indifferent to evolution before, was now decidedly against it.

Mert woke pallidly. She looked at the monster. The monster looked at Mert.

Mert passed out again.

"Please," Harry pleaded in a most un-British like fashion. "Don't do wrong by my Mert."

"I won't even touch her," the monster said. "She may be lovely but she is still a woman and I am tired of looking at women. You see, on my planet we started to use artificial insemination a million years ago. We developed a supply that would last us for a thousand years. The men, no longer good for anything else, gradually died out. To our amazement, less and less men were born every passing generation. Eventually only females were being born. We have just used up the last of the semen. This would have been the last generation if we had not found new males. Earth is the only planet with a fairly advanced human life."

"You mean . . ." gasped Reggy. "You're a female?"

"Of course," cooed the monster repulsively. "Can't you see? After all, I'm naked."

Reggy blushed.

"Then as I see it," said Harry. "There ain't no blokes to do my Mert in."

"Exactly."

Harry shook his wife. "Wake up, me dove. You're safe."

"But then you won't need me," said Reggy sighing with relief. "You already have your Adam and Eve."

The monster half ate Reggy with its . . . her . . . eyes. "Oh if you only knew how much I needed you. You see . . . you're MY Adam."

Reggy felt like a piece of ice. "You don't mean . . .?"

"But I do, "the monster said wrapping a tentacle around him. It was damp and smelled of fish. It began to drag him across the room and Reggy felt powerless. "Come," she said with a passionate hot breath pouring vilely on him. "We have ten whole days to ourselves before all the other women get to you."

She picked Reggy up with another tentacle and walked through the sliding door and into a deeper part of the flying saucer.

CAT WOMAN

by Gerald Gordon

RUSS was awakened by a buzzing. He wasn't sure whether it was the telephone or someone at the door. He got up from the bed in his stocking feet and padded through the long, dark hallway toward the telephone. It wasn't the phone. He heard the sound again. It was the front door, all right. He pressed the buzzer, noting he was half way presentable in khaki trousers and a blue polo shirt, the outfit he had put on when he started to read on the bed several hours ago. He really must have been tired to have fallen off to sleep like that, he thought, as he opened the door. He saw a woman standing at the landing at the foot of the stairs, looking up at him apologetically. Even in the dim hall light and still half asleep he could see she was slimly attractive in tight-fitting toreador pants and a pull over sweater. Her voice had a pleasant, well modulated sound. "Are you Mr. Evans?" she asked.

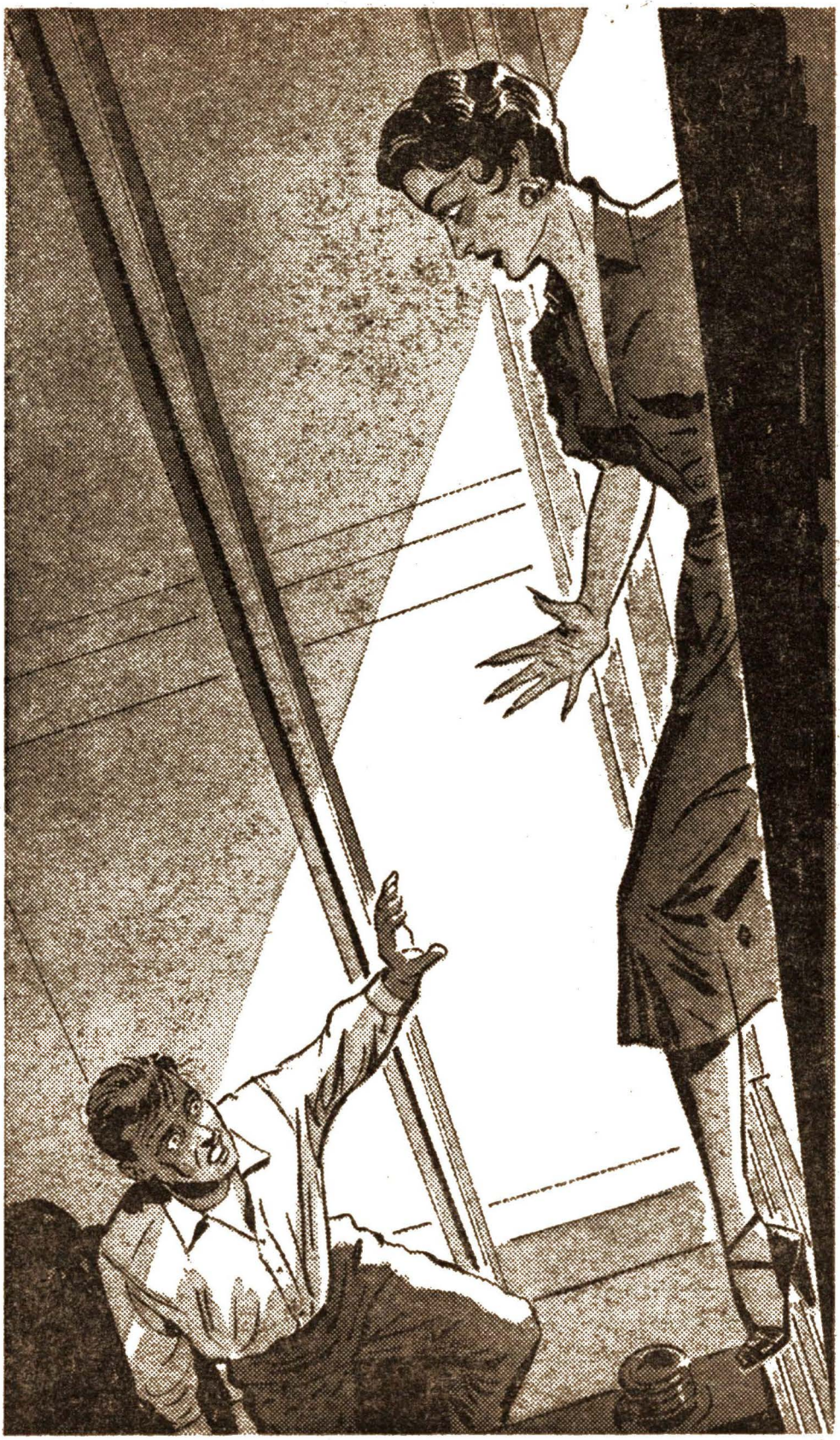
"No, my name is Russ Gillespie. I'm just sharing the apartment with Burt while his folks are in Europe."

"Oh, I'm sorry I disturbed you. Do you know when Mr. Evans will be back?"

"He should be in anytime now." Actually, Russ didn't know when Burt would be back. He remembered this was Tuesday and on Tuesdays Burt played handball at the Olympic Club and afterwards went with the handball gang for drinks and dinner at *Delmonico's*. No need to tell her that, though. Aloud, Russ said, "I'll be glad to help if there's anything I can do."

She hesitated a moment, then said, "Well, maybe you could. I'm Sally Crawford and I live in the next door apartment building. There's a cat down in the lightwell in the back and it can't get out. It cries pitifully every night and it's almost impossible to stand."

"Maybe I could do something," he said, smiling faintly. He wasn't much of a hand at such an operation. He would probably break his neck but this Sally was mighty pretty. And she had red hair, too. He was glad for the first time that Burt was playing handball and not home managing his father's apartment houses as he was supposed to. There were four of them, two on either side of the street on the west side of Nob Hill in San Fran-



cisco. "I'll be with you in a minute," he said. "Soon as I put on. . . ." He didn't get to finish the sentence. There was a slamming of the door and even before he turned he knew it was the apartment door that had closed behind him from the draft by the open hallway window. He gulped. He knew he had emptied his pockets before lying down, including his keys. He was locked out—and without any shoes. Lord! He rattled the door knob—a useless gesture.

"I'm sorry," Sally said. "You've locked yourself out, haven't you. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, it's my own stupid fault," he said, managing to grin, but cursing himself inwardly. "I'll get back in somehow," he blurted, "then we'll see about the cat."

"You're very nice," she smiled. It seemed to him her eyes had a kind of yellow gleam as she turned toward the door.

Now, what was he going to do? Ah, he had it. Mrs. Bullock, the divorcee with the six year old boy who lived above them. If she were home he could go through her apartment and down the backstairs. Then he could enter through his own bedroom or kitchen windows from the landing—if the windows weren't locked.

Mrs. Bullock, a small, dark-faced woman with quick, nervous movements, was talking to a vacuum sweeper salesman who was about to clinch the sale when Russ appeared. She giggled when she heard what had happened. "You're just like Burt," she sniffed. "He's always forgetting his keys, too. And you'd better watch out for that gal. She likes cats."

The salesman shook his blond head pessimistically. "A friend of mine got the devil clawed out of him the other day trying to rescue a cat from a well. He had to go to the hospital he was clawed up so badly."

"I'll try the back windows if you don't mind," Russ said to Mrs. Bullock.

"Sure, go ahead," she said opening the back door, "that's what Burt usually does when he forgets his keys. I'll leave the door open in case the windows are locked.

His luck. They were. He walked despondently back to Mrs. Bullock's apartment. "They're all locked tight," he announced

"Why don't you call Burt's aunt," she suggested quickly, Mrs. Carter Evans. She lives and manages the apartment across the street. She has a pass key."

"That's right," Russ said, beginning to feel hopeful again. "I forgot all about that."

"Sure, call her. I'll go over and get it for you. After all, we can't afford to have you walk across the street in your stocking feet. People might think you're crazy." Mrs. Bullock and the salesman laughed at her little joke.

Russ managed a faint smile as he picked up the phone book. He

found her number listed and rang it. Mrs. Evans was there and was so sorry to hear about his misfortune and would be glad to give him a pass key. Mrs. Bullock got up from the sofa. "I'll get it for you. It'll only be a minute," she apologized to the salesman. "It's only across the street."

The salesman put down his pencil and form sheet. "She was just about to sign it," he sighed.

"I'm sorry," Russ said.

"Oh, that's all right," the salesman said, pushing at his horn rimmed glasses. "I'm used to waiting. My wife sits in the car and waits for me when I make the rounds in the evening. Sometimes she has to wait as much as two hours."

"That's a long time to sit in a car."

"Oh, she doesn't mind," he said quickly. "That way she gets to hear what happened. And I can tell you, some mighty peculiar things happen in this business."

"I imagine so," Russ said disinterestedly. He didn't want to hear about vacuum cleaners. He just wished Mrs. Bullock would hurry so he could see Sally again. What a girl—that red hair, those eyes with the gleam. Now he knew why Burt hadn't mentioned her before. He smiled to himself, thinking of that look of innocence Burt would put on when he told him about Sally.

"What kind of work do you do?" he heard the salesman ask.

"News vork." He walked over to the new sweeper standing in the middle of the floor and picked it up. "It's light," he said. "I didn't know they made them that light."

"That one only costs 49 dollars. That's the middle price range. We've got one that sells for as low as 29. Yes, sir. You know how many sweepers we sold last year—two million, 500-thousand. We're way on top."

Russ almost sighed out loud with relief when Mrs. Bullock returned holding the key. "Sorry it took so long," she said breathlessly, "but Mrs. Evans began to talk and I could hardly get away."

"Thanks very much. You're very kind," he said, taking the key and heading quickly toward the door.

"Oh, it's all right," she said, "you boys have been very nice to me." The salesman had the papers in her hand even before she sat back on the sofa.

Russ quickly opened the door to his apartment, put on his tennis shoes, got his keys and wallet on the bureau, then hurried to the next door apartment and rang the bell marked Miss Crawford. She came down the stairs almost immediately, smiling warmly. She was prettier close up even than he thought she would be. Clear, fresh skin—not a blemish. Full, curving lips . . . the contours of the breasts appealingly full under the sweater. She was hardly more than 25.

"We'll need a flashlight," she said in her soft, almost caressing

tone. "It's too dark to see down there now. Do you have one?"

"Burt might have one. I think I saw one on the kitchen shelf."

"I'll go with you," she said. "It was nice of you to come. I thought you'd be so mad at me you'd never come near this place."

"I didn't blame you at all," he insisted. "I was just kind of sleepy and didn't know what I was doing." What a graceful, easy walk she had. She moved almost effortlessly but beneath that easy flow he felt there was a quick kind of strength—muscular strength.

"That poor little cat," she said, "has been crying every night for more than a week. And to think it's caught down there and can't get out. I've been throwing food down to her. In fact, I crawled down myself last night and tried to find her, to take her out but apparently she got frightened and hid. I'm afraid to try again. It's too much for me." She gave him an admiring look. "You don't look as if you would have much trouble."

"I've climbed out of a few tight spots in my life," Russ said, thrusting out his chest a little. "If it's . . . I mean if she's down there," he quickly corrected, "I'll find her."

"You're very nice." She turned on the smile again as they entered the apartment.

Russ switched on the kitchen light regretfully. He remembered now that he and Burt hadn't cleaned it in weeks. Dishes were piled high in the sink, the frying pan was stained with the yellow of scrambled eggs, there were crumbs and coffee stains on the linoleum covered table. Russ made some half-hearted apology as he picked up the flashlight.

But she didn't pay any attention. She was talking about cats again. "I'm crazy about them," she said, walking down the steps ahead of him.

What a build, he said to himself, getting a full rear view. That arch in her back, the perfection of her calves. Everything was perfect. If only she wouldn't talk so much about cats. It made him uncomfortable.

"I've always had cats. I can't remember when I didn't have at least one cat for a pet. I feed hundreds of them. I just can't get enough of them." As they walked through the alleyway Russ noticed a large grey cat, its eyes a greenish amber in the dusk. "Just a jiffy," she said, "I want to turn on my hall light." She opened the door to her apartment. As she did there was a grey whir and the cat swished right on by her and was on its way up the stairs. "Oh, darn! He would do that."

"You want me to chase him," he volunteered.

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "It's all right if he stays there for awhile ." She switched on the light and led through a rear entrance until they came to a brick balcony

overlooking the light well—a drop, Russ figured, of anywhere from 12 to 15 feet. There was a pile of lumber in the center, a few scattered pieces of dilapidated furniture, and that was about it. She pointed to the lumber. "That's where I saw her last. But she ran away by the time I got down and I couldn't find her. Poor little thing. She's so frightened . . . and she looked so thin. You could see every bone in her. She must be half starved.

He took a quick look over the balcony and handed her the flashlight. "I'll go on down," he said, "you can toss me the flash then." He climbed over the edge, held on with his hands a few seconds and let go. It wasn't too hard a fall. He caught the flashlight and threw the beam about and saw something whitish by the lumber pile. It didn't move. Coming up close he saw it was the parched remains of a cat. It was almost skeletal—just a few hunks of flesh clinging to some of the bones. It must have been dead, he figured, at least a year. "That's the spot," she called, "just where you're standing now. But she wouldn't come to me. She was afraid . . . poor little thing. I just couldn't sleep at all last night for thinking about her out there alone like that . . . and so hungry."

Russ quickly kicked the rotting carcass under one of the pieces of lumber and threw the beam in every corner of the well which wasn't more than about ten feet long and about seven feet in width. There were flat brick walls on all sides which made it impossible for a live cat to hide without being seen. But just to make sure, he turned off the flash and called: "kitty, kitty, kitty" . . . but saw no gleam of cat eyes . . . until he looked up at Sally leaning over the balcony. He could swear there was a greenish-amber gleam in her eyes. "Can't you find her?" she called disconsolately.

"No, I can't."

"That's strange," she said, her voice taking on an irritated tone. "She was right there last night. There's no way for her to get out. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"All right," she acquiesced, but she didn't sound convinced.

It was only then that Russ thought about climbing back out of the well himself. Strange he hadn't thought about it before. That Sally probably had thrown a spell on him. He could see it was going to be quite an operation to get out. In fact, he wasn't sure he could get out. The wall in front of him was completely smooth except for a few bricks that stood out from the others. The well narrowed down to a few feet in width at that point but still wasn't narrow enough to use his arms as a lever to hoist himself up. However, he tried it several times only to slip and fall back each time. "I don't know whether I'm going to make it

or not," he announced finally.

"Hmm," she sniffed, "you're not as athletic as I thought you were. I did it. I had no trouble."

Russ got red in the face. He drew back several feet, made a leap, grabbed a protruding brick with one hand, pulled himself up until he got his left hand on the same brick, then somehow managed to get his free hand on the flat surface of the balcony, enabling him to pull himself all the way up. "There was nothing down there," he said, still angry. "Nothing at all." He started to say he had seen the carcass but decided for some reason it wasn't a good idea. It was only then that he began to wonder how she managed to climb up that wall. Hell, he was in good shape. Half his training in the Marine Corps had been running obstacle courses, climbing up and down the sides of ships and landings. No woman could have manipulated that. And what had she heard or seen down there? Why that cat . . . ?

He heard her voice now, almost a hiss. "I told you I heard it. I told you I heard it cry for food." He thought if he didn't turn away she would have spit in his face. He walked away quickly, turning back only when he considered himself at a safe distance—and even that far he saw her eyes, a full yellow glow now, focussed on him.

And then, she s t a r t e d to change. . . .

THE STOP AT NOTHING

by Mark Dane

THE wire was brief, urgent, postcardish.

SAM POTTER
CROWN HOTEL, PROVIDENCE, R. I.
YOUR TIME IS UP stop TAKE TWELVE MIDNIGHT TRAIN stop TRACK NINE stop WILL MEET YOU AT NOTHING stop
CHARON

It was quite a gag. A rather elaborate one, too. Of course, it was convention time and a whole army of tired representatives of the Allied Meats Mftrs. had gathered in the friendly environs of Providence to spread their annual havoc through the best hotels and night clubs. Convention time usually meant all kinds of nonsense like squirt guns and trick costumes, loaded cigars and aged business demons wolfing after anything that

even looked feminine and susceptible. It was also the season of—fake telegrams.

"Hurry up. Come home, your house is on fire!"

It was just a new wrinkle on that old one. He idly wondered who could have sent it. Carl? Max Barrett? That new kid, Wesley, who was after his desk job in New York and had done a bad job of hiding it? He shook his head sadly. Whoever it was should have known him better. Sam Potter would never tumble to an oldie like that one. He'd been the best salesman in the meat line for too many years. After all that time on desk jobs, fighting for security and the comfortable rut, Sam Potter was too old and wise a hand to be falling for fake telegrams of emergency.

He crumpled the yellow square into a ball and shot it into one corner of his hotel room with exaggerated scorn. That finished the matter so far as he was concerned. Someone would be awfully disappointed that's all when he didn't fly down to the station, bag and hastily-stuffed baggage to puff onto a train. He laughed aloud. Where the blazes was Nothing, anyway? It wasn't a place like Denver or Chicago, was it?

But a frown ran tracks across his forehead.

Charon. The name that had been signed. It was clearly a mistake on the joker's part—someone who had heard his wife's name and misspelled it. A real practical joke is only effective when the name of someone you know is used so that you are easily misled by the printed lie. That is the real trap to the thing.

COME HOME, I NEED YOU

KAREN

Now that, in spite of his experiences with convention humor would have stood a better chance of duping him. His wife was named Karen. Not Charon—

It was hot and the walls of the hotel held the heat like some outsized oven so he thought no more about it. He mixed himself a stiff one from the array of bottles on his dinner table and drank it down with one motion to get the most out of it. After that, he moved to the bed where his tails and white tie were laid out as if on display. Quite a shindig tonight. It was the last evening of the Convention, the wrap-up, all-out, turn-out. Real gone but after twenty years of the damned shoulder-rubbing affairs, he was ready for this one too. Oddly enough, he did want to get home. The drink he had had was warming him all over so that Karen's face and devoted body were close to him. Damn! he thought. Even after all this time, his wife still had some appeal for him. He wanted her . . . he had forgotten all about the telegram.

The elevator doors closed softly and the gradual descent of the cage put Sam Potter in a ruminative mood. He leaned against the bright metal sides of the thing

and thought of Karen again. How she worried about him.

Poor, sweet Karen. She wanted to come, to keep watch over him but he talked her out of it on the time-worn grounds that she hated conventions. After all, it was only for a few days at best, and her own work at the Volunteer Relief Organization would demand her time and effort. That was Karen. Sweet, charitable, kind.

His thoughts guided his fingers into his coat pocket for the letter he had received from her on the second day of his stay in Providence. He chuckled in satisfaction. She always worried about him.

As he fumbled for her letter, the elevator halted and the doors whirred apart with a low hum of electrical power.

He stepped between them, still exploring in his pockets with sudden annoyance as his impatient feet carried him out into the plush lobby. Where the devil was the thing? He was sure he had kept it—

Hidden from view, his hand abruptly found something that wasn't a letter, or his keys or anything that should be in the pockets of his coat from his last memory. He muttered a curse and brought the object out. He spread his fingers fan-wise to look at it. He stared down at the object he had found for one long, uncomprehending minute.

It was the telegram. The one he had wadded into a shapeless ball and thrown away upstairs. It was still rumpled, balled and indescribable. But now it was here, in his hand. And he was downstairs—

He shivered involuntarily so that the bellhop gliding by with a tray of cordials stopped with a show of servile concern.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Potter, sir?"

"Uh—no." He shrugged and laughed hastily. "I guess I had one too many, Tommy. Seeing pink elephants, you know. Do me a favor?"

The youth, eager to please, wagged his capped head quickly.

Potter handed the rolled-up scrap of paper to him along with a contrastingly sleek dollar bill.

"Take this, Tommy. Do what you please with the dollar but throw that wad of paper away somewhere. Anywhere. Eat it if you like. Got that, now?"

Tommy grinned slyly with what he thought was complete understanding. Shifting his tray, he pocketed both items with remarkable ease.

"You bet, Mr. Potter."

Potter waved a broad palm at him and headed toward the street. The brief exchange of pleasantry with the youth had put him back in a better frame of mind. Still, it was damn confusing. He was sure he had—oh, hell! Maybe, these Conventions were beginning to get him, after all.

Outside, the lights of the city

were on and there were street sounds and routine sights and as he beckoned to the uniformed doorman for a cab, he silently prayed that the party this night, this once, would be worth while.

The long stretch of dining room was a madhouse. Over the disarranged plates and half-eaten food, the champagne glasses were in every degree of filling, the mass babble of a thousand separate conversations ran on like some gargantuan record that would never run down. Balding heads, some black, some grey, bobbed up and down like corks over the wilting starch of collars that had been proudly erect a scant few hours before. Boiled shirt fronts had buckled past the will of their owners under the influence of rich food and the paralysis of constantly filling champagne glasses. It was a big party, a bubbling champagne feast, all expenses paid with the magnaminity of the hand that controlled these arms and legs of the ALLIED MEATS phantasmagoria. Give our agents, our salesmen, our representatives, the best. After all, this is the last night of the Convention.

Cigar and cigarette smoke settled over the immense banquet hall as if a titanic battle was in its final stages of ferocity, indecision. . . .

Sam Potter blew a smoke ring and sat back, his stomach full of royal food and comforting champagne.

"The Old Man certainly takes care of his own," he heaved with ponderous pleasure.

Next to him, Max Barrett was busily scribbling on the soiled tablecloth, outlining some meat data to the studious young fellow peering owlishly around his elbow.

It was spectacles, horn-rim absurdities and a wavy crest of hair that made Wesley Wells look studious. But the scholastic look was rapidly disintegrating under the damaging uncertainty of one cocktail too many.

"That's how it lines up, Wes, my boy," Max was saying, unmindful of the awful din on all sides. "To sell a steak, you have to sell the sizzle. Not the steak." He grinned widely as he said it, his famous suavity and professional ease of manner made boyishly lax by the party.

"Remember those words," gurgled Sam, happily sarcastic," and you might graduate to the baloney packing department."

Max roared his approval of the joke but Wes shot him an offended glare.

He only glares at me cause he's half-loaded, thought Sam. The young squirt hasn't any real guts.

"At least, Mr. Barrett knows the line and tries to help me!" blurted Wesley.

Now I know he's drunk, thought Sam again. He'd never bark at me sober.

"Wesley, I'm disappointed in too many people too often, espe-

cially in you," he chided mockingly. "I thought we were really getting on together." He spilled some of his drink laughing.

Max Barrett lay a hand on his arm. "Easy, Sam. Wes is only trying to learn the business."

"I'll say he is. He's a real go-getter he is, that Wes. Regular little pen wiper. I hear he even sorts the Old Man's mail."

He was getting a little drunk himself. But who the hell cared! It was Convention time and that's the same thing as Mardi Gras.

Wesley was spluttering indignantly now and Max Barrett, his face crookedly grinning back at Sam's close-to-home remarks was softly placating him. Sam snorted and refilled his glass from one of the ridiculous magnums that had been set at each diner's place. That had been one of the prime gags at the Convention, too. The magnums actually had false bottoms like wine glasses and contained just the normal amount found in a champagne bottle.

Farther along the table, Carl suddenly came awake from his own pillow of folded hands and began to murmur drunkenly, "Speech . . . speech . . . somebody make a speech. La . . . ies an' gen'man. . . ."

That had everyone in the immediate area roaring with glee and the little *contretemps* was temporarily averted. Carl, a middle-aged broker for ALLIED MEATS was a notoriously weak drinker. He often drank too much and now he had gone to sleep after his third one.

Max ground out his cigar and reached for a fresh one from the scattered supply on the table. He had to grope past the clutter of cups and dishes and an ornate fruit bowl to do so but it was all part of the general confusion, the grand informality. He eyed Sam warmly. "Light me, will you, boy?"

Sam dug into his breast pocket for his lighter, the twenty case Ronson dream that Karen had given him only last week for his birthday. He was still at that stage of birthday-present-pride when you got a whack out of showing off the gift. It came out of his pocket with a sweep of grandeur. But something else did too.

A ball of crumpled, yellow paper scooted onto the tablecloth and found a clearing where it rested like a jewel in a proper setting.

That looked like a gag too. Max laughed.

"Taking up magic tricks, Sam?"

Sam stared down at it, confused. Something tried to piece itself together in his dizzying head. He blinked stupidly. It couldn't be. . . .

"Well, how about my light?" Max demanded with the asperity of kings.

"Oh, sorry, Max, I—" He fanned the thing into flame and lighted Max's cigar.

Cursing, he dropped his lighter and grabbed the balled wad of paper. He tore at it with clumsy fingers and a cold sweaty fear

and spread it into shape. A cold feeling transferred itself from the fingers that held the rumpled square of paper into his vitals. It was the telegram. But it couldn't be! He had flung it away angrily into the corner of the room back at the Crown. Yes, he had even handed it to the bellboy to throw away—

Max was regarding him curiously "Something wrong, Sam? It's your's, isn't it? Some note you forgot to throw away, probably. Do it myself all the time."

Wesley Wells was watching him too.

He ripped out an oath and pounded the table.

"Damn it! This has gone the limit! Which one of you sent me this fool thing?"

Carl was asleep again, mumbling in his stupor but Max Barrett and Wesley Wells were all blank stares and head-shaking negatives.

"Send you what? You drunk or something, Sam?" demanded Max, his wire-haired head bent forward belligerently.

"What are you talking about, Mr. Potter?" Wesley asked slowly as if afraid to lengthen Sam's tirade.

Wordlessly, he thrust it at them as they exchanged glances. He followed their every nuance closely as they hunched over to read it. He could read faces; selling customers for years had taught him more about people and tricks of the trade like reading into all physiognomy than any planned instruction would have. Intensely, impatiently, he waited for the guilty flash, the betrayal of eye movement but it never came.

With a shrug of his lean shoulders, Max handed the telegram back to him.

"Not me, sweetheart. I never saw it before."

"What about it, Wells?" Sam bullied the younger man. "Is this your idea of humor?"

"No, no, Mr. Potter! I don't go in for that sort of thing." Wells flushed embarrassedly but he could see it wasn't the same thing.

He was frightened and bewildered, now. You just don't get telegrams out of nowhere. Somebody had sent it to him. But who? Who of all this drunken, bloated assembly?

"Then who did send it?" he wondered out loud, conscious of a ragged, jagged sense of fear tearing through him. He sat there turning the thing over and over between his sweaty fingers. It was beginning to become unreal. Like the future you pick for yourself when you're a kid. The one you never fulfill.

"Seems to me you're building this thing up, Sam. Hell, it's only a gag. This is a businessmen's convention, remember? That means everything from false alarms to false arrests. You ought to know that."

"But look, Max," he didn't know where he got the feeling or

where he got the idea but he seemed to be pleading. "If it is a gag why plant a name on it that I never ever heard before? That makes the joke valueless since the only worth to be had is my actually going home before the Convention is over. That way—it's funny, see? But it's a cinch I won't respond to a name unknown to me."

"That's true," admitted Max past his cigar. Beyond that he didn't say because it was obvious that he didn't think a phony telegram was worth worrying about. But Wells came to life with a triumphant start, his lean, bony young face showing self-approval as though he had been the one who discovered the Pacific Ocean and not Balboa.

"Charon—of course! Don't you fellows remember your Mythology in school?"

Sam looked at him dumbly, the telegram still clutched between numbed fingers.

Max swiveled around in his chair to eye the young sychophant keenly. "Well, out with it, Wes. Is it a game you play—like charades?"

"No, don't you see?" ran on Wells excitedly. "Charon—the River Styx. Like when you die. Charon is the ferryman who carries the lost souls over to the dark shores. Uh—the infernal regions."

Max grunted. "Damn unfunny joke if you ask me."

"Isn't it?" asked Sam, only to be saying something.

Wells shrugged in disappointment. "I thought it was rather—good."

Max was staring at Sam now.

"For Pete's sake, Sam, forget it! We sent worse lemons than this in our day. A sense of humor is just like people, you know. It's got to grow up too."

Sam smiled, hiding the sensation of uncertainty that locked him in his chair. The buzz of voices around them seemed to unify in one tremendous outpour of sound. It was becoming unbearable. His hands were moist, his collar burned the tired flesh of his neck and he wanted to be somewhere else. Beneath his dark dinner jacket, his heart was beating irregularly with slow, spasmodic thuds. Karen, Karen, he wanted to hear her voice once more. He had to get to a phone.

"Look, boys. It's awfully stuffy in here—I think I'll run along—"

"But Sam," protested Max. "It isn't even twelve yet. You don't want to duck now. The main event is at one. The committee's got some strippers coming over after they finish their act downtown."

Not even twelve yet. Sometimes words, prosaic words you've heard and used a million times have such a different meaning, such greater meaning. Was that the theory of relativity too? He felt like laughing in their faces. Maybe he was drunk, maybe he'd dreamed it all up. Maybe he didn't care anymore.

He had pushed back his chair

and was standing. Max looked him up and down with mounting scorn.

Wells started to blurt something but Max motioned him to silence. "Let him go, Wes. The strippers may be too much for his blood pressure!"

He walked away from them stiffly, down the long aisle, past the noisy revellers he had known and worked with. No one seemed to see him leave except Max Barrett and Wesley Wells. No one rose to halt him. Everybody was so drunk, so delightfully uninhibited, so wonderfully alive. What did it matter anyway? They had no place to go. They had no appointment at twelve. He did though.

Directly below the entrance to the banquet hall, he paused to look at the giant circular face of the clock handsomely mounted there. The racing minute hand was silently gliding past the numerals . . . 9, 10, 11 . . . and then Twelve!

Bong! The first boom of the twenty fourth hour's death volumed through the hall as he stepped across the threshold into the outside foyer. Bong!

Bong! He closed the door and turned.

Bong! He blinked, unbelieving.

Bong! Bong! Bong! His heart triphammered violently. Rose and fell.

Bong! A stabbing pain knifed his lungs. He couldn't breathe.

Bong! His eyes stared out from his head. What he was seeing couldn't be real, couldn't be there but it was. . . .

There was no lighted hallway, no long, velvety carpet running out to the street entrance that all the tuxedoed guests had laughingly entered so many hours ago. There were no hall mirrors, no huge chandelier dangling from the vaulted ceiling. But there was something else.

Bong! The throat of the clock, hidden yet ear-filling, hung over the scene.

He was alone. Alone on a long, dark platform that stretched into miles and miles of darkness. At the extreme end of the platform and his sanity, a shrouded string of cars, connected to the self-identifying shape of a locomotive that trickled black smoke upward into nowhere, silently waited with all the evidence of a darker journey. He was on a railroad platform, a station depot. . . .

Bong!

The unseen voice of the clock poised for its final stroke. A shadowy figure, a blob of darkness just to one side of the phantom train, detached itself from the gloom and beckoned toward him with a commanding wave of one angle of darkness. Unfeelingly, he stumbled down the long ramp of wooden platform, his feet making no sound.

Bong! It was twelve and he was on the train sitting somewhere inside of it. He wanted to leave now, get up, scream and halt the madness but—

The train was moving.

Max Barrett shook his head wonderingly at Wesley Wells:

"I didn't think he'd fall *that* hard for it. It was a good gag—planting copies of that telegram all over the place was a terrific idea but—did you see his face—?"

ALIAS NAPOLEON

by John Jakes

JACK Morris did not have an imaginative mind. This fact had never bothered him, for once he had bought the Wax Works pitch from an aging carny who had to go to Arizona for his health, he didn't need imagination. He made a good living as good livings went in his scale of values, and in especially good seasons he even had enough money left over from running expenses for a week-end in a Miami Beach hotel. If Jack Morris had been imaginative, he might have taken a rowboat down the Colorado or gone seal-hunting in the Bering Straits. But he didn't give a particular damn about such exotic activities. Unimaginatively, he went to Miami Beach which as far as he knew was synonomous with exotic living.

What if Jack Morris *had* been equipped with an imagination that flourished and rioted with strange schemes and non-prosaic images? Would things have been any different? Perhaps. For instance, on that warm July night, when the carny was staked out on the eastern city limits of Peelsville, Illinois, with plenty of cash in the till from Thursday night and more to come as the marks flooded in tonight, Friday, and best of all, tomorrow, Sunday . . . well, for instance, if you take that night . . .

It's useless. Jack Morris was Jack Morris. A medium-tall man of thirty-five, married once, now divorced, a carny to the core, with a taste for checked vests, nickel cigars and redheads.

On this particular Friday night, around twilight, with about twenty minutes till the gates opened, Jack Morris was returning to his pitch from supper. By his side, standing only to his waist, strode Major Mite, a salty little character who sported a copy of the Police Gazette in his hip pocket. The carny had been lighted, the bulbs firing the night with a hundred different colors stretched in gleaming chains between the tents. The sawdust smell rose like perfume and people moved in and out of the tents in that hurried stir of excitement before the marks were let onto the lot.

The sky in the west displayed a narrow band of orange light, and the rest of the heavens had long

since purpled with here and there a star shining. Jack Morris walked along, hands in his pockets, a cigar in his mouth. Major Mite was whistling a melancholy tune when all of a sudden, Jack Morris said, "For God's sake!" softly.

"What's up?" piped Major Mite.

"D'ja see it?" Morris asked.

"What? See what?" complained the Major, his voice rising slightly and his tiny face screwed into a daemonic scowl. Jack Morris decided (unimaginatively) that there was nothing to get so excited about.

"Ah," he said. "It was just a shooting star, I guess."

"Is *that* all?" Major Mite complained loudly.

Morris laughed. "Yeah. Kind of surprised me for a minute, I guess, looking up and seeing it there. Kind of pretty, too. I thought it had a green tail on it," he added softly, mostly to himself, because he thought Major Mite would probably laugh if he heard it.

Major Mite *did* hear it, and laughed. "Take it easy, Jack. Shooting stars don't have green tails. Not the ones that I ever saw!"

They had arrived at the Morris pitch, so Jack stopped by the tent flap. He thought about the shooting star. Funny, he thought. Eyes playing tricks. I could of swore it landed in those trees a couple of miles back. The light went out just before the thing reached the trees. *Nuts!* Shooting stars don't have green tails, he thought derisively. Must of been them beans I ate. Have to tell cookie where to get off tomorrow.

"You better lay off the stuff, Jack," Major Mite declared chirrupingly.

"Sure, sure," Jack said amiably. "I'll do that."

"So long," called the Major, striding aggressively down the midway toward the sideshow tent.

Jack Morris rolled his cigar around in his fingers and decided he'd better quit goofing off or he wouldn't have any dough in the till when the night was over. The lights were on in front of his tent, and he glanced in admiration at the lurid sign over the entrance. *Chamber of Marvels! Gallery of Famous Folk! The Amazing Wax Works of Dr. Stephanovich, Imported from London,* England. Who Dr. Stephanovich was, Jack Morris didn't know. He also didn't know whether or not the figures inside the tent had ever been in London, England. He cared less. It was a good pitch.

Morris passed around the tent into his own private top, there putting on his straw hat and his light blue jacket. Then he turned on the lights in the main tent, ducked under the flap and inside. The lighting was subdued, with small floor spots focused up on the faces of the dummies. In the near-gloom, the noises and the strident calliope music of the midway seemed far away. Jack Morris even shivered at the grisly likenesses re-

produced in pale yellowish wax. There was Ghengiz Kahn, and a prehistoric man with a blow pipe (empty, of course) and John Dillinger, crouched low, a savage expression on his wax features, a wicked looking (fake) gun in one balled fist. There was Napoleon Bonaparte, hat on head, hand within coat, staring out petulantly from sightless wax eyes. Some half a dozen more, including a Frankenstein monster with green-tinted wax skin. A good pitch . . .

Suddenly Jack Morris heard the tent flap stir. He turned, a bit nervously. The flap was vibrating faintly as if someone had come in off the midway. Morris stared fixedly at the flap for a moment. No one had come in. He heard a strange nearly imperceptible buzzing in his ears, and it seemed to him that he saw a thin veil of smoke floating just inside the flap itself. He looked away, then back. The smoke was no more. What the hell! Jack Morris thought. Either somebody looked in who was smoking a cigarette, or else it was the wind. He started out of the tent just as somebody ran by on the midway shouting, "We're opening!" Jack Morris hastened outside to get into position behind his spiel booth. He whispered into his microphone, heard the raspy reverberation of his voice in the portable speaker, and peered down the lighted midway to where the first of the marks were pouring eagerly through the gate. Arnie, across the way, was already spinning his wheel, clickety-clickety-clickety, around and around, wetting his lips in expectation. It was a perfectly still, warm night. There was no wind blowing . . .

"All right ladies and gentlemen step right up and see the famous Wax Works, sights of history to thrill you, to chill you, to fill your heart with wonder amazement and amusement for the price of fifteen cents, one thin dime plus one thin nickel come on step right up here . . ."

He had a good crowd, a steady flow of customers. The little boy accosted him at just past nine-thirty, coming out of the tent with a group of marks who commented on the exhibits they had just seen. The little boy grabbed Morris's sleeve belligerently, but his eyes were frightened, though Jack Morris never noticed this.

"Hey, hey, mister," the boy complained.

"What you want, kid?"

"There's somebody *alive* in there."

"Sure, kid," Jack Morris laughed. "The more live ones come in, the more I like it."

The boy was close to tears. He shook his head stoutly. "No, I don't mean *that*. I mean there's somebody *alive* in one of those statues."

"Ah, go on," Jack Morris said good-naturedly. "You're pulling my leg."

"No I'm not!" the little boy exclaimed. "I could see him inside

that Bone Party guy, or whatever his name was. I could see him *looking*. I looked at his eyes and he looked right back at me."

Jack Morris frowned at the little boy. "Kid you've had too much . . ."

"Rooooger!" shrilled a female voice. The voice became a woman who dragged the boy away, but not before he could turn terrified, anguished eyes on Jack Morris, and cry, "He's alive, in there, in Bone Party, looking out. I *saw* him . . ."

Morris sniggered to himself. Crazy kids. Get a bellyache from too much crackerjack and start seeing things . . .

(Imagination? The little boy had it. How many others who went into the Wax Works that night saw what the little boy saw, and imagined? How many were afraid to say anything about it, to their mothers, to their wives, their children, afraid to be laughed at, ridiculed? How many? No one will ever know. The little boy saw it. The little boy imagined, and spoke it aloud . . .)

The crowds began to slack off around eleven. At twelve-thirty the lot closed down and Jack Morris turned out the lights in the top and went over to the manager's trailer for a few games of pinochle and a few beers, the party breaking up at around one-thirty. Flashlight in hand, Jack Morris made his way back to his top accompanied again by Major Mite.

"See any more green stars?" the Major jeered, reeling slightly from an excess of alcohol.

"Ah, cut it out," Jack Morris said. Then he remembered the little boy. "I got something better than that. A kid was in the pitch tonight who thought the statue of Napoleon was alive . . . get that, will you? Alive!"

"Pretty stupid, all right," the Major agreed. Jack Morris yawned and as the Major flung a last taunt about green stars and vanished down the darkened midway, Morris lifted the front flap of the tent and walked inside, intent on having a last look at the exhibits, as he did every night, to see whether or not any marks had fooled around with the wax figures while he was not watching. His flashlight bored a beam through the darkness ahead of him, and suddenly a wisp of smoke darted through the beam, twisting and twirling in mid-air. Jack Morris gasped. The smoky whorl rotated confusedly in the air for a moment, glimmering with small pin-points of greenish light. Then it darted. That was the only word for it. Morris followed its darting to the right with the flash beam. The light fell upon the childish head of Napoleon Bonaparte.

"For God's sake . . ." Jack Morris breathed.

The smoky whorl danced around the head of Napoleon Bonaparte, then seemed to fuse toward and into and through the wax, and Jack Morris could have sworn that the dead eyes of Bonaparte were

alive with coruscating bits of greenish fire. *Something,* Jack Morris knew, was inside that wax figure! He shined the flash beam straight into the eyes and he saw them whirl and dissolve and solidify again with a pattern of winking green lights.

Jack Morris was apprehensive, even a little afraid. No man would have been otherwise. But he was not completely terrified by any means. He took a firm grip on the flash and said rather loudly, "Who are you?"

He thought he heard a laugh. My God, he thought, the laugh was *inside* my head, too. The little kid was right. But this is nuts, something talking inside my head.

"Come on," he said, "who are you?"

A name was repeated within his mind, a name that meant nothing to him. The voice was small, cruel, dry and mocking. "I was foolish," the voice said. "Unaccustomed as I am to these strange surroundings, I didn't expect you back. I've been looking around."

"What . . . what are you doing in Napoleon?" Jack Morris asked. The mind within his mind was a little bit frightening, like the brush of a dead finger across a forehead.

"Looking," the voice replied.

"Looking?" echoed Morris.

"Looking," the voice confirmed. "I've been looking all evening. This is a good place from which to look. Most of your people can't see me, or if they can, they won't say that they can."

"What are you looking for?" Morris asked. He felt the cold rings of sweat beneath his arms now, and the silence of the dead carny lot, and the night world outside, and for some reason fear seemed to come a little easier, and he could almost hear each drop of sweat roll down his chest like the tick of a clock.

"I'm not looking *for* anything, replied the voice in the mind of Jack Morris that came from the head of Napoleon Bonaparte. "I'm studying. I want to get to know your people rather well, before . . ." Again the small laugh.

"Listen," Morris blustered. "Who the hell are you?"

"But I already told you!" The name was repeated.

"I don't understand that. Where are you from?"

This time there came a second name. Jack Morris made an angry gesture with the flashlight. "I don't speak nothing but English!" he half-shouted.

"Then I suppose I must translate," replied the voice mockingly. Green fire danced and sparkled within the eyes of Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France and master of the world, standing near Peelsville, Illinois in all his wax-yellow majesty, hat on head, hand within coat . . .

"*Mars!*" shouted Jack Morris. "*Mars!*"

"That is correct," the voice replied.

"I don't believe you. Damn it, *I don't believe you!*"

"That's no concern of mine," replied the voice casually.

"How . . . how did you get here?"

"In a ship."

"What kind of a ship?" Jack Morris felt that if he put enough questions to the peculiar dry voice, it would get frightened and go away, or else he would wake up in a couple of minutes. Sure, *that* was it. One too many beers in the manager's trailer. Got to quit having so many beers. Beers make you fat, beers work hell with the kidneys. Right now a couple of the boys are lugging you down the midway because you had one too many crappy beers . . .

In the eyes of Napoleon Bonaparte, green comets.

Jack Morris knew he did not dream. He wiped away the sweat from his forehead with one equally wet palm. It would not be true to say that Jack Morris was not frightened. He was. But the most important motivating factor of the moment was his inward distrust of people not his kind. *Mars,* eh? A crazy foreign somebody who had to be feared because he was foreign. Jack Morris felt a heightening of temporary courage within him.

"Perhaps you saw my ship," the voice replied. "Let me see . . ."

"*Hey!* What the hell are you doing?" It was as if a cold knife blade were inserted into the gray folds of his brain.

"Merely looking into your mind." The cold knife went away. "Yes, you saw my ship. You thought it was a falling star, with a green tail. I destroyed it when I landed in the woods not far from here."

Things were getting too much for Jack Morris. "What the hell do you think you are, coming in and lousing up my show? A lousy little bunch of fog and green stuff, that's all!" He tried to sound confident, cocky and bold. Inwardly he was quaking with distrust and fear of the foreigner.

"I have power," the voice replied with cool deadliness.

"I don't believe it!" Jack Morris shot back.

"Watch!" said the voice. Jack Morris turned his head slightly. He heard a vibrating whirr, a zipping sound, and then a small *thud.* The blow pipe placed to the lips of the prehistoric man shook gently, and Ghengiz Khan, directly opposite the prehistoric man, had a small round hole in his belly.

Jack Morris stared at the two wax figures for a moment, bewildered. Then the actual terror began to take hold of him. He looked from blow pipe to hole, hole to blow pipe, and back. "I'm crazy," he whispered, "I'm going nuts."

"You're not crazy," the voice replied. "I merely wanted to show you that I have power."

"There's nothing in that blow gun!"

"There's energy."

"Energy!" Morris whispered hoarsely. "What the hell is energy?"

"What I control," replied the voice. "What I can use to make dead matter live and obey my will. See." And Napoleon Bonaparte nodded his head twice, up and down, slowly, and the green lights did a frenzied dance in the eye sockets.

"I don't know what energy is," Jack Morris babbled. He was thoroughly frightened now. "I don't know what it is."

The laugh of the voice in his mind sounded brittle and contemptuous. Somehow Jack Morris identified that sound, and it pierced through his mounting terror and held that terror in check for a moment. The voice was laughing, jeering, sneering at him and he didn't like it.

"What's so goddamned funny?" he snarled.

"If all your people are as foolish as you," the voice said, "it will be easy."

Somehow the ominous emphasis of the word *it* penetrated the dazed, confused and angry mind of Jack Morris. "What will be easy? What are you talking about?"

"The subjugation of Earth."

"Sub . . . sub . . ."

"Conquest."

"Con . . ."

"We're taking over." And it had the cold, dry, final sound of authority. Jack Morris began to chuckle softly. Then he began to laugh. Then he rocked back and forth, howling softly with glee. Come on, boys, wake me up, douse me with some water, I had too many beers. Oh my God, this is rich, this is the funniest damned thing, I guess it must be the DT's. Come on, boys, I didn't know you could get DT's from beers, but throw the bucket on me, I had too many.

The voice buzzed angrily within the mind of Jack Morris. "You don't believe me? You stupid thing. You don't *believe* me? I'll *show* you!"

The world shot away, the carny tent and Bonaparte went screaming down a swirling vortex of night and Jack Morris grew swollen, balooned across the world and saw with the thousand, the million eyes of a strange and alien mind. Hundreds, millions of green shooting stars fell down, one after another, and small whorls of smoke fused with toasters and automobile headlights, with motion picture camera lenses and fountain pens, with bed posts and with school books, with department store mannequins and television tubes, eyes, watching, eyes all over the world, eyes of the invader watching, learning, discovering weakness, watching, planning, while in the black spaces far out more green stars gathered and more and more and on earth the eyes watched and osberved and remembered and planned and made ready and watched . . . and observed . . . and remembered . . . and . . .

Jack Morris dropped his flashlight. He pressed his hands against his eyes. He wanted to scream. Then a thought came to him. He had imagination now, the voice and the mind of the alien had filled his mind with imagination, and he saw the world beaten and taken over and . . .

"You see?" the voice whispered.

"Christ . . ." Jack Morris said. *"Christ . . ."*

The voice had lost its tone of anger now. The coruscating bits of fire in the eyes of Napoleon Bonaparte glittered less fiercely. "It's unfortunate that you had to discover me," the voice said, "but I think we can get along. I'll travel with you in here, and watch, and of course you won't say anything." The voice hesitated. "I suppose one mistake is to be expected when there are so many of us trying something so new . . ."

Beyond the tent walls, Jack Morris knew, lay the world . . .

"I've got to warn them!" he cried hoarsely.

"Stop!" said the voice.

"I've got to warn them!" Morris shouted again, forcing his feet to move. The voice buzzed angrily, excitedly and he turned away from Napoleon and stumbled through the darkness toward the tent flap. The fallen flashlight threw grotesque shadows on the leering face of John Dillinger.

"Got to . . . got to . . ." Jack Morris breathed crazily. It seemed miles to the outside, miles, but he had to go, had to get out. The thing had *shown* him what they were going to do, and unless he, Jack Morris, warned the people . . ."

"Got to . . ." The breath tore savagely out of his mouth.

"I have power!" said the voice warningly.

"Got to . . ."

A scream rose to the throat of Jack Morris, remaining there soundless, as the air filled with whirling screaming points of green fire and John Dillinger shot Jack Morris to death.

FAITH KILLER

by Winston Marks

"WATCH this next curve," the old doctor told him. "We call it, 'Hell Bend'. It consigns more souls to the other world than any spot on this highway."

Dr. Reed Fassin took the dangerous hairpin turn fast and expertly, disdaining to glance down the thousand-foot drop-off to his left. At 38, Dr. Fassin needed no advice on his driving. He knew his car, his reflexes and the laws

of motion as surely as he knew his profession. It was all a matter of hard physics, intelligence and applied reason.

As the rubber stopped squealing and the sleek convertible lurched back from its tortured springs, Fassin resumed their debate. "It's preposterous to tolerate the woman," he said flatly. "Preposterous and unprofessional."

Dr. Coffey, older and white-haired, relinquished his grip on the door handle and tried to relax. "Sorry I mentioned it if it disturbs you," he said softly.

"Faith healers are common enough," Fassin said, "and I grant that they thrive on persecution. But a healer who practices witchcraft openly is dangerous. That's carrying the power of suggestion too far."

Dr. Coffey raised his eyebrows in amusement. "Then you agree that they do have a positive power?"

"They dispense placebos," Fassin replied. "You know that as well as I do. Mental placebos, direct suggestions of improvement. A desperate patient will seize on any hope, believe any lie. These witchcraft devices verge on hypnotic therapy, and that stuff is tricky even in professional hands. What's worse, it breeds superstition in the place of sensible, scientific attitudes toward medical treatment.

"You'll rue the day if you condone such a practice in your area, Dr. Coffey."

"My dear boy, I don't condone, sanction or condemn it. I am merely fascinated with some of her results. This past year I've seen four of my own cases with inoperable cancer live long, long past their due dates, and in relative painlessness. She treated them."

Fassin compressed his lips in a cold smile and withheld his retort. Coffey was getting old, and it was not unheard of that non-malignant tumors were confused with carcinoma. Yet, it wouldn't have been polite to mention the possibility of mis-diagnosis. He shrugged. "They are your patients, and you'll have to cope with their attitudes."

"They're my people, and I hate to see them suffer," Coffee said mildly and dropped the subject.

The mountain road wound down into the valley town, and the old man was deposited at his clinic. "Thank you kindly for the transportation," Coffey said.

"Not at all, doctor. Hardly out of my way at all, and I always enjoy these conversations with my senior colleagues," Fassin lied. Had he known that the conversation would have degenerated to faith-healing he would never have volunteered to spare Coffey the tiring train trip returning from the medical convention. The detour had required a dead-end round-trip through the mountains before he rejoined the highway to his own city.

"If you take my advice, though, you'll get the local board of health

to crack-down on this female meddler."

Coffey waved him on with a laugh, and Fassin drove on up the main street to the next intersection, where he intended to turn around. The traffic light halted him, and as he waited a long cue of people drew his attention to a ramshackle store-front with a huge, unwashed plate-glass display window. Over the entrance was a long, frayed banner of cracked oilcloth. In bold, red letters was the unapologetic legend:

"FAITH HEALER."

The pause for the green light was irritatingly long, and Fassin's curiosity had too long to generate. When the "go" signal flashed he wheeled his vehicle over to the curb and got out to investigate the burden which old Dr. Coffey had to bear.

The line contained some thirty people including several in wheelchairs, and threaded its way inside to a sizable room stripped bare of fixtures except for a table, one chair and one long shelf.

Fassin shouldered his way inside and gained a clear view of the proceedings. A "patient" was just leaving with a placid expression on her lined, aged face.

The "healer," a stocky woman in her fifties, was most unimposing in a cotton print dress with large pockets. Into one of these she dropped a bill as Fassin watched. She was dark, almost gypsy-dark, and she wore her black-dyed hair straight, pulled back to an ugly bun at the base of her skull.

She said, "Hinckel, the basin." A door in the back partition opened, and a boy of ten came in with an enameled white pan of water in which she washed her hands. It smelled of phenol.

The next patient, a middle-aged man, lean of face and pot-bellied, took his place in the chair with his back to the healer. His scrawny hands lowered his grotesquely distended belly to his lap. Obviously a late stage of dropsy, Fassin diagnosed silently. Advanced edema. The man needed tapping, if possible. If not, he was beyond hope.

The healer dried her hands, and without a word began stroking the patient's forehead. Her face was square, gray and emotionless, straight-lipped and flat-nosed—no wonder she had her patient's face away from her.

Her wrinkled fingers were dark and strong, and the man's face relaxed under the manipulation. At length the woman spoke. "You are very ill. I can feel it in my hands. You must cooperate."

"I will," the man said, his eyes frightened.

The woman called out to the boy again, "The wax, Hinckel." The dark-eyed little boy came in again, hands cupped over a shapeless mass, and the odor of hot paraffin came to Fassin's nostrils.

She took the soft glob in her left hand, held it near the base of the man's skull and snipped a bit of

his brown hair with a pair of child's, blunt-nose scissors. Then she kneaded the hair into the wax and quickly shaped it into the crude image of a man.

Holding it before the man she said, "Your condition can kill you if you fail to cooperate. Have faith in me, and you will be better. Behold your image which I hold in my hand. It contains a part of you. It *is* you. I hold your health in my hands like I hold this doll."

She took a pin from the collar of her dress. "See, I am about to prick you, and you will feel it." She stabbed the wax doll lightly in the neck, and the man jerked hard, grabbed a corresponding area of his neck and grimaced.

Next, she poked a fingernail at the doll's fat belly, and the sick man doubled over. She said, "This is not your real trouble. The sickness is up here." She set the doll on the table and returned to massaging his head and neck.

Fassin was appalled at the raw, unashamed emotions that washed successively over the man's pained face. Now there was repose and trust, again.

The woman's voice was flat and ordinary as she droned on. "You are mortal, and I cannot cure you of that. Some day you will die, like all of us, but now you will live. You will feel better each day that you return to me, for I have your life in my hands now, and my hands know the truth."

She dropped her arms. "Come back to me tomorrow." She set the little image on the shelf behind her, and when she turned, the man was holding out two one-dollar bills. She took them without comment.

Fassin stepped forward as the woman called for the wash basin. At least she went through the motions of sanitation, Fassin reflected, as the smell of carbolic acid drifted from the pan of steaming water once more.

The doctor intercepted the man patient near the door. "Are you under a doctor's care?" Fassin demanded abruptly.

The man stared at the well-dressed physician from head to foot and shook his head slowly. "Not any more. They give me no hope—just big bills."

Fassin took the man's listless wrist and felt of the flaccid tissues of his arm. "You had better see Dr. Coffey this afternoon," he said, "if you value your——"

The man snatched his arm away. "I left a whole hospital full of doctors two days ago and drove 600 miles to come here. Now I feel better. If you are a doctor you had better take some lessons from her." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder and waddled by Fassin with a scowl.

A cold fury seized the physician. "Fool!" he called after the condemned man, who ignored him and disappeared. Fassin turned to glare at the healer. She regarded him frigidly with arms relaxed at her

lumpy hips. Her voice quivered.

"Go back to your broken bones and your chickenpox," she said. "Doctors are not welcome here. Not your kind."

Fassin moved to the long shelf behind her. Several hundred wax effigies stood unlabelled in uneven rows, one indistinguishable from the others. Enough patients were represented there to keep Dr. Coffey in a most comfortable practice. As it was, he knew, Coffey was scraping along on a bare subsistence level.

His anger mounted, and he whirled to face the line of gullible sufferers waiting to be mulcted. Their eyes were large and staring and shocked at his intrusion.

"This woman is a murderer," he declared loudly, "and you are her victims."

Silence in the room made the muffled street sounds seem harsh and vulgar. The healer stood motionless now, looking straight before her.

"Some of you," Fassin continued, "could live long, useful lives if you remained in charge of a physician. Others of you will die soon regardless of this despicable fraud's fairy tales. The only thing she relieves you of is your money. Save it, or spend it on whiskey. That will make you feel better, too."

He knew he was making a spectacle of himself, and the knowledge added fuel to his anger. He stepped to the end of the shelf and walked its length, arm extended, sweeping the fragile images to the stained floor where they broke. Heads and torsoes rolled about grotesquely.

He cried, "If you want peace of mind go to church, or better yet, go to a psychiatrist. This stupid woman can only——"

He had turned to face the patients, and the look of horror on several faces stopped him. A woman, then three men rolled up their eyes and fainted to the floor with heavy thumps.

The healer pushed Fassin aside and went to them muttering, "You may have killed them. To see one's image destroyed can be fatal."

It had been an unwise act, and suddenly Fassin rushed from the hateful place in chagrin. As he pushed the crowd aside he heard the healer's voice shrill a command. "Hinckel, come here!" He lost the rest of it in the angry muttering that followed him, but the boy emerged from the door saying, "Yes, mam. The right front."

Fassin got in his car, jabbed the starter button and was reaching for the shift lever when he noticed Hinckel, the healer's boy helper, bending over beside the hood. The physician slid across the seat and stuck his head out. The boy had a razor and was sawing at the tread of the tire.

"You, stop that!" Fassin leaped from the car, but the lad escaped. The doctor kneeled to examine his

tire. It was a new, white sidewall with the treads hardly marked with wear, so it was easy to find where Hinckel had snicked an inch-long sliver of rubber from the rim of the tread. It was a mere shaving, and Fassin went over the rest of the tire for several minutes to be sure the boy hadn't slashed the vulnerable sidewall or loosened the valve cap.

One of the penalties of driving fast was the expense and meticulous attention one must give his vehicle, especially the tires. Fassin took no chances on his rubber. He always bought expensive brands, insisting on safety tubes and extra heavy treads. It had paid off in a perfect, non-blowout record.

Satisfied that he had frightened the boy away in time, he got in, performed an illegal U-turn and sped from the little city.

Coffey was more than welcome to his precious faith healer and his starvation practice. Thank heaven, his own post as resident surgeon insulated him from such incidents as this.

As his high-powered car climbed the smooth ribbon of pavement into the hills, his anger subsided, and he reflected upon the utter irrationality of people. He was under no illusion that he had helped Dr. Coffey or harmed the healer's practice. The gullible would have their way if it cost them their lives.

How different this was from the sanity and precision of his own surgical practice where facts and skills yielded predictable and substantial fees. His colleagues would laugh over his incredible tale of back-woods superstition.

The yellow and black caution sign warned of his approach to "Hell Bend," and something made him ease off on the throttle as an approaching car made him take the outside lane only two feet from the sheer cliff's edge.

He wondered if he had examined that tire closely enough, and that made him wonder what had been the boy's purpose in slicing the scrap of rubber from the tread like that.

He remembered the little wax effigies, and then the tire business made sense. The woman must believe her own nonsense. Probably that scrap of rubber was imbedded in a hunk of wax right now. And the hunk of wax would be a lumpy image of his automobile, since she had been unable to get a scrap of his hair or a fingernail paring for her vengeful purposes.

He chuckled at the thought. Now if anything went wrong on this trip home he'd never be able to shake the incident from his mind.

Funny thing about superstition. Even the completely rational mind insisted on attaching absurb significances to entirely disconnected occurrences. Here he was, Dr. Reed Fassin, a scientist, sitting tensely behind the wheel of a perfectly safe vehicle in top condition, slow-

ing down to 20 miles per hour just because of old Dr. Coffey's warning about all the souls dispatched on this curve—and because of the missing sliver of rubber.

Deliberately he relaxed and tromped hard on the accelerator. The convertible squatted and dug around the hairpin, scattering gravel from the shoulder down into the thousand-foot chasm to his right. Nervelessly, he rode out the high speed skid and bore into the next easy curve and the next with increasing velocity. Nothing had happened, and why should it? He knew his car, his reflexes and his tires.

He was still chuckling when the right front tire exploded and snatched the wheel from his relaxed grasp. His lightning response caught the wheel and wrestled the car back from the very brink, but the light guard rail peeled up over the slanting hood, pierced the windshield and skewered Dr. Fassin's handsome skull as easily as poking a pin into a soft wax doll.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

by Ralph Williams

CONNOR did not like to travel by air. He did not get airsick, but he had a chronic sinus condition which plugged his ears and gave him headaches, so that he lost more time recovering from a trip by air than was saved. When he could, he traveled by train.

The company, however, had just bought a new Beech executive transport, and the sales manager was determined to get his fair share of use from it. Connor had tried to explain about his sinus, but the sales manager was a hearty, beefy type who considered infirmity in his subordinates as a rather sly form of malingering. When Connor saw it was not going over well, he dropped it. He was not too well satisfied with his job anyway, it was easier to just ride along and start looking quietly for a company that did not have a plane, or at least did not insist on salesmen using it.

So Connor came into Springfield by air, and because the company pilot was an eager beaver and found a hole twenty miles out and came down through it fast for a VFR approach, thus lopping fifteen minutes off his block time, Connor climbed out of the plane as deaf as a bat, with a splitting headache. Luckily, it was after five when they got in, too late to make any calls. Connor went directly to the hotel, took three aspirins, and flopped on the bed to sleep it off.

He woke about midnight with his headache gone, feeling much better. His ears were still plugged, but they would probably be OK by morning, and with luck he could finish his business tomorrow and be out of town by train before the plane came back through on Thursday. Meanwhile, he was hungry, he had been much too miserable to bother with dinner earlier.

The hotel dining room closed at ten PM, according to the sign on the glass door. Connor walked on through the lobby and out under the marquee and stood there looking up and down the street for restaurant signs. A few doors down there was a larger, somewhat more opulent hotel, with a dining-room sign lit. He strolled over and glanced inside. Apparently this was one of the popular night spots. There was a bar, a small dance floor and a band, and the place was crowded and noisy. Food would be expensive and probably limited to sandwiches at this time of evening, and with the noise and his ears plugged he did not feel up to coping with a waiter he was pretty sure would be covertly impolite to a coffee-and-sandwich customer.

He walked down a block to a cross street and looked both ways along it, teetering indecisively on the curb under the stop light. A few bar signs, but no restaurants there either, not even a hamburger joint.

Fine town.

Well, perhaps the night clerk at the hotel might know of some place.

He went back to the hotel and found the night clerk leaning over the desk, talking to one of the guests. As Connor came up the guest nodded and smiled and went on upstairs, swinging a folded newspaper. The clerk turned and gave Connor an inquiring look. Connor told him what he wanted and the clerk said something Connor did not quite catch because of his plugged ears and nodded in the direction of the other hotel.

Connor shook his head. "Cheese sandwich and a lot of racket for a dollar, plus a half buck tip," he said pleasantly. "I know those places. Any quiet restaurant around here where a man can just get something to eat, a dinner?"

"It's pretty late for dinner," the clerk said. His tone implied that anyone so irregular in his habits had only himself to blame if he went hungry.

Connor's business often placed

his temper under serious strain which could not be discharged in open agression, and he had developed a standard way of dealing with rudeness, a little trick of throwing out deliberately confusing or irrelevant statements in a dogmatic, challenging fashion. He said coldly:

"I never eat before midnight. Bad for the digestion."

The clerk looked satisfactorily startled. "You don't?" He studied Connor doubtfully and leaned over the desk and asked something in a low, embarrassed voice.

"What?" Connor asked with deliberate loudness.

The clerk glanced nervously around the lobby. "Are you on a special diet, sir?" he asked, leaning far over the desk and half-whispering still, but shaping his lips exaggeratedly with the words, seeming to give them some specially solemn significance.

Probably thinks I'm nuts, Connor thought. To hell with him. He nodded shortly.

The clerk licked at his thin lips and doodled absently on the scratch pad before him, studying Connor out of the corners of his eyes. "Well," he said finally, in a somewhat louder voice as a reluctant concession to Connor's infirmity, "there's a place up the street a way, kind of a hole in the wall, but they're supposed to have a good cook. Lot of local people on special diets eat there. He might be able to find something for you."

He gave Connor directions and Connor thanked him and left before he could frame any of the questions that were obviously itching him.

Connor had some trouble finding the place; it did not open directly on the street, but on a narrow alley off the street; you would never know it was there unless you happened to look down the alley and see the small red "Cafe" sign.

There was a short counter with stools and three booths along one wall. In the back booth, two nondescript individuals were drinking beer and talking. A short chubby man with a hat on the back of his bald head was sitting on one of the stools reading a newspaper with a toothpick in his mouth and a cup of cold coffee before him, and the counterman, in a greasy apron and T-shirt, was scraping rancid grease from the hotplate.

A cheap-restaurant smell pervaded the place, the ripened bouquet of years of neglected scraps of decaying food, uncleaned iceboxes, over-heated skillets and scorched eggs. It did not look very promising, and Connor thought about going back to the hotel bar, but at least it was quiet, and about as clean as you could expect of a place of its type.

He sat down on a stool at one end of the counter and the counterman came up and asked him: "What'll it be?"

"I'm not particular," Connor said. "Just so it's dead and plenty

of it. I'm hungry as a goddam wolf. What have you got?"

The counterman wiped absently at the counter with a rag. "Steak OK?" he asked. "French fries?"

Connor nodded. "That's OK. Medium."

The counterman went back to the refrigerator, and the fat man put his newspaper down and looked at Connor. "Warm out tonight, ain't it?" he offered.

Despite his trade, Connor was basically a reticent man, he probably was not really very well fitted for selling. He disliked strangers who tried to strike up acquaintances in public places. Besides, he was not in a mood for conversation. One ear had come unplugged, with a little sucking plop, while he was walking from the hotel, but there was still a ringing that made it hard for him to understand what was being said.

He grunted noncommitally and sipped at his coffee.

The fat man was not discouraged. "Stranger in town, ain't you?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Connor said, resenting the fat man's bucolic assurance, and besides he wasn't really a stranger. He had never lived here, but he had been quite often in Springfield on business, though perhaps not so much in recent years. "What makes you think so?"

The fat man grinned ingratiatingly, showing bad teeth and whitish gums. "Why, my gosh, I know *everybody* in this town. I'm the undertaker, it's my business to know everybody." His brow wrinkled in thought. "Say, though, how'd you come to find this place? Not very many out-of-towners come in here to eat."

"Smelled it, of course," Connor said matter-of-factly. He glanced at his watch. "What's keeping him with that steak?"

The fat man chuckled. "It'll be along," he said. "Ernie just don't believe in rushing things."

The two men in the back booth finished their beer and left. The fat man tried a few more remarks which Connor did not bother to reply to, and then went back to his newspaper. Eventually, the steak came.

It was bad. Connor could smell it when he lifted the first bite. He put the fork down again without tasting it and lit a cigarette, wondering whether to make a fuss, or just walk out. He could have the man fry a couple of eggs, he supposed, but the way things were falling tonight, they'd probably be bad too. And anyway the counterman had gone back into the kitchen and did not seem in a hurry to return. Maybe he'd better just go back to bed and forget about dinner.

The trouble was, he was still hungry.

The coffee was not bad, he sipped at it and smoked, trying to make up his mind.

The fat man had been watching

him covertly around his newspaper. He put it down now and leaned over toward Connor. "What's the matter?" he asked confidentially. "Meat no good?"

Connor looked at him and said nothing.

The fat man grinned. "A little ripe, I bet, huh?"

"No, not exactly," Connor said considering, turning the fork and examining it clinically, "too fresh, I'd say. I can't eat fresh meat."

"Too fresh?" the fat man's eyes widened. "I sure wouldn't expect that of Ernie No, sir, not Ernie, Ernie don't believe in wasting his dollar beef on strangers." He reached over and picked up the fork with the bit of steak still impaled and sniffed loudly at it. "Boy, you're nuts. That ain't fresh, it's damn near rotten."

Connor stared at him in quiet rage. So Ernie didn't believe in wasting good beef on strangers? He grasped the fork and shoved it roughly against the fat man's scraggly mustache. "I say it's too fresh!" he said harshly. "Look at it, look at that blood! What's he think I am, a goddam vampire?"

The fat man reared back on the stool, startled, and then laughed. "Vampire, huh? By gosh, that's pretty rich, I'll have to remember that." He called out: "Hey, Ernie! Come on out here! You know what, you're serving blood for vampires now; this fellow here says so. Wait'll I tell the boys about that." He wheezed and chuckled happily.

Ernie came up and looked at the untouched steak on Connor's plate. "What's the trouble?" he asked.

"It's too fresh and bloody," the fat man chuckled. "He says he ain't no vampire, he can't eat it."

"Well, if you don't like it, you don't have to eat it," Ernie said to Connor. "That'll be a dollar six bits."

Connor shook his head. "That won't be a cent," he said. "That meat's not fit to eat."

"Too fresh and bloody!" the fat man put in. "Oh, Jesus." He wiped at his eyes.

"You asked for a steak, you got a steak," Ernie said expressionlessly. "You want me to get a cop in here?"

"You're damn right I do," Connor said. "I want him to take a look at that steak, see what kind of food you serve in here. I guess you never heard they have restaurant laws in this state?"

Ernie clamped his jaw and said nothing. He took the plate and slid the food into a garbage can and then came around the counter. "Now," he said. "You want to pay me that buck six bits, or you want me to clip you?"

"Hey, wait a minute, now," the fat man said. "You got no call to get tough with this fellow, Ernie, you know yourself that meat really wasn't fit to eat; he just called you on it, that's all."

Ernie looked indecisive and the fat man pressed him. "I tell you," he said, "why don't you fix him

something else, something he can eat, then he'll pay you for that. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

Ernie obviously did not think it was. "I'll fix him whatever he orders, but he'll have to pay for that steak too. My food costs me money. I can't afford to throw it away just because some fellow's too delicate to eat it."

Connor shook his head firmly. "I won't pay for that steak, and you get rough I'll have you up for asault so quick it'll make your head swim."

"You will, huh?" Ernie said. He stepped closer.

"Now wait a minute, wait a minute, how about this then," the fat man leaned closer and dropped his voice conspiratorially. "Ernie, you know that quarter of 'wild beef' I brought you in last week, it won't last forever anyway, why don't you just give us a cut off that? Then he can pay you the same as for the steak, you don't lose anything, everybody'll be happy."

Ernie shrugged. "It's your meat. You want to give it away, that's your business. Just so I get paid for the steak."

"What is this 'wild beef'?" Connor asked cautiously.

The fat man winked at him and grinned. "You'll like it,' he said. "It's kind of special. We'll have to go in the back room, though. Ernie's afraid to serve it out here, somebody might come in."

Connor did not care very much to get involved with illegal venison, but he was getting fed up with the argument, and he saw no good way out of it without either paying or getting in a fight, neither of which appealed to him either. He got down from the stool reluctantly and followed the fat man into the back room. There was a bare table there and a couple of kitchen chairs and an old cabinet in the corner. The fat man went to the cabinet with an air of familiarity and took out a bottle half full of clear fluid and two glasses. "How about a little nip while we're waiting, huh?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. What is it?" Connor asked.

"Well, it ain't embalming fluid, even if I am an undertaker, but I expect it'd substitute real well. It's just plain old corn whiskey."

"OK," Connor said. "Make it a small one."

It was good enough whiskey, as corn whiskey goes, and they had another, sitting at the table under the bare electric bulb, and Connor began to feel a little mellower. The fat man obviously meant well; he had done his best to smooth over a rough situation, and Connor began to feel rather ashamed of his own surliness.

Presently Ernie came in with another bowl of French fries and a covered platter. He set the platter on the table and lifted the cover. There was a sudden overpowering stench.

"Surprise, huh?" the fat man

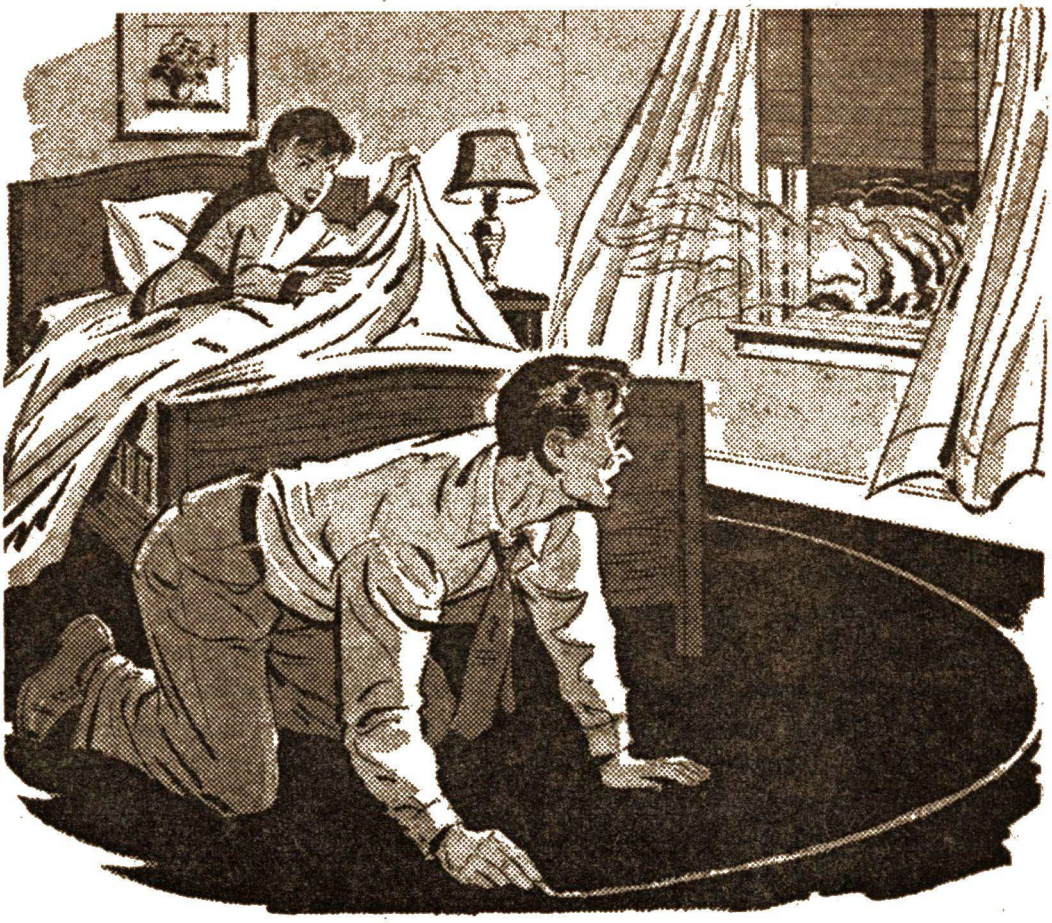
cried jovially.

Connor swivelled his head and stared with frozen eyes at the thing on the platter.

"Eat hearty, boy," the fat man said.

Connor tried to rise, pushing himself stiffly up with his hands on the edge of the table, and tripped backwards over the chair. He lay there gagging, unable to get up. Dimly he heard Ernie shout: "You goddam fool, Jake, you've done it now!" and the fat man wringing his hands and babbling: "But, my gosh, Ernie, how was I to know? He *had* to be the fellow Ed Perkins said he was sending over, said he never ate before midnight, had to have a special diet—and he didn't like blood; why he said himself that meat you give him was too fresh. I just thought I'd surprise him; you know yourself I always got more than I need, my gosh—"

"Shut up!" Ernie said sharply. "You and that fool Perkins just made another damfool mistake, that's all. I tell you, you damn ghouls don't sharpen up, you can just start taking your trade some place else." He looked at Connor, still tangled in the chair. "Well, we can't let him go bellering out of here." He came around the table toward Connor, picking up a steak knife.



OLD SNAGGLEBUCK

by William G. Weston

HE walked up the path in the cold December rain, acutely aware that the porch light wasn't on. And that there were no lights in the living room, either. Because that would have helped.

Resentment surged up within him. Resentment against Helen's neglect of the lights, resentment against the builders of the old house they had recently bought—they hadn't shown much sense in placing light-switches.

When he opened the front door and saw only the deeper dark within he wanted to close it again. He could ring the bell and say he had forgotten his keys. But he had done that last week and he wasn't quite sure that Helen had believed him.

The blackness was lightened only by the two thin slices (so far away!) of yellow light below the closed dining room and kitchen doors.

Robert Main drew a deep breath, like a swimmer before diving into a great wave, then plunged into the hostile darkness.

He almost reached the light-switch when something gripped his ankle. He froze, his breathing sharp and quick, like an animal scenting imminent danger. Then he blindly scrambled forward. The *something* that clutched his ankle was heavy and clinging so that he tripped and fell against the hall table.

It seemed that time stood still while he frantically scrabbled for the light-switch. *There was no time! Only the awful darkness and himself and the something clutching his ankle.* Then the kitchen door opened and the wonderful yellow light poured out, pushing back the stubborn darkness. But he knew that it was only waiting to close in on him again. He sniffed, as if trying to locate the source of some unpleasant odor. And once again he was a small boy, trembling in the night.

Then Helen was beside him, hurriedly wiping floured hands on a crisp apron.

"Did you hurt yourself?" she asked anxiously while he stared down at his feet.

Robert stooped and picked up the thing that had wrapped itself around his ankle; spread out the small wet garment. "No, but it isn't your fault I didn't," he said. His voice sounded queer and he hated her then for making him speak.

"That crash—and then the way you screamed," Helen said.

"I did not!" he said furiously. "I didn't utter a sound." He looked at her, a small woman, wondering why he had ever thought her pretty and vivacious. She was faded now, like a poor carbon copy, and the vivacity was nothing but a keyed-up nervousness. He held up the soggy garment. "Isn't this Bobby's new coat?" He asked accusingly. "I nearly broke my neck tripping over it."

"I—I told him to hang it up," she faltered. "I suppose he forgot." She did not actually move, but it seemed that she flinched from the impact of his stare. Then she took the coat.

"Forgot!" he said. "Just like you forget to switch on lights."

Helen had started to hang up the coat while Robert removed his own. "I think it's silly for a grown man to be afraid of the dark," she flared at him.

"Who's afraid of the dark?" he shouted.

"I've watched you. You show it more and more. Saying you forgot your keys!"

Robert stopped, one foot on the first stair. "I know you're trying to make me out some kind of a nut," he said bitterly. "Just because my father was sick before he died you pretend there is something the matter with me. I wish I was as smart as he was. And you can bet I didn't leave my things scattered around for him to trip over."

"I won't allow you to whip Bobby," she cried as he went up the stairs, but he didn't answer her. A big man, he had always made a point of bounding up stairs, but nowadays he got a bit out of breath. So that his annoyance was increased. He stopped for a moment before entering the room where the queer animals engaged in timeless foolish antics on the papered walls.

One reason they had bought this old house was because there could be a large combined bedroom and playroom for Bobby. Entering he saw the toys scattered in confusion on the floor and his annoyance increased. It was time he took a hand if the kid was ever to get proper training.

The small blond head was bent over, the chubby hands so busy with the crayons the boy didn't look up. That was another thing, Robert thought. All this talk about the boy being artistic. As if he wasn't too moody and imaginative as it was. "Hello," he called. "Aren't you going to say hello to me?"

The little boy looked up. "'Lo, Daddy," he said. He slowly put down his crayon and got up. Robert hoped, as he always did, that the boy would run to him, jump into his arms. But he only came slowly toward him so that he had to lift up the small stiff body. "You were a bad boy," Robert said, disappointment sharpening his voice. "Getting your new coat wet and not hanging it up."

"I forgot, Daddy."

Robert held the child close to him, hoping that he would burrow his small blond head against his chest. He wanted the thin arms tight around his neck.

The boy squirmed. "Daddy, you're hurting me!" he wailed.

From downstairs came Helen's thin high voice. "What are you doing to that child?"

"Nothing!" he shouted back. He loosened his tense grasp, allowing the boy to wriggle out of his arms, while anger and frustration swept over him. What was the matter with the kid? If he was just a little affectionate he wouldn't want to hold him so tight.

He met Helen coming up the stairs. "I won't allow you to whip him," she said breathlessly. Now she didn't seem so faded and blurred carbon copy. She looked clear and sharp, the outlines distinct.

"I didn't whip him," Robert cried. And he thought *I can't allow myself to get angry; it isn't good for me.* "How about dinner instead of all these melodramatics?" he asked.

He had two martinis and felt better, so that he was able to enjoy his dinner after all. Helen, as usual, didn't eat much. Well, it was her own fault if she didn't eat; she couldn't blame him if she was so thin and pale.

"I'm sorry if I upset you," Helen said when he pushed his plate

away and lit a cigarette.

He resented her obvious attempt to be conciliatory. "I know," he said angrily. "You just want me to see 'someone'."

"Maybe it would help," she said.

"They are all a bunch of quacks," he shouted.

"But I've seen you reading lots of books on psychiatry and psychology."

"That's why I know it's all bunk," he said hotly. "According to them nearly everybody is crazy! You'd like them to say I'm crazy, wouldn't you?"

" I just want you to be all right," Helen said pleadingly. "I know you are all right, just tired and nervous."

"If anyone should see a psychiatrist it's *you*," he said, grinding out his cigarette. "The way you yelled tonight anyone would think I was in the habit of using a whip on the kid."

"But sometimes you look as if you wanted to hurt," she said. "Sometimes you look just like your father."

"My father never whipped me. But he had his own way to make me behave."

She looked at him intently. "Whatever it was, don't try it on Bobby," she said. "I remember the first time I met your father," she went on. "Sitting there in his library surrounded by those rotting, smelly leather-bound books."

"Those books were hundreds of years old," Robert said. "They should have been mine, but my mother burned them."

"Your mother seemed like a very sensible woman," Helen said. "But I felt so sorry for her, she was so sad and quiet."

"The two of you would have made a fine pair," Robert said.

"I don't think that was a nice thing to say," Helen said.

"Those old books had a lot of wonderful things in them," he said as if he hadn't heard her. "Father said that as long as he had them he didn't need any newfangled books on science or psychology." He was smiling now, talking with animation. "I know when he sprung Old Snagglebuck on me it certainly kept me in line."

"What a queer name, Robert."

He laughed. "Oh, that was just my name for him," he said. "He was only about five feet tall, but very broad. His arms were covered with long hair and they hung down below his knees."

"How horrible," Helen shuddered. "How could your mother stand such a person around the house?"

He laughed. "Oh, *she* never saw him." He paused and a thoughtful look came over his face. "I wonder," he said softly. "I never thought about *that* before. Maybe that was why she burnt the—" He stopped and shook his head. "No, Snagglebuck wasn't *real*. He was just a sort of bogeyman that Father invented to make me be-

have. He had some Latin name for him and he went through some mumbo-jumbo that was so convincing I could actually see him."

"I think that was a shocking thing to do to a child," Helen said.

"But you don't understand," he said as if he was reasoning with a rather dull child. "Father said you can only get obedience through fear. Gosh, I can see those long crooked teeth yet!"

"Your father's?" Helen asked coldly.

"Snagglebuck's," he said with annoyance. "That's why I called him Snagglebuck." Then excitedly. "The words—I wonder if I can remember the words?"

Helen stood up so abruptly she jarred the table. "You shan't do anything like that to Bobby," she said tensely. "If you try I'll leave you!"

He didn't hear her. "Then he'd not forget things," he said softly, to himself. "Maybe he would run to me—"

She seized his arms. "Do you hear me, Robert? If you do anything to Bobby I'll take him away!"

He laughed her words away. But he couldn't forget how great and powerful his father had seemed. Of course it would be different with him, because he loved Bobby so much.

So he didn't say any more about Snagglebuck but night after night she irritated him with her pleas that he "see someone." And Bobby's behavior grew worse.

It was a cold, wet winter and Helen caught a cold she couldn't lose. So that now Robert was further annoyed by what he called her snuffling.

He couldn't sleep so that he put in the night hours trying to remember those words his father used to chant. The words that made his father greater than other men. *"Dies, Mies, Jeschet—"* Sometimes in the darkness he would think he was getting all of it. For then the room, so still, so quiet, except for Helen's breathing, would seem to fill with sly, *unheard* noises. And then, perhaps, he wouldn't hear Helen's breathing and he would know she was awake. And he would rage silently at her spying.

But other nights, when the room was filled with the sly noises and the shadows seemed to have life he would shake her shoulder to awaken her, and then lie quietly, the cold sweat streaming down his face.

He knew he shouldn't keep saying those words but he couldn't stop it.

It was then that he insisted on having a night light in the bedroom.

And it was then that Helen went to see a psychiatrist.

Luckily Helen's cold turned into influenza. He was relieved when Dr. Thompson, plump, elderly, and definitely not a psychiatrist, insisted she go to a hospital.

Sick as she was Helen refused to

go until the motherly Mrs. Dooley was hired as housekeeper. "You'll —you'll be good to him?" she pleaded to Robert as the ambulance attendants carried her down the stairs.

It took only two days to confirm his opinion that Mrs. Dooley wasn't the right sort of person for Bobby. She spoiled him, and several times Robert caught her looking queerly at *him.*

So he arranged for a leave of absence from his office and then discharged Mrs. Dooley. She didn't take it very well, flouncing out of the house muttering something about "That poor baby."

He stood smiling quietly. Now he would have the chance to show Helen how a child should be properly trained.

When the darkness came he felt strangely excited. If he could only experience his father's power. He started to tell Bobby stories about Snagglebuck, holding the boy on his lap like a timid, unresponsive animal. They were the same stories his father had told him, but he had never been held on *his* lap.

Bobby squirmed. "I want my Mommy," he said. "She tells me nice stories."

That night he drew the circle around Bobby's bed, using one of his crayons. He felt a strange exultation to feel how easily it came back to him.

The little boy stopped his soft crying as he watched him. "I didn't know you liked to draw, Daddy," he said.

"Daddy is doing this because you've been such a naughty boy," he said. With sure strokes he drew the pentagram inside the circle. "*Dies Mies—Jeschat, Boen,*" he chanted.

"What are you drawing, Daddy?"

Robert stopped his chanting. "Daddy is going to call Old Snagglebuck so he can tell you what happens to naughty boys," he said, carefully, precisely, finishing the pentagram.

"But I'm scared of Ole Snagglebuck. He might get me," Bobby cried.

"Not if you stay inside these lines."

"Did he ever get you, Daddy?"

"He tried," Robert said. "He always said he would, but he never could."

The little boy wailed. "Please, please, don't call him. I don't mean to be naughty."

Robert was touched by his cries and went to the bed. "When will Mommy be back?" Bobby sobbed. "She wouldn't let Ole Snagglebuck get me." Robert's face hardened and he stepped back from the bed. When he faced the other way the words came out easily. "*Dies Mies Jeschat Boenesdoesef Douvema Enitemaus.* OH, MOLOCH, COME, COME!"

The room was very dark now, but Bobby screamed. "I can see him," he cried. "I can see him!" The boy pulled the covers over

his head.

Robert looked at the heavy shadows. The kid certainly had a vivid imagination. His own father hadn't been able to make him *see* Old Snagglebuck so easily.

Then for a long time he sat on the edge of the bed, holding the boy and talking soothingly to him. He felt so good when the thin arms held tight around him.

Next day Bobby timidly showed him some drawings. The kid did have artistic ability, because the drawings, childish though they were, looked just like he had described Old Snagglebuck. Just as he had imagined him when he was a boy. He could remember it so well; his father chanting—and in the corner—

Bobby cried so much at bedtime he was worried. He knew Helen would make an awful fuss if she heard about it. He tucked the boy in his bed. "Mommy's coming home tomorrow," he said. "You don't want to worry her, now do you? If you don't say anything about Old Snagglebuck Daddy will buy you some new crayons."

"But I'm so scared of Ole Snagglebuck," Bobby wailed. "He's standing over there looking at me. And he smells so bad."

"I don't see him," Robert said. He switched on all the lights. "See?" he asked.

"He's right over there," Bobby pointed. "I'm awful scared."

As he soothed the boy Robert wondered about what Bobby had said about the *smell.* Funny, he hadn't told Bobby about that fetid odor he used to imagine.—Then he spoke gently until sleep came—

Bobby was up very early the next morning. He promised to be very good while Robert drove up to the hospital. Now, walking up the path, carrying the suitcase, Robert saw him peeking from behind the curtains. Then he came racing down the path. "Mommy, Mommy," he sobbed. "I'm so glad to see you, Mommy! Oh, I'm so afraid of Ole Snagglebuck, Mommy!"

Helen dropped to her knees and drew the child to her. "What have you done to him? Oh, what have you done to my little boy?"

"I haven't done anything. He's just glad to see you."

"You say nothing, and he's so thin and pale!"

Then he looked and saw that they were both thin and pale, so that for the first time he thought how much alike Helen and Bobby were.

"Tell Mommy what's the matter," she said softly.

"Ole Snagglebuck is always trying to get me."

Helen sprang to her feet. "You promised me," she said accusingly.

"Daddy," Bobby wailed. "I didn't mean to tell Mommy."

When they were in the house she faced him. "I can't go through with any more of this," she said. "I'm going to call Dr. Schwartzkopf."

"I won't see any psychiatrist," he said and stalked into the kitchen to mix a drink.

When he returned Helen was at the telephone.—"But Doctor, I must see you right away. Yes—yes—Oh? Well then, just as soon as you can—" She cradled the phone and rose, facing him.

"If you think I'll let any psychiatrist poke around in my mind you're the one that's crazy," he yelled furiously.

"If you don't I must leave you," she said.

"Go ahead," he said.

"Maybe you don't care about that," she said sadly. "But if I go, Bobby goes with me."

"No! You can't do that!"

"I will. Oh, Robert, please, won't you let me help you?"

Oh, she was clever, he thought. She knew the courts almost always allowed the mother to have custody of the child. "All right," he said, trying to smile. "I'll see him. When is he coming?"

"He didn't know whether he could get here today," Helen said. "But he'll try to get here as soon as possible."

Bobby was allowed to have dinner with them that night. He'd been more cheerful during the day, but after, when Helen suggested bed, he shrank back into his chair. "Please, Mommy, don't make me go to bed," he pleaded.

"But it's time for little boys to go to bed," Helen said softly.

"But Ole Snagglebuck says he is going to take me!"

She knelt by the terrified child. "There's nothing to be afraid of," she said soothingly. Over the small blond head she looked accusingly at Robert.

It was a long time before she came downstairs again. "I hope you are pleased with what you have done," she said.

"It was only a game we were playing," he said sullenly.

"And all those crayon marks on the floor," Helen went on. "I should think you would be ashamed. I want you to erase them while he's asleep. I started to, but he became so hysterical—" She was interrupted by the doorbell.

Dr. Arthur Schwartzkopf was young, personable, and, Robert thought, obviously eager to establish himself in his profession. "Do you wish me to lie down on the couch, Doctor?" he asked with heavy sarcasm.

The doctor sighed as if that joke was already growing tiresome. "No," he said. "I just want you to tell me what this is all about. Start in by telling me about your father."

His words came haltingly, reluctantly at first. And then Robert found he liked telling Dr. Schwartzkopf about his father. It was such a relief to someone who would listen, who could ask intelligent questions. But sometimes he realized he was shouting; then he would try to talk softly.

"Now about this circle," the

doctor asked after a long time, his voice soft, persuasive. "Don't you think it would be better if you erased it?"

"No, no!" Robert cried. "I can't erase it!"

"But it would relieve your wife's mind if you did."

"I don't know why both of you make so much of it," Robert said angrily.

"But if there is nothing to it, why don't you please her? Now, why don't you do it tonight? Otherwise anyone would think this er-ah —Snagglebuck has an objective reality to you."

Robert stood up. "I'm thirsty," he said sullenly. "I want a drink."

Out in the kitchen he hastily poured some whiskey into a water glass and gulped it down. Then he tiptoed back and stood listening to the low talk in the living room.

"Oh, do you really think so, Doctor?" Helen was saying, her voice queer and strained. "Of course — I — I thought — but I thought that he really—"

"I'm sorry," Dr. Schwartzkopf said. "But you yourself had already told me so much of this. That is why I came here tonight—late as it was. It would be dangerous—"

"But maybe he will get better," Helen said.

"Of course he will, Mrs. Main. With the proper care; and if he will co-operate. But you could see that he wouldn't erase those childish marks on the floor. That is because they mean something more to him than they would to a—a mind that is not disturbed."

"You mean," Helen almost whispered. "You wouldn't have been so sure if he had erased the lines?"

"I would have felt better about it. These obsessions can be very dangerous," the doctor said, his voice professionally sympathetic. "From what you had already told me I anticipated this, so I took the liberty of making preliminary arrangements with a very good institution. And the commitment papers—I have them with me."

Robert crept back to the kitchen. He rattled the bottle ostentatiously against the glass as he poured himself another drink. Then he walked noisily back to the living room.

"I guess I needed that drink," he said, his voice a bit too loud. "I guess you're right. It's silly for a grown man to make so much out of such a simple little thing like rubbing out some lines."

"Oh, Robert, I'm so glad!" Helen ran to him, kissed him. Over her head he saw that Dr. Schwartzkopf was looking at him speculatively. *So you think you are going to railroad me to a booby-hatch,* he thought. He remembered the visits to his father in the asylum. The screams as he walked through the corridors. And they hadn't helped his father. The last time he had seen him he'd been in a straightjacket. He could hear the old man's screams even now. How he had struggled—and the terrible words! Robert wiped the sweat

from his forehead. "Well, suppose we all go upstairs and get it over with."

"Yes, yes," Helen said. "We'll go upstairs now."

But when he stood in Bobby's room, the damp cloth in his hand, Robert knew he couldn't go through with it. "It's silly," he burst out. "Three adults making so much of this!" *What do either of you know of this thing? Did either of you see him, hear him?* "I can't do it!" he cried out.

The doctor looked at Helen, nodded his head almost imperceptibly as he fumbled in his pocket for a pill box. "You are disturbed," he said soothingly. He took two red and blue capsules. "Won't you take these so you'll feel better?"

Robert knocked the capsules out of the doctor's hand. "Oh no you don't!" he screamed. "I'm not going to let you dope me so you can take me away!"

"It isn't fair," Robert cried. Then he thought, *I must be calm, I have to be calm!* "All right," he said with an effort. "I'll show you I'm all right. I was playing with the pentagram; I'll rub it out!" On his hands and knees he furiously started to wipe out the crayon lines.

On the bed Bobby sat up sobbing. "Mommy, don't let him get me," he cried.

On the floor, Robert was carefully, laboriously rubbing at the crayon marks. "It isn't fair," he sobbed. "It isn't fair, sending a man to an asylum—just because he played a game."

But now he had difficulty seeing the lines. It was getting dark. Dark and cold, so that the sweat on his face was icy.

Then Bobby screamed. "I see him, I see him! He's right over there in the corner! And he's saying he wants something!"

While Helen tried to comfort the child Dr. Schwartzkopf quietly went to the telephone. When he returned Robert cried out bitterly. "Why did you do that? I rubbed out the lines, didn't I?"

"You did very well," the doctor said. "You are just emotionally upset. Now if you'll just be quiet—"

"I'll be quiet," Robert said. "It wouldn't be fair if you sent me away for the rest of my life—just because I played a game."

"If you are quiet there won't be any trouble at all," the doctor said. On the bed Bobby was now lying without a sound.

When the white-coated attendants came Robert got up. "You know I'm all right, don't you?" he asked pleadingly. "I've co-operated, haven't I?" Helen went downstairs with them, crying softly.

They were at the front door when Bobby screamed. *"Daddy, Daddy,* help me!"

Robert wrenched away from the burly attendants, sending them sprawling. When he burst into the room the child was drawn up in terror on the far side of the bed. "He says he is going to take me,"

he sobbed.

"I won't let him get you," Robert cried. He seized the bit of crayon, frantically starting to draw the protective circle around the bed. Then he remembered the other words his father used to chant.

He was chanting the incantation when they burst into the room and started dragging him back down the stairs. Helen stayed to comfort the frightened child.

They were half-way down the stairs, "Jeez," one attendant said. "Did you notice the stink in that room?" Then Helen screamed and Dr. Schwartzkopf rather tiredly turned and went back upstairs.

It seemed like a long time before he rejoined them in the hallway.

"Well, I guess we better take this guy," the talkative attendant said. "Say, Doc, what makes guys like this go crazy?"

From upstairs came Helen's wailing cry, louder now. "Bobby, Bobby, give me back my Bobby!"

Dr. Schwartzkopf looked pale and ill as he lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. The cries had diminished to a low moaning. "Crazy?" he asked. "Did you say *crazy?*"

SCORPION

by Hal Ellson

THE tapping on the wall sounded again and Luis opened his eyes, blinked, yawned. Growing dark in the cell, hotter now than during the afternoon. The tapping had ceased, utter silence followed, then the sound of footsteps. Rodriquez pacing his cell like a mad tiger. Every evening he started and went on till the last man was long asleep.

'He'll hang himself yet,' Luis thought, and a new sound came to life, a guitar speaking with muted notes. Luis closed his eyes and in the darkness saw nimble fingers idly plucking the strings of the instrument. A soft voice joined in and the words of the ballad melted the strength of twenty listeners.

As the song ended, the tapping started up once more and Luis stirred on the straw mat where he lay, eyes open now. The light in the cell was almost gone, the endless night moving in. Soon enough the bedbugs would begin their methodical tortures, the lice become voracious. Even in sleep one couldn't escape, for there were nightmares to contend with, and dreams that always ended in a final denial.

The tapping continued, a faint sound, unreal. Rodriquez pacing his cell in maddened silence caught Luis' attention again. He began to count the man's steps, saw him in his mind's eye moving back and forth between two fixed points like an animal in a cage. One—two—three — four. One — two — three —four. Luis put his hands over his ears but the steps grew louder —a pair of worn sandals walking across his brain.

"Luis!"

Suddenly he sat up. The voice didn't seem real. "Who calls me?" he said to the dark.

To the right of him he heard a scratching against the thick wall, as if the man in the next cell had dug his nails into the very stone.

"Luis."

"Juan?"

"You were asleep?"

"Not quite, old man. What's up?"

"I do not want to bother you."

"Ah, it begins. But you do, old man. What now?"

"Wait!"

Both men lay still. Footsteps echoed in the corridor, slow, even. They paused, came on, paused again. An explicit pattern. Then a light shone in Luis' cell, revealing his inert form for a mo-

ment. The guard looked in and went on his way, came back and sat down to doze once more at the end of the corridor.

"All right, you old cut-throat," said Luis. "What are you after?"

"You must know already."

"A cigarette. Do you think me a millionaire?"

"He who has two and shares one with another is more than that."

"I am tired of sharing."

"As you say, my friend. I had hopes, but you have already given me more than enough."

Luis smiled to himself, for he liked Old Juan and felt sorry for him. Not one to share with another, nevertheless he had been generous with the old fellow.

"All right," he said, "be ready." Which meant that Old Juan was to watch at the crevice. Time, or perhaps a mason's dereliction had produced a crack in the thick wall between the two cells, one too small to cause the guards any worry and yet not too small to elude the ingenuity of the prisoners.

With a quick movement Luis produced a matchbox which contained no matches. Instead, a large and thoroughly virile cockroach occupied it. With two fingers acting as pincers, Luis deftly plucked the cockroach from the box, laid a cigarette across its back, and then tied it there with a piece of thread. That done, he put the cockroach into the crack and blew his breath

after it to send it scurrying on its way.

Old Juan was waiting on the other side of the wall and, as the roach appeared, he seized it, stripped it of its precious burden and sent it back to Luis who caught it and put it back in the matchbox for future use.

Old Juan lit up, then said, "A million thanks, my friend!"

"Thank the cockroach," Luis answered.

"My thanks to him too."

Silence then. Old Juan lay back on his straw mat and smoked. Luis stared at the dark, listening to the "mad tiger" pacing in another cell. Only that sound for a while. Then the guitar, soft, muted, a sad song, music and voice carrying to the listeners in the dark cells and making them dream.

When the song ended, Old Juan put out his cigarette and placed it over his ear. Sleep wouldn't come. Again and again his troubled mind approached the question. But perhaps it would be better not to tell, simpler for Luis. For he couldn't escape and, if he did not know what was in store for him, at least he would not die a thousand deaths before the final terrifying moment. But still . . .

Old Juan turned over and scratched himself. The bugs were biting; his body welled sweat. In the dark, through which came Rodriquez' ceaseless padding, he felt the cell walls closing in, an imperceptible yet certain movement slowly diminishing space and air. . . .

He slept, awoke, centuries of time devoured in a few minutes of fitful sleep, the dark still there but eternal, he thought, till he put out his hand and touched the wall. Two soft notes plucked from the guitar fell into silence, and now along the corridor all but Rodriquez slept. Old Juan sat up, listening.

"Luis," he finally called.

A mumbled answer.

"I have something to tell you."

"Save it for tomorrow, old man. We have much time for discussion."

"Tomorrow I may not have the courage to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"What I know. It concerns you, something frightening."

Luis smiled in the dark. "You have had a bad dream, go back to sleep, old man."

"Not so. Listen. For your own good I did not want to tell you this, but now I think you should know. You have done me many favors. . . ."

"Get to the point."

"All right. Of course you know there is no such thing as the death penalty here."

"And that is lucky for both of us."

"Perhaps, but there are ways of getting around such things. Which puts each of us in a different boat."

"Old man, I don't follow."

"Wait. Listen. Some of us are here because of a single grave mistake. Others, to put it baldly, are men who have repeated the same acts. . . ."

"You are talking about me," said Luis.

"True. I mean no offense. To go on, both of us have committed murder, I for one reason, you for another. That makes us alike and at the same time different."

"How?" said Luis. "We've both killed and that makes us both the same."

"To a degree. Mind you, I am not seeking to criticize. Each of us has his cell, but you know what you have done, your reputation."

"Come to the point, I am sleepy."

"Each of us is separate, different. We are regarded so by those who keep us here. I know what they think of me. As for you. . . ."

"I know what they think of me."

"You may think you do, my friend. But as I was saying, legally there is no death penalty, yet there are ways to get around the inconveniences of the law. Should they think that a man has not earned the right to live, they find ways of eliminating him."

"So they are preparing something for me," Luis said, amused.

"It is what I heard."

"Tell me what you heard, my friend."

The old man paused, then went on, saying: "This has happened before, I know. The others know. Any one who has been here long enough. Sometimes they decide to get rid of a man."

"Perhaps I am to be shot in the back."

"No, they have another method. The Scorpion's Cell."

"What is that?"

"When they decide to do away with a man, he is sent to that cell. A scorpion lives there. When one lies down to sleep the scorpion comes and stings him. In the morning the stretcher-bearers go to the cell and carry him away. It is simple as that. No one has ever come out alive."

Shaken, Luis was sitting up now. "But how do you know they are preparing me for this?" he asked.

"I have heard. Yesterday I swept the Captain's office."

"And when does this take place?"

"Tomorrow. They will change your cell, that is all. You will know then. But perhaps I shouldn't have told you. It is easier when one doesn't wait for death."

"Perhaps," said Luis, and he spoke no more. Nor did the old man.

One went to sleep; the other lit a cigarette and lay back on his straw mat, staring at the dark. The cells were quiet, all but that of Rodriquez. From there came the endless sound of his footsteps as he paced in his madness.

Near dawn, Luis closed his eyes —for a minute it seemed—then a clamoring brought him to wakeful-

ness, discordant voices and the sound of a club rapping across the bars of a cell.

A long day began then, the longest Luis had ever known. There was no suggestion that what Old Juan had told him would come about. The guards were indifferent, the other prisoners knew nothing. It was a day of agony nevertheless and, as it approached its end, he was ready to believe that nothing would happen.

Finally he called to Old Juan. "My friend," he said, "it seems you were wrong. What have you to say for yourself?"

"I told you only what I heard," the old man answered. "Perhaps I was wrong, I hope so. But the light of day still remains."

About to answer, Luis stopped himself, for there was a stirring at the end of the corridor, then footsteps. Not one guard but several. Their heels clicked on the concrete. Moments later they stopped in front of Luis' cell. The heavy iron door was swung open. Luis was already on his feet and he met their eyes but there was nothing to see. Their faces were masks.

"Come along," said one. "You're moving to another cell."

At another time Luis would have questioned them, but now he knew. This was it and words would alter nothing; questions would only elicit lies or silence. He stepped out of his cell.

They moved down the corridor and turned into another wing of the prison where a cell was waiting, the door open.

"In there," said one of the guards.

Even as he stepped in the door was slammed shut behind him. Angrily, then, he put his face to the barred aperture in the door and shouted after the guards, "Why am I here?"

No answer. Only the sound of retreating steps.

Luis turned around. Already the light was fading quickly in the cell. The walls were dark, smelling of dampness, the air heavy and almost chill. Soon the dim light faded and a single shadow filled the cell. Luis stood in the center of it.

He began his preparations now, taking the newspaper he had concealed upon his person and spreading it on the floor around him. He squatted then with hands clasped about his knees and began to wait, never moving.

Hot now, the air close and still. Sweat oozed from him; as the minutes passed his fear intensified. Things began to happen; he heard the guitar playing softly, invisible fingers plucking the strings, and a song the player had never before sung—faint, then as if he were there in the same cell, then faint again. Old Juan, too, whispering, tapping on the wall, whispering again, an insistent plea for a cigarette. And Rodriquez padding across his cell like a jungle cat. All illusory sounds that marched across

his brain to destroy that needed silence through which he hoped to hear the approach of the scorpion. Even his heart conspired against him now, beginning to boom, and his breath came in great painful gasps.

Somewhere in that dark cell the scorpion waited. Or perhaps it was already moving toward him. Impossible to hear, though, with his heart thundering and his breath rasping across his teeth. He strained to listen for the sound the scorpion would make as it crossed the paper and his heart thundered louder yet, his breath rasped harder. Sweat streamed down his face and the salt burned his eyes.

He wanted to scream out for help, but help would never come. No one would hear, no one would lift a finger. Best to squat there, as he had planned, with the newspaper spread around him. But already his legs were aching and there was no telling when the scorpion would come, nor from what direction it would strike. Sleep was out of the question, even to relax might mean sudden death.

And so the minutes passed, melted, became hours; his legs numbed but at least the thunderous noise of his heart and the awful rasp of his breath abated. He could hear now, for there was nothing left but silence.

How it happened he didn't know but somehow he dozed off, squatting in that tiring position, then suddenly came awake. A sound had alerted him. And now he heard a scraping on the paper, the tentative and yet progressive movement of something crawling toward him. In another moment the sound became harsher, louder, as if not a scorpion but some monstrous insect was coming toward him.

Frightened, he struck a match and held it from him. Nothing to be seen, no matter which way he turned. Then the flame died.

It was like a blow, a tremendous thunderclap in his mind, for he had wasted a match. Only one left now. If he wasted the next, he knew he was doomed. Only a light could save him.

He began to pray, over and over he beseeched the Virgin of Guadalupe to save him, made promises, if only she would help. And then somehow he mastered his fear, not that it vanished. For it was still inside him.

Nothing now but silence and time lost, the dark of the cell the only thing. The minutes oozed, then at last he heard a sound so faint that it was beyond belief but the hair on the back of his neck bristled. Nothing again, then the same scraping on the paper. He didn't move, couldn't have if he had wanted to. Something coming toward him, steadily now. He tried to time its progress, judge its distance from him. Slowly, slowly, nearer and nearer, and at last, unnerved, he struck the remaining match.

As it flared and the yellow flame appeared he saw nothing. Then, there, almost within arm's reach he saw the scorpion. It had stopped and raised its deadly tail. Luis stood up suddenly, hesitated a moment and stepped on the waiting insect, crushing it beneath his heel.

Morning and the corridor echoed to the steps of the guard and stretcher-bearers. Finally they stopped before Luis' cell. A guard unlocked the door and flung it back. Then he and the stretcher-bearers stared as if at a ghost, for Luis stood in the doorway, smiling at them, a cigarette at his lips.

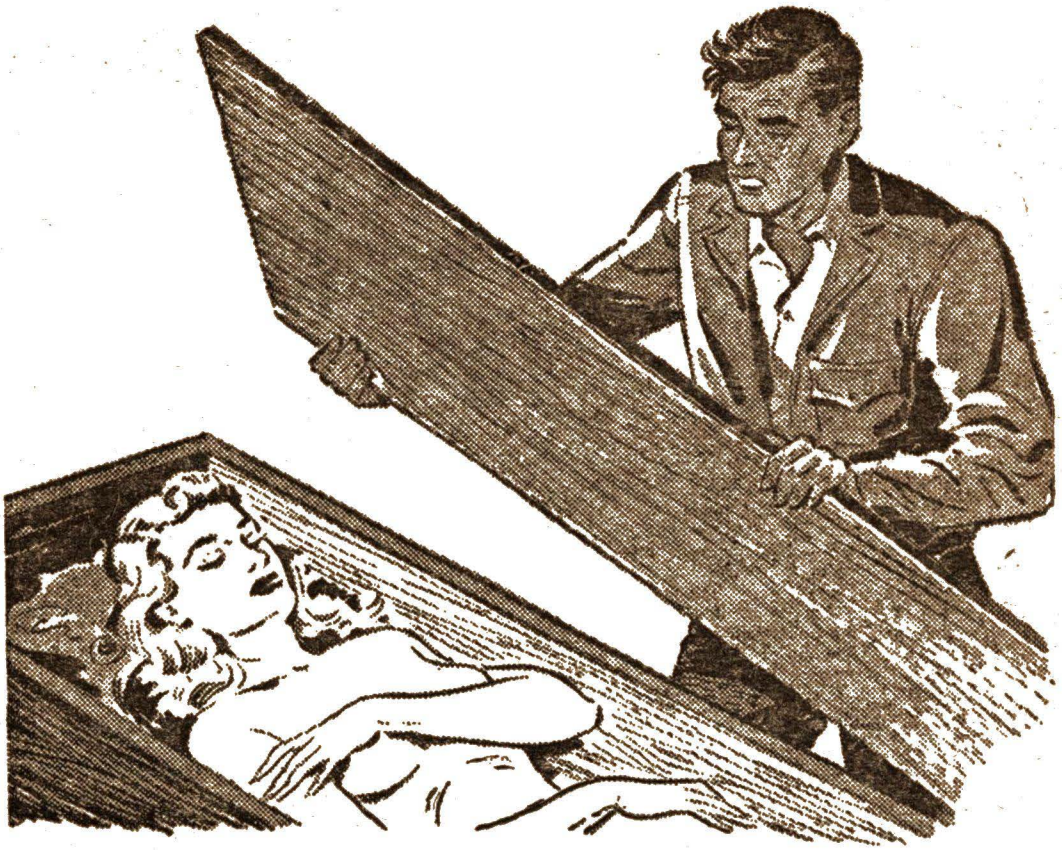
"Has any one a match?" he said.

Guards and stretcher-bearers seemed ready to run. Finally a guard stepped forward and struck a match.

"Gracias!" said Luis, taking the light.

The door was slammed shut in his face. Rapid footsteps retreated down the corridor. One guard reported to the Captain, a moody man who held as many superstitions as the others under his command.

"An act of God," he exclaimed on hearing that Luis was alive. Then he spoke again. "Release the prisoner," he ordered, and the ignorant guard was only too glad to comply.



BUT A KIND OF GHOST

by John Wyndham

SAM TINEWAYS was the first citizen of Yoxburgh to appear on the morning after the storm. He climbed over the sea-wall at an hour when the day was little more than a large dirty patch in the eastern sky. Down on the beach the high wind was still blowing bundles of yellow spume about the shingle that the tide had uncovered. The strand along the wall and the foot of the cliffs was narrow and spray-swept, but feasible. Sam huddled himself into his coat, and set out to plod along it with eyes cast down, intently searching the stones.

Most of the town of Yoxburgh used to stand further east—where, now, the gray waves of the North Sea roll. Immemorially this has been a troubled coast. Its men have had to take on Norsemen, Danes, Saxons, and Dutchmen, Frenchmen, and Germans in turn, but always the most persistent enemy has been the sea—an enemy that has sometimes been slowed, but

who never retreats. Dykes and breastworks, houses and churches have, century after century, fallen before it, and still with every storm the waves carve further into the cliffs on the south side. One by one the cottages up there are undercut and fall into the hungry water while the inhabitants continue their lives of intermittent retreat.

People have been living and fighting around Yoxburgh for so long that they have left a great many traces of the past. When the cliffs crumble curious things often come down with them. After a new fall, a diligent searcher in the shingle may find coins of any date, corroded weapons, bronze pieces of mysterious purpose, and, sometimes, ornaments and jewelry. In the newly exposed cliff face, too, there may be unexpected sights—a scrap of metal catching the light, bones protruding. Once there was a bleached skull which kept up its last sightless stare at the sea for several weeks until another storm brought it down and ground it up in the pebbles.

But it is unusual for the prowlers on the shore to lift their eyes for a moment from their search. It was only to reassure himself that a half-house balanced on the cliff-edge was not about to fall upon him that Sam looked up, and so happened to notice the chest.

One surprising thing about the chest was that it had not already fallen, for it projected near to two feet out from the perpendicular cliff-face, and looked to be held none too firmly. Another thing was the depth at which it had originally been buried—all of ten feet below the surface, Sam reckoned. Even so, and although Yoxburgh's cliffs are modest, that put it out of reach, some fifteen feet above his head.

Sam considered it for a moment. Clearly it must be old, therefore it had possibilities. He looked round quickly to make sure no other searchers were out yet. To leave now would mean abandoning the chance of finding a bit of jewelry that he might give to Mary, or a few loose coins for himself. On the other hand, the box *might* be full of coins and jewelry . . .

He decided to take the risk, and hurried towards the cliff-ladder further on.

Ten minutes later he was sprawled precariously, head and shoulders over the cliff edge, coaxing a noose of rope round the protruding chest with a long rod. Once he had the noose tight, it needed only a few tugs to work the chest loose. There was a ticklish moment when it came free. A small cascade of dirt rattled on to the pebbles. The chest tilted alarmingly, but it remained fast in the loop. Now that he could see the whole of it, Sam found it larger than he had expected.

He looked along the beach. In the distance two blue-jersied men

were climbing over the sea-wall. They would, he knew, start working towards him. It would be unsafe to lower away. On Yoxburgh foreshore finding is keeping, and there were two of them . . . The only thing to do was to try to get it up before they were able to see round the bluff or cliff that hid it from them at present. Sam laid hold, and began to heave . . .

He was blowing and sweating by the time he got it safely over the edge, but as he mopped his brow his very success caused him to regard it with mixed feelings. His ability to pull it up at all argued that there could not be anything very valuable inside—if anything whatever. Nevertheless, it was old, all right, very old, without a doubt. But at the moment he noticed little more about it than that it was fastened with numerous metal bands. His present anxiety was to get it safely away before someone came to ask questions.

Another glance below showed him the two men quite close now, heads bent down and turning from side to side, immersed in the search. Sam thrust the chest under a convenient bush, and set off with an elaborately casual air to borrow a handcart.

* * *

Mary, in a cream-grey coat and with a flowered scarf over her tawny hair, came in while the Tineways family was at breakfast. She smiled at his parents, and spoke to Sam with a slightly managing air.

"Bus goes in five minutes," she said.

Sam gulped the last mouthful, and reached for his cap.

Being a young man in love is an uneasy state at best. Moreover, some young men are younger than other young men, and it was Sam's misfortune to be one of them. And young women are captious. They are apt to have a repertoire of moods they consider suitable in their swains, and times when they require them. There are, for instance, moments when they fancy enterprise, finding constancy and dog-eyed devotion ineffably tedious.—Though when someone like Sam succeeds in screwing down his natural awe of young goddesses and goads himself into a nervous semblance of enterprise it is, inexplicably, never one of these moments. After a series of wrongly chosen moments it becomes increasingly hard to display masterfulness at any moment at all, so that he retreats into unvocal devotion—and that's wrong, too.

"Sam," Mary explained to the Tineways parents, "is taking me to Becwich Fair." And she swept him out.

Mary moved irritably at Sam's side, and raised her voice above the bus noises.

"Not woken up yet?" she inquired, coolly.

Sam roused himself from speculations on the treasures that the chest, now safely deposited in his

own room and disguised under an old sail, might hold for him.

"Just doing a bit of thinking," he protested.

"Do you have to think when you're out with me?" she asked.

There seemed to be several possible angles to that. Sam avoided all of them.

"I been on the beach. Thought I might come across a bit of jewelry or something for you," he told her.

With a faint access of interest, she inquired:

"Find anything?"

Sam hesitated. He would look a fool if there turned out to be nothing in the chest, besides, there were other people in the bus to overhear him.

"No," he said. "But one time I will.".

She gave a small sniff. "I don't know as I'd care for the sort of stuff they find there, anyway. Old fashioned," she said.

Sam sighed a little to himself at the tone of her voice. He wondered how he could stop it from becoming a day of indifferent replies without turning it into one of pet quarrels.

There was, perhaps a chance at the movie they went to that afternoon. At one point in it Sam became aware of a movement beside him. He took her hand. She pulled it away.

"What's the matter?" he asked, but she shook her head.

Afterwards, in the cafe, she asked:

"Why is it you never say things to me like he was saying to her, Sam?"

"Maybe I thinks 'em," said Sam.

"How do I know you think them if you don't say them? I don't believe you love me, Sam."

Something rose in Sam. It struggled beneath the crust of habit and self-consciousness. But the crust held.

"You're talking soft now," he told her.

"Do you love me, Sam?" she insisted.

"Would I be here now if I didn't?" Sam asked.

"You might, easy."

"Not me," said Sam.

He spoke stoutly, but that did not seem to be enough for her. Her face was turned away. She was hurt with him, and he was hurt with himself. Often when she wasn't there he would think of things he would say to her about how she looked and how he felt about her; and then when he was with her they didn't get said. Somehow—well, if he were to say to her what the fellow on the screen had said to his girl it wouldn't sound right: most likely she'd think he was trying to be funny at her expense, and things would be worse than ever. Still, he made an effort:

" 'F course I love you, Mary."

"Really and truly?"

Well, here was the moment: the time to pour out all those things

he had thought of.

"I—" he began, and then stopped. She was looking at him, lips a little apart.

"Yes, Sam—?" she prompted.

His mind was a miserable blank. He could not remember one of those things.

"I—I just told you so," he said, unhappily.

Mary's face kind of died a bit, but she let him take her hand . . .

* * *

The chest was a sturdy affair, not to be opened without trouble and noise. It was necessary for Sam, returning late that evening, to stretch his patience a little further still. In the morning, after his father had left the house, he collected a hammer and cold chisel and retired to his own small room.

Upon examination the thing proved stouter even than he had thought. It seemed first to have been covered with a sheathing of metal to protect the wood. Into this the long tongues of its hinges and other metal strappings had been recessed. Finally, overlaying the whole, and apparently added later, was a tightly clinched framework of heavier metal bands. These were riveted without regard for the hinges, giving the inescapable impression that it was not intended to open at all.

For the first time since his original discovery of it Sam was encouraged: there must, he felt, be something of real value within so much protection. He rubbed away some dirt to find the line of the lid closure, and picked up his chisel.

Cutting through the bands was a longish job. The metal was moderately hard—bronze, it might be, certainly not iron, or they would have rusted away. It was necessary to sever them in six places, and he had barely started on the last when his mother called him down to dinner. She showed no interest in what he had been doing. The hammerings and sawings of menfolk were habitual to them in her experience, and if they seldom produced anything worth while, they did at least keep the men out of her way when they weren't working.

By mid-afternoon Sam had the lid ready to lift. He set the chisel carefully in the crack, gave it a rap or two, and bore down upon it. Nothing happened. He examined the crack more carefully. It appeared to have been caulked and then sealed with a hard, shiny substance. Sam was a patient young man. He spent an hour chipping and scraping it away. The next time he tried the lid creaked and gave. It did not jump up, for the bands passed over the hinges and would have to be bent. His excitement grew. He levered until there was room to get the toe of his boot into the gap. Then he put the fingers of both hands inside the lid and heaved. With a creaking and a cracking and a shower

of flaky dirt it came up.

Sam straightened himself. He took one look into the box. Then he stood staring, blank as a waxwork, in petrified consternation. In all his varied speculations nothing had suggested to him that the chest might contain a body—and that it was the body of a young woman somehow made it worse . . .

It lay in there with lily-white limbs curled like an unopened flower. The toes, knees, hands and face were brushed with a petal pink. Lashes like a filigree of gilt velvet lay on her cheeks. To cover her she had nothing but the capricious serpentines of two thick plaits like golden hawsers.

Sam stood thunderstruck while a variety of sensations tangled inside him in wild competition; in a few seconds he ran through most of the major emotions before panic came uppermost, and set him sweating. All sense of the wonderful or marvellous was swept away by the perception that he had encumbered himself with a body. He had a quick-cut vision of innumerable policemen and officials eagerly disbelieving every word he told them about it. Panic did not wait to consider the enormity, the impossibility of what he now saw; it simply issued an order: 'Sam, get rid of it quick. Let somebody else hold this baby.' And Sam hesitated no longer.

He thrust down the lid, and pulled the canvas round the box to hide it. He could hear his mother safely at work in the scullery as he stole down with the load on his shoulder. It was just luck that his father entered the door as he reached the bottom step.

"Hullo, son. What you got there?" inquired Tineways senior, amiably enough.

Panic is a neglecter of details. Sam could not have looked more put out had he been carrying the corpse openly in his arms.

"Nothin'," he said in a way that made two simple syllables ooze with discomforture and guilt. Even he himself felt the reply inadequate. "Just an old box off the foreshore," he added.

His father's expression changed. He remembered how Sam had looked when caught in youthful misdemeanours.

"Let's have a look," he suggested.

"It's nothing," said Sam. "Just an old box like I told you."

His father twitched the canvas aside. "Aye. It's an old box, all right," he said. "An' what's inside?"

"Nothing," Sam protested again.

The older Tineways' suspicions became firm.

"Look here, my lad. We've always done right by you. Share and share alike it's always been here."

"But there ain't nothing in there, Dad."

"Well, then there'll be no harm in us having a look, will there?"

A hopeless feeling came over Sam. He knew his father with his mind made up. He put the box

down on the floor. At that moment his mother entered from the scullery.

"Bringing that dirty thing in here," she said. "What've you got in it?"

"Nothing. It's empty, I tell you," muttered Sam.

His father took hold of the lid. Sam gave up, and averted his eyes, preparing for the thunder and lightning. The lid creaked as it was raised but the lightning failed to strike. Sam looked down. There she lay, lovely as a statue in tinted shell, pearl mounted with gold.

"H'm," said his father.

Sam goggled. It was the most improbable sound he had ever heard. He looked quickly at his mother, expecting to see her transfixed with horror and outrage. She was not. Her expression was match to his father's grunt. Sam felt his reason sliding. He was not certain of the forms parental reactions might take at the sight of a comely young woman's corpse stowed in a box with none of her beauty hidden, but this seemed to him to be none of them.

"Well?" he said, desperately.

"H'm," grunted his father again. He leant forward and reached down. Sam watched his father's hand hover over the smooth white shoulder, and then descend. It went on descending, disappearing into the milky skin until he heard its knuckles rap on the bottom of the box. Tineways went on to rap the sides. The figure lay in the box unaffected by the arm which by its motions should have dissected her into several parts.

"Queer thing to do a box up like that with nothing inside of it," Mr. Tineways said, ruminatively. He looked hard at Sam's expression of moonstruck vacancy. "Very queer," he added. "Still I'd not be surprised if someone mightn't give quite a bit for the box anyway, seeing as it's old, all right. Put it in the shed, lad, and we'll see about it."

Sam, in a cloudy-minded way, shouldered the box again, and took it outside. Mr. Tineways gave a quick nod to his wife, and slipped upstairs into Sam's room. In half a minute he was down again.

"Nothing up there," he said. "Funny him acting that queer, though."

Out in the shed Sam placed the box carefully on a pile of sacks, and stood staring at it. He hesitated, and then raised the lid again. One thing was inescapably clear—neither his father nor his mother had seen what he saw. He looked down on her. Tentatively he put forward a hand to touch. He hesitated again, it looked like a brutish paw above smooth alabaster. He stretched one finger out gently towards the shining shoulder. It met nothing. The end of it disappeared into whiteness as though it had been cut off. Sam jumped back as if he had been stung. He slammed down the lid, and hurried back into the cottage.

It would have been an immense relief to talk to someone about it. But whom?—And, also, how? You couldn't expect Mary or anyone else to be understanding about a thing like that. Scepticism was the usual thing towards even highly authenticated ghosts. So what could you expect if you were to say: 'I've got a ghost, a very private sort of ghost that nobody can see but me?' Sam knew perfectly well what he himself would think of anyone who came to him with such a yarn . . .

The evening stroll with Mary was more than usually silent. It was clear to her that there was something heavily on his mind; unsatisfactory as Sam might be in several ways, absent-mindedness was not customarily one of them. As a rule he was there right enough, even if he was struggling away inside a sort of thicket of diffidence. She would have liked to help him, but he stayed as shy of the hints she cast as if they had concealed hooks. Their attempts at talk petered into silence before the walk ended. Somehow the parting left her with less of the usual desire to jolt him up a bit, and more of a protective feeling towards him.

* * *

With his mind full of unpleasant possibilities Sam found sleep elusive, though he wooed it first on one side and then on the other for a couple of hours or more. It was around perhaps the fiftieth turn that he caught a glimpse of something white in the beam of moonlight from the window. He blinked, and looked again. Then he lay very still.

She stood there looking at him. She seemed to shine more whitely than ever in the pale light, but she neither hindered it nor cast a shadow.

"You needn't be afraid, Sam," she said—or seemed to say.

That was all very well, but a fright like Sam's was not going to be dissolved by one soft sentence. It took time for his tongue to become obedient enough to ask:

"Wh—wh—who are you?" And his voice was wobbly.

Any ghost is bad enough, but Sam found the pangs of embarrassment added to those of fright. The only naked woman Sam had ever seen before had been a summer visitor sunbathing, and that through a telescope. Somehow this was not at all the same. She had not looked quite so undressed when she lay curled up in the chest. But it was Sam who had all the disadvantage. She stood quite calmly looking at him. Only the ends of the thick plaits moved, swinging slightly.

"My name is Hiltrude," she said, matter of factly.

Sam pulled himself together. He attempted severity.

"You—you didn't ought to be here," he told her.

"You needn't be afraid, Sam," she repeated.

"You're out of that box. You're a ghost," Sam told her.

"Ghost?" she said. "Ghost—yes, I suppose you could call me that."

"Well, I don't believe in ghosts," proclaimed Sam, stoutly.

"No, Sam?" she said, unmoved.

"What's more," Sam continued, "any ghost I ever heard of wore decent clothes, or at least a sheet."

"How strange," she mused. "A spiritual sheet. How very odd!"

Sam regained enough courage to sit up in bed.

"What are you doing here? What do you want?" he demanded.

"What do I want?" she repeated, and lapsed into thought.

With sheer sweet lines, and lucent, like fine porcelain, she stood in reverie while the moonlight glistened on the burnish of her plaits. The gold-fringed eyes of distant blue were looking at him still, but seeming now not to see him. She tilted her head upward and made a little suppliant movement with hands that were like pink petalled flowers on ivory stems.

"What *is* there—for me?" she asked.

Sam's alarm had declined, even his embarrassment was less acute, and his curiosity had increased. What he wanted was a straight answer to a straight question.

"Look here—" he began, forthrightly. She did so, and some of the decisiveness ebbed from his tone. "—I only want to understand what's going on," he ended, on a more plaintive note.

"You shall," she told him. "They said I had an evil star, Sam. They said that it was all because of me that storms arose, that rowers fell sick, that oars cracked, that the boats sprang leaks, that the dragon-ships broke their backs on sand-banks, that the water went sour, that fogs came up, that villages were prepared for us. All these things and many more they attributed to my star. I suppose they must have been right, some of them were wise men, but I didn't make all these things happen, honestly I didn't, Sam. Indeed, I prayed very hard that they shouldn't but things like that went on happening until at last they said they wouldn't take me any further lest they should all be lost. Some of them wanted to send me to Odin with a sword, but others were afraid that my spirit might follow them instead of going to Odin. So they put me into a fine casket, and some of them wept although they were afraid of me and my star. Then they sealed it up so that my spirit should not escape to trouble them. And after they had buried it deep, they sailed away."

Though Yoxburgh folk are used to history that is a living tradition rather than something pressed dry in the pages of a book, Sam was moved to say, doubtfully:

"That must have been a goodish while ago."

She agreed, reflectively: "Yes, I should think so. The world seems to have changed a great deal—and the people, too." She studied

him with a thoughtful frankness which caused him some discomfort.

"I've always heard they talked very different in those days," he said, with pointed suspicion.

"But I'm not *talking* to you, Sam —not as you mean. No one but you can hear me unless I want them to."

Sam reverted to an earlier question:

"What do you want here, anyway?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly so that the golden cables slid on her satin shoulders.

"I don't know yet, Sam. It is clear, since you have set me free that my star still shines: whether or not it is indeed an evil one we shall doubtless find out quite soon. Has any misfortune already overtaken you since you opened the casket?"

"No," said Sam, "and I don't want none, neither. I got enough troubles as it is. You go away somewhere and leave me alone. You've got no right to be here at all—certainly not indecent like that."

She looked down at her shapely breasts and rounded arms.

"Don't you think I look nice, Sam? The world can't have changed *that* much! It must be you that's queer."

Before he could think of an adequate response she went on: "I can decide nothing now. There have been so many changes I must try to understand. I shall watch. I will come again soon."

"Now, look here—" Sam began. But even as he spoke she began in some way to lose definition. She blurred. She contracted into an opalescent pillar trickled with gold. Then she vanished away . . .

* * *

During the days that followed Tineways senior was in no hurry to get rid of the chest.

"With old stuff like this it don't do to jump at the first offer," he told Sam. "Got to feel your way around till you get hold of a chap as knows the stuff when he sees it."

Sam would have been a great deal happier for knowing that the chest was out of the shed at any, or no, price, but as the days and nights continued to pass without incident he was able to reach the point where he could tell himself that the whole thing was a dream —though he did not get quite as far as opening the chest again to check on it.

And then, perhaps a week later, he awoke in the night to find Hiltrude standing beyond the foot of his bed. There was no moonlight this time, but he found he could see her just as clearly as before. She had the same easy grace. She seemed textured as softly as a dove's breast. Her hair shone like gilded silk. But this time her face wore a pensive, rather puzzled expression.

"I have been watching," she remarked. "This is a *very* strange,

place, Sam. And full of strange people, too. The women *look* different—though they are still women. But the men! What has happened to them? Have they become children? Are they slaves? And they don't fight! Why don't they fight? It is very strange. . . ."

"Well, if you'd come a few years ago—" Sam began, but she paid no attention to him.

"The men I knew were strong and fierce. They fought, they took, they were jealous. They loved—and hated. These I have seen here not like that: not *men*."

"Now look here—" Sam began, in protest.

She turned a serious and wondering regard upon him.

"You have told me to look here before. I am not much impressed," she told him, but she continued to look. "You are not much of a man, Sam," she remarked, at length.

"Look—" began Sam again. But she held up a hand, delicate as a silver leaf, to stop him.

"I have watched you," she said. "I have seen you and the others working—sweating like slaves for a few coins, instead of taking what you want, like men. What is wrong with you all?"

"Well—it's kind of different now. Things aren't like that any more," Sam said.

"That," she pointed out, "is what I was telling you. But why?"

"We're—sort of civilized. We—"

"And men cannot even make love any more. That is very sad for women. Now, take your Mary, Sam—"

"You leave Mary alone. She's a nice girl, Mary is—and decent, too," he added, pointedly.

" 'A nice girl'—oh, my poor Sam. Poor Mary!"

"Now, look—I mean, what's it to do with you, anyway? You just keep off it."

"But, Sam, Mary is a woman—a woman who puts a warm heart into your hands for you to make it warmer—and you handle it as if it were a snowball you're afraid of melting. It's dying of exposure, Sam."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I tell you it's no business of yours."

"But she's lonely, Sam. Everyone's lonely. Can't you see she is?"

"No, I can't," Sam growled.

"You must try, Sam—because you're lonely inside too. Do you love her, Sam?—Yes, I think you do, in your funny way. But only in taking love and giving love, Sam, do we ever get, for a time, the sweet illusion of unloneliness. Can you understand that, Sam?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he muttered.

"Then you shall, Sam," she said, in a tone which made him eye her uneasily.

Hiltrude looked down at herself reflectively.

"I can't just stay like this all the time. For it is a lonely thing, too, to be no more than a dream in the wind. I want a form that

I can use and live in. I must take one over. I did think of taking Mary's."

Sam goggled, alarmed though uncomprehending.

"But then," she went on, "I changed my mind. You see, although a woman is altogether nicer and a more alive thing to be —yet it is more convenient to be a man, even in this strange world of yours."

"If you think—" Sam began. But his expostulation was cut off as she turned her face towards him.

"Look at me, Sam," she told him.

Unwillingly he raised his gaze, past the curve of her chin, across the red blossom of her mouth, beyond the delicacy of her nostrils, until he met the far blue of her eyes. After that he could see nothing else. Huge, they grew. Vasty as a summer sky into which he fell, lost, and still more lost . . .

As suddenly as if a switch had clicked, it all stopped. He was back in his room. But he saw it differently, for he was no longer in bed. He was looking down at someone else who was in the bed—at least, it wasn't exactly someone else, it was himself—only he happened to be looking at himself from outside. Very confusing.

The sham Sam, the Sam-usurper, in the bed smiled up at him. The standing Sam lowered his eyes to look down at himself—er—herself? It was—well, it was— He blushed, and averted his eyes, gathering the great golden plaits about him-herself for what modesty they afforded.

• • •

It was not warm; it was not cold; it was not anything much. There was little sense of presence, or of time for the most part, though occasionally something would solidify out of the shiftingness for a while, and become perceptible with true shape. There was no need for rest—yet ever the desire for it: no place to rest—yet everywhere. One was more tenuous than the wind, more insubstantial than a sigh. One floated in the ether like an unformed wish.

Yet there were currents, gently magnetic fluxes to sway one's nothingness hither and thither. One had only to think, and one could be there. Sometimes it was misty and vague; sometimes so real that you could see every detail, hear every word, seeming so solid that you wondered that nobody saw you . . .

Sometimes the persuasion was from outside. Suddenly one came out of nowhere into somewhere, perhaps called by a thought, or, it might be, sped by a wanton list. Sometimes there was reason, at others, none.

But all the time it was lonely . . . lonely . . . lonely . . .

Clearest of all, and the most troubling, were the times when he found himself close to the Sam-usurper and to Mary. The first of these was a considerable shock.

They were close together on a grass bank by a small spinney.

Mary was lying back with her eyes closed, an expression on her face that he had never seen there before. She drowsed in happiness, with the smile of the conquering captive on her lips. The Sam-usurper held the back of her head cupped in his hand. He leant closer to whisper in her ear. One could hear the words he said quite plainly; they were almost familiar, so nearly the things that Sam had rehearsed to himself and never dared to say to her. Her eyes opened slowly, like a lazing cat's; but there was no laziness in their sparkle. They looked up into the Sam-usurper's. She wound an arm about his neck, and pulled his face down against her own:

"Oh, Sam!" she sighed. "My sweet, sweet Sam. Why did you stay so far away from me?"

The enwraithed Sam was filled with an anguish. Things that he had never known before became suddenly clear to him. He felt lonelier than ever. And he felt deeply jealous. But which was he jealous of, the Sam-usurper, or Mary? The man or the woman? It was hard to tell, he had become so mixed up. Some of him was still Sam, all right—but some of him was suffused with the most unfamiliar sensibilities which, surely, must be Hiltrude's. And then suddenly he knew he was jealous of them both—not because either of them was a man or a woman, but because they were both of them, for a time, unlonely . . .

Another time when the Sam-usurper was perfectly clear to him was when he discovered him alone in the shed behind the cottage. The Sam-ursurper was at work on the chest there. He had pulled off the heavy outer metal bands and thrown them aside. He seemed quite unaware that he was not alone. With intent care he was using a screwdriver as a lever to prise up one of the ornamental bindings from its recess. When at length he had some ten inches of it free he worked it backwards and forwards until it broke off. He rolled it up as if it had been a ribbon of lead, pressed it still flatter between his palms, and put it in his pocket. Then he went out.

Sam wanted to follow, but before he could he lost entity. Something seemed to disperse him; he became part of everything once more, like water poured into water . . .

• • •

When awareness took him again, it came differently. He did not just happen somewhere. There was a coercive gathering together, an impulsive thrust, and there he stood, facing his dispossessor.

The room was narrow, white, and lit by one small, high window with bars across it. Almost the only furniture was a shelf of boards against the wall. At one end of it lay a blanket, neatly folded. At the other sat the Sam-usurper, eyeing him moodily.

"This is a very strange world,"

remarked the Sam-usurper.

"You said that before," Sam told him.

"I don't care for it."

"It's good enough for me," said Sam.

"Probably," agreed the Sam-usurper, with a touch of scorn. "Anyhow, your form is no good to me now. It's in prison. So I shall go."

"Prison?" echoed Sam, looking round with a new understanding. "What have you—? he began. But he was not able to finish the question. The Sam-usurper's eyes were fixed on his own, and he was falling, falling towards them . . .

Suddenly he was sitting down, and Hiltrude was standing in front of him.

And, with a catch of his breath, he understood her loveliness as if he had never seen it before. She was the sweet things of the earth, the soft curves of hills, falling water in the sunlight, a flower in Spring. He looked at her a long time.

"Hiltrude," he said. "I didn't understand— You are like a—goddess."

She smiled, but she shook her head slowly.

"Oh, Sam," she said reprovingly. "Have I wasted my time on you? It was nicely meant, but— No woman is like a goddess—she doesn't want to be. So will you please remember that, Sam?"

"All right," said Sam, "but all the same—"

"Good-bye, Sam," she said.

Her white limbs hazed. They mingled with the golden glints of her hair. Her rose-red mouth lost form. The blue of her eyes softened and dispersed. For an instant there was a column iridescent as a pearl. Then there was nothing at all . . .

* * *

A long time later a key turned in the lock, a face looked in, a hand beckoned, and a voice said, "'Ere."

They led him in front of a desk. Sam noticed with relief that the place was not a prison, but the Charge-Room of Becwich Police Station. A sergeant behind the desk looked at him severely.

"Now, my lad, let's have it," he said, not unkindly.

"I don't know why I'm here," Sam told him simply.

The inspector picked up a familiar-looking strip of metal, and laid it on the blotting-pad. Some of the dirt had been rubbed off in places, and where the metal showed it gleamed yellow.

"Did you, or did you not, go to old Soames down the street this afternoon and ask him what he'd give you for this?" asked the sergeant, placing a massive forefinger upon it.

"Er—suppose I did?" countered Sam.

"Suppose you did," agreed the sergeant, "then we'd like to know where you got it. Maybe it's all right, but Soames just isn't used to people walking about with loose

strips of gold in their pockets; nor are we, for the matter of that. Better cough it up, lad."

"All right," Sam decided, and told him about the chest.

The sergeant shook his head.

"You didn't ought to of, you know," he said, in paternal reproof. "There has to be an inquest on things like that to decide who can claim them. You've still got it?"

Sam assured him it was still in the shed at home. The sergeant nodded.

"Well, they tell me from Yoxburgh you're a decent lad," he said. "I've a mind to let you cut along now—on condition you take it round to the local station first thing tomorrow morning—just as it is, mind."

"I—I'd sooner take it round tonight," Sam said.

* * *

The sun was near to setting when Sam, disburdened in both body and mind of the chest, left Yoxburgh police-station and hurried to Mary's home.

The light in her eyes when she saw him at the door was something new—and very precious.

"Come along out," said Sam.

There were still those things that he had wanted to tell her, now he could. And in a grassy hollow, with the twilight settling about them, he did. Possibly the Sam-usurper had told her some of the same things before, but she didn't seem to mind.

Quite a long time passed before they started to wander back. On the cliff path they paused, looking out over the darkling sea. Sam heard her murmur something under her breath. He thought he caught the word "ghost" at the end. His arm tightened round her.

"What was that?" he asked, with misgiving.

She looked up at him smiling. "Something I once found in an old book, Sam. It used to make me cry sometimes because you—Oh, well, that's all over. It doesn't matter any more now."

"But—s o m e t h i n g about a ghost—?" he prompted.

She said, shyly: "I don't mind telling you—now, Sam." And she quoted softly:

"'A naked thinking heart that
makes no show
"'Is to a woman, but a kind of
ghost . . .'"

Sam held her close and kissed her.

"We're forgetting about that ghost from now on," he said.

It seemed like a fine idea.

THE GARDENER

by John Christopher

NORMALLY I do not think I would have considered taking a room in such a street. As all artists must, I have a keen sensitivity to atmospheres. In the dramatic, as in the peaceful, I am at ease. It is only the common-place, the squalid, the ordinary that drags my spirits down and unnerves me. And Winburg Street was only too plainly a striking example of the common-place.

There are many hundreds of streets like it in the outer suburbs of London. It ran off from a fairly busy road; on either side half a dozen petty shops and then the unbroken ranks of early-Victorian, two-storied houses. It is typical of everything I loathe. In such houses, among the antimacassars, the faded pictures of forgotten aunts, the clocks that no longer work and the dusty Presents from Southend, people live their tattered, faded lives, expecting nothing, achieving nothing, hoping for nothing. Even to think of their shadowy existences is an agony. And yet, in that sultry, ominous September of 1940, I found myself living among them.

Between Dunkirk and September there had been the confusing kaleidoscope of the Army machine whirling about me; examining, testing, considering, re-examining, reconsidering, shelving, re-re-considering, and at last monumentally rejecting the cog that would no longer fit with the other cogs. Like a cog the machine spat me out, and like a cog I rolled through the burgeoning chaos of London, unknowing and involuntary, coming to rest at last in Winburg Street under the shadow of Mrs. Greycoot's softly-feathered wing.

I cannot remember now how I came to call at Number 9. Perhaps someone had recommended the house to me, or perhaps Mrs. Greycoot had advertised the room on a post-card in a window, and my weary brain had somehow been attracted to it. Whatever the reason I called, and in a few minutes Mrs. Greycoot was bringing me tea in the parlour, pouring it out from a ridiculously ornamental tea-pot, shaped to resemble a squatting, black cat.

I was searching, I suppose, for comfort after the bleak impersonality of the Army, and comfort there was in the small, anxious, cheerful face of Mrs. Greycoot. She looked like a bird, a grey, feathery, fussy bird. While I sipped the weak, sweet tea she twittered on; about her husband, working all night in the factory down the road, and her only son, soldiering somewhere in the improbable, burning mists of India. As a rule,

she explained, she would not dream of keeping lodgers. But with so much less to do now that Tommy had gone soldiering, and as a palliative against the nervousness of lonely nights by herself in the house. . . . Thirty shillings a week, and I should have Tommy's room, re-decorated for him specially only the year before.

She led the way up a creaky, stair-case, barred with gleaming rods. The room was pleasant enough. A divan bed, a useful writing-desk, even a few reasonable books. And a wide window, gleaming now with the late rays of the sun. I walked across to it to look out. Mrs. Greycoot followed me, clucking apologies.

"I hope you're not nervous about such things," she said. "It's a drawback, I know. But you get used to it in time. We hardly notice it now."

A drawback! I felt like laughing. There it stretched, like the toothy jaw of some great, recumbent beast; a reminder, an inspiration, a hope and an ideal. The sun fell on it gently now, caressing the gilded wings of the angels, quietly withering the flowers.

"No drawback at all, Mrs. Greycoot," I said. "It's an excellent cemetery."

She looked at me doubtfully, but did not pursue the matter.

* * *

And so I found a haven in Winburg Street. Each day as I walked along to Number 9 I used to ponder its ugliness, not knowing whether to weep or rejoice over its squalid solemnity. Stemming, perhaps, from some deep-rooted sense of guilt and inferiority, a feeling has obsessed me throughout my life that it is the ordinary, the average, that is important. The good and the bad, the tragic and the comic, the noble and the base —all these pass by. Only the Ordinary remains, changing from one kind of ordinariness to another, vital and enduring. Even when I laugh at its tawdriness and stupidity, I know that my laughter is rooted in fear.

At nights I would hear the Incredible battering at Winburg Street, whistling and shrieking and hurling itself against it. Mrs. Greycoot and I would cower together beneath the stairs, drinking cooling tea by candlelight, and in the morning there would be, perhaps, another gap along the road. But the ordinariness of Winburg Street always triumphed, and in a few days the sifted rubble had the same tired, permanent air as its surroundings. And from my wide window I would see the vivid gashes of earth as the green was torn away, and see the earth heaped up again and covered with flowers, and at last see the flowers fade. There, in the cemetery, death galloped fast, and offered me, in its passage, some relief from the horror of immutability.

By day, too, studying at the Slade School, I escaped. At first I

looked forward with horror to my return to Winburg Street in the evening. Getting off the bus I would see the grocery shop at the corner and grit my teeth as I walked past it, past Futkumfurt (Shoe Repairs), past Nettle & Son (Florist and greengrocer), past Jas. Barton (Stationer and Newsagent), past Wm. Merry (Butcher), and so to Number 9. Keying the door open, I would run upstairs and gaze out on my marbled and flowering garden.

Over high tea, with Mr. Greycoot risen blinkingly from his bed, Mrs. Greycoot would impress on us the small, exciting doings of the day. Long before I knew any of them even by sight, Mrs. Greycoot's chatter had acquainted me with all the petty tradesmen of the neighbourhood. The scandalous love-life of the fishmonger, the hypocritical religious devotion of the corner grocer, the joyless inebriation of the cabbage-selling Nettle—all these and more were made known to me. With sweet and touching gentleness, Mrs. Greycoot tattered the reputations of them all, and threw them, a many-coloured confetti, across the dining-room table.

Only one escaped her casual destruction. For Mr. Merry, the Butcher, she had only praise. Where in London, she implored, she beseeched us, would one find another butcher so winkingly generous with the meat ration, so open-handed with offal? This liver, yesterday's sheep's heart, tomorrow morning's sausages—all products of Mr. Merry's brimming pantry. Butchers she knew (her head wagged darkly) who didn't have liver twice in three months, who laughed at the mention of sheep's hearts. How fortunate she was to be registered with affable Mr. Merry!

The extravagance of her praise interested me. As I walked to the corner in the morning I looked through the awnings of skinned rabbits and interminable sausages for a glimpse of the impeccable Mr. Merry. Although it was early, there was a small queue of housewives, and at its head, magnificently aproned, flourishing his butcher's knife like the sword Excalibur, stood Mr. Merry. I gazed at him for a moment, before walking on to catch my bus. He was a man of small stature but large proportions. The apron bulged about his cheerful rotundity, his round cheeks glowingly embraced a moderate sandy moustache. Here, if anywhere, was the Priest of the Common-Place, the very sign and symbol of Winburg Street. I walked on morosely, past the jaded newspapers, the reminiscent turnips, the mutely reproachful rows of shoes, past the dummy packets of Shredded Wheat and out into the world beyond.

But as, day by day, the weeks escaped from me, I began to feel a change. I realised I was looking forward to my evening return. I

found myself counting the traffic-lights, joyfully, to the bus-stop, and gazing with a strange, excited wonder at the familiar row of shops. Was the advertisement for Indian tea still in the top right hand corner of the grocer's? Had someone at last claimed the patent-leather dancing shoes from the end of the row in Futkumfurt? Could Mr. Nettle, filled with the strange madness of his profession, have thrown away the cardboard bananas and hung bunches of radishes, like tiny red and green lanterns, about his fragrant-smelling shop? There was a rare joy in finding that nothing had changed. Reflecting on it I would mount the stairs dreamily at Number 9, and lie on my bed until the voice of Mrs. Greycoot twittered me down for tea. Sometimes I did not look at my cemetery for days on end.

And, at last, I joined the Home Guard. It was a triumph for Winburg Street. Standing with rifle and bayonet outside the local Post Office, sitting drinking beer in the guard room with the others, I pondered the depths of my own ignominy. Winburg Street had won. I was assimilated; absorbed into its life and its dull reality. I chatted with Jas. Barton and old Joe Cartwright, whose face was like the leather he nailed on shoes all day. I drank ale with lugubrious Mr. Nettle, and cheerful Mr. Merry.

That strange, monotonous autumn! By day the starry remotenesses of barrage balloons gleamed in the air, twinkling and twirling, reflecting the sun. By night the rivalling stars swung dizzily downwards, plunging, frost-polished, until they seemed to hang only a little way above the hard, cold ground. Sometimes in the morning I would see the sexton and his assistants breaking fresh ground in my sparkling, white garden, and find them, when I returned to Winburg Street in the evening, still bending over the clayey pits. There would be six or seven at a time now, yawning among the aloof marble slabs and the startled angels. And the next day they would be filled, and the sexton and his men would wearily dig again.

One evening, at the Home Guard Drill Hall, I met the local curate. He was a tall, attenuated, nervous young man, submerged like myself in the prevailing tempo of monotony, but still fighting where I submitted, still resentful where I was resigned. He talked of life and death and the resurrection, wielding the words as a shield against the spilled ale and tobacco smoke, the rifles in racks, the discarded boots beneath the bunks. We looked at him, wonderingly. Only Mr. Merry spoke out.

"Life is life," he said, "and death is death, and I should say that both have their uses. Resurrection? What do we want but rest?"

Such noble triumph of mediocrity, whose ultimate achievement

is in that unmoving stasis that is complete, unchanging rest! The curate looked at Mr. Merry, stared and faltered and turned away in horror. We saw him go, through the haze and the beer fumes, out to the syren stars.

"We shan't see 'im again," said Mr. Nettle.

But we saw him only a few days later. The high, indignant death that blundered about the sky fastened one night on Mr. Greycoot. They brought him back to Number 9, and there were soft, feathery tears from Mrs. Greycoot, and the next day, anonymous in khaki, we carried him down through the churchyard gates, and into the cemetery. There, over the plain wooden coffin, the curate mumbled his phrases and Mr. Greycoot, who had slept by day, was committed to eternal sleep and night.

I looked up from the grave. Evening was stirring about us, creaking and whispering and sending dead leaves on futile, fluttering errands. And I saw them facing each other across the ravished earth, the curate and Mr. Merry, the priest of the mysteries and the priest of the common-place.

Then, for a while, there were the bird-like lamentations of Mrs. Greycoot. Her grief was garrulous but not bitter. The curate came one day while we were at tea, and stayed for half an hour, his bony knees drawn up towards the fire, a cup balanced uneasily in his hand. He sat uneasily, not saying much, and we were all relieved when he went.

And, like a warming fire, Mr. Merry came, cheerful and crackling, wooing her grief away with gifts. He brought her liver and brawn, and his own remarkable steak and kidney pies. No mysteries or verities, no spiritual soothing, but the very fabric of life he brought her, and like a bird she forgot the bereaved nest, and returned again, eager, to the bustle of existence.

I watched helplessly as the Ordinary strode with such vigour and triumph across the boundaries of my life. From this, I thought, there could be no apostasy. The ultimate reality was trivial and tawdry—and enduring.

How little we know at the height of our discerning!

Winter was now about us, and although I returned earlier from the School the shadow of night lay on Winburg Street as I reached it. There was a raid on, and at the stop before Winburg Street the bus stayed, shuddering, while somewhere near a bomb fell, shattering the dusk. I felt strange and exalted.

As I got off the bus there was the smell of dust in the air. I ran forward and saw the torn edges of Number 5 and Number 9, leaning towards each other across the dusty ruin that had once been Mr. Merry's shop. Already men were swarming about it, pulling away girders and bricks, hunting

for whatever lay beneath. I joined them, and we worked together while the day faded all round.

I saw him scrabbling beside me, long and stooped, bending forward with jerks. His face, above the curate's collar, was grey and twisted in some vast emotion. I heard him mutter, thickly:

"The hammer of God. The inescapable hammer of God!"

And I suddenly knew my mistake.

Two prophets, two priests, I thought confusedly. The priest of the mysteries and the priest of the common-place. Opposing priests they were, indeed, but which was which? I straightened my back and looked at the curate, and knew him for a good, God-fearing, *ordinary* man.

Someone held up a bloody fragment of flesh, and turned and was sick. Jas. Barton laughed.

"Don't get excited, lads. Remember this was a butcher's shop."

I saw the curate's grey face and, as I bent near him, heard him gabbling Latin. We dug on silently, through the rubble of bricks and sausages and wood and joints of meat and glass, down to the cellar that might have saved our Mr. Merry.

We reached the cellar, and scrambled through its ruins to find him. He lay as though asleep, beside a long, wooden chest. As the others bent over him, I watched the curate. I saw him open the chest, and stagger back, as when an expected terror is by its realization made more terrible.

Bending forward I directed my flashlight into the chest. It held only tools, a pick and a shovel, still caked with wet earth.

I looked at Mr. Merry. He lay on his back, defenceless, with his hands resting palm-upwards by his side. And, looking at the thick ridges across them, across those pudgy, calloused hands, I knew the full story of the curate's horror.

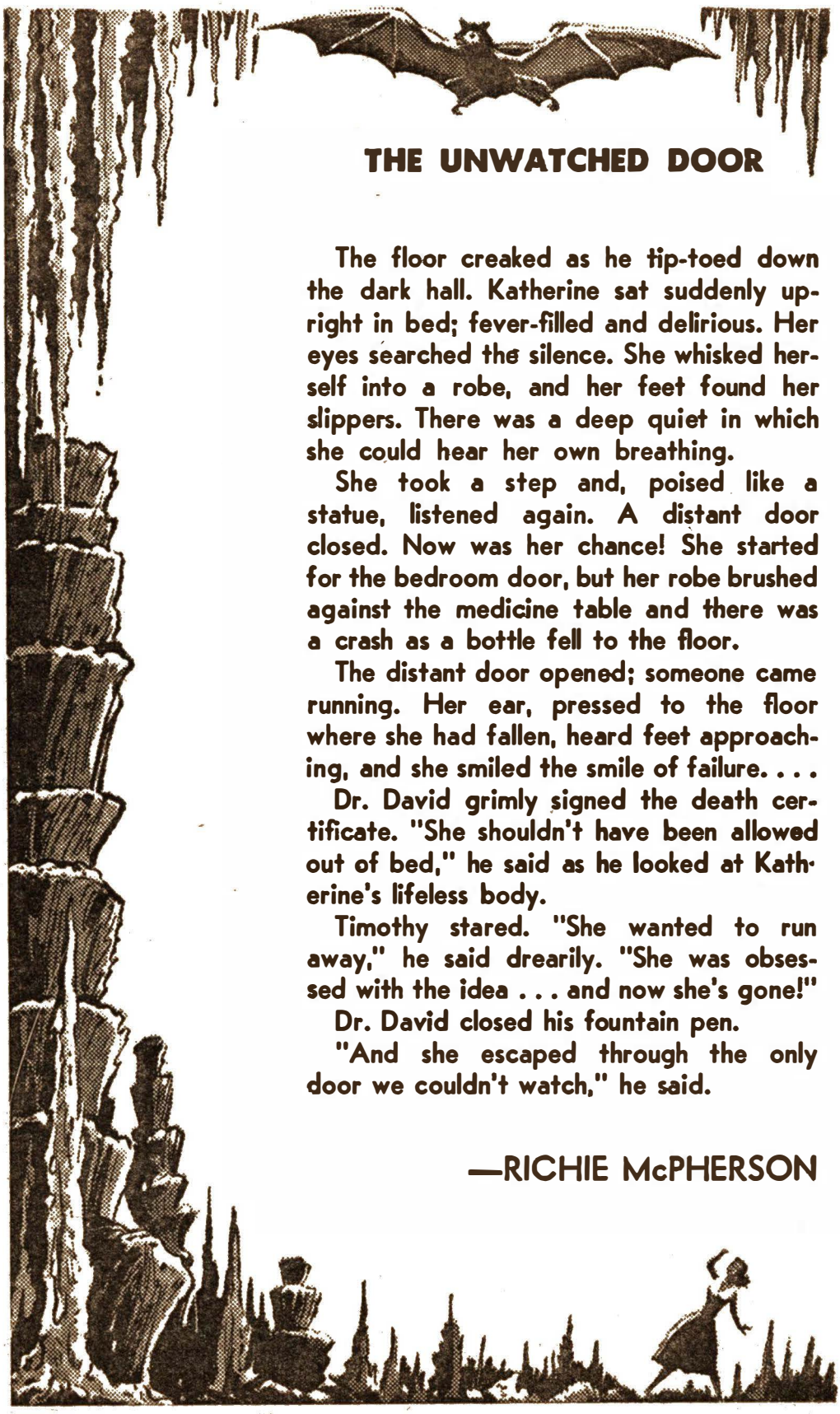
I do not judge nor condemn. We act according to our lights, and none knows from what dim swamp his flickering light arises. The strange ways of war have strange effects. Poor Mr. Merry, with the women flocking round him, beseeching, begging, imploring for the little extra ration! I remembered the words I had heard him say:

"Life is life and death is death, and I should say that both have their uses."

As they lifted Mr. Merry up from the cellar, one of his hands fell into the beam of the flashlight. I looked again at its horny hardness. He had been, after all, a simple soul. People had demanded and he had provided, digging through lonely hours for the strange fruits of his garden.

I turned my eyes away from Winburg Street. The marble slabs glimmered in the starlight, the tiptoeing angels seemed to beckon.

Night had fallen on Mr. Merry's garden.



THE UNWATCHED DOOR

The floor creaked as he tip-toed down the dark hall. Katherine sat suddenly upright in bed; fever-filled and delirious. Her eyes searched the silence. She whisked herself into a robe, and her feet found her slippers. There was a deep quiet in which she could hear her own breathing.

She took a step and, poised like a statue, listened again. A distant door closed. Now was her chance! She started for the bedroom door, but her robe brushed against the medicine table and there was a crash as a bottle fell to the floor.

The distant door opened; someone came running. Her ear, pressed to the floor where she had fallen, heard feet approaching, and she smiled the smile of failure. . . .

Dr. David grimly signed the death certificate. "She shouldn't have been allowed out of bed," he said as he looked at Katherine's lifeless body.

Timothy stared. "She wanted to run away," he said drearily. "She was obsessed with the idea . . . and now she's gone!"

Dr. David closed his fountain pen.

"And she escaped through the only door we couldn't watch," he said.

—RICHIE McPHERSON

THE FRIGHTENED

STARRING BORIS KARLOFF . . .

You can now hear Boris Karloff in "The Frightened," a gripping, eerie series of strange, haunting tales. Below is just one of the many macabre mysteries which will be told by the Master of Mystery on your local radio station. . . .

KARLOFF: Are you one of the frightened?

Listen to a story of terror . . .

There are things that happen to us in our infancy that never can be quite explained. How many times have you wondered and pondered about something that occurred many years ago? Something for which your adult mind can make no explanation? Oh, you can visit a psychiatrist and he'll blandly say you had too much ice cream that night—or possibly you mixed pickles with milk. But—judge this particular tale for yourself. It happened to William Welles when he was only ten years of age. And the same thing happened every night when Mr. Sporko came to visit his parents. . . . . .

The Welles home was a quaint cottage on the Surrey Road in England. Mr. and Mrs. Welles were a couple devoted to the occult and mysterious. Their home was a veritable shrine of Bhuddas and Sivas and ancient deities. Strange paintings and carvings of long-dead civilizations hung from the four walls. But to their small son, William, the house was a wondrous playground. To his childish eyes, the Welles home was a riot of color and design. It was almost like the carnival that came down the Surrey Road once every year. And on Saturday night, an hour before midnight, Mr. Sporko would come. Funny little Mr. Sporko with his black coat and bald head and shiny glasses. Mr. Sporko always visited the Welles' on Saturday night. And little William looked forward to his coming. Because Mr. Sporko always had a bag of jellybeans and funny stories for little William. But then the clock would approach twelve and Mother Welles would get up, clap her hands and smile: "Say good night to Mr. Sporko." And William would dutifully rub the sleep out of his eyes and toddle upstairs to bed. And the big living room door would slide shut and William would go to bed eternally wondering what Mr. Sporko and his parents did after he had gone to sleep. He never saw Mr. Sporko leave either. Oh, many was the night he tried to stay awake to see the funny little man depart but always it got late and he was fast asleep in his bed before he could watch him go. And so it went for

a whole year. Come Saturday night, Mr. Sporko would arrive, play with William until close to midnight and then Mother Welles would urge her son to "Say good night to Mr. Sporko" and the fun would be at an end. *"Say good night to Mr. Sporko."* It became almost a litany to little William. The words would puzzle around in his head until he fell into sleep. And then in his mind, the thing grew. Like all small boys, William Welles had to find out for himself. So one Saturday, he made plans and followed them through with great cunning. He ate lightly all day, napped for the better part of the afternoon. So when Mr. Sporko put in an appearance, he was well rested. Mr. Sporko's bag of jellybeans were thrust in a pocket and untouched. Finally, Mr. Sporko and Father Welles went into the living room and Mother Welles said: "Say good night to Mr. Sporko," again. William dutifully did and marched upstairs. But when the big living room doors rumbled shut, he stealthily crept back downstairs and eased himself up to the oaken doors. William's heart beat like a tom-tom. He was only a small boy, you see, doing something he knew he shouldn't. A strange flurry of voices sounded behind the closed doors. William drew closer. He was on the eve of the greatest discovery of his life. Now, he would know what went on while he slept in his room upstairs. Slowly, eagerly, he inserted his small fingers in the crack that separated the doors. Gently, silently, he drew them inches apart. The strange voices picked up in volume. Light streamed out from the inner room and William Welles, aged ten, peered in . . . . . perhaps like the psychiatrist you'll say what he saw was a small boy's vivid imagination or a bad diet . . . or fever . . . but William Welles saw a scene from Hell . . . Mr. Sporko was dressed all in black; his bald head gleamed with a crown of roses. Mr. and Mrs. Welles were kneeling before him stark naked, their heads flung back while Mr. Sporko read aloud from a massive, black book. But far more terrible—the room was thronged with people. Strange people in still stranger clothes. People with faces like skulls; thin, haunted spectres of the graveyard. William Welles screamed and fainted . . . . . there would be nothing more to the tale except for the simple, irrevocable fact that William Welles never saw his father and mother again. Or Mr. Sporko. It was as if the earth had swallowed them up. And no one ever believed the poor little orphan's tale about the mad party he had witnessed when he peered through the living room door . . . . . well, that's all there is to the story . . . but before you retire . . . before you go to your bed . . . *won't you say good night to Mr. Sporko. . . . . .?*

THE SINGULAR OCCURENCE AT STYLES

by Alan Henry

HISTORY will attest that Mr. Newsome Holder was insane, although his was a form of insanity which did not manifest itself in various bizzare symptoms, but in one single act conceived dispassionately and with amusement in what Mr. Holder regarded as his clear, superior mind. He looked quite ordinary, in fact, this A m e r i c a n — perhaps a bit fat around the waist and gray around the ears, but excellently dressed, for he had inherited a fortune from his mother and had never done a day's hard labor in his life. Those who noticed—and not many did—recognized him as a tourist, a sight seldom seen in this tiny English hamlet of Styles, a short distance from London, but a sight in no way frightening or unusual.

Mr. Holder stood at the upward end of the cobbled High Street, gazing with affection at the collection of shops under the drowsing May sun. On a hill in the distance glistened the windows of a very large manor house. Mr. Holder felt his pulses beat a bit faster, for this was indeed the perfect setting in which to fulfill himself.

Mr. Holder was planning to commit murder in Styles.

He had experienced, via years of leisure and nearly unlimited funds, every sensational pleasure of which man is capable, save one. Now at last, since all other peaks had been left far below, he was ready to ascend this final pinnacle, and kill another human being for the sheer intellectual joy of finding out how one felt as one did it.

Picking up his traveling bag, the last sounds of the rattling bus which had brought him out from London dwindling from his hearing, Mr. Holder proceeded down the street, past the greengrocer's, past a stationer's, to an inn over whose doorway hung an iron sign bearing the words, The Red Bull. How *English!* thought Mr. Holder rapturously. How ancient, how connotative, how typical! Almost literally quivering, Mr. Holder entered and engaged a room from the landlord.

He lunched joyously on ale and cold mutton and then retired to his rented chambers on the second floor, overlooking the High Street. A couple of boys could be seen throwing a red rubber ball and catching it, while a shambling collie leaped at their heels. No sound came to Mr. Holder's ears save the bark of the animal, and that seemed so faint as to belong in a dream. The manor house on the hill might at any moment, in Mr. Holder's view, have become frenzied with activity as a troop of be-plumed Cavaliers rode into its yard. The miniature village summed up perfectly for him hundreds of years of tradition.

Mr. Holder looked at his watch. Quarter past two. He planned to wait until nightfall before committing the murder, but one did have to be prepared. He opened his valise, and in turn opened a blue velvet box in which reposed a keen-bladed knife. Mr. Holder sat in the sun at the window, running the fatty ball of this thumb along the razored blade.

Like many, Mr. Holder regarded the grass on the opposite side of the fence as greener. He had for several years contemplated an intellectual murder, but was undoubtedly too close to his native America to appreciate the aesthetic values of a trunk homicide or blackjack assault. Then too, being somewhat of an intellectual, he despised the lurid treatment given such murders by the American newspapers.

For more years than he could count. Mr. Holder had been what was vulgarly known as a fan of the British detective novel. He cared nothing about the titles or the authors or the puzzles, but delighted only in the remarkable way in which murder in England, at least in books, seemed so polite, so rational, so un-crude, so purely cool and restrained. He had pored over maps, selecting at last the name of a small village whose sound summed up all his feelings for what England must be like, and so here he was, actually in Styles, and thrilled at the prospect of killing in the perfect environment.

He planned to treasure the newspaper accounts. It would be referred to as a "Singular Occurrence at Styles," or, at its most sensational, "Startling Happening at Styles." Always the tone of wonder, yet admirably controlled, as if the mood of the entire nation toward murder could be summed up in the placidity of a group of Oxford dons taking tea.

The sun sank lower, and when it had finally set, and a fragrant spring night covered Styles, Mr. Holder left his room with the knife in his pocket. He strolled past the upward end of the High Street, and at length saw a young man come pedalling along on a cycle. Mr. Holder hailed him and inquired the time. The young man courteously responded, although letting it be known that he was already late for an engagement at the home of his sweetheart. Mr. Holder then managed to draw him from his cycle on the pretext of getting a light for his cigar.

As the young man bent forward obligingly with his hands cupped around the match's flame, Mr. Holder stabbed him through the chest several times.

Mr. Holder then dragged the corpse and the cycle to the edge of the road, and commenced to disfigure the former with his knife, in a fashion his palpitating brain could only think of as singular. He left the knife by the corpse, and the corpse where it would cer-

tainly be discovered by daylight, and walked back to The Red Bull.

Mr. Holder found himself desperately wishing to tell someone about the crime, so that he could experience the intoxicating magic of English reaction. The innkeeper was not momentarily present, and there was only one customer, a man of forty or thereabouts, wearing a tweed jacket and smoking a pipe. The man, whose name happened to be John Richardson Ford, had a tankard of ale at his elbow, and glanced around pleasantly as Mr. Holder entered.

"Hello there," said Ford. "I heard we had a visitor in Styles."

"I am the visitor. My name is Newsome Holder."

"Ford's mine." They exchanged handshakes.

"I just killed a man," said Mr. Holder.

"Excellent!" Ford laughed. "That's always profitable. Hope you did it in a novel way. Getting damned hard to be clever any more, isn't it?"

"This one, I am sure, is . . . singular," said Mr. Holder. He described briefly the crime he had committed. He was disturbed, however, by the frown on the brow of Ford. "Is anything the matter?" Holder inquired at the last.

"Well, I hate to say this when we've only just met, and don't know anything about one another, but if you want to startle the populace of Styles, you're going to have to do a bit better than a poor swain butchered in the ditch. Of course if you're interested in establishing a certain mood it might go, but I really don't think it's awfully clever." Ford clapped him on the shoulder. "Mind you, I know that sounds a bit lordly, but I believe that honesty can avoid many mistakes. Your little crime sounds too gangsterish, too American, if you see what I mean."

Mr. Newsome Holder was stricken. He did not know if he could stand to hear Ford speak further. But Ford continued goodnaturedly, "Why, only last Tuesday, Miss Crisby, at tea, concocted a fiendish little killing involving a large mirror, a pistol and a doorbell. Mike Ginnis is mapping one out in which he's going to use a baby's perambulator as an engine of death. I say!" Ford exclaimed. "I really think I have said too much. You look as if everything had just gone smash."

"No, no . . ." muttered Mr. Holder. "Quite all right. Must have air."

And he lurched out into the High Street and reeled toward the upward end, past the last shop, to the sylvan spot where the forever late swain lay bleeding on his cycle. Mr. Holder's master scheme had proved empty, and his mind could not hold up beneath the battering of that realization.

Muttering to himself, Mr. Holder searched about in the grass for the knife, torturing himself by thinking, "Not singular, not singular at

all." At last he closed his fist round the handle of the knife, and turning toward the mellow, glowing lights of The Red Bull, he exclaimed, "May God damn this community of devils." He was actually crying as he said this, and immediately he raised the knife.

Aware of his own miserable luck at being cast among madmen, he ended his own life with a brief stroke of the knife.

"A real murder!" exclaimed John Richardson Ford next evening in the public room of The Red Bull. "I . . . I had no idea. Such things don't happen in this part of the world, except on paper."

P. C. Finch, laboriously writing out his report on the bar, said, "I found the body myself. I mean the bodies. What the blazes did you say to him, Ford?"

Ford scratched his chin reflectively. "Now that I look back, it's damnably like one of my own books. It's not what I said, but the perspective in which I said it. No one ever comes to Styles except publishers and literary agents and those few—very few—tourists who are either devotees of novels such as Miss Crisby and Mike Ginnis and I write, or amateurs attempting to write similar works. Even though this Holder was clearly no good, I feel damned guilty, because I assumed he knew about the little colony of writers here at Styles, or he wouldn't have come. So when he said he'd 'killed' someone, I was delighted. I thought he was talking, as we do around here, about a book he was writing. You know, Finch—you've been at some of our get-togethers."

Finch nodded. "The conversations are always most amusing, sir. 'I killed the Duchess in the most ingenious fashion this morning. My publisher is certain to be pleased.' Poor devil. He never stopped to think that murders that are—what did'y say was the word he used —singular?—murders that are singular are always more singular in books than in real life."

"I can't imagine, though," Ford said, "why an American would come to England just to commit a murder. Personally I've always felt that a body thrown down a lift shaft in someplace like Kansas City would be a hell of a lot more colorful."

"My feelings exactly, sir."

Ford sighed. "But then there's always danger, when you write about something with which you're not familiar."

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