

Tales That Will Take You To Your Wildest Dreams

WEIRD

NO. 2 • WINTER

MYSTERY

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CALL ME MONSTER

by G. L. Vandenberg

THE IDOL

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by Ursula K. Leguin

SOLOMON'S DEMON

by Arthur Porges

THE

MATING SEASON

by Wilton G. Beggs

A NIGHT WITH HECATE

by Edward W. Ludwig

NO HARM DONE

by Jack Sharkey

HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

by Wilson Kane



A slow, deep, tired voice: ". . . weren't for
a woman, I wouldn't be drunk."

See A NIGHT WITH HECATE



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| | |
|---|-----|
| CALL ME MONSTER, G. L. VANDENBERG..... | 4 |
| DARKNESS BOX, URSULA K. LEGUIN..... | 48 |
| A NIGHT WITH HECATE, EDWARD W. LUDWIG..... | 56 |
| SOLOMON'S DEMON, ARTHUR PORGES..... | 71 |
| THE IDOL, A. BERTRAM CHANDLER..... | 81 |
| NO HARM DONE, JACK SHARKEY..... | 94 |
| HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY, WILSON KANE..... | 99 |
| A LESSON FOR THE TEACHER, ROBERT BLOCH..... | 110 |
| THE MATING SEASON, WILTON G. BEGGS..... | 121 |

Cover by ED. VALIGURSKY
"CALL ME MONSTER"

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Hatred, violence and death became the

*All the injustices of his past
crowded in on him—changed
him—until he could only snarl
at the world and scream,
“Okay! Go ahead—”*

CALL ME MONSTER

By G. L. VANDENBERG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

HE CROUCHED in the corner of the closet, a frightened shriveled up little creature. He hugged his knees close to his trembling body. In his pathetic desperation he wanted to become smaller and smaller until he would be nothing. For, in the torment of those days and hours, in which, he was sure, centuries had passed, becoming nothing was the only escape he could conceive of.

In the forbidding blackness Time and Space were smothered until he imagined he was no longer in the closet. He was lost. Lost in a terrifying, desolate corner of the Uni-



order of things.

verse, in whose cruel blackness not even the eyes of God could see.

Lost and alone and having nothing, no one to turn to, he wanted to cry. But fear was his master. And the instruments of fear were sadistic and deceptive. They replaced the torment in his sensitive mind with a moment of pride and courage. He was a big boy now and too old to cry. He would be eleven years old in two months, if Time ever began for him again, and now he must be brave and not cry.

She would not like that. She wanted him to cry and if he didn't she might keep him there forever. But he wouldn't cry. He would remain crouched. And the terror would mount. And he would wait, wait for the one excruciating moment she knew he was waiting for. More than anything else he hated the frustrating moments (or was it years or days or months?) of waiting and not knowing when!

Then, after all the time that had ever been had passed, and it seemed eternity was behind him, she would remove the adhesive tape from the keyhole. A tiny speck of light would gush through, as though God had hurled a star into the

midst of his black loneliness, to warm a silent tear on his cold and forgotten face.

Then the door would open. An ocean of blinding light would fall in upon him, forcing him to hug the bare wall and bury his head deep in a corner. He would hear her foot tapping on the hard floor and the terror would multiply a million-fold. When he turned his head and conditioned his eyes to the stinging glare she would be standing there, an ugly vision of triumphant smugness. She would have her arms stiffly folded and her head cocked to one side. He would see the tight grotesque grin and the pale fleshy step-ladder of chins that hung loosely above her lace collar. She was a giant of a woman, straight as a steel rod and impenetrable. He could not remember ever seeing her smile.

His father had taught him it was not right to hate. It was only easy. The gift of divine forbearance was something a man should never lose.

He wanted very much, in these awful times of punishment, to hate his Aunt Sarah. But the still fresh memory of a tolerant, warm-hearted old man, whose passing he deeply mourned, was ever present to guide him toward a form of forgiveness.

He would emerge from the closet, stiff and hungry. When she asked if he had learned his lesson he would say yes, though he never was quite sure what the lesson was. In the sanctuary of his own soul he would forgive her. He would tolerate her. But he would never in his lifetime come to understand the insane logic of her discipline.

For Jeffrey Barton the closet remained a coherent, throttling reality. He accepted the punishment and the restrictions she placed upon him. Yet, even as his young mind experienced the first rewards of flexibility, he still failed to comprehend the logic of her action.

He could not conceivably be as different from other children as she seemed to think he was.

"Sinful! Sinful! A child with your background!" was her reaction when she caught him chewing bubble gum.

Possession of a sling shot brought a more vehement reaction. "A barbaric instrument! You dishonor your father's grave! Infidel! Little infidel!"

And, for sneaking off to play with the kids on Front Street: "Animals! They're nothing but animals! Dirty little street

urchins who'd murder you as soon as look at you! How your mother would grieve for you, cheapening yourself this way. You have a little of the animal in you, young man!"

His days stretched into weeks, his months into seasons and years.

And, as Aunt Sarah clipped the wings of Time, she cruelly accelerated the torment of his mind. She was racing the motor while the automobile was stinging still. He could not realize he would never be free from 'sin' because 'sin' was anything she chose to make it.

Inevitably the time arrived when he realized it was no longer possible to endure the agony. He would never be able to please her. She was an impregnable fortress that, spiritually and mentally, existed in a world he could not reach, a world totally alien to the one his father had brought him into.

In his pathetic capitulation, unaware that even Aunt Sarah could not bring Time to a standstill, he foresaw for himself a life of exile in the closet; a chamber of horrors in which there would be no peace of mind; and finally a tomb in which there would be *eternal* peace of mind.

It was on a cold, rain-swept

October afternoon that a germ of hope reentered his life.

Obedying instructions from his guardian he went to the library, which constituted a separate wing of the house. Aunt Sarah was seated behind the great oak desk that had been his father's. Her hands were primly folded on the blotter in front of her. Her face, as his conscious memory had always known it, bore no expression.

"Sit down, Jeffrey. Take your hands out of your pockets."

She rarely completed a sentence without criticizing him for something. This was her most dominant characteristic and in seven years he had come to loathe it.

He obeyed. He always obeyed.

When he was seated and his hands were folded properly on his lap, she began.

"Jeffrey, you have reached the age of sixteen. If you can learn the lesson of goodness and self-discipline there might someday be valid reason to believe you are an intelligent, growing young man. You are too old now to be placed in the closet for your sins."

It was impossible for him to hold back the smile that parted his lips.

"I wouldn't consider this news as cause for jubilation just yet. There is no reason for me to believe you won't continue to live as errantly as you have in the past . . ."

"Yes, Aunt Sarah."

"Don't interrupt." She gave her hands an angry twist. "Personally I don't believe your confinement to the closet has ever taught you a blessed thing. So you must understand that you will not be immune from punishment when you misbehave in the future. Quite the contrary. The penalty is liable to be even more severe. After all, you may (as well face it), you're old enough to know better now."

She went on talking but he was unable to hear her. The severity of future punishment bore no impact. She could draw upon every source of energy in her versatile, pestilent mind and never be able to devise anything as strangulating as the closet had been to him. An unspeakable joy crept through every fiber of his being.

Several million dollars.

The words dashed themselves against the first tender thoughts he had enjoyed in seven years. For a moment all was confusion. Then he was aware that she was still talking, saying something about

an enormous amount of money. He listened.

“. . . and your father was the dearest, kindest person I ever knew in this world. I gave my sacred word to him that you would be reared in the same Christian tradition that has brought dignity and honor to the Bartons since they first landed on these shores. You must realize your father was an immensely wealthy man. Exactly *how* wealthy is not your business at the moment. When you become twenty-one every last penny of that wealth will be yours. And my job will be finished. I pray to God in Heaven that you will take advantage of the upbringing I've given you and uphold your father's good name.”

Jeffrey wished she would stop praying to God in Heaven and just tell him *how much* money. He quickly forgave himself for the irreverence of the wish and went on half-listening, half-dreaming as she concluded her lecture.

Two such surprises in one day came close to erasing the bitterness of seven years. But not quite close enough. For as he approached the door on his way out of the library, something impelled him to turn and look at his aunt. She was still sitting at the desk, rigid as

always. For just a split second an infinitesimal smile played on her pale lips. Then her face was without expression again. In that moment, in his freshness of mind, Aunt Sarah took on a new aspect.

How curious, he pondered, that on the day she was obliged to inform him of his inheritance she also chose to dispense with the use of the closet.

For the first time in his brief life Jeffrey Barton had a thing to look forward to. Time itself responded to his rejuvenation by resuming a normal pace. That, by Jeffrey's standards, was something akin to lightning-like swiftness.

The five years were by no means pleasant. Only fast.

As a human being Aunt Sarah did not show any improvement. She did grant him limited freedom of movement but her warped devotion to discipline remained unchanged. Chastisement was still available in a variety of forms and for an even wider variety of reasons. She continued to passionately chisel away at his sanity.

At the age of eighteen Jeffrey was thrust headlong into the social arena, a part of his life which had been in the planning stages for as long as

Sarah had been his guardian. How many times had that strident horn of a voice pummeled his ear drums, stressing the importance of his future social obligations? And how many times had two days banishment to the closet of correction blighted his comprehension of that importance?

He understood now the *why* of the closet. He understood but he would never forgive. He understood the discipline, the nurses, the doctors, the tutors, the insipid poise lessons. He understood that all these were necessary to paste together a synthetic body with a remote controlled brain, both to function in a manner befitting his station in life.

But Aunt Sarah had committed a grave strategic error.

The closet.

There was no forgetting that.

His twenty-first birthday was a social event of grandiose proportions. He was the center of attention in Hamilton Square, the axis around which the social set rotated. Overnight he had become everybody's *best* friend. He had, as Aunt Sarah informed him five years earlier, inherited "every last penny" of the Barton fortune. There wasn't a richer man in the city of Salem.

Vera Stevens was a vital part of the long range plans Aunt Sarah had worked out for him. It had never been mentioned but he supposed Vera would someday be his wife just as she would someday be the richest woman in Salem.

But somehow Vera did not disturb him as much as the others. She was a trifle haughty and prone to shock at the flimsiest display of bad taste, but she showed understanding and consideration. He wanted nothing more than that.

It was at Vera's lawn party that he thought back over the last five years. He recalled the many times, when he should have been studying or practicing the piano, but was actually dreaming of the revenge he would someday wreak upon his oppressor. How succulent and cleansing revenge would be, he told himself.

The birthday came as a major letdown.

He sought no revenge. Alarm spread through him when he realized he never would.

And there was no release. He felt no more freedom than he had ever known.

He was astonished and disenchanted and then angry. He

had been so sure that Aunt Sarah had full knowledge of his intended retribution. She would tremble as he approached her on *his* day. He would delight in telling her he was cutting her off without a cent and putting her in the street. Every part of him would glow with radiant joy as she fainted dead away at the news.

There was no joy. She did not tremble or faint away. He did not cancel her long established allowance.

As a meager substitute he merely escorted her away from the other guests, saying he wished to speak with her. When they were alone he made a determined effort to unnerve her. His eyes narrowed into a resentful stare. His mouth was taut, ready to spring open to release his imprisoned feelings. A long, terrible moment passed.

She waited. Not a muscle moved in her grim withered old face. Another moment. He grew rigidly tense. He stuffed his hands into his pockets to conceal clenched fists. He did not speak.

She did.

"You needn't play cat and mouse with me, Jeffrey. Speak your piece and be done with it. And take your hands out of your pockets."

He spoke but his words were without meaning. Their positions were reversed, he told her. He felt there was room enough in a twenty seven room house for both of them but he would appreciate it if she kept out of his affairs. He would *appreciate* it! How could he use such a word with her? How polite could he be with the person who had so utterly disengaged his individuality?

He had spoken his inadequate piece and now he watched as she walked, proud and erect, back to the guests at the lawn party. She had not even answered him. Her face had not revealed the slightest sign of disturbance or surprise. Nothing. She knew all along he would want his revenge. He was right about that. But she also knew, when the moment came, he would fail. Why did she know! What in God's name was the extent of the injury she had done him!

He stood there gazing after her, his mind frozen with a fear he had once known and thought he would never know again. He wanted to run after her, throw her to the ground so he could tower over her and tell her to get out of his life. He didn't do it. He only felt

like a poor fool, thinking of dominance in terms of height. Aunt Sarah thought of it in terms of power. She was right.

The money was his. The position, the mansion, the luxuries, the friends, the tradition, the multitudinous things that would avail him nothing were all his.

Hers was the power.

As he looked across the lawn at the crowded party the guests became blurred and grotesque. Somewhere, lost in that blur, lurked his evil maker, teacup in hand, holding forth over two or three guests, outlining the next stage of his development.

How he hated her! How he loathed her! But how helpless he was to fight her.

Whatever morale he had been able to gather just before the birthday was quickly shattered afterward. There were three servants in the house. Beyond that he was alone with her in the expanse of twenty-seven rooms. She rarely put in a physical appearance anymore, preferring the isolation of her room. But he did not have to see her to know that she remained the source of his living nightmare. He was unable to make a move without her knowing about it. Her advice and comments

would then be transmitted to him via the servants.

His enormous material wealth was useless to him in his inner struggle. The money only elevated him to the titular leadership of a ritualistic, tradition-bound society. He wanted neither the leadership nor the society itself. But it was his obligation, his ridiculous eternal obligation to rule the aristocratic roost.

He strove to meet the countless petty demands of his new life, knowing he could never succeed because he could never believe as they did. They were shallow, stagnant creatures. Their flat world began and ended in Hamilton Square and one ventured beyond its limits at the risk of falling into empty space.

But he was born into Hamilton Square and it was as much his world as theirs. In the gloom of this knowledge he sank to the depths of despair. Out of despair grew instability. His nerves were on edge every waking hour. He began to have difficulty sleeping. And when he did sleep he dreamed.

He dreamed about the closet.

Not until after the rumor started did he first see the image.

The rumor didn't disturb him. It was typical of the pettiness of Hamilton Square.

In the course of his mental decline his temper had divorced itself from all reason. Every social gathering he attended was sure to witness, at any given time, a display of his temper. Luckily Vera was always with him to prevent physical violence. He was going "eccentric" at a very early age. This was the quaint nature of the rumor and he hated them for having nothing better to do.

The image was a more serious matter. It appeared on a cold February day while he was strolling along the banks of the Weldon River. He was alone and trying to find some manner of relaxation from the bitter turmoil that churned inside him. He had not informed anyone of where he was going.

The brisk New England wind slapped refreshingly at his face. The calm of the river, visible only between the itinerant cakes of ice, was soothing to his tired nerves. Somehow he was immediately aware that here, alone in the pure, open air, he could think clearly again.

A man's loneliness, he reflected, was so dependent upon where he lived it. Beside a river lined with trees, guarded by age old rocks, he could feel the warmth of security, for a small portion of the world was

there for him to see. In the concealment of a closet he could rot away, for there there was a portion of nothing.

He continued his stroll until he came within sight of the old Grover wharf. There was a group of men hauling supplies into an old warehouse. He started to walk toward them. His attention was arrested by a towering elm tree. Its height was awe-inspiring. Glistening icicles bejeweled its regal cape of snow.

One of the icicles near the base of the tree caught his eye and held it. More formidable in appearance than the others it was, nevertheless, dripping lazy pellets of water that formed a tiny crater in the soft snow. It was both intriguing and sad how, at precise intervals, another drop of its life slipped away forever. He could not remove his eyes. It staggered him to know that he had so much in common with a frozen, dagger-shaped piece of water. Each day something of his own life was slipping away and he had always been as helpless as the icicle to prevent it. He watched it dripping . . . dripping . . . dripping . . .

"Hey, fella, watch yer step there!"

The voice was fuzzy, as

though it was coming through a mouthless mask.

"Hey, what's the matter with you anyway? You in a trance or something? That water's mighty chilly. You fall in there and don't know how to swim yer a dead duck in ten seconds."

Something touched his arm. His eyes opened. Everything seemed warped. He made out the figure of a man . . . an old bearded man wearing a fisherman's slicker . . . standing beside him . . . a bewildered expression on his weather-torn face.

"You all right, fella?"

His clouded eyes found the wharf beneath his feet. He was standing on the edge . . . another step and . . . His head turned in a dream-like motion . . . he was able to see the outline of the giant elm several hundred yards away. It was *there . . . and he was on the wharf . . . why? . . . how did he get to the wharf? . . . his head throbbed savagely . . . How much time had elapsed? . . . He refused to consult his watch . . . the sun was still shining . . . it was the same day . . . good . . . or had a whole day passed? . . . no . . . no . . . impossible . . .*

"Listen, fella, are you all right?" the old man repeated.

"I think you better get back from the edge."

Jeffrey looked away from him. Through the dullness of his senses came his thick, hesitant answer.

"I'm fine . . . I'll be . . . all right."

The man forced an unamused laugh. "See here now, you weren't thinking about going in for a little dip by any chance?"

"I won't . . . jump," he droned. "I'll be . . . all right . . . Please leave . . . me alone . . ."

The old man retreated to his chores at the warehouse, keeping one puzzled eye on the wharf's edge.

Jeffrey found support against a post. His hand rose in agonizing slow motion to soothe his aching skull. He fought to regain control of himself. His eyes refused to focus. He shook his head violently. A disobedient mind continued to churn dizzily. Sickness erupted in his stomach. He hugged the post. He leaned over the side of the wharf. It had to be a dream. An incredibly realistic dream. It *had* to be! It was time to wake up. Wake up! Wake up!

The sickness retreated. Clarity crowded the throbbing out of his skull. The dullness subsided. Focus returned

to his eyes. The wharf . . . the post . . . real . . . solid. Not a dream at all! He rested his cheek against the post and gazed into the water.

The image gazed back at him!

The image smiled, revealing a cavernous mouth rimmed with gleaming teeth of gold.

The image stared at him through narrow, malevolent eyes.

The image emitted a hollow, gargling laugh, causing its silken facial hairs to bristle.

The image spoke, its gargantuan voice shooting up from the bowels of the icy river. "Me! Me! Me!" it roared.

Then, as mysteriously as it had appeared, it was gone!

His eyes were in perfect focus now. He jerked his head in the direction of the warehouse. The old man was still regarding him with concern.

The air was pure again. Everything was back in kilter. He turned and began the long lonesome walk home.

By the time he reached the iron gate outside his home he was in a state of semi-shock. He stumbled into the house, went to his bedroom and locked himself in.

He spent the rest of the day attempting to wipe the ugliness out of his mind. The incident and the image remained. He wanted desperately to pick up the phone and call Vera and tell her about it. Dear adorable Vera, always compassionate and understanding. He had come to love her, within the context of whatever meaning love had for him, in spite of the fact that she was Aunt Sarah's choice.

No, it would be wrong, he decided. It was too bizarre, too unbelievable. He could offer no logical explanation for it. To confide in *anyone* would surely give substance to the idiotic rumor of his "early eccentric behavior."

Night fell on his room and there was no sleep. Through the waning hours he tossed and turned, dredging the recesses of his mind for an explanation, struggling valiantly to keep a firm grip on his sanity. The rumor could not be true. He would not allow it to be true! His sanity was intact! He knew it!

Maybe he was the only one who knew it!

No! It was impossible! Impossible because alone by the river just twelve, thirteen hours ago he had been the sanest man on Earth! Alone

with nature, absorbing the wonder of God's work, he had felt the warmth of inner peace. It was the finest moment of his life. Yet it was taken away! Why? Why!!

He sprang up in his bed. His mind was a labyrinth of frenzied thoughts that crashed into each other and exploded over and over. He put his hands to his eyes and his head between folded knees. And once again he felt and looked like the little boy in the closet.

"Why?" he asked himself softly. And he began to weep.

Why was that moment of happiness torn from him? What was it that made him see the revolting image in the water? If he had never seen the image it would not now be branded indelibly in his mind and he would still know . . .

Aunt Sarah!!

Yes! Yes, that putrescent face of evil was her doing! It was a part of her. The part no mortal soul had ever seen. He had looked into the water that day and seen the reflection of her diseased mind.

His mind rushed forward excitedly supplying answers. What he had really seen, of course, was nothing more than an hallucination. But he was glad he saw it now that he knew what it was. More

than anything he had experienced this served to impress upon him how efficiently and savagely she had cornered his sanity.

He could not go on alone any longer. He had to find someone who could help him get to the root of her influence. If it meant discussing the image he would discuss it. He could afford to conceal nothing. The next few weeks or months might be the difference between salvation and utter collapse.

Tomorrow afternoon he would visit Ned Anderson. He would see him for psychiatric treatments seven days a week if necessary but he would be cured! If, on this cold and forbidding night, there was a particle of his sanity remaining he would use it to recapture all the rest.

Sleep came and Jeffrey Barton had a beautiful dream.

It was his first. And his last.

The harsh insistent knocking hammered at his skull. He opened his eyes. Someone was knocking at his bedroom door. He heaved himself out of bed and unlocked the door.

Poppy, a wisp of a chambermaid, stood frozen in the doorway. Her normally serene blue eyes bulged as

though she had just witnessed a murder.

"What is it, Poppy?"

"Begging your pardon, Master Jeffrey, but it's your Aunt Sarah . . ." Her mouth remained open and nothing came out.

"What about my Aunt?"

"She's . . . she's gone, sir."

"Gone? Poppy, what are you talking about? Gone where?"

"Oh, we don't know where, sir! That's just the trouble."

"Trouble . . ." Still half asleep, Jeffrey became annoyed. "Poppy, you're not making any sense!"

The maid was trembling. "She didn't ring for breakfast. She always rings for breakfast, but she didn't ring this morning." She was getting the words out faster than she could say them.

"What makes you think she's gone?"

"Well because, sir, it's close to three in the afternoon and she didn't ring for lunch either."

"Three in the afternoon!" He had not planned to sleep so late. There was the visit to Ned Anderson. He must get that done.

"Yes, sir, and when she didn't ring by two o'clock we . . . that is the cook and me

. . . we went to her room. We knocked but there wasn't any answer so we took the liberty of going in, sir. And she was gone."

He stood for a moment in ponderous, amazed silence. He decided to postpone the visit to the doctor. He hurried into his clothes and ran to Sarah's room.

Poppy was right. The room was empty. The bed had not been slept in. There was no sign of a note and, to the extent his amateur deductive powers would take him, no indication of foul play. He questioned all the servants. None of them had seen her leave the house that morning.

He was baffled. She couldn't have just vanished. He was sure she would never go away without notifying him . . . or at least the servants. Where was she?

Terror gripped him. Was this some new psychological tactic she had devised? It was a possibility. Maybe she realized that being controlled while she was in the house had only accomplished ninety percent of the damage to him. So she decided to move to a remote vantage point. Now she could control him but he would *never* be able to see her. The prospect was more than he could bear.

He conducted a frantic search of the house. She was nowhere to be found. He had no choice but to call the police.

By the following morning the police had searched all of Salem and the surrounding area. They did not find her. The afternoon papers gave the story front page headlines. Day and night for a week Jeffrey was harassed by reporters and police. They would exhaust one area of questioning and immediately start another and then another.

The theory most prevalent in Hamilton Square was kidnapping. Jeffrey found that amusing. There were many things that many people might like to do to Aunt Sarah but whisking her away was not one of them. If it was he feared for the kidnaper.

By week's end the police abandoned the investigation. The newspapers were relegating the story to the middle pages and Hamilton Square was busy preparing for Tessie Borden's coming out party.

Jeffrey had never believed it was possible that Aunt Sarah would ever leave the Barton mansion, let alone the city of Salem. It took him

fully eight days to really believe she *was* gone. When finally convinced he expected a great wave of relief to sweep over him.

He was alone in the immense living room. He sat smugly in the huge colonial wing chair before the fireplace. He looked up at the mirror over the fireplace. The room was warm and dark except for the low fire in front of him. His life was going to mean something now that she was gone at last.

Was she gone? He quickly pushed the question outside of his mind. Was she really gone? Again he dismissed the question. But it fought its way back in another form. How did he know she was really gone? The question burned inside him. He *didn't* know. And all the ways of finding out had been exhausted. He *couldn't* know. She *had* disappeared, yes. That was a fact. But the cause of her disappearance and the end result were only frustrating question marks. Why and how danced out of his reach, tormenting him further. Was she dead? If not, where did she go? Would she come back? That was another mystery.

He sat huddled in the wing chair staring at the waning fire before him. The flame

danced capriciously up and down . . . backward and forward . . . brave dying flame . . . in and out . . . up and down . . . drowsy . . . constant flame . . .

Then blackness. Inundating blackness, devoid of Time and Space.

He was standing against the mantel, his hand clutching his forehead. His drooping eyes fell on the mirror. There was no reflection of himself or of any other part of the room. The tall Grandfather clock on the opposite side of the room, normally the first thing anyone saw when looking in the mirror, was not reflected.

In the misty depths of the mirror he saw a shapeless, spongy embryo moving toward him, taking form as it approached . . . closer . . . ever closer . . .

The image!

It's gargantuan voice repeated the words it had spoken from the river. "*Me! Me! Me!*" it roared.

With herculean effort Jeffrey tore himself from the mantel and fell with his face to the floor. He dared not look back. He lay there with his eyes squeezed shut and his heart beating viciously. He was unconcerned about how he had gotten from the chair to the mantel. His only

thought was that he had been right about her plan of action. It was a new line of psychological attack, more diabolical than any she had ever devised.

He waited for what seemed a week. Then he slowly opened his eyes and peeked at the mirror. The mist was gone. He got to his feet. He saw the reflection of the old grandfather clock. He was all right again. He turned the lights on and sat in the wing chair.

From that moment on he was consumed by one burning thought. She was still alive and she would come back! It was the only thought that made any sense. There wasn't a shred of evidence to show that she was dead . . . or even that she *might* be dead.

She would come back and he must be ready for her. Deep within him he had the conviction that this was his last opportunity to set himself free of her.

He phoned Ned Anderson. The doctor gave him an appointment. He would begin psychiatric treatment the next day.

"The keyhole," he said. "That was the worst torture of all. If only I could have determined just when she would take the adhesive tape from

the keyhole to let in the first blinding ray of light it might not have been so bad. But I never could and I'd go crazy."

Jeffrey bolted upright on the leather sofa.

"What I mean is I'd . . ."

"It's all right, Jeff." Doctor Anderson's voice was reassuring. "I *know* what you mean."

Jeffrey reclined and continued talking.

"Waiting and not knowing when. I read somewhere that's the way they flog criminals in England. A man is sentenced to a year and twenty lashes to be applied one at a time. But he is never told in advance when any of them are to be applied. So he has to sit there and play the cruelest guessing game of all, praying it could happen now, this minute. And then it comes and afterward he isn't any happier than before because he knows it will come again . . . and he doesn't know when. The cycle goes on and on." He was silent for a moment. "I guess Sarah must have read the same book," his tone was bitter.

"Uh-huh," the doctor mumbled. "Go on."

"There was never much after that. Once the light came through the keyhole I

only had one thing to look forward to. A few more days with her and then back in the closet again."

"Mmm." The doctor went to his desk, sat down and began to pore over the voluminous notes he had taken.

Jeffrey watched him intently. A tender-hearted old man . . . reminiscent of my father . . . knows what he's doing too . . . but the treatments have lasted for six weeks now . . . twice a week . . . why doesn't he ever do anything but pore over those damned notes? . . . what is he thinking? . . . if there's been any improvement why doesn't he tell me about it? . . . There hasn't been any, that's why! . . . Sarah has been to see him and convinced him the rumor is true! . . . No, no, no! . . . Mustn't believe that . . . mustn't get worked up . . . he's doing his best to help . . . he's one of the top men in his field . . . I just haven't told him everything yet . . . he doesn't know about the image . . . I should have told him about it long before this . . . I really should have . . . why haven't I! . . . look at him . . . he sits and goes over those notes and burns his good mind away trying to find the answer . . . and the answer hasn't reached those pages yet . . . or has

it? . . . what was it he said yesterday? . . . something about existing in the inner world . . . what did that mean? . . . maybe I'd better tell him . . . yes . . . yes, I will tell him . . . only not today . . . not today. . . .

Doctor Anderson yawned and slapped his notebook shut.

"I don't blame you if you're bored," said Jeffrey. "How many times have I gone through that closet for you?"

The old man lifted his glasses to his forehead where they perched like another pair of eyes over two protruding eyebrows flecked with gray. He rubbed his eyes.

"Makes no difference, Jeff," came his patient reply. "It happened more than once. I expect to listen to it more times than it happened."

Jeffrey started to get up.

Anderson waved him back down.

"Do you mind, Jeff? We're not through yet . . ."

I must tell him!

"I want you to see if you can go all the way back to that first experience once again . . ."

Tell him! Tell him!

". . . and tell me what it was you did that prompted her to conceive of the closet as a penal device."

Not today! Next time! Next time!

"Are you listening to me, Jeff?"

"Huh? Oh, yes . . . look, Ned, we've been over this so many times. I don't see the point . . ."

"Jeff," he interrupted soberly, "we can't afford to stop going over it. I realize you could find more pleasant things to do in an afternoon, but you must face a few facts . . ."

"I know, I'm not a child anymore, I'm close to thirty and somewhere in the heaping mass of eighteen years there is a haystack and in it there's a needle. All we have to do is find it and I'll be in tip-top shape." He got up and paced the room, scowling, restless, trying to shake his irritation.

"That's right, Jeff. I never for a moment wanted you to think this would be easy. We have to keep moving forward, keep pinpointing. And we have to be patient. The only thing we know to be uncontroversibly true about the mind is the mystery of it. Our work is like the cycle you spoke of. Each great discovery is countered with a new phase of the mystery. It's never easy, Jeff. Never."

Jeffrey sat on the sofa and looked at the floor.

"I'm sorry, Ned."

The doctor picked up a small chair, placed it in front of him and sat.

"If you feel a resistance we can call it off for today. But bear in mind we'll start the next session where we left off today. Between now and then you should prepare yourself." He paused and then spoke with intense concern. "Jeff, there is no better indication of how much help you need than what happened last night."

Jeffrey's eyes flared with anger. "I told you that wasn't my fault!"

"All right, we both know it wasn't your fault," he remained calm. "But today Sam Lawrence is nursing a broken jaw."

"He's lucky it isn't a broken neck!"

"Why did you hit him, Jeff?"

"He doesn't know how to behave with women."

"Isn't that his business?"

"Not when he's in my home and the woman happens to be my fiancée!"

"Do you think Vera approved of your hitting him?"

Jeffrey wanted to bellow the answer at him. His reply was almost inaudible.

"No."

"What about the other guests? Do you think they understood why you did it?"

"They *couldn't* understand!" he said fiercely.

"Why couldn't they? If Sam had been that obvious in making a pass at Vera it seems to me they should have sympathized with you."

"They don't know what sympathy is on Mother's Day!"

"Is it possible that Sam didn't actually make a pass?"

"No!"

"Perhaps it was just the way he *looked* at Vera, the way he smiled. And you interpreted it to mean . . ."

"Now listen to me, Ned . . ."

"No, Jeff!" The doctor was firm but not harsh. "As an old family friend I think I had better do the talking."

Jeffrey's eyes were cold deadly holes, spitting hatred at the man across the room. In that instant a sudden loathing boiled in him. He wanted to leap from the sofa and . . .

An old family friend.

The gentle truth and sincerity of the words caused him to avoid the doctor's straightforward, penetrating look. He lit a cigarette.

"All right, Ned. I'm listening."

"Did Sam Lawrence make anything resembling a physical pass at Vera?"

"No," he whispered. It hurt him to say it. It hurt bad!

"What made you hit him?"

There was an unendurable silence as Jeffrey searched for a way to explain.

"The party began at eight. It lasted until two or three this morning. Sam hounded her all that time. He kept taking her off into a corner alone . . ."

"Do you think you were jealous?"

"It wasn't jealousy. Vera belongs to me. I don't have to worry about her. I kept watching him, the way he operated, the shallow insipid laugh, the pseudo-intellectual speech maker, the professional gentleman, the courageous musketeer. He's a mass of bubbles, Sam is, and every time a lady says no one of the bubbles breaks and Sam is that much closer to floating away from this Earth."

Doctor Anderson smiled. "You've analyzed Sam Lawrence rather well. Now what made you hit him?"

"That's the part that's hard to explain. I know I kept watching him . . . I wasn't drinking . . . and suddenly, I

don't know just when or how, he changed. He was no longer just a man with an evening of sex in mind . . . something happened to his face . . . his mouth curved into the most lecherous smile I've ever seen . . . his eyes were brimming over with lust . . . I knew in a flash that he was the personification of evil and I turned away from the mantelpiece and . . ."

"And your imagination caused you to break his jaw."

Jeffrey rubbed the side of his face.

"I have a dentist appointment later today. He did some damage himself."

"Jeff, I want you to stop seeing all your friends."

The suddenness of the request jarred him, as the doctor had intended it to.

"You want me to do what!"

"Cut yourself off completely from all your friends."

"Why?"

"Why not? You neither like nor respect any of them, do you?"

"No," he replied and then added, "except for Vera."

"Jeffrey, we've covered a lot of ground and we've barely scratched the surface. Your relationship with Aunt Sarah, the way she raised you, your conscious reasons for hating her, and many

other elements can be brought to account for your inability to conform to your own society. We know you have a rather mild temper until you are in a gathering of friends. Then it becomes an incredibly violent temper. But Hamilton Square is not your sole resentment. We know you resent being the only Barton left and what responsibility that entails. The family name, the tradition and so forth. And so you've given every indication that you intend to be the *last* Barton. You've been formally engaged to Vera for eight years and you've consistently avoided marriage for two prime reasons. You love her but resent the fact that she was Aunt Sarah's choice . . . and you have an overwhelming and, at the moment, quite understandable fear of having children. All this we know and we're in a good position to fight it. But there is one thing we don't know . . ."

Don't tell him! He must not know!

"Somewhere," the doctor continued, "somehow, during those early years you managed to develop . . . well, at the moment I shall call it a kind of power. It enables you to see, or at least *think* you see, something in a person that is

apparent to nobody else and that unleashes a desire in you to commit physical violence. Naturally, after the strict manipulation by Sarah, you've reached the point where it is impossible to control this power . . ."

Must not tell him! Make an excuse . . . have to go to the dental appointment. He is getting too close!

" . . . to the point where the power practically possesses a mind of its own. That's why I think it would be best if you stopped seeing your friends. Your temperament has always been at its worst in their presence."

"Where do you think I should go?"

The doctor sat behind his desk and consulted his notebook. "In studying the reasons she had for locking you up I find they generally had to do with your having sneaked off to places she had placed off limits."

Jeffrey sighed. "Yes, there was only one place fit for a growing young aristocrat to breathe air in and that was Hamilton Square. Everyplace else was off-limits."

"Everyplace?"

He stared at the floor. "Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But it's true. I could have fed the pigeons on the Salem

Common and it would have been a crime."

"I find the place mentioned most often is Front Street. Any particular reason for that?"

"Many. Front Street is poverty row, crawling with inferior animal types, no place for a little boy with a halo of purity around his head. To associate with poor animal types was to *become* an animal type."

"Why did you keep going there?"

"She was so dead set against it. With all the frightening stories she told and the long dull lectures that followed I managed to construct an elaborate mental image of Front Street. I was sure it was a place of dark intrigue, a kind of crossroads of the world, flaming with excitement. One day I slipped out of the house and went there . . ."

"And your images were destroyed, of course."

"Not completely. True, it wasn't what I had visualized. There was nothing romantic or exciting about it. It was squalid and obscene and corrupt. I remember running like lightning away from it, the only time I was ever glad to get home. But I went back. Somehow it held a strange

fascination for me. And I had to keep going back because I wanted to know what that fascination was. But I never did find out what it was . . . until I was around twenty . . . and then it was too late."

"What was it?"

Jeffrey walked to the window and looked out over Hamilton Square.

"It was discovery," he said.

Ned Anderson frowned.

"Discovery?"

"Yes. Of certain realities, certain truths. My first shock came when I learned the kids on Front Street wouldn't play with me because I wasn't acceptable to them. *Me*, I thought, having to be accepted by *them*! I had difficulty controlling the urge to run home and laugh in Sarah's face. Eventually I *was* accepted and I played with them as often as I dared. The next shock came one day when we were playing near the fishing boats. One of the kids, a scrawny little devil with hair sprouting in every direction over his head, told me his great-great-great somebody or other had come over on the *Mayflower*. When I refused to believe him the other kids rallied around him and zealously defended his story. He wasn't a very bright kid and

normally the others didn't even like him. But they were proud as hell of his ancestors. I couldn't fully digest it then but my discovery was one of people. Those kids had entered a world without wealth or material possession. They substituted for that by developing the ability to laugh and sing and play . . . and be proud of what they didn't have. I came into a world paved with red carpets, the material wealth just sitting there waiting for me to take it . . . and I had to sneak into the other world to find a substitute for my misery. So the discovery was also one of money. Stripped of it I realized Hamilton Square would have been another Front Street and not all of its high flown tradition could have prevented that. Given enormous wealth the opposite would hold true for Front Street. The kids on Front Street were no less victims of circumstance than I was."

The doctor sucked on a freshly lit pipe.

"When was the last time you went there?"

"About eight years ago. I drove through without stopping."

"Why don't you spend a day there? Talk with people. Maybe you'll see one of the

kids you knew. You can talk over old memories. Try it and see."

He was glad Ned had brought up the subject of Front Street. For a while it looked as though the doctor was on the brink of exposing the one secret he wanted curiously to cling to. Thank God he'd gotten away from it.

He put his hand on the old man's shoulder and smiled at him.

"Thanks, Ned. I'll try it. Maybe it'll restore something. I hope so anyway."

The living room seemed to float. Everything was out of proportion. He floundered toward the mantelpiece and gripped it for support. The awful spinning sickness was at his stomach again.

The dentist . . . he had been to see the dentist . . . but how did he get home? . . . he couldn't remember coming home . . . what kind of an injection had the fool given him anyway? . . . he couldn't remember . . . no, wait! . . . there was no injection . . . there was only the watch . . . dangling on the end of a chain . . . bright gold watch . . . back and forth . . . steady . . . a pendulum . . . fascinating . . .

Blackness.

The living room . . . mantel-piece . . . everything floating. What happened!! . . . a memory cell spilled open . . . hypnosis! The dentist said he would use hypnosis . . . no pain . . . he was right . . . it worked well . . . but terrible after affects . . .

What was wrong with the mirror? . . . where was the reflection of the old grandfather clock on the opposite wall of the room? . . . the mirror was a dense mist . . . reflecting nothing in the room . . .

He gazed into it and watched the image take shape before his eyes; horrible, unbelievable, but there.

Every responsible part of him was overcome with the desire to run, run out of the house, get to Ned Anderson, tell him she was back, ask him, beg him for help.

The gargled laugh rocketed from its echo chamber roots and shot through him, galvanizing every nerve ending in his body.

"Doctor Anderson can't help you, Jeffrey. He'll find out what you haven't told him. Then he will never be able to help you!"

Jeffrey answered in a soft frightened whisper.

"Please go away."

The image smiled. Its thun-

derous voice softened to a hoarse whisper.

"Forgive me, Jeffrey. One of the servants entering the room might not understand, is that it? Yes, yes, you're right. That mustn't happen!"

"Go away! Please go away!"

The image placed a gnarled, ring studded index finger to the lipless gash that was its mouth.

"Shh! The servants, Jeffrey! I can't go away. There are only two people who can help you. You are one and I am the other."

"No, no, that isn't true!" he screamed. - "You're trying to destroy me! You want me to go insane! You've planned it for years!"

"You do me a great wrong, Jeffrey," came the throaty reply. *"Your rationalization has gone wrong if a mere consonant is the difference between what I am and what you think I am."*

"What do you mean?"

"You're trying to think of me as a fiend. I am really a friend. See what a difference a single insignificant letter makes? Look closer, Jeffrey. Look closer and you will see that I am your friend!"

He was unable to resist. He moved his face closer to the

mirror. He was stricken with horror at the close-up of the image. Behind the ravenous eyes there was a long suffering sadness. Under the silken hair that grew from every pore, lay smooth sensitive skin. The bloodthirsty mouth concealed the gentle soft lips of a child. The hairless forehead was a maze of criss-crossing wrinkles. And in the deep crevice of a scar running just below the hairline he saw a smoldering brand. Its letters were barely perceptible. They spelled his name!

He moved now. He backed away from the mirror, knocking over an end table. But he could not take his eyes from the image.

The image beckoned him to return.

"Now you know, Jeffrey! It will be you and me together now! You see why you can't tell Doctor Anderson, don't you?"

He found himself being irresistably drawn back to the mirror.

"Yes . . . I see now . . ." he droned.

"A good thing, too, Jeffrey, because our two minds are so far superior to any single mind. We outsmarted Sarah's mind, didn't we? We proved we could get along without her!"

"Did we . . . really prove it . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course we did!" said the image. It spoke feverishly now as the mist in the mirror began to clear. *"We can do without anyone, Jeffrey. Remember that! Only we have the power now. Go to Front Street, Jeffrey. There is excitement there, a different kind of life. Go there and enjoy the new power! And live! Live . . . Live . . ."*

The mirror cleared and the image was gone.

The room was normal again. His head no longer ached. Yet he still needed the mantel to support him. The revelation had unhinged him. Aunt Sarah had been at the root of all his inner turmoil but the image was not her. It was not any part of her.

The image was himself!

That was the fact. He could not dismiss the fact. *That* was why he couldn't tell Anderson! The old doctor had come close, maybe too close, when he said a power existed almost as a separate being. He knew the image was right. He could never tell Anderson now. He could never tell anyone!

The stink of dead fish was sheer hell on his sensitive nostrils. Front Street was hot and crowded and sticky. The

swarming itinerant shoppers elbowed and shoved him. His eardrums swelled with the discordant screeching of fish hawkers. Grimy-faced kids made fun of him and splashed mud on his spotless tailor-made seersucker. The street was filthy, littered with fish heads, old newspaper and wet sawdust.

Front Street. Jugular vein of the waterfront. Source of life to a community in which there was already too much life.

He had been strolling for over an hour, reliving the fascination he had experienced as a child. Their turbulent existence was so completely alien to his own. What amounted, for him, to the ugly realities of life, were only commonplace occurrences to these people. They lived and they *were* the ugly realities. Unsheltered, he thought. Just as unsheltered as the poor dead mackerals laying row upon row in the bleating sun.

He continued his stroll. He didn't buy anything. He didn't stop to talk to anyone. He didn't know quite how to go about it. Such were the inhibitions that came with maturity. How simple it had been as a child, just a matter of marching up to other children and saying you wanted to

play with them. Nothing to it. There was something ridiculous about the prospect of interrupting a man selling fish and saying you just wanted to talk to him. There was the distinct feeling the fish hawker wouldn't be interested.

He walked further, leaving the fish markets and shoppers behind him. The street narrowed into a series of cheap flop houses, tenements and taverns. This section was more familiar. It was calmer than he remembered it. There was a group of kids sitting serenely on the edge of the wharf, trying their luck with makeshift fishing poles.

He peered through the window of a tavern. It was empty except for a bartender who was wiping glasses and looked bored to death. Jeffrey thought about going in. It seemed a good way to start a conversation, even though the bartender would necessarily be a captive audience.

He went inside. He stumbled over a beer keg that was sitting with several others just off the center of the room. The bartender looked up long enough to size him up and groan exasperation. The place was cool but had a damp musty odor. There were sev-

eral booths and tables with chairs turned upside down on them. The ceiling was low, lined with broad oak beams. At one end of the bar there was a narrow flight of stairs. Behind the bottles a mirror ran the length of the bar. The names of drinks and their prices were scribbled on it in soap.

Jeffrey sat on a wooden stool at the bar. The bartender went on wiping glasses, apparently not interested in late morning trade.

Jeffrey waited a moment. He cleared his throat.

The bartender grunted, stuffed his towel into a glass and came toward him. He was red-faced and pushing sixty. Jeffrey was sure he had one of the beer kegs under his apron.

"What's your hurry?" drawled the bartender. "You are starting early, you got all day." He placed a pasteboard coaster in front of him. "What'll it be?"

"Old Fashioned," said Jeffrey.

"Old Fashioned," the bartender repeated. His lips barely parted for the words to escape.

He took his time with the drink, giving Jeffrey the once over as he mixed. When

he spoke again there was a glint in his eye and his words contained a good-natured saltiness.

"You must be a fisherman," he muttered. "Always glad to know when the fleet's in."

Jeffrey couldn't stop his reflexes in time. He looked down at his imported seersucker in complete bewilderment. Then, just as quickly, he looked back at the bartender, embarrassed. The bartender was shaking his drink. There was a mischievous grin on his face.

Jeffrey was at sixes and sevens for a moment. Then he smiled. Being such fair game for the bartender's sense of humor amused him.

The bartender poured the drink and set it on the bar in front of him.

"You lost, mister?"

"Lost?" he said flatly. "I'm afraid I don't . . ." He caught the bartender inspecting his suit again. "Oh, I see what you mean. No, I was just strolling in the area and . . . well, I thought I might like to talk to someone."

"Who?"

Jeffrey shrugged. "I don't know . . . anyone."

"What about?"

"Well, nothing really. I just wanted to get acquainted with someone . . ." The bartender's

stare made him uncomfortable. ". . . And talk."

"About nothing?"

He answered with a weak hollow laugh. "No, not about *nothing* . . ."

"Then what about?"

He shifted uneasily on the wooden stool. He couldn't understand why the old guy was so curious.

"Well, about anything . . . I just want to . . ."

"You a cop?"

"No, of course not." He was dumbfounded. "Why?"

"What business you got here on Front Street?"

"I assure you I'm only visiting. I have no business and I don't want to make trouble for anyone."

The bartender gave him a long steady look.

"You made a mistake, mister, coming to this neck of the woods in those fancy duds."

He was right, Jeffrey thought. Dressed as he was he would have difficulty starting any kind of a conversation on Front Street.

"You want me to leave?" he asked.

The bartender laughed. "I said you wore the wrong clothes, mister. I didn't say your money was no good. Stay as long as you like. Only be careful on your way home."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean certain people who don't have money form bad habits. They wait in alleys for certain people who *do* have money. You know what I mean?"

"But it's broad daylight!"

"High noon, four in the morning, it makes no difference. Out on that street the muggers and winos will take one look at you and see a walking vault."

"Thanks," he said. "When I come back I'll know enough to use my head and dress differently."

The bartender's mouth dropped open. "You mean you might come back to this hell hole?"

Jeffrey smiled. "This isn't my first visit."

The bartender whistled in surprise and walked away muttering something about the idle rich.

Jeffrey had two more drinks. When he looked at his watch it was one-thirty. There was plenty of time, he decided, to go home and change clothes. Then he could come back and mingle and never be noticed.

"How much?" he shouted to the bartender, who had gone to the other end of the bar.

"One-eighty," came the reply. He rang up the amount

on the cash register on his way to pick up the money.

Jeffrey fumbled through his pockets. His face turned crimson. He smiled weakly. The bartender stood with his hands on his hips and a don't-tell-me-you-lost-your-wallet look on his face.

Jeffrey completed another clumsy search through his pockets.

"I'm afraid something is wrong," he said.

"I'm afraid I know what it is," the bartender muttered.

"I always keep my wallet in my upper right hand coat pocket. I don't understand."

"I do. Somebody saw you coming, mister."

"Saw me coming?"

"A pickpocket."

"A pickpocket! At this time of day?"

"They keep very irregular hours."

A melancholy frown twisted his features. The bartender was so complacent about it. Pickpockets and thugs were accepted facts of life to him. But it wasn't only the bartender. Now that he thought about it the whole street seemed different to him. He wondered if one of the kids he had once played with might have so resigned himself to the ravages of poverty as to

resort to a life of thievery . . . picking pockets in order to exist.

"I assure you . . ." he began and was interrupted by a bland wave of the bartender's hand.

"I know, I know . . . you'll send me the money. But it just happens I already rung it up on the register. I don't want to be stuck for it in case you should step out the door into a mild case of amnesia."

"Well, I . . ."

"It's all right, Fred. He won't forget to pay you."

Jeffrey spun around to see who belonged to the third voice.

The girl was young and attractive. A winsome smile played on her friendly mouth. Her hands rested gracefully in the pockets of a light trench coat.

"That's very kind of you, Miss, but you don't have to . . ."

"We've known each other before, Mr. Barton. Won't you let an old friend give you a reference?"

He was confused and speechless. If they *were* old friends he was not aware of it. But he liked her looks whether they were old friends or not. Her skin was porcelain smooth, drawn tight under high exotic cheek bones.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'm afraid I don't . . ."

She let him dangle in mid-air for a moment.

"I'll try to refresh your memory. Shall we sit in a booth?"

"Yes . . . yes, by all means," he answered dumbly.

The bartender forgot about the tab and went back to the monotonous task of wiping glasses.

They sat facing each other in a cramped wooden booth. She was silent again, deliberately silent. He felt a discomforting warmth in his face. He knew he was blushing.

"You'd better not wait for me to guess," he said with a sheepish grin. "I'm not really very good at guessing."

Her eyes sparkled brilliantly. They were large brown ovals. He liked looking into her eyes.

She laughed.

"What's funny?"

"You're embarrassed," she said.

"No . . . no, I'm not. Really. I just . . . I just can't remember, that's all."

"You were twelve and I was ten and we played together not more than a block from where we're sitting." The playful smile returned to her lips. "And I see no reason to tell

you my name because you once told me you'd never forget it."

He avoided looking at her. "I *have* forgotten," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

Her smile faded. She reached across the booth and put her finger under his chin. She brought his face level with hers.

"Hey, pull yourself together, Mr. Barton. You haven't committed a crime." She waited until he looked into her eyes. "It's Julie. Julie Noyes. Remember now?"

He nodded.

"You used to tell me how you had run away from your house to be able to play with us. You remember that?"

"I can't forget it."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Her eyes met his. His stare forced her to grin awkwardly. She slipped the kerchief from her head and shook her hair until it fell evenly around her shoulders.

"I've read about you in the newspapers every now and then," she said.

He didn't answer, preferring to be enchanted by the magnetism of her face. Years had gone by and she seemed so vibrant and alive.

She grew uneasy. "You're engaged to that Stevens girl, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I am."

He liked the way her nose wrinkled when she smiled. And how her hair fell in a soft curl over one eyebrow.

"I guess you just don't have much to say to me, is that it, Mr. Barton?"

She started to leave the booth. Something of the radiance was gone. He had offended her. He was furious with himself for not being able to show his enthusiasm for the reunion. He stopped her.

"Please," he touched her arm. "Please sit down. It's just that . . . it's been so long . . . I guess I don't know how to talk to anyone anymore."

She sat facing him again, studying his face. She seemed to understand his plight and to sympathize with it.

"I remember you that way. We were always doing things that confused you. And you were always apologizing . . ."

He grinned. "I remember . . . You all ran out of patience because I never stopped asking questions. You wondered whether people in my neighborhood sent their kids to school."

She laughed infectiously. "Now you're back on the memory beam."

He felt better now that the conversation had gotten off the ground. He wanted to

spend more time with her. She laughed the way he remembered the others laughing.

"Tell me about yourself, Julie. What have you been doing these long seventeen years?"

"You really want to know?"

"Of course. I'm very interested."

"Living," she said and this time he laughed. "What's so funny about living? Sometimes it isn't easy. Only I don't like to think about those times. I just take it as it comes, moment to moment, day to day . . ."

"Are you married?"

"Am I what?"

"Married."

She rested her head against the back of the booth. The corners of her mouth dipped downward. All at once she looked tired.

"Are you kidding me, Mr. Barton?"

"Why would I want to kid you?" he asked innocently.

She slowly unbuttoned her trench coat, then let it fall open to reveal a string of false pearls and a cheap cotten dress with a plunging neckline. Her firm breasts huddled close together at the neckline.

"Do I look like a girl who could afford to get married?"

"I think you do."

"Let's face it," she said bitterly, "I'd lose a fortune."

"Julie, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come, come, Mr. Barton. Where've you been all these years? Where were you when they handed out the facts of life?"

Her sudden harshness rattled him. "I'm sorry if I don't understand . . . have I . . . have I offended you?"

"Oh, brother, you *are* kidding me." She buttoned her coat. "Thanks for the afternoon of pleasant memories. If you'll excuse me I'd better leave before I get embarrassed. And if I get embarrassed somebody might laugh!"

She got up from the booth and strode toward the door.

He ran after her and took her by the shoulders.

"Please, Julie," he groped for the right words, "I don't know what I've said but I didn't mean to make you angry. Honestly. You've made me very happy . . . just talking to me. I want to see you again. Please believe that."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Barton," she said in a half-whisper, "I get a little touchy every now and then. Sure you can see me again. Anytime."

"Thank you, Julie."

"Don't mention it. Just climb the stairs to the left of

the bar. You'll find me at the far end of the hall on the right."

"You live *here*?"

"You still want to see me?"

"Yes," he replied quickly.

Her large brown eyes closed for a moment as if to wall off tears. She drew his head down and pressed her lips against his.

"When you come by be sure and check with Fred, the bartender," she said. "So long, Mr. Barton."

He stood there, his gaze transfixed where she had disappeared through the door.

He left the tavern. Outside the sun had swung over to the west. Soon it would be evening. A wild sensation swept through him. He had to see her again soon! There was no waiting for tomorrow. It *had* to be sooner. That night!

He walked along the street remembering their conversation and how ineffectual he had been. The desire in him fizzled as he realized she could never appreciate Jeffrey Barton. He needed confidence, a more forthright approach, the ability to laugh as she did and hold up his end of the conversation. He had none of those qualities.

Then he remembered. In his mind the phrase kept repeat-

ing itself. *Two minds are far superior to a single mind.*

He had to get home as fast as possible. At home there was someone who could help him.

The image was still far off in the swirling background of the mirror. But it was already fully formed. As it converged on him he saw all of it for the first time. As if to erase any doubts he may have held it conformed in every way to his physical self.

There was no longer any desire to resist. And if there had been the desire he knew it would have been pointless. The image was irrevocably his and he accepted it. It was the one source of truth he had ever known. He could always depend on it. It was his friend and his benefactor. He needed it and it needed him. Together they represented a whole. Separated, each was helpless.

He stood mesmerized as its hideous frame loomed larger. When it reached the mantel's edge it stepped to one side. Its hair-infested arm gestured toward the hazy background.

"Look, Jeffrey!"

Jeffrey obeyed. His wilting eyes drifted toward the mist.

"Look closely, Jeffrey!"

The mist began to clear.

"There she is!" cried the image. *"See her, Jeffrey?"*

The mist was gone. The Front Street Tavern materialized before his eyes.

"Come in, Jeffrey! Come in!"

A weightlessness came over him. In the next second he merged with the mirror and the tavern became a reality.

"Over there, Jeffrey! On the stairs. She is a lovely creature, isn't she? She was made to deliver pleasure. For you. For you, Jeffrey. You saddened her this afternoon. She wanted you to love her. But you'll rectify that, won't you?"

The image was still with him but no longer visible.

The tavern was crowded with raucous drinkers. Body heat and tobacco smoke combined to smother the atmosphere. He glanced into the annex. The booths and tables were littered with bottles and glasses, overflowing ashtrays and sopping wet coasters. There was a couple at every table. Most of them were making obscene advances at each other. They were all laughing and having a gay time.

"There's no time to waste, Jeffrey. She's not on the stairs now. She's gone to her room. Waiting for you!"

His eyes wandered from the tables and booths, over the bar. Fred, the bartender, and a crowd of seedy looking men

were laughing uproariously at someone's joke.

"Up the stairs by the bar!"

His eyes reached the stairs.

"She's waiting for you Jeffrey! To see you again. She is your pleasure. Go up the stairs!"

His eyes surveyed the crowded bar. Nobody was watching the stairs. They weren't even aware of his presence. He darted up the stairs and found himself at one end of a long corridor. The rooms were set close together.

"All the way to the end! On the right! There is your pleasure, Jeffrey! Anytime, she told you. Remember? Hurry, Jeffrey, hurry!"

He stole down the corridor, his pace quickening with every step, the ecstasy piling up inside him. He stopped in front of the last room. He was out of breath. He waited. He would have to catch his second wind before he could make the proper entrance. He could not disappoint her.

He was ready. There was no reason to knock. He knew she was waiting for him, waiting to enchant him. He opened the door. He saw the man and froze.

The man was sitting beside her on the bed. The man was unshaven and obscene in his undershirt. The man was

old enough to be her father and was contaminating her mouth with seething kisses.

The shock was compounded when he realized she was not resisting the man. She had betrayed him! His head swelled with blind rage. The room swayed before him. He slammed the door.

They broke apart. She screamed when she saw him. She ran to the corner of the room. The man sprang from the bed and lunged at him.

His claw-like fingers found the man's fleshy bare arm with deadly accuracy. With scalpel precision he opened a gash, releasing a torrent of blood. The man shrieked with pain and scrambled for the door. He clutched the man's neck with iron-strong hands and squeezed until the blood had been compressed into the head. He heard a snap. The body fell in a lump, horrible heap on the floor.

He turned to find her. She cringed in the corner, her thin frail hands knotted together in front of her mouth, her painted face racked with fear. She held no enchantment for him now. The memories had been shattered. She wasn't the same little girl of long ago. She couldn't please him anymore. She was a sorceress,

meant to tease and laugh at him.

Her scream lasted only a split second. His hands took her naked white throat. The thick silken hair bristled as his thumb pressed at the jugular vein, choking off another attempted scream. Her eyes bloated out of proportion. The last gasp of life abandoned her limp body. He let her fall to the floor.

He heard voices in the corridor. Voices getting closer. The door! He fled to the door and bolted it. More voices . . . louder . . . a knock! He saw the window. The voices were shouting angrily . . . pushing at the door. He looked out at the alley below . . . a two-story drop . . . he crept to the window ledge . . . he jumped . . .

Pain ripped through his twisted ankle. His mind was spinning. He heard a crash. Upstairs in the room! They had broken the door down. He crawled into the protective shadow of the building .

"Run, Jeffrey! Run! Run! Run!"

He ran, in tortuous pain, toward the dimly lit street and disappeared into the fog.

The fog evaporated and he saw the grandfather clock on the other side of the dark living room. He turned to the

mirror. In the disappearing mist he caught a final glimpse of the grimacing image, its eyes dilating with lurid satisfaction.

"Well done, Jeffrey. Well done!"

His ankle throbbed unmercifully. He limped toward the sofa. He stopped. The sound was faint. Someone breathing. He was not alone in the room!

He turned and saw her standing by the window, her lovely body framed there in the moonlight.

"Jeffrey, where on earth have you been?" Annoyance filtered through her carefully modulated tone. "It's almost midnight, darling."

"What are you doing here, Vera?"

"What am I doing here? I haven't seen you for three days. I'm engaged to you, remember?"

She moved toward him.

"Stay where you are, Vera!"

The deadliness of his command was foreign to her. She stopped.

"Darling, what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. I'm perfectly fine!"

He was caught between the sofa and the mantelpiece with nothing to lean on. He winced as another charge of pain

went through his ankle. He had no choice. He hobbled to the mantel.

"You're hurt!" Vera exclaimed, coming swiftly closer to him.

"I told you I'm all right. Go home, Vera!"

"Jeffrey, you're behaving so strangely. You haven't been drinking, have you?"

He turned away from her. "Go home, Vera. Please go home! I'll call you in the morning."

"No," she answered, sounding a note of concern. "I won't go home. I've been waiting here for three hours. Tomorrow is your birthday and I wanted to surprise you with a present. Now you tell me to go home. What's happened, Jeffrey?"

"Why do you keep asking me what's happened?" he bellowed.

"Darling, you can be a little more civil than that. And a little less mysterious. I only want to know how you hurt your leg."

"I tripped. Coming through the front gate," he snapped.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"I'm very tired, Vera. Please let me call you in the morning."

"Nonsense. We're going to have a look at that ankle."

Her hand reached out for the lamp switch.

"Don't turn the lamp on!" he shouted. "Leave it alone!"

He heard the click. The area by the mantelpiece was bathed in light. He hobbled to the sofa.

"Now don't be silly, darling. How can I administer first aid if there isn't any li——"

The words died on her lips. A shudder raced through her. She saw the dark red stains on the mantelpiece. Her eyes were drawn to the sofa. His hands were soaked with blood. His eyes turned upward to meet hers. She gasped. His face was sullen, treacherous.

Her mouth quivered.

"Jeffrey . . ." was all she could whisper.

He stood up. "I told you not to turn on the light, Vera." He had to forget about the ankle. That could be attended to later. He had an emergency to deal with.

"Jeffrey," she repeated, forcing the words, "where did that blood come from . . ."

"I warned you to go home, Vera. I told you I would call you in the morning." He moved toward her. "Why didn't you have sense enough to leave?"

"What are you going to do?"

The answer was in his eyes.

She moved. She wasn't fast enough. He jumped in front of her, putting her between him and the mantel. Panic seized her, blotting her coherence. Short uncertain steps brought her closer to the mantel as he closed in upon her.

"Jeffrey, stop it!" she screamed. "Stop looking at me that way! What's wrong with you?"

"Kill her, Jeffrey. Kill her now before she can talk to anyone."

He moved in closer.

"Jeffrey, stay away from me! Stay away!"

Her back touched the mantelpiece. The panic curdled her reflexes. She had retreated as far as possible. The blood stained hands darted forward and clamped her neck. She mustered up a full burst of energy to scream. His grip was animal-like. It choked off her vocal chords. She clawed at him, digging her nails into his distorted face. She scratched and kicked in a feverish effort to hold on to life. It was useless. The pungent sense of death was all around her. The room got darker. She felt the last dull breath of life slipping away.

She saw the vase on the mantelpiece above her head.

There would be only a second or two. Her hand reached up and gripped the rim of the vase. The strength was gone. She was able to tilt it but she knew she could never bring it down on him.

He glanced at the vase. He realized what she was trying to do. That was the end, she thought.

His eyes widened. He relaxed his grip. A burst of fresh air rushed into her crippled lungs.

"Leave it alone!" he demanded. "Take your hands off the vase."

Instinct told her to cling for dear life. He released her neck; leaving her choking for more air. The hostility disappeared from his features. He began to whimper like a child. He clutched at her fingers. He could not remove them from the rim.

"Let go!" he cried. "Please let go of the vase!"

She didn't know why he was terrified of it. She couldn't afford to care. She only knew clinging to it was her only way of staying alive.

He put both hands to the task of prying her loose. She tore at his hair with her free hand. He lost his grip and fell backwards, leaving her off balance. The vase started to topple. She couldn't stay on

her feet and keep it from falling.

She fell near the fireplace. Jeffrey made a final desperate lunge to save the vase. It was too late. It crashed to the floor, spilling its contents to the rug.

He stood in rapt silence, gaping at it. The electrifying scream that escaped Vera's throat failed to move him. He was mesmerized by the sight on the rug.

Vera stood up. Her hand went to her mouth as if to hold back the sickly feeling that sifted through her.

The vase lay in pieces on the ornate rug. Near one of the pieces she saw a mound of cold gray ashes. At the base of the mound was the charred skull, a hideous misshapen thing with stray patches of hair to show that decomposition was all but completed.

Her leaden feet edged her toward the door. She saw he was no longer interested in her. She opened the door and ran with alarming speed out of the house.

He stood watching the ugly remains of Aunt Sarah. From some distant crevice came the muffled voice of the image.

"The furnace. Back into the furnace to stay!"

He took his eyes from the floor. He remembered Vera had been there. Now she was

gone. It was too late to do anything about that now. He rushed to the servants' closet, found the necessary equipment and came back to the living room to clear away the evidence.

He watched the blazing fire through the open door of the furnace. There would be no evidence now. He was angry for not having completed the cremation the first time. He glanced at his watch. One o'clock.

Exhaustion and furnace heat combined to make him drowsy. His eyes closed. His head drooped to one side lolling grotesquely.

He came awake with a start. His eyes raced to the watch. One-forty. Can't afford to fall asleep like that again, he warned himself. The fire was dying away. The last particle of Aunt Sarah's wretched bones had turned to dust. He couldn't understand what odd desire had ever provoked him to keep her on the mantelpiece. His warped logic convinced him that she had still exerted her influence while she had been in the vase. But now she was gone forever. Now he would be all right. He would never again have anything to fear.

Except Vera!

She knew! And she would tell Ned Anderson.

He would have to stop her. Hurting Vera was the last thing he wanted. But if he did not silence her she would go to Ned. And Ned would believe her. And Ned would think he was insane.

That could never happen because he knew he was *not* insane! Now that Sarah was finally gone he was on the road to recovery. He'd even be able to stop the psychiatric treatments. Of what use would they be to him?

The fire died out. He sat for a while, knowing what he had to do, deciding on the best method of doing it. There wasn't much time. Time, it seemed, had always been his enemy.

He climbed the cellar stairs and entered the kitchen. The wall clock told him it was two-thirty. He could be at Vera's house by two-forty if he hurried. He knew the house well. He could slip in without being heard, silence her, and slip out. All within the space of fifteen minutes.

He passed through the living room, pausing to check once more for any traces of what had happened. The rug was spotless.

The stillness of the room

was jarred by the sound of the front door slamming.

Ned Anderson came to a halt in the doorway of the living room. He looked like anything but a doctor with his collar opened and his gray hair windswept and disarrayed. He was fighting to catch his breath.

An icy hardness pervaded his gentle old features. It told Jeffrey everything. Vera had been to see him. Now they both knew. Jeffrey staggered a step backward. For a moment a fuzziness clouded his thoughts. Events were piling up too fast for him to keep up with them.

"I've had a long night, Jeffrey," the old man spoke between short gasps, "a long hard terrible night."

"You look tired, Ned."

"I think you'd better sit down, Jeff." He entered the room as Jeffrey sat on the sofa. "Vera is at her home, suffering from a severe case of shock. She is unable to speak or to comprehend . . ." He stopped as he noticed Jeffrey was not reacting.

He was accepting the news with stoic calm. His reaction was an inner one. A state of shock! There was still time! Ned did not know yet. But he came here because he suspected. He must be watched.

"I want to know what happened, Jeffrey!"

"I don't know what you mean, Ned."

The doctor moved in front of him. His back was to the mantel. "Vera came home a little over two hours ago. Her neck was covered with blood. Someone had tried to strangle her. I know you saw her here . . ."

"How do you know that?"

Her mother told me she came to your house at nine-thirty."

"But Vera didn't tell you, did she? I mean she couldn't have told you if she's in a state of shock."

His reply astonished the old man.

"You're not going to deny seeing her, are you?"

"I haven't seen her for three days."

The doctor looked into his eyes. There was a transparent film over them, a wall that had cut him off from any further rational contact.

"Jeffrey, you realize I'm your friend, don't you?"

"Don't let him tell you that, Jeffrey!"

"Yes, I realize that, Ned."

"And you know I wouldn't try to hurt you?"

"Be careful! He has a plan! He'll put you away!"

"Yes."

"I told you I had a long night. Perhaps I can best explain why I'm here if I tell you how much has happened tonight. So I want you to listen and try . . . please try, Jeffrey . . . to understand."

Jeffrey got up from the sofa and walked to the mantelpiece. For a moment the sight of the bloodstains immobilized him. He had forgotten to clean the mantel. He turned to face the doctor, covering the stains with his back.

"Is there any reason why we can't discuss it tomorrow?"

"I must talk now, Jeffrey. I was on my way home at midnight. I bought my morning paper and before I could move away from the newsstand your name hit me smack between the eyes."

He could not conceal the shock. "My name!"

"There was a double murder in a flophouse on Front Street. A man and a young girl. They had both been strangled to death. The papers say it was done by someone of superhuman strength. The girl's neck had been mangled out of shape and punctured in two places."

"I don't understand how my name enters into it."

"The man was carrying your wallet."

The jolt unstabilized him, as if someone had split the room down the middle with a giant hatchet.

"The police proceeded on the stupid theory, presumably for the benefit of headline hungry reporters, that the man was you. That theory won't last very long."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll have to tell them the man was *not* you. If *you* don't tell them somebody else will."

"Will *you* tell them, Ned?"

The doctor hesitated. "How did that man get your wallet?"

"He was a pickpocket."

Ned's expression told him the old man thought he was lying.

"It was one o'clock by the time I reached home. I had no sooner walked in the door when the phone rang. It was Paul Carter, the Stevens family doctor. He urged me to come and see Vera at once. I went as fast as I could. I spent an hour with Vera. As I told you she was unable to say anything. But when I was through examining her it was not necessary for her to say anything. Shall I go on, Jeffrey?"

There was no doubt now that Ned had come with but one intention. He would put him away. Someplace where

he would be alone again. Alone forever. There was no use depending upon Ned to help him anymore. But there was someone he could depend upon!

"You'd better continue," he told the doctor.

"Very well. I read the newspaper story again, carefully. I knew you had gone to Front Street yesterday. I had no idea how long you had stayed but I was reasonably sure that, on your first visit, you would have difficulty meeting or talking to anyone. So I knew the murdered man was not you."

Jeffrey turned from him and faced the mirror. The reflection of the old grandfather clock began to ripple gently.

"Judging from the amount of blood on both bodies and the amount found on the window ledge I knew the killer's hands must have been covered with blood when he left the room. The person who tried to strangle Vera had blood-stained hands . . ." he paused. "Like the stains on your mantel," he concluded.

The mirror was a mass of frenzied vibrations. The room became distorted.

"You're quite a brilliant man, Ned. Let's hear the rest of it."

"Please, Jeffrey. You don't have to hear . . ."

"I insist, Ned! You say

you're my friend, you want to help me?"

The doctor eyed him cautiously. "The window in the room was twenty feet from the ground. That can be a dangerous jump for a man in a hurry. When you walked to the fireplace just now you were limping.

The room was no longer reflected. There was only the friendly mist. And in the distance, taking shape to come to his aid, was the image.

"Is that all, Ned?"

"Why did you try to kill Vera?"

"I haven't said I did try to kill her. You were trying to trap me, weren't you, Ned?"

"How did she find out about Aunt Sarah?"

"So you know about Aunt Sarah too!"

"I'm afraid I've only suspected," the doctor sighed. "You see, twice a week for six weeks just wasn't enough time to *know* anything. If I had any idea you were so close to what happened tonight I would have . . ."

"You would have what, Ned?"

The old man regarded him with sober concern. "I would have seen to it that you had gotten a rest."

"In an institution? No, Ned, you couldn't have done that."

The image was at the mirror's edge. Its ghastly face was aflame with hatred. It snarled like a chained animal straining to break loose. It wanted to kill!

"You couldn't have put me in an institution. Do you know why, Ned?"

"Jeffrey, listen to me. You must understand it won't be for always. You're not beyond salvation."

Jeffrey laughed hysterically.

"I'm not even in need of salvation. Look into the mirror, Ned."

"Jeff . . ."

"Look into the mirror and you'll see why no one can ever harm me again. My salvation is in there."

The doctor walked to the mirror. He looked into it. His expression turned to pity.

"There is nothing in the mirror, Jeffrey."

He jerked his head around in a sudden moment of panic. The image was still there, still awaiting the order that would unleash the stored up fury.

"You're wrong, Ned. Look closely."

"The poker, Jeffrey! By the fireplace! Take the poker and . . ."

"And you'll see how well protected I am. Go on, Ned. Look!"

"Hold the poker behind your back, Jeffrey! That's right! Now wait! Wait for just another moment . . ."

"See my slave, Ned? With him I can do anything and nobody will ever suspect!"

"Ready, Jeffrey! Get ready! Lift the poker high in the air . . ."

" . . . between us we eliminated Aunt Sarah. We did humanity a favor, did you know that, Ned? Take a good look at him . . ."

"Now, Jeffrey. Now!"

" . . . take a good last look at him . . ."

"Look out, Jeffrey! He has a gun! Bring the poker down! Kill him. Kill him."

The poker swiftly, accurately found its mark on the tender aging scalp. Ned fell to the floor, the grayness of his hair receding under the warm red flow of blood.

"Again Jeffrey. Once more to be sure!"

The room quaked in the aftermath of two rapid gun shots. The poker crashed on the stone hearth before the fireplace. The small automatic slipped out of Ned Anderson's dead fingers.

Jeffrey clutched at the two small holes in his stomach. He gripped the mantelpiece. His hand pressed hard against the

wound, trying to hold the blood in.

He shrieked at the image as it began to melt like burning wax before his eyes.

"Come back! Come back! I'm all right! He can't put us away now! What are you afraid of! Come back here!!"

The image did not hear him. Its hot searing features were swallowed up by the fading mist.

He looked at the floor. Ned Anderson was dead. There was only one voice left to silence. He could do it alone.

He moved toward the door. Pain shot out from every direction and tore into his garbled stomach. His face perspired. He clung dearly to the fragments of life that was left. There was enough, more than enough he told himself, to get him to Vera's house.

He opened the front door. The cold clear air gave him invigorating impetus. He passed through the huge iron gate and went into the dark empty street. A ten minute walk from there. Plenty of time. Put her out of the picture. Then safety.

His heart pumped furiously as he realized he was going in the wrong direction. Vera's house was the other way! Turn around! Turn around!

His feet would not obey!

They moved faster. Faster in the wrong direction! He ordered them to slow down! He was the master of his own feet! Why did they move in the wrong direction? They took him faster and faster.

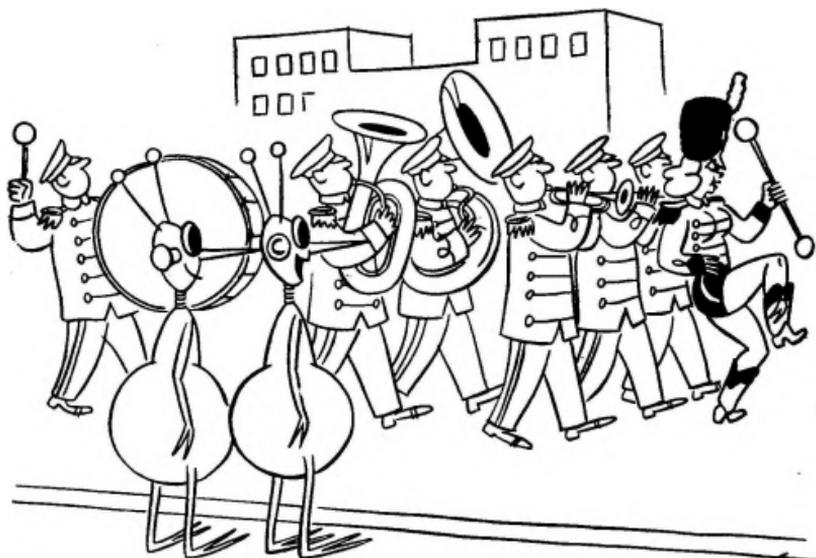
Turn around, he urged. Back to Vera's!

They were running now, still in the wrong direction. His heart could not keep up. It pumped at top speed. His

feet moved faster. Something snapped. The pumping stopped. His legs crumbled. The ground smashed into his face. His cheek rested against the soft green earth.

The river shimmered gently in the pale moonlight. A giant elm flexed a thousand green muscles in the tolerant wind. And the stars looked down on a corner of creation to find a man at peace.

THE END



"There's one leader it would be a pleasure to be taken to."



DARKNESS BOX

By **URSULA K. LeGUIN**

Illustrator **LUTJENS**

His doom was to fight forever in a timeless world. Until the sea-gift opened, its contents spilled, and death became real. But so did life.

ON soft sand by the sea's edge a little boy walked leaving no footprints. Gulls cried in the bright sunless sky, trout leaped from the saltless ocean. Far off on

the horizon the sea-serpent raised himself a moment in seven enormous arches and then, bellowing, sank. The child whistled but the sea-serpent, busy hunting whales,

did not surface again. The child walked on casting no shadow, leaving no tracks on the sand between the cliffs and the sea. Ahead of him rose a grassy headland on which stood a four-legged hut. As he climbed a path up the cliff the hut skipped about and rubbed its front legs together like a lawyer or a fly; but the hands of the clock inside, which said ten minutes of ten, never moved.

"What's that you've got there, Dicky?" asked his mother as she added parsley and a pinch of pepper to the rabbit stew simmering in an alembic.

"A box, Mummy."

"Where did you find it?"

Mummy's familiar leaped down from the onion-festooned rafters and, draping itself like a foxfur round her neck, said, "By the sea."

Dicky nodded. "That's right. The sea washed it up."

"And what's inside it?"

The familiar said nothing, but purred. The witch turned round to look into her son's round face. "What's in it?" she repeated.

"Darkness."

"Oh? Let's see."

As she bent down to look the familiar, still purring, shut its eyes. Holding the box against his chest, the little boy very carefully lifted the lid a scant inch.

"So it is," said his mother. "Now put it away, don't let it get

knocked about. I wonder where the key got to. Run wash your hands now. Table, lay!" And while the child worked the heavy pump-handle in the yard and splashed his face and hands, the hut resounded with the clatter of plates and forks materializing.

After the meal, while his mother was having her morning nap, Dicky took down the water-bleached, sand-encrusted box from his treasure shelf and set out with it across the dunes, away from the sea. Close at his heels the black familiar followed him, trotting patiently over the sand through the coarse grass, the only shadow he had.

AT the summit of the pass Prince Rikard turned in the saddle to look back over the plumes and pennants of his army, over the long falling road, to the towered walls of his father's city. Under the sunless sky it shimmered there on the plain, fragile and shadowless as a pearl. Seeing it so he knew it could never be taken, and his heart sang with pride. He gave his captains the signal for quick march and set spurs to his horse. It reared and broke into a gallop, while his gryphon swooped and screamed overhead. She teased the white horse, diving straight down at it clashing her beak, swerving aside just in time; the horse, bridleless, would snap furiously at her

snaky tail or rear to strike out with silver hoofs. The gryphon would cackle and roar, circle back over the dunes and with a screech and swoop play the trick all over. Afraid she might wear herself out before the battle, Rikard finally leashed her, after which she flew along steadily, purring and chirping, by his side.

The sea lay before him; somewhere beneath the cliffs the enemy force his brother led was hidden. The road wound down growing sandier, the sea appearing to right or left always nearer. Abruptly the road fell away; the white horse leaped the ten-foot drop and galloped out over the beach. As he came out from between the dunes Rikard saw a long line of men strung out on the sand, and behind them three black-prowed ships. His own men were scrambling down the drop, swarming over the dunes, blue flags snapping in the sea-wind, voices faint against the sound of the sea. Without warning or parley the two forces met, sword to sword and man to man. With a great shrilling scream the gryphon soared up, jerking the leash from Rikard's hand, then dropped like a falcon, beak and claws extended, down on a tall man in grey, the enemy leader. But the tall man's sword was drawn. As the iron beak snapped on his shoulder, trying to get the throat, the iron sword jabbed out and

up, slashing the gryphon's belly. She doubled up in air and fell, knocking the man down with the sweep of her great wing, screaming, blackening the sand with blood. The tall man staggered up, turning half blinded with sand and blood only when Rikard was almost on him. Without a word he turned, lifting his steaming sword to parry Rikard's blow. He tried to strike at the horse's legs, but got no chance, for the beast would back and rear and run at him, Rikard's sword slashing down from above. The tall man's arms began to grow heavy, his breath came in gasps. Rikard gave no quarter. Once more the tall man raised his sword, lunged, and took the whizzing slash of his brother's sword straight across his uplifted face. He fell without a word. Brown sand fell over his body in a little shower from the white stallion's hoofs as Rikard spurred back to the thick of the fight.

THE attackers fought on doggedly, always fewer of them, and those few being pushed back step by step towards the sea. When only a knot of twenty or so remained they broke, sprinting desperately for the ships, pushing them off chest-deep in the breakers, clambering aboard. Rikard shouted to his men. They came to him across the sand, picking their way among hacked

corpses. The badly wounded tried to crawl to him on hands and knees. All that could walk gathered in ranks in a hollow behind the dune on which Rikard stood. Behind him, out on deep water, the three black ships lay motionless, balanced on their oars.

Rikard sat down, alone on the dune-top among the rank grass. He bowed his head and put his hands over his face. Near him the white horse stood still as a horse of stone. Below him his men stood silent. Behind him on the beach the tall man, his face obliterated in blood, lay near the body of the gryphon, and the other dead lay staring at the sky where no sun shone.

A little gust of wind blew by. Rikard raised his face, which though young was very grim. He signalled his captains, swung up into the saddle, and set off round the dunes and back towards the city at a trot, not waiting to see the black ships steer in to shore where their soldiers could board them, or his own army fill up its ranks and come marching behind him. When the gryphon swooped screaming overhead he raised his arm, grinning at the great creature as she tried to perch on his gloved wrist, flapping her wings and screeching like a tomcat. "You no-good gryphon," he said, "you hen, go home to your chicken-coop!" Insulted, the monster yawped and sailed off eastward

towards the city. Behind him his army wound upward through the hills, leaving no track. Behind them the brown sand lay smooth as silk, stainless. The black ships, sails set, already stood out well to sea. In the prow of the first stood a tall, grim-faced man in grey.

Taking an easier road homeward, Rikard passed not far from the four-legged hut on the headland. The witch stood in the doorway, hailing him. He galloped over, and drawing rein right at the gate of the little yard he looked down at the young witch. She was bright and dark as coals, her black hair whipped in the sea-wind. She looked up at him, white-armored on a white horse.

"Prince," she said, "you'll go to battle once too often."

He laughed. "What should I do—let my brother lay siege to the city?"

"Yes, let him. No man can take the city."

"I know. But my father the king exiled him, he must not set foot even on our shore. I'm my father's soldier, I fight as he commands."

The witch looked out to sea, then back at the young man. Her dark face sharpened, nose and chin peaking crone-like, eyes flashing. "Serve and be served," she said, "rule and be ruled. Your brother chose neither to serve nor

rule . . . Listen, prince, take care." Her face warmed again to beauty. "The sea brings presents this morning, the wind blows, the crystals break. Take care."

Gravely he bowed his thanks, then wheeled his horse and was gone, white as a gull over the long curve of the dunes.

THE witch went back into the hut, glancing about its one room to see that everything was in place: bats, onions, cauldrons, carpets, broom, toadstones, crystal balls (cracked through) the tiny crescent moon hung up on the chimney, the Books, the familiar—She looked again, then hurried out and called, "Dicky!"

The wind from the west was cold now, bending the coarse grass down.

"Dicky!—Kitty, kitty, kitty!"

The wind caught the voice from her lips, tore it into bits and blew it away.

She snapped her fingers. The broom came zooming out the door, horizontal and about two feet off the ground, while the hut shivered and hopped about in excitement. "Shut up!" the witch snapped, and the door obediently slammed. Mounting the broom she took off in a long gliding swoop southwards down the beach, now and then crying out, "Dicky! . . . Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!"

The young prince, rejoining

his men, had dismounted to walk with them. As they reached the pass and saw the city below them on the plain, he felt a tug at his cloak.

"Prince—"

A little boy, so little he was still fat and round-cheeked, stood with a scared look, holding up a battered, sandy box. Beside him a black cat sat smiling broadly. "The sea brought this—it's for the prince of the land, I know it is—please take it!"

"What's in it?"

"Darkness, sir."

Rikard took the box and after a slight hesitation opened it a little, just a crack. "It's painted black inside," he said with a hard grin.

"No, prince, truly it's not. Open it wider!"

Cautiously Rikard lifted the lid higher, an inch or two, and peered in. Then he shut it quickly, even as the child said, "Don't let the wind blow it out, prince!"

"I shall take this to the king."

"But it's for you, sir—"

"All seagifts are the king's. But thank you for it, boy." They looked at each other for a moment, the little round boy and the hard splendid youth; then Rikard turned and strode on, while Dicky wandered back down the hills, silent and disconsolate. He heard his mother's voice from far away to the south, and tried to answer; but the wind blew his call

landwards, and the familiar had disappeared.

The bronze gates of the city swung open as the troop approached. Watchdogs bayed, guards stood rigid, the people of the city bowed down as Rikard on his horse clattered at full gallop up the marble streets to the palace. Entering, he glanced up at the great bronze clock on the bell-tower, the highest of the nine white towers of the palace. The moveless hands said ten minutes to ten.

In the Hall of Audience his father awaited him: a fierce grey-haired man crowned with iron, his hands clenched on the heads of iron chimaeras that formed the arms of the throne. Rikard knelt and with bowed head, never looking up, reported the success of his foray. "The Exile was killed, with the greater part of his men; the rest fled in their ships."

A voice answered like an iron door moving on unused hinges: "Well done, prince."

"I bring you a seagift, Lord." Still with head bowed, Rikard held up the wooden box.

A low snarl came from the throat of one of the carven monsters of the throne.

"That is mine," said the old king so harshly that Rikard glanced up for a second, seeing the teeth of the chimaeras bared and the king's eyes glittering.

"Therefore I bring it to you, Lord."

"That is mine—I gave it to the sea, I myself! And the sea spits back my gift." A long silence, then the king spoke more softly. "Well, keep it, prince. The sea doesn't want it, nor do I. It's in your hands. Keep it—locked. Keep it locked, prince!"

Rikard, on his knees, bowed lower in thanks and consent, then rose and backed down the long hall, never looking up. As he came out into the glittering ante-room officers and noblemen gathered round him, ready as usual to ask about the battle, laugh, drink, and chatter. He passed among them without a word or glance and went to his own quarters, alone, carrying the box carefully in both hands.

HIS bright, shadowless, windowless room was decorated on every wall with patterns of gold inset with topazes, opals, crystals, and, most vivid of all jewels, candle-flames moveless on golden sconces. He set the box down on a glass table, threw off his cloak, unbuckled his sword-belt, and sat down sighing. The gryphon loped in from his bedroom, talons rasping on the mosaic floor, stuck his great head onto his knees and waited for him to scratch her feathery mane. There was also a cat prowling around the room, a sleek black

one; Rikard took no notice. The palace was full of animals, cats, hounds, apes, squirrels, young hippogriffs, white mice, tigers. Every lady had her unicorn, every courtier had a dozen pets. The prince had only one, the gryphon which always fought for him, his one unquestioning friend. He scratched the gryphon's mane, often glancing down to meet the loving golden gaze of her round eyes, now and then glancing too at the box on the table. There was no key to lock it.

Music played softly in a distant room, a ceaseless interweaving of notes like the sound of a fountain.

He turned to look at the clock on the mantle, an ornate square of gold and blue enamel. It was ten minutes of ten: time to rise and buckle on his sword, call up his men, and go to battle. The Exile was returning, determined to take the city and reclaim his right to the throne. His black ships must be driven back to sea. The brothers must fight, and one must die, and the city be saved. Rikard rose, and at once the gryphon jumped up lashing her tail, eager for the fight. "All right, come along!" Rikard told her, but his voice was cold. He took up his sword in the pearl-encrusted sheath and buckled it on, and the gryphon whined with excitement and rubbed her beak on his hand. He did not respond.

He was tired and sad, he longed for something—for what? To hear a music that ceased, to speak to his brother once before they fought . . . He did not know. Heir and defender, he must obey. He set the silver helmet on his head and turned to pick up his cloak, flung over a chair. The pearly sheath slung from his belt clattered against something behind him; he turned and saw the box, lying on the floor, open. As he stood looking at it with the same cold, absent look, a little blackness like smoke gathered about it on the floor. He stooped and picked it up, and darkness ran out over his hands.

The gryphon backed away, whining.

Tall and white-armored, fair-haired, silver-capped in the glittering shadowless room, Rikard stood holding the open box, watching the thick dusk that dripped slowly from it. All around his body now, below his hands, was twilight. He stood still. Then slowly he raised the box up, clear up over his head, and turned it upside down.

DARKNESS flowed over his face. He looked about him, for the distant music had stopped and things were very silent. Candles burned, dots of light picking out flecks of gold and flashes of violet from walls and ceiling. But all the corners were

dark, behind each chair lay darkness, and as Rikard turned his head his shadow leapt along the wall. He moved then, quickly, dropping the box, for in one of the black corners he had glimpsed the reddish glow of two great eyes.—The gryphon, of course. He held out his hand and spoke to her. She did not move, but gave a queer metallic cry.

"Come on! Are you afraid of the dark?" he said, and then all at once was afraid himself. He drew his sword. Nothing moved. He took a step backward towards the door; and the monster jumped. He saw the black wings spread across the ceiling, the iron beak, the talons; her bulk was on him before he could stab upwards. He wrestled, the great beak snapping at his throat and the talons tearing at his arms and chest, till he got his sword-arm free and could slash down, pull away and slash again. The second blow half severed the gryphon's neck. She dropped off, lay writhing in the shadows among splinters of glass, then lay still.

Rikard's sword dropped clattering on the floor. His hands were sticky with his own blood; he could hardly see. He groped his way to a chair and sat down. Then, as he had done on the dune-top after battle, he bowed his head and hid his face in his hands. It was completely silent. Only one

candle still flickered in its sconce. Rikard raised his head.

The gryphon remained still.

"It's dead," said a small soft voice, as the witch's cat came picking its way delicately among the fragments of the smashed table. "Once and for all. Listen, prince!" Rikard stood motionless, blank-faced, till a sudden sound made him start: a little ting! nearby. Then from the tower overhead a huge dull bell-stroke reverberated in the stone of the floor. The clocks were striking ten.

There was a pounding at his door, calls and commands echoed down the palace corridors.

"You'll be late for the battle, prince," said the cat.

Rikard groped among blood and shadow for his sword, sheathed it, flung on his cloak and went to the door.

"There'll be an afternoon today," the cat said, "and a twilight, and a night will fall. At nightfall one of you will come home to the city, you or your brother. But only one of you."

Rikard stood still a moment. "Is the sun shining now, outside?"

"Yes, it is—now."

"Well, then, it's worth it," the young man said, and opened the door and strode on out into the hubbub and panic of the sunlit halls, his shadow falling black behind him.

THE END



*In the pre-dawn hours the old man
scoured the city to find a wor-
shipper for the goddess he loved.*

a NIGHT
with
HECATE

By EDWARD W. LUDWIG

SHE awoke slowly, as if from a thousand-year sleep. Out of the dark vacuity of consciousness came the single thought:

"I am alive. I still exist."

She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids were frozen shut. She tried to open her mouth in anticipation of speech. Her lips seemed fused and as dry as ancient, sun-baked leather.

Out of the black silence came a voice, a humming-bird drone, far away:

"Awake, mighty Hecate . . . oh, gods of wind, fire and pain . . . by the heart of Astaroth, the tongue of Asmodius, awake . . . *per vota nostra, ipse nunc surgat nobilis dicatus Hecate!*"

The muted words of the chant were as tiny fingers of warmth touching the witch-goddess, dispelling the clouds of forgetfulness. The fingers seemed to caress her face, opening her dark, black-browed eyes, giving softness and warmth to red, sensuous lips.

She became aware of a soft breeze stirring the midnight blackness of her long hair, brushing it across the clear, white flesh of face and throat. The breeze teased at the edges of her frail robe. The garment, as delicate and light as a veil of fog, fluttered back to her shoulders so that moonlight fell upon the whiteness of her full breasts and naked body.

The voice cried, "Hecate, beautiful Hecate! You are here!"

"Yes, my children—at last."

She sucked the cold night air deep into her lungs. How wonderful it was! The familiar summons, the joyous awakening, the thrill of the magic moon and the dark sea of worshipping faces; then the wine, the throbbing beat of drums, the lusty dancing, the frenzied chants, and—most wonderful of all—Love.

"You are more beautiful than ever," said the voice, reverently. "In all the universe there is none as lovely as you."

She closed her eyes, smiling, letting the words echo through her consciousness. She stretched her arms above her head, basking in the joy of feeling alive. Then she brought her hands down, ever so slightly, over naked waist, long firm thighs, smooth white knees. She was aware of the rapid rise and fall of her breasts.

She opened her eyes, still smiling.

"Thank you, my children. I—"

She stopped, her tongue frozen. Her slow gaze fell to the clearing which should have held a choked sea of eager faces.

There was but a single face. Just one.

It was that of old Martin. He was a sparrow-faced little man, his shaggy gray hair tumbling over his wizened features as he

knelt before the stone altar.

She remembered. Suddenly she felt very old and very weary.

I had forgotten, she thought. I had forgotten that I am alone. It is the year 1997, and I am alone. . . .

DESPITE the grief that had welled up within her, she held her head high.

"Beautiful Hecate," came Martin's soft voice, "you are sad. Are you angry with me?"

Her slender body lost some of its stiffness. "No, not angry. But I do not understand your people. I do not understand why they let the old gods die."

As she spoke, a dark procession of lost faces marched through her mind. Great Dagon, lovely Diana, beautiful Venus, swift Hermes, mighty Zeus. How strong they had once been!

But those who worshipped the other Master had come with their holy water and their crucifixes and their edicts. Then, and by far the worst, had come the doubters, spewing forth cold logic to prove that the Elder Gods could not exist. The entire Earth had been washed with logic. It had been soaped, brushed and toileted and laid to dry in sterile sunlight.

The Elder Gods had died like leaves on an October tree, falling one by one—for without believers they could not exist.

Now only she—and the King himself, the Master of Darkness—remained.

Hecate's sad eyes turned to the sparrow-faced man. "You're a poet, Martin. You understand men. How did it happen? Why did men stop believing?"

The old man shrugged. "Perhaps my people became old. They lost their fear of the night. They told their children there was nothing to fear in a darkened room, and they lost their power to imagine. They put equations on pieces of paper and they made microscopes and telescopes. And whatever could not be explained by the equations, whatever could not be seen through the microscopes and telescopes, was cast out, ignored, explained away."

He nodded at the sky. "Men made new gods, forgetting the old. There are the new gods—the planets and stars, the silver rockets. Can the wine of Dionysus compete with the challenge of Mars? Can the joy of a Sabbat surpass the thrill of conquering Jupiter's ice seas?"

Hecate shook her dark head. "But we could have given them wealth, immortality, all the ecstasies of Earth. They had no right to forget us. Didn't they know that we can't exist unless they believe in us?"

Martin didn't answer.

"And you," she went on, "why aren't you like the others?"

He scratched the back of his gray, shaggy head. "Perhaps because my father and *his* father worshipped you. I was taught to believe. Too, maybe it's a kind of perverseness—my way of defying a world that has no use for a poet who writes only of ancient things."

Her face softened. She smiled at this helpless, absurd little man. A poet, a maker of dreams, living his feeble existence in a forest cabin. An exile in this drab world of 1997. Yet without his faith, she knew, the darkness would devour her as it devoured a thousand gods and goddesses before her.

SHE raised her face to the full, silver moon. Memory was strong. It was easy to imagine that this was a night of a thousand, two thousand years ago.

Yes, how clear it was! In her mind's vision she could see herself swooping down from the night sky. Behind her would be her monstrous brood—ghoulish Mormo, the poltergeist Ceropis, the thousand-shaped, donkey-footed Empusas.

She could see the steaming cauldron with its hissing hell-broth, with its wondrous odors of lizard and toad and storax and myrrh.

Down, down she would swoop, over the heads of the gape-jawed worshippers, through the swirl-

ing smoke, past the black-robed priests and their shrine of laurel boughs, across the chalked pentagram and to the great stone throne.

Then the shouting, the howling, the dancing! The wild rhythm of skin-drums, louder and louder, like a chorus of thunderous heart-beats surging up from the Earth.

The occasional figures, edging away from the light of the fire and lifting heads of silhouetted black to the full moon. The hurried disrobing, the gestures, the *changing*. Suddenly the beast howl, rising above the drum rhythms and the shrieking voices. Then the swift beast movements and the skittering away into the night.

More chants, more incantations. The hurling of rainbow powers into dancing flame. The stripping of virgins, the screams and laughter, the futile beat of hands, the pulling of soft young bodies into the shadows.

The melting of waxen images. The bleating of a black lamb, the thrust of sharp teeth. The flow of hot crimson into an altar's trench.

Out of the flames, a new arrival! Perhaps laughing Pan, his cloven hoofs tapping to the beat of drums. Perhaps, if the moon were very bright, the greatest of them all! The Master!

Upon such a moment all move-

ment and all sound would cease. Pan and even mighty Hecate would fall prostrate, heads touching the century-worn earth. . . .

Hecate blinked. The vision faded. The priests, the worshippers, the smoke and flame dissolved into forest shadows. The shoutings, the chantings became fragile echoes carried away by the night-breeze, swept like frightened ghosts back to lost and forgotten centuries.

Gone, she thought, gone forever.

SHE became aware that a murmur had fallen over the forest, like the drone of an approaching rocket, far away. Abruptly, it loudened and exploded into a chorus of deep-throated, metallic growls. Vibrations traveled through the ground like invisible legs of great iron spiders. The stone throne trembled.

In the distance, hovering beneath the tree-horizon, was an ever-brightening glow of light.

"Martin! What is it? What's happening?"

The old man looked apologetically down at his cracked, worn shoes. "This is why I called you. The men from the city are destroying the forest. My house, your throne, the altar—all will be destroyed."

She choked. "Why, Martin?"

"They're going to build a new rocket port here. The forest, they say, is a waste of space."

She leaped down from the throne, eyes wild, black a whirling crown of midnight. "When will they be here?"

"V—very soon. Maybe within an hour."

She spat. "You fool! You should have called me sooner. It's been weeks since you've called me!"

"I was sick, beautiful Hecate, so sick I couldn't even leave my house. Even when they told me the house would be destroyed—"

"Silence! Without the throne and altar I, too, will be destroyed. I won't be able to come even when you call me!"

"I—I know."

She gasped. "Martin, you know I need two things in order to live: love and worship. You must help me find new disciples, men who will believe in me and love me. Only with that faith and love can I live apart from the forest and throne and altar. We must find those disciples now, before sunrise. Do you understand?"

The metallic crunchings grew louder as hungry steel mouths closed over pine and spruce. The light was brighter, rivaling the glow of the moon.

"Did you hear me, Martin? *We must find those disciples before sunrise!*"

"B—but I've tried before to

tell men of your beauty. They won't believe me. They think I'm crazy."

"Tonight I'll go with you. I'll help you. I'll *make* them see my beauty. They'll *have* to worship me."

"But they can't see you. They can neither see nor hear you unless they believe in you."

Her eyes flashed. "Just one disciple, Martin! If I find just one, I'll be stronger, strong enough to live away from the throne, strong enough so that others can see me. Then they, too, will believe. They'll begin to give me love, Martin—the love that only young men can give—and I'll be as I used to be. I can give them gifts, even immortality. Promise them that, Martin! Promise them immortality!"

Martin looked at the hostile glow of light. He shivered before the ripping, crunching sounds of the machines.

"I'll try, beautiful Hecate."

As he spoke, the steel-jawed face of chugging metal monster appeared at the edge of the clearing.

Hecate screamed.

They ran. . . .

THE city was a great, bubbling cauldron of swarming humanity. Its deep canyons blazed with the rainbow brightness of shimmering neon. Its air was heavy with the grumble of silver jet-

mobiles. Overhead, copter-jets swished and darted over the canyon tops like green- and red-eyed bats.

They stumbled through the man-swarm that covered the second-level sidewalk.

"Go where they're unhappy, Martin, where they're dissatisfied."

Martin thought for an instant. "There's a place just a block away. We'll try that first."

Suddenly a coldness and a weariness crept over her. She swayed. "W—wait, Martin. There's something wrong with me."

It was as if a force were sucking the strength and life from her body.

She looked up.

Before her loomed Gothic towers, ornate spires, delicately-stained glass windows. A cathedral. A red-bricked anachronism half-hidden among silver mountains of steel and cement.

She shuddered.

The home of the Unmentionable One. The Great Destroyer of darkness.

There had been a time when she and her brood would have swarmed into a cathedral screeching with evil delight. Now, a single wave of a crucifix, a single drop of holy water would mean oblivion.

"Martin," she breathed, "take me away, please."

The old man squinted at the cathedral and jerked. "I'm sorry. I—I didn't think."

He led her away, stumbling through the fury of flesh, sound and light.

Strength returned to her and, gradually, a sense of satisfaction came to her. She'd caught only a glimpse of the cathedral's interior, but it had appeared empty. A smile touched her moist red lips. Even the Unmentionable One, it seemed, was not doing so well these days.

"Here we are," puffed Martin. "I'm sure we'll find unhappy, lonely people in here."

THE SPACERAT, said the glowing red sign. The outside of the building was painted the dull, deep yellow of decayed teeth. On the swinging door was a caricature of a black rat sitting in a bowl-like spaceship.

They entered.

A quiet semi-darkness met them like the caress of soft hands. Hecate paused, both surprised and pleased. There *were* those in the city who wanted to escape from the dizzying avalanche of movement and light and sound.

She eyed the men who sat silent at the bar, sipping cool, colored liquids. Yes, she could feel the aura of loneliness in the air, the loneliness of men who escape into shadows.

She spied two young men wearing the white, skin-tight uniforms of the Moon Patrol. Devils of hatred danced in her eyes.

How she hated them! The souls of these empty-eyed rocketmen were as dry and hollow as the tubes of their rockets. These were the men who had robbed the moon of its mystery, its magic and beauty. These were the men who had transformed the moon into a flame-scarred target, a battered bulls-eye in the sky. If only she had the power to swoop down upon them in her *true* form: snake-haired, fire-eyed, fork-tongued!

She whirled away from them, the bottom of her thin robe floating upward like breeze-stirred feathers. "Over there, Martin. The young man at the end of the bar. I can feel his bitterness. Talk to him. He'll believe."

Martin walked up to the black-haired, side-burned man in the faded leather jacket. Hecate stood back, almost afraid to listen as words drifted to her faintly:

". . . a woman," Martin was saying, "most beautiful you ever saw . . ."

A slow, deep, tired voice: ". . . weren't for a woman, I wouldn't be drunk."

Martin's gaunt face was white. Beads of perspiration glittered on his wrinkled forehead. ". . .

do anything you want . . . never find anyone like . . ."

The young man turned his head, disinterested.

Hecate trembled, then straightened and moved forward seductively. "Martin, tell him about my beauty, my body, tell him how warm my kisses are. Tell him how I make love."

"Y—yes, beautiful Hecate. But—"

She silenced him with a sweep of her hand, sat on the bar stool beside the black-haired young man. She opened her robe to reveal the shadowy whiteness of her large breasts. She crossed her long legs and ran her delicate fingers suggestively down her firm, naked thighs. Her slightly parted lips touched the ear of the bitter-faced young man.

"Can it be," she breathed, "that you don't want to make love to me? It will be as nothing you've ever known."

"Hecate, he can't hear you," whined Martin.

"Silence! Listen to me, young man, hear me. Listen to what my friend says. I can give you—"

The young man turned away. "Damned nut," he muttered.

He downed his drink, cleared his throat, rose, strode to the swinging door.

So swiftly. So very swiftly.

Hecate knew that he was like all the others. He could not meas-

ure a philtre's power on a slide rule nor discover Valhalla in a telescope.

Therefore he could not believe.

OUTSIDE again, they stood on the slidewalk. They were tight, silent little islands in the flowing stream of mankind.

At length Martin murmured, "Maybe you could stay alive in the city. After all, I believe in you, and I can love you—just as I used to."

She sighed. "Thank you, Martin, but you know you couldn't. You're—forgive me—an old man."

She stiffened. "Martin, the children! Of course. They could not love me, but at least they would believe. I could keep living. What time is it? Is it too late to find children?"

Martin shook his head. "It's never too late to find children these days. They're so filled with vita-tabs they sleep only an hour or so a night. But children aren't as they used to be. They've changed, too."

"Nonsense! Children never change. Take me to them. Quickly!"

Martin nodded. He began to walk.

The minds of children, thought Hecate. They were like empty bottles, uncapped, new and shining. Why not fill the bottles? Start with the boiling

potions of superstition. Add the blood-red wines of hatred, the midnight elixirs of fear. Stir well, shake, and cap tightly. Seal them forever against the cold winds of logic!

Down, down the furious streets. Pushing, dodging, stumbling, being pushed, squeezed, thrust, carried forward.

Somewhere in the night a clock struck, its clear tones rising above the babble of the city. It struck once, twice, three times.

Hecate paled. "Three o'clock, Martin. Hurry!"

The old man faltered. He leaned against the side of a building.

"Beautiful Hecate, I'm so tired." He closed his eyes and gasped for breath. "I told you I'd been sick. Let me rest just a minute—"

"No," she snapped. "If dawn comes and we haven't found another believer—" She shuddered, unable to voice the horrible thought.

Martin's eyes opened. "Yes, beautiful Hecate."

Onward. Like scraps of drift-wood in a riptide.

AT last a great emptiness lay before them, a blue-floored canyon resting in the midst of towering steel and concrete.

"Here we are," said Martin, panting. "It's the spaceport."

They walked up to a transparent glassite wall that was stripped with red warning lights. Inside, to their right, was a long line of white-domed hangers. Far across the field, as if on the other side of a lake, lay a score of needle-nosed continental rockets. They were huddled in a neat, unbroken row like dead wasps on a collector's display board. Nearer, in the center of the field, three guide-cars were towing a silver rocket of Mars Exploration.

Abruptly, Hecate saw the children.

There were two, boys, one very small, one not so small. Their noses and palms were pressed against the transparent wall. Their eager gazes were hungry tongues devouring the blue miracle before them.

"Be careful, Martin. Don't frighten them."

Martin tottered toward them, touching the wall once and again to keep his balance. Hecate glided after him, her features calm and confident.

"Hi, boys," said Martin.

The boys turned. Their bodies seemed manlike and strangely similar in their white tunics. It was as if they were store manikins, products of molds that differed only in size.

The larger boy, about ten, said, "What's the matter, Mister? You sick?"

Martin tried unsuccessfully to laugh. "N—no. I just want to tell you something. Would you believe I've found something a lot more fun than watching rockets?"

The smaller boy, about six, seemed interested. "What's more fun than watchin' rockets?"

"It sounds strange, but it's true. Have you heard of invisibility?"

"Sure, like with the Green Flash on TV. But there ain't no such thing, really."

Martin smiled. He was breathing easier now. "No, not so far as science knows. But I'm a scientist, and—" He hesitated, a mock frown creasing his forehead. "No, I guess I'd better not tell you."

Hecate scowled. What in Lucifer was old Martin babbling about? She started to scream a protest.

The older boy stepped back from the wall. "Okay, go on and tell us, Mister."

Suddenly she understood. She clapped her hands. Martin was being clever. The scientific approach. Yes, this was it. Yes, yes! She bent forward, her head shaking with excitement, a black and effervescent cloud hovering over the children.

"It's like this," said Martin. "I was working in my lab—"

"What lab do you work in?" asked the boy.

"My own. My private lab."

The boy snorted. "Nobody works alone. Only the government labs can get equipment. You run along, Mister."

"No," said the smaller boy. "Let's listen to him."

Martin sighed. "Well, like I began to say, I discovered a strange gas, and it—"

"You a para-physiologist?"

"Er, no."

"A psycho-syntheticist?"

"I, er, no, I'm more like a chemist."

The boy crinkled his nose contemptuously.

"Anyway," continued Martin, "this gas makes a person invisible!"

The boys laughed.

"You don't believe me? All right, look over here. Look hard. What do you see?"

"Nothin' "

Hecate stiffened as Martin pointed to her. With all the force of her will she struggled to make herself visible.

Martin coaxed, "You can see someone right here if you try. Just keep looking. Keep trying. You can see her. You *will* see her."

"I don't see nothin'," said the older boy.

Hecate cried, "Look at me, not *through* me! I'm here in front of you. See me!"

The smaller boy squinted. His body hunched forward. "Jupiter,

for a second I thought I did see somethin'. Somethin' black."

"That's it!" exclaimed Martin. "You're seeing her! Keep looking!"

"Aw, you're imagining things," said the older boy. "Let's go home."

"But I wanta see the Mars rocket take off."

"The Mars rocket ain't gonna take off till morning."

The boys turned away.

A sob broke from Hecate's lips. "Wait, children! You almost saw me! Look again, oh please, just once!"

She lunged after them. Her quivering hands touched their eyes, lips, noses, shoulders. Her fingers were like flashing knitting needles weaving invisible coats about the children.

"Look at me, please—"

They passed through her, feeling nothing, seeing nothing.

Bitter realization came to her.

The bottles were already filled, capped, and sealed forever.

THEY walked silently and without purpose. What time was it? Four o'clock? Five? How soon would dawn arrive? She thought of that terrible, final moment when the *real* darkness might arrive. She trembled and forced the vision from her mind.

They came to a small park. The trees and shrubs and grass

were cloaked in a darkness broken feebly by lights from the city. Darkness, thought Hecate, was the nearest thing to being home.

They sat wearily upon a rickety bench.

Hecate murmured, "Why is the park empty. Why are we alone?"

"Nobody comes to parks anymore, except maybe lovers now and then. It's too quiet here, and people aren't used to quietness. They're doing away with parks. This is one of the few left."

She smiled grimly. An idea formed in her brain.

"Men can not help us," she mused, "but there is One who might help even now."

Martin was silent.

Hecate rose. "Yes, the greatest of them all, the only one except me who has not perished. The King. The Master of Darkness."

Martin shivered. "Even *he* isn't believed in much any more. I don't think—"

"You don't think *he* could come? I know how to make him come!"

She clasped her hands together, raising her head to the night sky. She felt a hope and a strength returning to her.

"Yes, it would be easy." She glanced down at the bench. "This could be our altar."

Martin sprang up, blinking away his weariness. "I've worshipped you, mighty Hecate, as

my father and grandfather worshipped you. I've thrilled at your beauty, exalted in your love. But I don't like sacrifices."

"Now Martin, you will bring me—"

"No, please—"

"A virgin."

He lowered his gaze. "You mustn't ask that. It isn't right."

She snarled, cat-like. "You're an old man, Martin. You've still a chance for immortality, a chance to be young again. Wouldn't you like to love me as you used to?"

His gaze flicked from side to side, nervously, as if he were seeking a place to hide. "Someone would see us."

"Nonsense. You said yourself that no one comes to parks anymore. A sacrifice would please *him* most. Go, Martin! Bring back a virgin—a girl, soft, young, vibrant, innocent!"

Her voice was charged with an electric savagery that made the old man cringe. There had been a time when the impact of that command would have stilled a screaming wind, silenced a storm-whipped sea. Once, Dagon himself would have cowered beneath its razor-edged fury.

Martin bowed. "Yes, beautiful Hecate. I will bring you a virgin."

SHE waited. The seconds were like heartbeats pumping hatred and desperation through her

veins, pumping ever faster.

Soon, footsteps.

Martin was returning, his white face shining in the shadows. Under his arm was a small bundle.

"B—beautiful Hecate, I could not find a virgin, and so—"

"And so you brought a child!" The beat of hatred in her quickened. "Good! Good!"

Martin's mouth quivered. "It is not a child."

She frowned. As he came nearer, she stared at the bundle cradled in his arm.

"Martin!"

A hairy ball of life squirmed uncomfortably in his grasp. It was a tiny white terrier puppy.

She shook with rage and despair. "You idiot!" She spun away from him, her foot stomping the earth.

A stupid, soulless puppy. What an insult to *him*. An insignificant puppy for One who once dreamed of mastering the universe!

She glanced up at the night sky. That light in the East—was it the light of dawn? Had the tortuous moments passed so swiftly?

Fresh terror gripped her. There was little time. Perhaps, she reasoned, even a puppy might have some sort of a soul. Even a puppy's flesh was filled with hot, rich blood. *He* might be pleased after all.

She whirled back to Martin, eyes like hot coals. "Start the Sabbat. You have cord?"

"Yes, beautiful Hecate."

"Tie the animal to a leg of the bench. A knife?"

"My pocket knife."

"That will do. Hurry!"

THE old man worked slowly and clumsily. His hands were like knotted tree stumps, his breath like the wheezing of a fish flopping on sun-baked sand.

"Now the fire, Martin. A great fire!"

Martin fumbled, gasped, tottered.

Twig upon twig, branch upon branch, limb upon limb.

"More, Martin! A fire that will reach to the moon!"

More branches were ripped from dry sockets. Martin staggered back and forth, thrusting load after load upon the dark pyramid before the bench.

"Excellent, Martin! Light it!"

The scratch of a match, the pinpoint of flame. The ignition, the hissing, the crackling, the explosion of scarlet.

Accompanied by white, billowing smoke, the flames ripped into the night air.

They began the chant. Softly at first, then swelling into a piercing crescendo.

"Dance, Martin! Do *his* dance!"

Martin stood puffing, opening

and closing his eyes with each rasping breath.

"Dance! I command you!"

Martin danced. His lean body was like that of a grotesque marionette manipulated by an insane master. The knife in his upraised hand shone crimson in the light of the crackling fire.

The puppy stood shivering, tail between its trembling legs. Its tiny body struggled helplessly against the twine that bound it to the leg of the bench.

"Faster, faster!"

Louder and louder grew the chant. Wilder and wilder became the dance. Higher and higher surged the flames.

"Now, the sacrifice!"

Martin froze in his dance. An idiotic, pain-wracked grin spread over his features. The knife slipped from his hand. He clutched his chest as if it were a bleeding wound.

"Martin! *The sacrifice!*"

Martin fell.

A coldness seemed to sweep over the park, chilling the air's hot hatred, sucking brightness from the flames.

"Martin? What's wrong?" Hecate's voice was no longer shrill. It was a feeble whisper, no louder than the whining of the frightened puppy.

Martin lay on the dark earth. His wide eyes stared for a moment at Hecate. His lips moved, but no sound came forth. The

words that lay in his throat were never said.

All things were fading—the flames and their crackling, the light and noise from the city, even hatred itself. The world was dissolving like delicate sand sculpture being washed away by a sea tide.

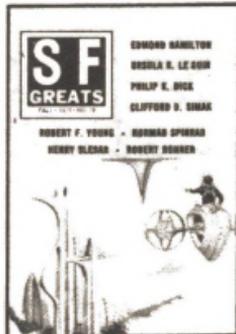
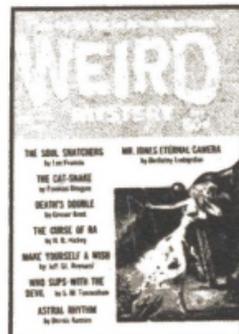
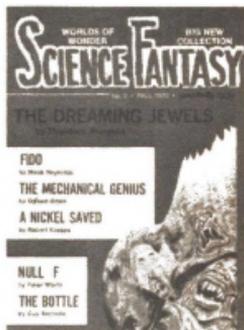
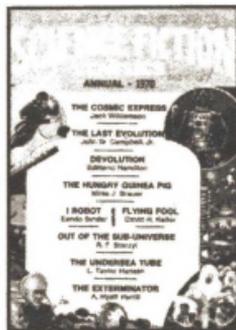
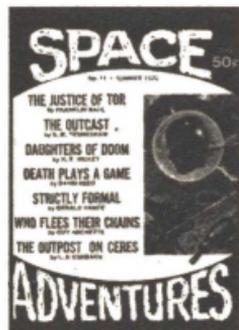
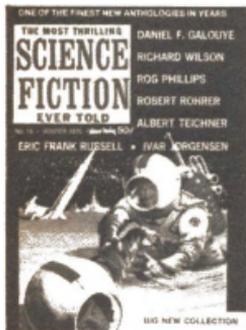
Wide-eyed and open-mouthed,

Hecate stared down at her feet, legs, thighs, body. They, too, were dissolving.

She realized that it was not unpleasant. It was like sinking into dark cotton to sleep forever. After all, she remembered, the nearest thing to home was darkness. . . .

THE END

From the WORLD'S LARGEST PUBLISHER OF S-F AND FANTASY THE MAGAZINES OF THE 70'S



SOLOMON'S DEMON

By ARTHUR PORGES

Illustrator SUMMERS

The Gothic tale of terror is seldom seen in these days of plot and character. But here, for old time's sake, is a fine example of the ghastly evil that rages in the dark of night.

THERE was no doubt that the old house had an aura of evil, but Barry Selden never believed for a moment that it was actually haunted. Such things might be all very well in England or the wilds of Dracula's Transylvania—assuming that the Reds would tolerate any supernatural deviationists—but not in New England. Besides, even his uncle had not mentioned any ghost; he had merely made obscure implications through the will. Obviously George Kaelin had wasted a good property in permitting this fine old place to lie vacant for fifty years. Imagine a house these days, and in a good tourist area, too, with high rents, lacking electricity. A crowning irony, since just beyond the north fence

the great steel towers marched across the fields shouldering high tension wires. And nothing in the building but rusty kerosene lamps.

Well, the estate was Selden's now. Uncle George, in the will, and urged him neither to live there nor to sell out. He even objected, it would seem, to tearing the house down and putting up a more modern one, although the land and location were quite valuable, protected from neighbors by a good buffering of scenic meadow. The old man had been maddeningly vague, hinting at some evil secret hidden in the basement, something it would be dangerous to disturb. The fellow was surely a kook.

And yet, from the moment he'd

moved in, with a view to preparing the place for his wife, Selden had been uneasy; no, he might as well admit it—scared. For the first time in years, he kept a light burning in his room all night. And surely it was significant that he'd picked the one farthest from that damp, dark basement. For a week now, he'd been exploring the house, making plans for remodeling, but still avoiding a detailed inspection of the cellar. But he couldn't delay much longer and keep his self-respect. There were some interesting old trunks down there that suggested the possibility of valuable antiques. If so, they might pay for modernizing the house. Today, therefore, it must be done. He would take one of the gasoline lamps—he'd brought two—down there, and look around. Then, when Valerie arrived, on Monday, they could make decisions.

IMMEDIATELY after lunch—luckily he'd been able to get a little butane stove in town—he began. It was fascinating to search the boxes and bales. Most of the clothing was hopelessly mouldy; but there were other items, some of them real treasures: books, including a couple of good Melvilles; some valuable glass; and a box of superb scrimshaw work in whalebone, ivory, and assorted teeth. At the sight

of it, Selden recalled that Uncle George's grandfather, who built the house, had been a whaler, as well as a blackbirder, in the 1840's.

The scrimshaw work—delicate, ingenious carvings—was of excellent quality and great artistic merit, worth hundreds of dollars. After all, each piece meant weeks of painstaking work on the part of some whaler with too much time on his hands between kills. Selden gloated over the stuff. This item he would keep; it was too nice to sell; that one, too, would hold Val's jewelry

At the very bottom of the box, wrapped in musty canvas, he found something else. Just a plate of yellowed ivory, perhaps four by five inches, cut apparently, from a single huge elephant's tusk. At the sight of it, he sucked in his breath.

Selden was familiar with many masterpieces of the grotesque, including those of the brilliant German school, but this displayed a primitive power beyond his experience, even though the artist must have been an illiterate seaman with only a sheathknife as an engraving tool.

The carving depicted a scene of nightmare context on the deck of a ship. One man, presumably the captain, from his dress, was cringing against the rail with an expression of sick disbelief on his



face. He was holding a small black box, the size of a brick. Before him, a sailor lay dead. He appeared to have been a giant of herculean build, perhaps cock of the fo'c'stle, yet one of his arms had been torn off at the shoulder, and his face was a shapeless ruin of mangled flesh.

Three other men were engaged in a gallant but obviously hopeless fight with a most appalling monster. It was tall, standing fully ten inches above the biggest sailor, cadaverously thin, and fearfully banded with wire-like muscles. One huge taloned paw still clutched the red rags of the dead man's face; the other was cramming the end of the severed arm into the gaping mouth. The creature wore a sort of tattered grey robe, through which its pale skin, sparsely dotted with green hair, gleamed obscenely.

Worst of all were the eyes, yellow and without pupils. They shone with unquenchable hatred, and their intelligence was beast-like, rather than human, in their animal lack of restraint.

The thing was earless, and had only a single moist pit for a nose, but its mouth was a jungle of teeth like great glass splinters, running far back into the mighty jaws.

The carving was carefully colored, and seemed to Selden to have a vitality beyond any mere fantasy. The scene it recorded

could not have happened, except in the sick mind of the artist, and yet, in the clammy cellar, with the gas lamp hissing, and no other humans within earshot, he began to shake as if agued. And suddenly, unable to resist the irrational panic, he seized the lamp, and plaque in his other hand, bolted.

Upstairs, in the more reassuring atmosphere of his room, and bolstered by two stiff Martinis, he found himself more calm, and able to examine the carving further. His first impulse was to rationalize the monster's physical proportions. No doubt the artist, as a slave catcher, could have seen a gorilla. This conception was probably based on such a brute. You could make the big ape taller, modify its head, give it a remnant of clothing to intensify the horror of its pseudo-humanity . . . But Selden couldn't convince himself. Actually, there was no resemblance to any of the large primates, except in strength.

Defeated in this line of speculation, Selden casually flipped the ivory from one hand to the other. The moment he saw the reverse of it, enlightenment came, for there, on the back, was a neatly carved inscription. Except for some misspellings, it read:

The encounter of the men of the *Sarah Hackett* with a malignant spirit of the Night. How an

evil demon, sealed up since the days of Solomon, was accidentally released by Captain Barker. It tore off the face and right arm of First Mate Ezekiel Sharpe, and then daunted by the light, which it cannot abide, retreated below decks. It was driven back into the box by the Voodoo Priestess, Mamaloi Hannah, who was freed as a reward. June, 1841.

Selden shook his head wonderingly. The unknown artist had gone to great lengths to make this appear the record of a true occurrence. Yet the world of 1840, like that of 1961, had no place for evil spirits bottled up by Solomon. Obviously, nothing like this had ever really happened. Yet beneath his rational scepticism there was the stirring of vague instinctive fears; he recalled the reputation of the old house, and the cellar with its air of brooding menace.

Once more he scrutinized the bit of ivory, and this time, on one edge, in a barely visible scratching in a different hand, he made out the cryptic words: "Sealed Trap."

In his mood of sharpened awareness, the implication seemed clear. Another clue to this fantastic affair had been carefully concealed, undoubtedly by Barker himself. There was a trapdoor, and it must lead to more documentation. Selden

knew that he must pursue the matter further. Only a complete investigation could remove the stigma from the house. Once the facts were established, reason would prevail, and he need no longer feel childish fears in the cellar.

BUT it was getting quite dark now; and when he thought of returning to the basement, his nerve began to fail him. Why not wait until morning? There wasn't any hurry; Val wasn't due until late afternoon. But self contempt for his cowardice was prodding him into action. He was no baby to be frightened of a cellar. An excellent middle-weight boxer, college champion on the horizontal bars, veteran of Korea—hadn't he fought down panic before? Yet even as he told himself this, he knew, too, that each man has something he fears above all else, fire, or snakes, or dying of cancer. There was no shame in such a weakness; it was part of being human. Why, even the imaginary monster of the picture ran from light.

Finally curiosity and shame triumphed over deeper instincts. He took one gas lamp, leaving the second burning in his room—the only illumination in the big house—and went back down. Once in the cellar, he put the lantern on an old highboy, so that it cast a cheery golden pool

over most of the room, and began a systematic search for a hidden trapdoor.

The floor was covered with the dust of decades, but he found a tattered broom and swept away at all the open spaces. The solid masonry looked as if it hadn't been touched since having been laid down over a century earlier.

Having drawn a blank from that phase of the hunt, there was nothing left but to shift some of the boxes and trunks. Perhaps the trap was under one of them. So grunting and sweating, he shouldered them aside, one after the other. Still not a single suspicious outline anywhere on the floor.

"One more," he thought. "I'll do just one more, then give it up for tonight."

Even as he told himself this, the quest was over. Pushed by his shoulder, a big trunk grated away from the wall, and there, not in the floor at all, but well above it, was a small wooden door, heavily studded with thick nails.

Filled with impatience. Selden found a pry bar and attacked the stubborn oak. It took twenty minutes, but at last the door swung free. He reached in, found his hand touching something, and pulled it out. At the sight of it, he felt his stomach contract like a clenched fist, spurting sourness up into his throat.

In his hand was a small black box, identical with the one in the carving.

Trembling with emotion, he carried it to a rickety table, and then brought the lamp over. Under its steady light he examined his find. The box was made of some exotic, highly polished wood, and had a lid equipped with heavy hinges of corroded bronze. To his surprise, the only lock was a necklace of vertebrae strung on coarse black hairs, and fastened with a little skin bag. The latter suggested something familiar, and abruptly Selden placed it: a *ouanga* of the sort common to voodoo rituals.

He stood there, box in one hand, thinking hard. Here was a decision to be made, and he was a little ashamed about hesitating. He ought to open the box, and so purge his mind of those irrational fears. But he could still see the captain standing there, sick and appalled by what came out of the little container. There was nothing to lose by waiting. Maybe in the light, with a good rifle, and an anthropologist learned in voodoo matters . . .

At that moment, something stirred inside. It was an experience to break anybody's nerve, and Selden's went. The box slipped from his palsied fingers. It hit the shaky little table hard; a weak leg splintered, and the lantern shattered on the stone

floor. Instantly the cellar was pitch black.

Completely panicked now, Selden ran for the door. Behind him there was a faint scuffling, and when he turned for one horrified glance, he thought he saw a tall figure with opalescent eyes rising from the box.

IT WAS then that he made a **I** a critical error in tactics. Instead of running for the back door, to open fields, and help, he took the nearest route—the stair case leading to his room. The moment he did so, he realized his mistake. There was no longer any retreat; a few seconds of blind fear, and he had trapped himself at the top of the old house.

There was the sound of heavy steps beneath, and half sobbing, he sprang into his room, slammed and bolted the door.

Once inside, he looked about frantically in search of a weapon. There was nothing. He seized a chair and wrenched at one sturdy leg. A club was better than bare hands. But before he could break it off, there was a booming crash, and the massive door split like wet pasteboard. A pale, wire thewed arm, clad in a ragged grey sleeve, and covered with oily green hairs, thrust savagely through the panel. There was an odd, grating noise. Selden realized with a surge of nausea that it was the grinding of teeth.

A face appeared in the gap, and he froze, gripped by flaming yellow eyes, pupil-less, and full of inhuman ferocity. This was the end, of course, Selden knew. No use fighting a thing like that. At the same time, deep inside of him, he was sure this was only a nightmare, bound to end soon with his awakening. But if that was so, why didn't he face up to the monster, laughing—when a person *knew* it was only a dream, that had always ended the terror before.

Then he realized something significant. The creature was not coming in, after all, even though the door was no longer an obstacle. Instead, slaving with rage, it shielded its face from the lantern. Clearly, it was unable to stand the light at closer range.

Selden felt new hope, remembering the inscription of the carving. If he could keep the thing at bay until dawn, the danger would be over. With the first light, it would have to seek shelter. That meant, almost certainly, a return to the cellar. Once here, it would be trapped until nightfall, and by that time, a dozen State troopers with tommy guns, or even bazookas, if necessary . . .

Then Selden groaned. Fool, he thought; the can of gas was still outside in the car. There couldn't possibly be enough in this

lamp to last more than an hour or so. He leaped over to it and made an estimate. Eighty minutes, maybe, at the most. And once the light failed, he was done for.

What about help? Any way to summon it? Not likely; the place was well isolated, and besides, what would be the use of calling somebody close enough to explain. The thing at the door, hearing a voice out there in the dark, would almost certainly take off after easier prey, with no lantern. And once in the open, at night—my God, the children! It came to him that the big party at the Dacre's would break up soon. When that happened, several dozen little boys and girls would stream across those black fields towards their homes. Sure, there would be a few adults around, but much good they'd do against this horror. The thought of the insensate thing raging among a group of terrified children was more than Selden could stand. It was his fault, in any case. Why did he have to find the hidden door?

He turned for a look. The creature was still there, unwilling to give up. The awful travesty of a face would peer through the shattered wood, then, with bubbling cries, draw back from the light. Selden tensed. Would a really bright beam kill the monster? The flashbulbs!

He leaped to the bureau, wrenched open the top drawer, and there, by the camera, was the flashgun. How many of the tiny bulbs left? He'd used quite a few, taking pictures of the house for his wife. Damn; only four left. Should he set them off all at once, or individually? Better go for broke; maybe a single good flash would kill the thing, or at least disable it.

HASTILY, ignoring those highly unpleasant sounds at the door, Selden arranged the peanut bulbs so that one would fire the other three. Setting his teeth, he forced his unwilling body nearer the threshold. At his advance, the monster quivered with a kind of greedy anticipation, and one great paw poked through the sagging door. The light pained it, however, and frustrated the thing withdrew again.

Selden stood there, his heart pounding, just outside of reach, flashgun high and ready. In a moment the terrible, noseless face peered in again, and he fired the bulbs. There was a thin screech of agony, and Selden could hear the great bulk writhing on the floor just past the entrance to the room. His hopes soared; but then the demon's suffering seemed to lessen, and it was clear that although it had received a nasty shock, it was far

from finished. In another few minutes, it stood by the door again, keeping its relentless vigil, and obviously waiting for the light to die.

Selden examined the lamp. About half an hour to go. Light couldn't kill the thing, that was plain enough; at least, not four tiny flashbulbs. What else was there? Half feverishly he thought: light . . . vibrations . . . electromagnetic field . . . electricity and—of course, electricity: it was related to light. So what; this damned relic of a house had none. Besides, a lousy 110 volts would be the midget flash all over. Unless your feet were in water, that much current couldn't kill a baby.

Then as he stood there, feeling that every possibility was gone, inspiration came. Just outside the fence, not a hundred yards away, stood one of the great towers that carried high tension current across the state. Surely this was the only remaining solution. He must somehow lure this monster into touching one of those wires. How much did they carry? At least 75,000 volts. Some, 110,000, he'd heard. Even with a low amperage, if that didn't do it, nothing could, and he, Selden, would be the first of many victims.

His mind was racing now. There was only one way, and if those children were to be spared,

now was the time. He took a deep breath, seized the lamp, and moved towards the door. If the thing refused to retreat, it was all over . . .

But the demon was still vulnerable; unable to bear the clear, whitish light, it backed away with slobbering cries of rage. Slowly, his intestines knotted with fear, Selden forced the monster down the stairs, a step at a time, and out the front door. It was a critical move. From now on, no matter how much gas he had, there was no possibility of trapping the demon. Not when it had the whole county to move in. It would be like trying to checkmate with one piece. No, it was up to Selden to make the creature follow him to its doom.

Out in the cool air, he began to back towards the fence. No time to go around to the gate; the direct route was faster. He slipped the lantern through the rustic bars, vaulted over, and headed for the steel tower. Just behind, barely out of the light, nemesis followed implacably.

At the foot of the tall, steel structure, Selden hesitated. Should he leave the lamp here? It would burn for a while, keeping the monster off; then, when it went out, the thing could climb, and Selden would be ready. No. Suppose, before the light failed, the children came? He couldn't risk that. The lamp

must go with him, to be quenched without delay at the right time.

He took the bail in his teeth, gripped a girder, and began. He'd never doubted for an instant that the thing could climb, and sure enough, it was following him up.

EVEN a college athlete in good condition would have found such a climb difficult, and Selden was no longer a boy. Nevertheless, thinking of the children in that gaily illuminated house a few hundred yards away on the hill, he found hidden reserves of strength. Slowly, panting and sweating, he inched his way up. It seemed to take hours, and the demon just below gnashed and snarled with the lust to destroy.

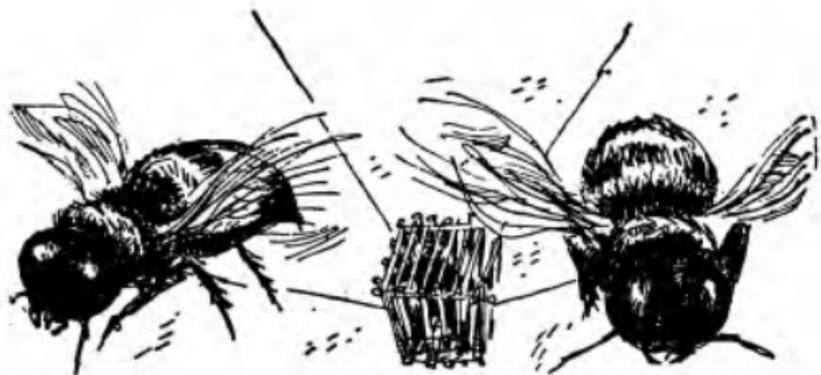
There! He could go no farther. Just overhead, now, was the nearest of the thick, aluminum cables, alive and humming with high voltage current. Damn! A new problem: that bright red light on the tower, just over his head. It was meant to warn off small planes. Well, it would have to go, since the monster might not come otherwise. Selden held on with one hand, lamp in teeth, pulled out his handkerchief, and wrapped it about his knuckles. Stretching full length, he gave the heavy globe a mighty swat.

It fizzed and quickly went out.

The lantern was sputtering, too. In a moment it would fail. There was no room at all to maneuver. Was the plan a failure even now? No, there was one desperate, last chance: Selden took the lamp from his teeth, set his jaw, and flung the thing like a meteor into the night. The monster gave a snarl of exultation; and flexing his knees slightly, Selden leaped into space. It was a mighty jump, and brought both hands against the lowest cable some ten feet from the tower. No current tore through his body, since he was ungrounded. Everything now depended on whether the monster imitated him exactly, or took what seemed a simpler course.

Standing near the top of the tower, the hulking thing stretched out one powerful arm, and gripped a cable. Whether it meant to shake Selden loose, or go after him, hand over hand, will never be known. There was a mighty spurt of blue flame as 75,000 volts of electricity crashed into the hairy body. Selden heard a long squalling cry, followed by a single deep groan. Then something was flailing up and back between tower and cable, arcing each time. It burned and burned and burned . . .

THE END



*He liked to collect oddities from
the ends of the universe. . . .
Then he found*

THE IDOL

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

NOBODY is so well paid that he'd turn down the chance of making a few extra dollars—and if such dollars are free of tax, so much the better. Geore Manning was no exception to the general rule. He had a racket, and a highly

remunerative one, and the additional income derived from it was never shown on his tax returns. He was lucky inasmuch as he had made, through his wife, some excellent contacts. Vera Manning, before her marriage, had

been Vera Lowenstein—and everybody has heard of the firm of Lowenstein and Levine, dealers in *objets d'art* from all over the Galaxy. Manning had met her when she was travelling in the old *Beta Leonis*, of which vessel he was second officer. Old Lowenstein had been pleased rather than otherwise to acquire a spaceman as a son-in-law, and it had not been long before a mutually advantageous arrangement had been worked out.

Manning told me all about it one evening, ship's time, when we were both of us off watch. I had expressed amazement that second mate's pay—and a married second mate at that—could run to such luxuries as the expensive microfilm projector, the private library of all the latest films and the liquor cabinet stocked with exotic wines and spirits that, even duty free, were well beyond the financial reach of the average ship's officer. Manning was ready to talk, having partaken freely of his own Vegan Dragon's Blood, which looks like a red wine but tastes like a superlatively smooth and potent Scotch whiskey with a hint of very dry Curacao. He was in a mood in which he

just had to tell somebody how clever he was. We were old shipmates and he knew that he could trust me.

He said, "I like all this, Bill. I like to do my spacefaring in comfort, like a civilized man—but there's one thing that I like even more."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"Doing the Income Tax sharks in the eye," he replied. "The way I'm making money now I should be working six months of the year for nothing."

"The Commission doesn't pay that well," I said. "In fact, the Commission doesn't pay well. Period."

"Who was talking about pay? But if I paid full tax on my makings I could never afford to live the way I do. Moral: If you make money, make it in such a way that the tax collector can't get his filthy paws on it."

"Risky," I told him. "Damned risky. If they get you—*when* they get you—they'll put the boot in."

He laughed. He had one of those lean, long, dark faces to which laughter comes seldom, on which laughter is all the more striking. He said, "If, not when, Bill. And it's a big if. I behave with scrupulous legality." He opened his liquor cabinet, took out two more

bulbs of the fabulously expensive Dragon's Blood, tossed one to me. He waited until we had both moistened our throats, then went on. "This is the way of it. I love my wife. Every voyage I bring her home things that I've picked up on the various planets we call at. I declare them as gifts, pay duty accordingly to the Terran Customs. I take them home to Vera. Sooner or later Vera gets tired of the way in which they clutter up the apartment . . ."

"I'm not surprised," I interrupted. "I'm still wondering what any sane woman could have done with that Altairian *wyzzoth* goad you brought home last trip."

"She did with it what she does with everything else," said Manning. "I love her; she loves her dear old father. She *likes* giving him presents. He likes giving her presents—especially after he's made a good sale. His presents to her are in the form of good, thick hunks of folding money. Then it's not only my wife whom I love dearly. There are all sorts of aunts and uncles and cousins by marriage all over the Galaxy. I bring them presents; they give me presents."

"It's risky," I said again.

"It's not," he averred.

"It's almost time that I was on watch," I told him, looking at his bulkhead clock that, like everything else in his cabin, was of a design and workmanship far superior to anything deemed suitable for the use of its junior officers—or, come to that, its senior officers—by the Interstellar Transport Commission.

"Another Dragon's Blood?"

"No thanks," I said regretfully. "Thanks for the party. See you at midnight."

I unstrapped myself from my chair, pulled myself out into the alleyway and then along to my own cabin, where I got ready for my four-hour spell of duty.

There may be more boring ways of passing the time than standing a watch in the control room of an interstellar ship, but I have yet to hear about them. The trouble is this: Everything is automatic, yet, in the final analysis, the automatic controls cannot be trusted. Nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand you could make a voyage clear across the Galaxy with the control and drive rooms unmanned; the thousandth time the blowing of a single fuse could cause catastrophe. Catastrophe in Space means more

than the destruction of property; it means loss of life. Control rooms, therefore, are manned at all times with officers trained and qualified to cope with the sudden emergency that, in all probability, will never arise.

The fourth officer, as he always did, hurried over his handing over. I, as I always did, refused to accept responsibility until I had checked everything, thereby selfishly extending the period in which I should have somebody to talk to.

The fourth fumed and fretted while I read through the previous entries in the Log, starting at the very top of the page, even the heading, *Starship Delta Orionis, Port Woomera, Terra, to Port Southern, Lorraine (Beta Crucis IV)*. I examined the entries concerning Temporal Precession Rates, the Relative Humidity of the ship's atmosphere, pressures and temperatures. I switched on the Tri-Di Chart and expressed disapproval of the game of three dimensional noughts and crosses that the fourth had been playing with somebody—perhaps the Electronic Radio Officer, perhaps himself—and made him clear the lattice from the tank.

At last I expressed my readiness, albeit reluctantly, to take over. The fourth bade me a surly goodnight and was out of the control room before I had strapped myself into the pilot's chair. I lit a cigarette, looked out of the ports at the rather frightening whorls and spirals of light that are all that one sees from a ship with the Interstellar Drive in operation. I looked away from the port to the faces of the gauges and meters. I looked at nothing at all and listened to the throb of pumps, the whirring of generators, the high whine of the precessing gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive.

I thought, inevitably, of what George Manning had told me. It all added up. I had wondered why he, a fairly senior second mate who had succeeded in keeping his nose clean, had asked for a transfer from the *Betty Lion*, with her regular run, to the *Delia O'Ryan*, far smaller (and with her personnel paid accordingly) and little better than a tramp. Now I knew. It all added up nicely. In a *Beta* Class ship, running only to the major ports, there would be small opportunity for picking up alien art treasures at bargain prices. In a *Delta* Class ship, running mainly to

small ports on unimportant, little known planets, a bottle of whiskey or a carton of cigarettes might well purchase something worth thousands of dollars.

I sighed. It was a good racket that George Manning had got himself into. It was a racket in which it was essential to have shoreside contacts, essential to have somebody who could teach one what was good and what wasn't. It was a good racket, and it was safe. The Terran Customs, although vicious in their treatment of smugglers, never charged high duties on declared gifts and it was highly improbable that they would ever discover Manning's connection with the firm of Lowenstein and Levine. Too, they were on the lookout for such obvious things as drugs and liquor and precious stones and would be inclined to regard works of art as mere curios.

To pass the time, I began to speculate. There would be nothing worth picking up on Lorraine. It was an Earth-type planet, Earth colonized. There had been no intelligent native life at the time of the colonization and the colonists had developed a drably industrial culture. Our next port of call was Port Broonaara, on

Broonaara, one of the outposts of the Shaara Empire. The Shaara, those communistic bumble bees, are not artists. There would be nothing for Manning there. After Broonaara we should call at Cleg, and after Cleg we should make the rounds of Willoughby, New Cheshire, Wittenfels and Dorado. From Dorado we were to proceed to Port Southern, and thence back to Woomera.

Even I, a peasant in such matters, knew that there would be nothing worth picking up on any of those planets.

Even I was wrong.

Having obtained the permission of the Queen-Mother of the local hive we dropped down to Port Broonaara. Broonaara is a pleasant enough world, not too hot, with all of its considerable land surface covered with luxuriously flowering trees and shrubs. It is an ideal world for the Shaara, who find it easy to maintain a colony there and to produce enough honey in excess of their own needs to maintain a flourishing export trade, both to their own home planets and to those colonized by Man.

It was morning, local time,

when we made our landing. Normally we should have begun discharge at once, have completed discharge by noon and commenced loading, blasting off in the evening. But this, we discovered, was not a normal day. The hive, a couple of miles to the west of the spaceport, looked like an active volcano. From the entrance at its top poured a stream of drones and workers, like dense, dark smoke, spiralling up into the clear, yellow sky. The Shaara drone who acted as the Commission's agent told us what was afoot. A new hive was to be established, he said, his voice droning from the diaphragm strapped to his thorax. A new hive was to be established, and what we were privileged to see was the nuptial flight of the new Queen-Mother and her entourage.

It was all very interesting, said the Old Man, but it wasn't getting his ship discharged and loaded.

The Shaara drone replied that he, in his younger days, had been an astronaut and that more than once his ship had been delayed by public holidays on Earth and on various Man-colonized planets. As a drone he saw nothing wrong with holidays, but

Shaara holidays were in honor of something happening *now*, not something that happened centuries ago. Even so, a holiday was a holiday . . .

The Old Man took the hint and asked him up to his cabin to partake of something in honor of the occasion. When they had left the officers' lounge Manning approached the chief officer.

"After all, sir," he said, "a holiday is a holiday, and the Guild ruling is that, whenever possible, local holidays shall be observed by the personnel of starships . . ."

"Oh, all right," said the mate. "Anybody who wants to go ashore can go ashore. A few drones extra cavorting over the surface of this glorified hothouse won't be noticed."

"Care to stretch your legs?" Manning asked me.

"Might as well," I told him.

We went to our rooms to get changed into our lightest clothing. We met in the alleyway, were joined there by Peter Carson, our Psionic Radio Officer. This did not please George. He disliked telepaths in general and Carson in particular. I didn't mind Carson myself. He was a harmless little man—rotund, almost bald, looking as though he should have been sucking

the nipple of a feeding bottle instead of the cigar that was always in his mouth.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked. "I could do with some exercise, and all that the others want to do is to get their heads down . . ."

"By all means," I said, before George Manning could make a rude, negative reply, as he was about to do.

George grunted. He led the way down to the airlock and the ramp at a speed that was indicative of his bad temper. Once out of the ship he strode over the scarred concrete of the apron as though he were in a hurry to keep an important appointment. By the time we reached the blue turf at the spaceport limits Carson was perspiring profusely.

"What's the big hurry, George?" I demanded.

"None," he snapped.

"What do you hope to find?" I asked.

"Don't you people ever read the Pilot Books?" he countered.

"Of course," I replied. "Broonaara, Fourth Planet of Delta Eridani. Mass 0.9. Atmospheric pressure at sea level 1010 millibars. Mean temperature at Equator 50° Centigrade . . ."

"What about the history of the place?" he pressed.

"It's one of the worlds of the Shaara Empire," I said.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Then you didn't read the book properly. There's supposed to have been a humanoid race here once. Probably the Shaara bumped 'em off—although they swear they didn't. Not that it much matters—our record insofar as the treatment of non-humanoid aborigines is concerned has some black patches . . ."

"So?"

"So they may have left artifacts." He turned to Carson. "Now you're here you might as well make yourself useful. Broadcast the thought of whiskey, bottles and bottles of whiskey, as strongly as you can."

"I'll try," said Carson.

His baby face puckered with the effort. George and I looked away from him to the yellow sky, to the swarms of spiralling black dots. We saw, at last, two of them detach themselves from the complicated aerial dance, fly in a dead straight line to where we were standing.

It was two of the drones. They came in gracefully, marred the beauty of their performance by a clumsy landing. They stood there

looking at us with their big, faceted eyes, rather handsome creatures with their black and scarlet striped bodies, their shimmering wings.

"Earthmen," said one in his buzzing, artificial voice. "Whiskey?"

"Yes," replied George. "Whiskey. Lots of whiskey. But you must pay for it."

"What do you want?" asked the drone.

"The people who were on this world before you. The people like us. Did they leave any ruins?"

He had some trouble getting the idea across, finally had to enlist the aid of Carson. The Shaara are telepathic, although not spectacularly so. We learned eventually that there were ruins, and that they were two hours' flight from the spaceport. Manning's face fell. To walk that distance, and most of it through thick jungle, would be impossible in the limited time that we had at our disposal.

The Shaara drones, however, are inclined to let their fondness for human intoxicants outweigh their dislike for work—and, in this case, the real labor was being done by workers. One of them flew

off and up, back to the hive. After a short delay he was back, and with him were a dozen of the big, drab workers. Each quartet of the workers was harnessed to a light but quite commodious cage, woven from the stems of some plant not unlike the Terran bamboo.

Not too happily we clambered into the cages. The ride itself was not too uncomfortable, however, once we had got used to the slight swaying motion. We went swinging low over the forest, over the blue trees with their gaudy yellow and scarlet blossoms, breathing deeply of the heady scents that drifted up through the warm air. We could shout to each other above the hum of the wings of the Shaara workers, and at first we did so. For most of the journey, though, we were silent—and I, for one, was almost asleep when my basket grounded gently on the springy turf in the center of a clearing.

Dazedly, I tumbled out to the ground, saw that Manning and Carson were doing likewise. I looked around me, did not see at first the ruins, moss covered as they were, overgrown with flowering creepers, their stones split by upthrusting trees.

How old they were I cannot

say. A thousand years might well be a conservative estimate. Two thousand? Ten thousand? But that elder race had built well. The huge, truncated pyramid still retained its shape in spite of the ravages of time, of Nature.

There was a door in the sloping side, overgrown, impassable. This the Shaara workers, unharnessed from the baskets, attacked with claws and mandibles, cleared in a surprisingly hort time. We peered at the dark entrance dubiously.

"This was, think, a temple," whispered Carson. "There are forces there still, dormant, needing only a worshipper to reawaken them . . ."

"Shut up!" snapped Manning. Then, "Damn it! I should have brought a torch!"

One of the two drones went to a nearby flowering bush, snapped off three huge, fleshy, yellow blossoms, handed one to each of us. George and I took ours automatically, then looked at them dubiously.

"Very touching," said George at last. "But we didn't come here to pick daisies."

"Light," said the drone. "Light."

We did not doubt him. We had come across far stranger things on other worlds. We advanced cautiously through

the gloomy doorway and found that the blooms, once in the darkness, shed a pale, sickly illumination, enough for us to pick our way over the cracked flags of the floor.

The air was dry and musty and smelled of age and decay. Things rustled away from our advancing feet. Something large, seen only vaguely, flapped noisily around us, uttering shrill, almost supersonic cries. Something whined softly and something else hissed.

I don't know which of us saw the statue first; it seemed that the three of us cried out simultaneously. It shimmered wanly in the feeble light, a shape as tall as a man, man-like in form. We approached it carefully, saw dimly that its body was almost formless, suggested a human shape rather than stated it. Only the hands, the outstretched hands, the eloquent hands had been fashioned in detail. Six fingered they were, but this was not obvious. They were hands, and they were the work of an artist who had spent his life striving to achieve perfection in their portrayal.

I heard Manning draw a sharp breath. I knew what he was thinking. I knew that

those hands represented to him a small, or even a large fortune.

"If we can get this thing out of here . . ." he whispered.

We could, and we did. The base of the statue was not anchored, and the statue itself—we later discovered that it was made of aluminium—was not heavy, was no heavier than a man would have been. Slowly, carefully, George and I carried it out into the ruddy sunlight while Carson lit our way with the luminous flow-ers.

When we could see it better we were not disappointed. Featureless though the body and head were, they had a certain strength. But nobody was going to look for long, if at all, at head and body when those hands were there to be stared at.

"I don't know who they were, or what they were," I said at last. "But they showed rather more sense in their depiction of their god than some of our religious artists . . . Sure, they made God in their own image—but don't we all? Those hands . . . The way I see it, they deified Man the artist, Man the builder, Man the craftsman . . ."

"No," said Carson earnestly. "No, Bill. The way, I *feel*

it, it wasn't that at all. They . . ."

"Shut up!" Manning told him rudely. "The main thing to worry about is getting this idol, if that's what it was, back to the ship . . . The trouble is that it weighs as much as any one of us. How much can these workers carry?"

The Shaara drones, who obviously thought that we were quite mad, were drawn into the discussion. They told us that one Earthman, or the equivalent, was the limit of the carrying capacity of four workers. The workers, who obviously couldn't think at all, stood patiently by whilst the matter was threshed out.

Manning decided that he, I and the idol should be flown back to the ship at once and that Peter Carson—who, after all, had come along uninvited—should wait by the temple until four of the workers returned for him. I said that it would be better if all three of us returned to the spaceport together, sending one of the drones and a carrying party back for the idol. It was Carson who settled the argument, saying that he would be quite happy to wait and that he found the atmosphere of the temple intensely interesting. Manning said that this suited him,

adding spitefully that Carson would have to pay his own fare—a bottle of whiskey each way—there and back.

The little telepath flushed, but said nothing. When we lifted from the clearing he was sitting on the turf, his back to one of the weathered stones, his eyes shut and what we called his receptive expression on his chubby face.

The captain and the mate were not at all pleased when we returned without Carson; after all, to leave a shipmate alone on an alien planet is one of *the* crimes. Manning tried to make a joke of it, pointing out that it was like one of those brain twisting puzzles in which a man, with only one boat at his disposal and with a goose and a fox in his charge has to cross a river and is hampered by the fact that his waterborne transport has not the lift to carry all three beings without sinking. The Old Man did not think that it was at all funny, neither did the chief officer. They made George promise to pay the Shaara drones and workers a handsome bonus in whiskey if they returned with Carson within three hours, then punished him further by making savage fun of his acquisition.

"At least it's useful," said the mate. "It will make a fine hall stand. It will hold three hats—one on its ugly head and two on each hand . . ."

"Satan soon finds mischief for idol hands to do," said the Old Man gravely.

"They're beautiful hands," protested Manning.

"They're ugly," said the mate. "The whole damned thing is ugly. I wouldn't give it house room, not even as a hall stand."

Manning lost his temper then, and said nastily that gold-braided epaulettes do not make one an authority on art. The mate lost *his* temper and said that an alleged knowledge of art does not make one an efficient spaceman. The Old Man said that Mr. Manning would have ample opportunity to learn to become such during the vessel's stay on Cleg, Willoughby, New Cheshire, Wittenfels and Dorado, because there would be no shore leave for him on any of those planets. Neither would there be any shore leave, he added, for Mr. Templeton. Mr. Templeton—myself—was rather peeved on learning this but had enough sense to say nothing.

They let us go then and we carried the idol into the ship and up to Manning's cabin,

lashing it securely in a corner. We had a few drinks then, and Manning unburdened his soul on the subject of brassbound peasants and snooping teacup readers who tagged along uninvited and got their betters into trouble.

By the time that Carson did return to the ship George had worked up a fine hate against him, and for all the rest of the voyage refused to talk to him. Carson in his turn sulked, and refused to talk to either of us.

It was all very childish, especially since he made it quite obvious that he had something important to tell us.

At last came the day when we dropped down from the blue sky of Earth, down to the familiar drabness of the South Australian desert, to Port Woomera. On flaring jets we fell slowly to our berth, touched gently. The airlock doors sighed open, the ramp extended itself to the apron. The usual horde of officials climbed up it into the ship.

The Customs were there, of course. (They always are.) They did a busy trade, handing out receipts for duty and purchase tax on the various curios, most of them cheap

and trashy, brought in by crew members Carson and I were standing in the alleyway when one of the Customs officers went into Manning's room. The door was open, and we could see the second mate showing the idol to him for inspection.

"And how much did you pay for that, Mr. Manning?" the official asked.

"All in all," said George truthfully, "a dozen bottles of whiskey—but they were actually for transportation to the ruined temple where we found it."

"Yes," whispered Carson to me. "The temple . . ." (We were on speaking terms again; the conclusion of a voyage usually brings about an end to enmities.) "I learned a lot when you left me there. After all the millennia the thoughts of the worshippers were verily still quite strong . . ."

"What were they?" I asked.

"They could," he said, "be roughly translated as 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's . . .'"

"But that's from *our* Bible."

"But it's not the basis of any of our religions . . ."

"Those hands," the Customs officer was saying.

"They *have* something. They *mean* something . . ."

He put out one of his own to one of the hands of the idol.

"Oh," whispered Carson. "Oh. The touch of a worshipper, a true worshipper . . ."

"But what . . .?" I began.

"Can't you see? The power is still there, but dormant, waiting for this . . ."

The Customs officer grasped the idol's hand in his own. Before our eyes the belly of the thing split open, and from it there rained to the deck a scintillating stream of diamonds and rubies and emeralds, of stones that were strange to us and that

shone with rainbow splendor.

Manning paled.

He knew, as we knew, that he would pay and pay for his crime of smuggling, that the authorities would never believe the story that he was ignorant of what the idol had contained. He knew that investigations would be made into the state of his personal finances.

He knew then what Carson, given the chance, would have told him—that the hands of the idol did not represent the hands of Man, the Builder, Man, the Artist, Man, the Craftsman.

They were the hands of the Taxgatherer.

THE END



No Harm Done

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS



Humorist Sharkey puts away his jester's cap to write a chilling tale that never telegraphs—and only once, subtly, hints at—its shocking ending.

THE BOY was a good-looking youth, with shiny—if over-long—blond hair, and bright white teeth. But his eyes were cloudy with the emptiness that lay behind them, and the blue circles of their irises hinted at

no more mental activity than do the opaque black dots on a rag doll. He sat with vacuous docility upon the small metal stool the guards had provided, and let his arms dangle limp as broken clothesline at his sides, not even

crossing them in his lap. He had been led to the chair, told to sit, and left. If he were not told to arise, he would remain there until the dissolution of his muscle cells following death by starvation caused him to topple from his low perch.

"Total schizophrenia," said Dr. Manton. "For all practical purposes, he is an ambulant—when instructed to move, of course—vegetable."

"How terrible," said Lisa, albeit perfunctorily. Lisa Nugent, for all her lovely twenty-seven years, was a trained psychologist, and rarely allowed emotion to take her mind from its well-ordered paths of analysis. To be unfeeling was heartless—But to become emotional about a patient was pointless.

"Yes, it's intolerable," nodded Dr. Jeff Manton, keeping his mind strictly on Lisa's scientific qualifications, and deliberately blocking out any other information sent to his brain by his alert senses. The warmth of her smile, the flash of sunlight in her auburn hair, the companionable lilt she could not keep out of her "on-duty" voice—All these were observed, noted, and filed for future reference. At the moment, nothing must go wrong with their capacity for observation of the patient. Emotion had a way of befuddling even the most dedicated minds.

"But why out here?" Lisa said suddenly, returning the conversation to a prior topic. "I should think conditions would be easier to control in the lab."

"Simply because," said Jeff, patting the small metal camera-like device on its rigid tripod, "I as yet have no experimental knowledge of the range of my machine. It may simply be absorbed by the plaster in the walls, back inside the sanatorium. Then again, it may penetrate, likely or not, even the steel beams of the building, with roentgenic ease. There are too many other people in the building, Li—Dr. Nugent. Until I can be certain just what effect the rays have upon a human brain, I dare not use it any place where there might be leakage, possible synaptic damage."

"I understand," said Lisa, nodding after a brief smile at his near-slip with her name. "You assume the earth will absorb any rays that pass beyond this boy's brain, and render them—if not harmless—at least beyond the contamination point with another human being."

"Precisely," said Jeff Manton, moving the tripod a short distance closer to the seated boy. "Now, I want you to assist me in watching him, and if you note in him any change—either in his expression or posture—tell me at once. Then we can turn off

the machine and test him for results. For positive results, at any rate."

LISA could not repress a slight tremor. The trouble with schizophrenia in its most advanced stage was the inability of contacting the patient. The boy, although readily capable of executing simple commands, could not be counted on to aid Dr. Manton nor herself in even the most basic test of his mental abilities. If the machine made him any worse—there would hardly be a way for them to discover it. If better—then new hope was born for other similarly afflicted.

"Steady, now," said Jeff, turning the tiny knob at the side of the metal box a quarter turn. "Keep your eye on him. I'm going to turn it on."

Lisa felt the sweat prickling along her back as Jeff flicked the toggle switch atop the box. Her eyes began to burn, and she realized she wasn't even blinking as she locked her gaze upon the figure of the boy through whose brain was now coursing a ray of relatively unknown effect. Rabbits and rats and monkeys in the lab were one thing. This, now, was a human being. Whether the effect upon him would be similar to that of the ray upon test-animals (scientifically driven crazy before exposure) remained to be seen.

"Anything?" muttered Jeff, sighting anxiously along the side of the box. "Anything at all?"

"He—No. He just sits there, Doctor. So far as I can see, there is no appreciable effect." She sighed resignedly. "He doesn't even flicker a muscle."

"Damn," said Jeff. He kept his finger lightly atop the sun-glinting toggle switch. "I'm going to give it one more minute before I give up. This thing *should* be vitalizing his brain by *now!*"

"But he's not even—" Lisa began, discouraged.

"Keep your eyes on *him*, damn it!" snapped Jeff, catching the turn of her head from the corner of his eye. "This *must* work! We daren't miss the least sign that it has!"

Man and woman stood side by side in the hot light of the afternoon sun, staring, staring at the immobile form of the patient, the patient whose disrupted mind they were attempting to reunite into an intelligent whole . . .

My name, he thought. *Funny, I should know my own name. I've heard it often enough . . . It's . . . Is it—is it Garret? That sounds like it, but—I can't seem to recall . . .*

He thought about the man who tended and took care of him. He had called him by name, hadn't he? And it was most certainly Garret. Yes, of course it was Garret. . . . Or was it Curt?

His mind, like badly exposed film, refused to give him an accurate sensation, from any of his senses. All he got for strenuous mental gymnastics was vague, blurry reception and muddled thought. And yet, there was a warm sensation that had never been in his mind before—Before what? Try as he might, he could not recall anything coherent before this moment in time. Just vague feelings of being alive, and simply growing up . . .

THE warmth of the sun was beginning to penetrate. He could feel it, coursing down upon him, soaking into him, revitalizing him . . . But it was unlike this other warmth, this *penetrating* warmth, that tingled through his mind. With the awareness of the sunlight came a slow awareness of shades of light, then of color, then of figures. And, for the first time, he made a strong effort, and—and *looked*.

He saw the man and woman standing in the sunlight a few feet from himself, saw the harsh glitter of that sunlight upon the strange object on three legs that rested on the ground before them. He tried to speak to them, but something restrained him.

If I can move . . . If I can just move a little bit, he realized, they'll see me, and they'll know I'm alive and well and aware.

He tried. He tried desperately to move. His body felt rigid, imprisoned. Just a little frantic, he thought of blinking at them, of moving his eyes toward them for sharp definite focus, so that they would *know* . . .

Nothing happened.

I'm paralyzed! he thought for a terrifying moment. Then—*No, I'm just not used to directing myself. I haven't the necessary coordination or experience, that must be it. Take it easy, now. Slow and easy. Don't panic.*

He strained desperately, and felt just the slightest hint of movement. Had they seen? he wondered. He was certain he had moved. What was the *matter* with the two of them?!

He watched them there in the sunlight, this man and woman who stood so intensely still, the man's hand upon that metallic thing on three legs. Then he knew that that thing was the source of the warmth in his mind. It had brought him to awareness.

But what good is it! his mind screamed. *To be alive and aware, and unable to let them know it!* The coldly frantic feeling was growing within him, now, taking hold of his brain with the frightening fingers of raw panic.

"*Look!*" he cried out, then knew with crushing despair that the word had gone no farther than his brain. *Please, he begged*

silently, see me here, see that I am alive, that I am not what I was!

Desperately, he strove to rise, felt the strange sensation of bondage that restrained his body, fought it . . . and won. It hurt. The sensation was unbearable. Yet he had moved. Perhaps only the quarter part of an inch, but he had moved. The woman—Had she seen?

Then he saw the man straighten up, heave his shoulders in a great sigh, and cut off the machine with a finger-flick. The tingling warmth died within his brain, and for an icy moment, he expected to plunge back to semi-comatose nothingness. But, after a giddy scintilla of dizziness, his mind remained strong and intelligent and alive.

Ignoring the blaze of pain that racked his entire being, he tensed himself, pushed, with strangled cries bursting inside his brain at the self-torture, and made himself move another quarter of an inch.

Did they see? Did they? Did they know? Would they free his mind, and leave his body imprisoned to his innermost pleas for release?

No, he thought, giddy with joy. *They . . . They're coming nearer! . . .*

"IT'S NO use, Lisa," said Jeff, looking down upon the motionless figure on the stool. "The machine is a flop. Rabbits and lesser creatures, fine, but for the mind of man, no use at all."

"I'm sorry, Jeff," said Lisa, knowing that his calling her by her first name meant that work was done for that day. "Maybe, with some adjustments—"

"Yeah," he grunted bitterly, as two white-jacketed guards led the boy back to his cell, "*maybe!*"

"At least," said Lisa, taking him gently by the arm, "he's no worse off. The experiment just didn't work out, that's all. But there's no harm done, at any rate."

"Nope. I suppose you're right," Jeff said bitterly, reaching to lift the stool from its patch of sunlight. Then, with a brief surge of anger at the futility he felt, he lashed out with his foot and kicked the green parsley-like top clean off a carrot that jutted just a bit higher than its fellows in the garden bed behind the stool. "No harm done," he muttered angrily, and went back with Lisa toward the sanatorium.

While a silent, agony-filled voice behind him kept shrieking, over and over, "*My eyes! He kicked out my eyes! I'm blind! Help me! Help me!*"

THE END

HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

By WILSON KANE

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

We're not trying to fool you with the by-line, Wilson Kane. Actually, we couldn't, because Robert Bloch's fans are going to know he wrote this story. Wilson Kane is one of prolific Bob's pen names. We use it here because it could be confusing to have two Robert Blochs on the contents page. So it's just a device to get two top yarns by one great writer into the same issue. Sneaky, huh?

RIGHT after Labor Day the weather turned cold and all the summer cottage people went home. By the time ice began to form on Lost Lake there was nobody around but Solly Vincent.

Vincent was a big fat man who had bought a year-round house early that spring. He wore loud sport-shirts all summer long, and although nobody ever saw him hunting or fishing, he entertained a lot of city people every weekend at his place. The first thing he did when he bought the house was to put up a big sign on his property which read SONOVA BEACH. Folks passing by got quite a bang out of it.

But it wasn't until fall that he took to coming into town and getting acquainted. Then

he started dropping into Doc's Bar one or two nights a week, playing cards with the regulars in the back room.

Even then, Vincent didn't exactly open up. He played good poker and he smoked good cigars, but he never said anything about himself. Once, when Specs Hennessey asked him a direct question, he told the gang that he came from Chicago, and that he was a retired business man. But he never mentioned what business he had retired from.

The only time he opened his mouth was to ask questions, and he didn't really do that until the evening Specs Hennessey brought out the gold coin and laid it on the table.

"Ever see anything like that before?" he asked the

gang. Nobody said anything, but Vincent reached over and picked it up.

"German, isn't it?" he mumbled. "Who's the guy with the beard—the Kaiser?"

Specs Hennessey chuckled. "You're close," he said. "That's old Franz Joseph. He used to be boss of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, forty-fifty years ago. That's what they told me down at the bank."

"Where'd you get it, in a slot-machine?" Vincent wanted to know.

Specs shook his head. "It came in a bag, along with about a thousand others."

That's when Vincent really began to look interested. He picked up the coin again and turned it in his stubby fingers. "You gonna tell what happened?" he asked.

Specs didn't need any more encouragement. "Funniest damn thing," he said. "I was sitting in the office last Wednesday when this dame showed up and asked if I was the real-estate man and did I have any lake property for sale. So I said sure, the Schultz cottage over at Lost Lake. A mighty fine bargain, furnished and everything, for peanuts to settle the estate.

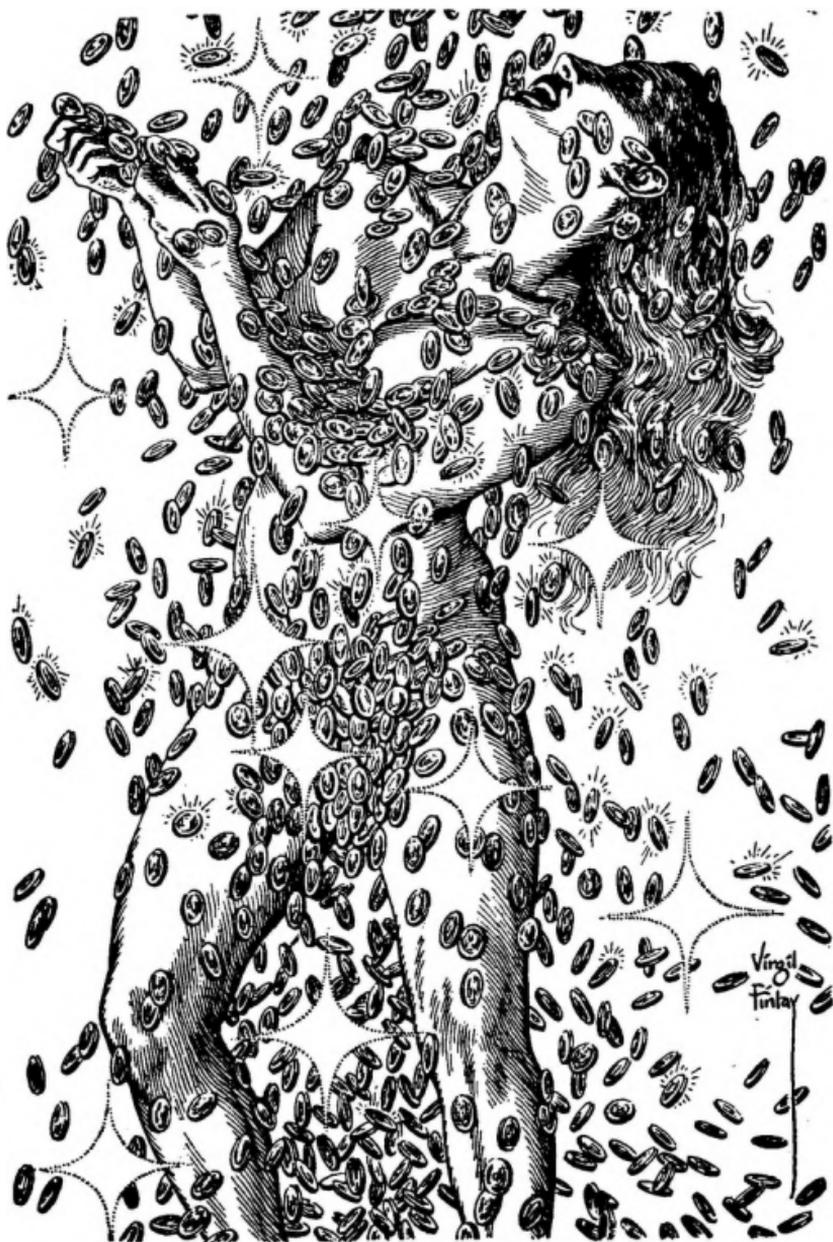
"I was all set to give her a

real pitch but she said never mind that, could I show it to her? And I said, of course, how about tomorrow, and she said why not right now, tonight?"

"So I drove her out and we went through the place and she said she'd take it, just like that. I should see the lawyer and get the papers ready and she'd come back Monday night and close the deal. Sure enough, she showed up, lugging this big bag of coins. I had to call Hank Felch over from the bank to find out what they were and if they were any good. Turns out they are, all right. Good as gold." Specs grinned. "That's how come I know about Franz Joseph." He took the coin from Vincent and put it back in his pocket. "Anyway, it looks like you're going to have a new neighbor out there. The Schultz place is only about a half-mile down the line from yours. And if I was you, I'd run over and borrow a cup of sugar."

Vincent blinked. "You figure she's loaded, huh?"

Specs shook his head. "Maybe she is, maybe she isn't. But the main thing is, she's stacked." He grinned again. "Name is Helene Esterhazy. Helene, with an e on the end. I saw it when she signed. Talks like



This woman certainly had strange uses for gold.

one of them Hungarian refugees—figure that's what she is, too. A countess, maybe, some kind of nobility. Probably busted out from behind the Iron Curtain and decided to hole up some place where the Commies couldn't find her. Of course, I'm only guessing, because she didn't have much to say for herself."

Vincent nodded. "How was she dressed?" he asked.

"Like a million bucks." Specs grinned at him. "What is the idea, you figuring on marrying for money or something? I tell you, one look at this dame and you'll forget all about dough. She talks something like this ZaZa Gabor. Looks something like her, too, only she has red hair. Boy, if I wasn't a married man, I'd—"

"When she say she was moving in?" Vincent interrupted.

"She didn't say. But I figure right away, in a day or so."

Vincent yawned and stood up.

"Hey, you're not quitting yet, are you? The game's young—"

"Tired," Vincent said. "Got to hit the sack."

And he went home, and he hit the sack, but not to sleep. He kept thinking about his new neighbor.

Actually, Vincent wasn't too pleased with the idea of having anyone for a neighbor, even if she turned out to be a beautiful red-headed refugee. For Vincent was something of a refugee himself, and he'd come up north to get away from people; everybody except the few special friends he invited up during summer weekends. Those people he could trust, because they were former business associates. But there was always the possibility of running into former business rivals—and he didn't want to see any of them. Not ever. Some of them might nurse grudges, and in Vincent's former business a grudge could lead to trouble.

That's why Vincent didn't sleep very well at night, and why he always kept a little souvenir of his old business right under the pillow. You never could tell.

Of course, this sounded legitimate enough; the dame probably was a Hungarian refugee, the way Specs Hennessey said. Still, the whole thing might be a very clever plant, a way of moving in on Vincent which wouldn't be suspected.

In any case, Vincent decided he'd keep his eye on the old Schultz cottage down the line and see what happened. So the

next morning he went into town again and bought himself a very good pair of binoculars, and the day after that he used them when the moving van drove into the drive of the Schultz place half a mile away.

Most of the leaves had fallen from the trees and Vincent got a pretty clear view from his kitchen window. The moving van was a small one, and there was just the driver and a single helper, carrying in a bunch of boxes and crates. Vincent didn't see any furniture and that puzzled him until he remembered the Schultz cottage had been sold furnished. Still, he wondered about the boxes, which seemed to be quite heavy. Could the whole story be on the up-and-up and the boxes maybe filled with more gold coins? Vincent couldn't make up his mind. He kept waiting for the woman to drive in, but she didn't show, and after a while the men climbed into their van and left.

Vincent watched most of the afternoon and nothing happened. Then he fried himself a steak and ate it, looking out at the sunset over the lake. It was then that he noticed the light shining from the cottage window. She must have

sneaked in while he was busy at the stove.

He got out his binoculars and adjusted them. Vincent was a big man, and he had a powerful grip, but what he saw nearly caused the binoculars to drop from his fingers.

The curtain was up in her bedroom, and the woman was lying on the bed. She was naked, except for a covering of gold coins.

Vincent steadied himself and propped both hands up on the sill as he squinted through the binoculars.

There was no mistake about it—he saw a naked woman, wallowing in a bed strewn with gold. The light reflected from the coins, it danced and dazzled across her bare body, it radiated redly from her long auburn hair. She was pale, wide-eyed, and voluptuously lovely, and her oval face with its high cheekbones and full lips seemed transformed into a mask of wanton ecstasy as she caressed her nakedness with handfuls of shimmering gold.

Then Vincent knew that it wasn't a plant, she wasn't a phoney. She was a genuine refugee, all right, but that wasn't important. What was important was the way the blood pounded in his temples, the way his throat tightened

up until he almost choked as he stared at her, stared at all that long, lean loveliness and the white and the red and the gold.

He made himself put down the binoculars, then. He made himself pull the shade, and he made himself wait until the next morning even though he got no rest that night.

But bright and early he was up, shaving close with his electric razor, dressing in the double-breasted gab that hid his paunch, using the lotion left over from summer when he used to bring the tramps up from the city. And he put on his new tie and his big smile, and he walked very quickly over to the cottage and knocked on the door.

No answer.

He knocked a dozen times, but nothing happened. The shades were all down, and there wasn't a sound.

Of course, he could have forced the lock. If he'd thought she was a plant, he'd have done so in a moment, because he carried the souvenir in his coat-pocket, ready for action. And if he'd had any idea of just getting at the coins he would have forced the lock, too. That would be the ideal time, when she was away.

Only he wasn't worried about plants, and he didn't give a damn about the money. What he wanted was the woman. Helene Esterhazy. Classy name. Real class. A countess, maybe. A writhing redhead on a bed of golden coins—

Vincent went away after a while, but all day long he sat in the window and watched. Watched and waited. She'd probably gone into town to stock up on supplies. Maybe she visited the beauty parlor, too. But she ought to be back. She had to come back. And when she did—

This time he missed her because he finally had to go to the bathroom, along about twilight. But when he returned to his post and saw the light in the front room, he didn't hesitate. He made the half-mile walk in about five minutes, flat, and he was puffing a little. Then he forced himself to wait on the doorstep for a moment before knocking. Finally, his ham-fist rapped, and she opened the door.

She stood there, staring startled into the darkness, and the lamplight from behind shone through the filmy transparency of her long hostess-gown, then flamed through the

long red hair that flowed loosely across her shoulders.

"Yes?" she murmured.

Vincent swallowed painfully. He couldn't help it. She looked like a hundred-a-night girl; hell, make it a thousand-a-night, make it a million. A million in gold coins, and her red hair like a veil. That was all he could think of, and he couldn't remember the words he'd rehearsed, the line he'd so carefully built up in advance.

"My name's Solly Vincent," he heard himself saying. "I'm your neighbor, just down the lake a ways. Heard about you moving in and I thought I ought to, well, introduce myself."

"So."

She stared at him, not smiling, not moving, and he got a sick hunch that she knew just what he'd been thinking.

"Your name's Esterhazy, isn't it? Tell me you're Hungarian, something like that. Well, I figured maybe you're a stranger here, haven't got settled yet, and—"

"I'm quite satisfied here." Still she didn't smile or move. Just stared like a statue; a cold, hard, damn beautiful statue.

"Glad to hear it. But I just meant, maybe you'd like to stop in at my place, sort of get

acquainted. I got some of that Tokay wine and a big record-player, you know, classic stuff. I think I even have that piece, that *Hungarian Rhapsody* thing, and—"

Now what had he said?

Because all at once she was laughing. Laughing with her lips, with her throat, with her whole body, laughing with everything except those ice-green eyes.

Then she stopped and spoke, and her voice was ice-green, too. "No, thank you," she said. "As I say, I am quite satisfied here. All I require is that I am not disturbed."

"Well, maybe some other time—"

"Let me repeat myself. I do not wish to be disturbed. Now or at any time. Good evening, Mr.—" The door closed.

She didn't even remember his name. The stuckup snob didn't even remember his name. Unless she'd pretended to forget on purpose. Just like she slammed the door in his face, to put him down.

Well, nobody put Solly Vincent down. Not in the old days, and not now, either.

He walked back to his place and by the time he got there he was himself again. Not the damnfool square who'd come up to her doorstep like a brush

salesman with his hat in his hand. And not the jerk who had looked at her through the binoculars like some kid with hot pants.

He was Solly Vincent, and she didn't have to remember his name if she didn't want to. He'd show her who he was. And damned soon.

In bed that night he figured everything out. Maybe he'd saved himself a lot of grief by not getting involved. Even if she was a real disheroo, she was nuttier'n a fruitcake. Crazy foreigner, rolling around in a pile of coins. All these Hunky types, these refugees, were nuts. God knows what might have happened if he'd gotten mixed up with her. He didn't need a woman, anyway. A guy could always have himself a woman, particularly if he had money.

Money. That was the important thing. She had money. He'd seen it. Probably those crates were full of dough. No wonder she was hiding out here; if the Commies knew about her haul, they'd be right on the spot. That's the way he figured it, that's the way Specs Hennessey the real-estate man had figured it.

So why not?

The whole plan came to him at once. Call a few contacts in the city—maybe Carney and

Fromkin, they could fence thing, including gold coins. Why the setup was perfect! She was all alone, there was nobody else around for three miles, and when it was over there wouldn't be any questions. It would look like the Commies had showed up and knocked the joint over. Besides, he wanted to see the look on her face when he came busting in—

He could imagine it now.

He imagined it all the next day, when he called Carney and Fromkin and told them to come up about nine. "Got a little deal for you," he said. "Tell you when I see you."

And he was still imagining it when they arrived. So much so that both Fromkin and Carney noticed something was wrong.

"What's it all about?" Carney wanted to know.

He just laughed. "Hope you got good springs in your Caddy," he said. "You may be hauling quite a load back to town."

"Give," Fromkin urged.

"Don't ask any questions. I've got some loot to peddle."

"Where is it?"

"I'm calling for it now."

And that's all he would say. He told them to sit tight, wait there at the house until he

came back. They could help themselves to drinks if they liked. He'd only be a half-hour or so.

Then he went out. He didn't tell them where he was going, and he deliberately circled around the house in case they peeked out. But he doubled back and headed for the cottage down the way. The light was shining in the bedroom window, and it was time for the wandering boy to come home.

Now he could really let himself go, imagining everything. The way she'd look when she answered the door, the way she'd look when he grabbed her gown and ripped it away, the way she'd look when—

But he was forgetting about the money. All right, might as well admit it. The hell with the money. He'd get that, too, yes, but the most important thing was the other. He'd show her who he was. She'd know, before she died. She'd know all right.

Vincent grinned. His grin broadened as he noticed the light in the bedroom flicker and expire. She was going to sleep now. She was going to sleep in her bed of gold. So much the better. Now he wouldn't even bother to knock. He'd merely force the door,

force it very quietly, and surprise her.

As it turned out, he didn't even have to do that. Because the door was unlocked. He tiptoed in very softly, and there was moonlight shining in through the window to help him find his way, and now there was the thickness in the throat again but it didn't come from confusion. He knew just what he was doing, just what he was going to do. His throat was thick because he was excited, because he could imagine her lying in there, naked on the heap of coins.

Because he could see her.

He opened the bedroom door, and the shade was up now so that the moonlight fell upon the whiteness and the redness and the golden glinting, and it was even better than he'd imagined because it was real.

Then the ice-green eyes opened and for a moment they stared in the old way. Suddenly there was a change. The eyes were flame-green now, and she was smiling and holding out her arms. Nuts? Maybe so. Maybe making love to all that money warmed her up. It didn't matter. What mattered was her arms, and her hair like a red veil, and the warm mouth open and panting. What mattered was to

know that the gold was here and she was here and he was going to have them both, first her and then the money. He tore at his clothes, and then he was panting and sinking down to tear at her. She writhed and wriggled and his hands slipped on the coins and then his nails sank into the dirt beneath.

The dirt beneath—

There was dirt in her bed. And he could feel it and he could smell it, for suddenly she was above and behind him, pressing him down so that his face was rubbing in the dirt, and she'd twisted his hands around behind his back. He heaved, but she was very strong, and her cold fingers were busy at his wrists, knotting something tightly. Too late, he tried to sit up, and then she hit him with something. Something cold and hard, something she'd taken from his own pocket; *my own gun*, he thought.

Then he must have passed out for a minute, because when he came to he could feel the blood trickling down the side of his face, and her tongue, licking it.

She had him propped up in the corner now, and she had tied his hands and legs to the bedpost, very tightly. He couldn't move. He knew be-

cause he tried, God how he tried. The earth-smell was everywhere in the room. It came from the bed, and it came from her, too. She was naked, and she was licking his face. And she was laughing.

"You came anyway, eh?" she whispered. "You had to come, is that it? Well, here you are. And here you shall stay. I will keep you for a pet. You are big and fat. You will last a long, long time."

Vincent tried to move his head away. She laughed again.

"It isn't what you planned, is it? I know why you came back. For the gold. The gold and the earth I brought with me to sleep upon, as I did in the old country. All day I sleep upon it, but at night I awake. And when I do, you shall be here. No one will ever find or disturb us. It is good that you are strong. It will take many nights before I finish."

Vincent found his voice. "No," he croaked. "I never believed—you must be kidding, you're a refugee—"

She laughed again. "Yes. I am a refugee. But not a *political* refugee." Then she retracted her tongue and Vincent saw her teeth. Her long white teeth, moving against

the side of his neck in the moonlight. . . .

Back at the house Carney and Fromkin got ready to climb into the Cadillac.

"He's not showing up, that's for sure," Carney said. "We'll blow before there's any trouble. Whatever he had cooked up, the deal went sour. I knew it the minute I saw his face. He had a funny look, you know, like he'd flipped."

"Yeah," Fromkin agreed. "Something wrong with old Vincent, all right. I wonder what's biting him lately."

THE END

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"How do you suppose it started?"

A Lesson For The Teacher

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Ruth Bailey wanted to engage in matrimony. But she was faced with two problems—a gorgeous young competitor and a guy who wanted to practice a while before he signed up.

ALL right," said Ruth Bailey. "Let's face it. I'm thirty-seven.

"Thirty-seven," she repeated. "That's the age when even the biggest Hollywood stars have trouble getting another five-year contract from a major studio. The age when a dramatic actress thinks twice before playing a fourteen-year-old Juliet, and then goes ahead and does it anyway, praying that the critics will be kind. At thirty-seven the career woman stops being a private secretary and begins to climb. It's the time when a postitute has to decide whether to become a madame or a scrubwoman; when a society matron sheds her third husband and looks for a fourth, and the housewife starts pestering her husband about mov-

ing out to the suburbs and joining a country club. Why, at thirty-seven some women become grandmothers! Time to sit back and enjoy the menopause that refreshes."

Ruth Bailey shook her head and smiled wryly. "That old saying about life begins at forty may hold true for men, but thirty-seven is the crucial time for most women. And what have I to show for it?"

Nobody answered her question, because Ruth Bailey was talking to herself. She'd found herself getting into the habit lately, and it was beginning to worry her. Lots of things were beginning to worry Ruth recently. Like being lonely at night and nobody giving a damn about her, and overhearing the kids talk about "Old Lady Bailey" at school.

Kids. All those young people.

She sat down on the bed and thought about them for a moment. For fifteen years she'd been a school-teacher, and there'd been nothing in her life but kids. Was it really fifteen years since Nick had been killed in the war? That's right—she'd been just twenty-two then, and ever since that time she'd taught. The way it looked now, she'd go right on teaching until she retired.

For a while Ruth had thought she might be getting somewhere with Harold Ferris, the manual-training instructor. Things had even reached the point where he invited her over to look at his ship-models.

Maybe she shouldn't have turned the invitation down. But at the time, Ruth thought it wise to play coy and kittenish. That was last semester, before Ann Corwin came to join the high school faculty. Ann Corwin, the Home Ec instructor—what on earth would a man like Harold Ferris see in her? Why, she was nothing but a young snip!

Ruth's lips shaped themselves into the wry smile again. That was the answer, of course. Ann Corwin was young. Young, and pretty; just the kind of a girl who

any red-blooded manual-training teacher would invite up to inspect his flotilla. She'd probably seen the whole fleet by now, while as for Ruth—"I guess I just missed the boat," she told herself.

She rose and stood before the mirror. She didn't preen. Thirty-seven is no age for preening, if you're an honest woman. And Ruth was, she insisted, honest. Still, she had to admit what she saw wasn't *too* bad. Her hair was still brown and glossy. Her skin, and the flesh beneath it, remained firm. She had good color and her figure wasn't too bad—maybe she'd been smart never to go in for the uplift bra fad.

"You're no spring chicken," she told herself earnestly, "but I'm damned if you're an old hen, either."

Well, it was nothing to cackle about. She was still thirty-seven, whether she looked her age or not, and today was her birthday. A fine celebration she was having, too. No relatives in the world to remember the occasion with presents, and Harold Ferris hadn't even sent her a card. No cake, no candles. "Just as well," she mused. "The heat from thirty-seven candles would kill me."

Sure, that was the way.



There was enchantment in the music and the soft lights.

Laugh it off. Kid herself about it. Only, all at once, standing there in front of the glass, Ruth Bailey didn't feel like kidding herself any longer. She peered at the mirror intently—not at her reflection, but at the shiny surface itself. The mirror had been here in her room ever since she moved in, fifteen years ago. Now it was beginning to speckle, to dull and tarnish in spots. You couldn't really notice it until you looked closely, but the process of decay was going on. And it would continue, slowly but inexorably. Eventually the mirror would crack; then it would be discarded in the junk-heap, with nobody to mourn its former, forgotten brightness—

"Oh, stop!" she told herself, turning away. But there was nothing else to look at in the bedroom except the bed. And nothing to do. In spite of all the old jokes, Ruth had never found a man hiding under her bed.

"And what's more, you never will," she said, aloud. "This is the way it's always been, the way it always will be." Her voice broke. "Damn it, why *can't* there be a man under the bed, just once? Even a brush salesman?"

In a moment, she realized angrily, the tears would come.

Because there was no man under her bed, no man in her bed, no man at all.

Her eyes brightened, ready for liquid release, then widened suddenly at the sound of a knock on the door.

Ruth opened it and stared up at her visitor.

He was young, he was dark, but above all, he was tall. He must have been six feet five, at least, and he towered above her in a way no brush salesman would ever do. Brush salesmen are small and neat and cheerful. This man was big, and he wore a rumpled slack-suit and his gray eyes were grave. But he *was* a man.

"Miss Bailey?" His voice was deep, very resonant, and he spoke with just the slightest hesitant trace of an accent. "You *are* Miss Bailey, are you not?"

Ruth nodded, but he didn't seem quite satisfied.

"The Miss Bailey who teaches the Social Science at the upper school?"

"High school," she corrected, congratulating herself that she'd guessed right about the trace of accent. "I teach Social Science, yes."

"Good. I was told I could find you here." He paused. "My name is Clay." He paused.

ed again, as if he expected some reaction from Ruth.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, mechanically. Her next phrase was no better, but she had to say something. "What can I do for you?"

"I would like you to teach me."

Ruth blinked. "But—"

"I know. It is all most irregular. But I made to inquire at the school, for someone who would be a private tutor. And you were suggested. It was said that your evenings were free."

Yes, Ruth told herself, *my evenings are free.*

"Oh, I do not mean that I will not pay," said Clay. He smiled. "My English is not too perfect. That is one of the things I wish you to help me about."

"Then why not take a night-school course in English?" Ruth asked. "There are some very good—"

"Please. I am a stranger, I do not feel yet at ease in a group. Besides, it is not just a matter of language. It is the customs, the folkways, the Social Sciences you instruct, this I wish to learn. I have so little of it where I come from."

"And that is—?" Ruth murmured.

"Martinique," Clay told her. "Fort-de-France."

"The West Indies? How exciting."

Clay shrugged. "Very dull. Very, how you say, provincial. I must learn the whole world. You will help me?" And he smiled again.

The smile decided her. After all, why not? He was a man, a handsome man. And her evenings were free.

"Why not?" Ruth answered. "Shall we say three nights a week? My fee will be five dollars an evening."

"Agreed. Can we start tomorrow night? Here?"

Ruth hesitated, thinking of her landlady. A mean, gossiping old biddy—she was bound to talk. Well, let her talk. It was about time Ruth gave her something to chew on. About time? It was literally now or never.

Ruth returned Clay's smile, with interest. "Tomorrow night," she echoed. "Here."

And so it began.

At first Ruth was uneasy. How could she work out a formal program of instruction for a grown man? She was no Margaret Mead.

But then, Clay was no ordinary student. He much preferred the informal discussion, the question-and-answer approach. He was not just interested in facts and figures; he

did not want mere knowledge, but *understanding*.

So they talked. They talked of cabbages and kings, and it sometimes became a seminar in philosophy rather than a lesson in civics. Ruth was delighted with Clay's perceptive mind, with his incisive questions.

Ruth was delighted with Clay, period.

She admitted as much to herself. He was shy, even to the point of reticence, concerning his own background and achievements—but eager to learn every detail of her own existence, past and present. It was all very flattering. His deference to her opinions, his courtesy, his reliance on her judgment, formed a startling contrast to the attitude of her regular daily pupils.

Her daily pupils. Ruth had always found it difficult to face them. Now it was becoming intolerable. The kids were awful, and getting worse. The change had started way back at the end of the war. That's when the convertibles began to show up in the parking-lot, and the reefers began to turn up in the pockets of the leather jackets. Then came rock-n'-roll and the I'm-Tough cult of Brando and Dean. Respect and responsibility vanished, and with it the wish to learn. Oh,

there were still exceptions, and Ruth didn't make the mistake of damning an entire generation as juvenile delinquents. But sometimes it seems as if the rebel yells of the rebels without a cause drowned out all other sounds, and it was a blessed relief to seek refuge in those nights with Clay. Ruth found herself looking forward to each evening—the three a week she spent teaching, and the two nights when they just went out together.

For that was the most recent development, the going out together. Clay had suggested it.

"Why not?" he argued. "What better way is there for me to learn—how is it said?—the folkways and the culture? To dine, to enjoy the entertainment, it is all a part of Social Sciences."

Ruth didn't resist very strenuously. She knew what was happening to her, of course, but she didn't really care. In fact, she had reached the point where she took an exultant delight in the opportunity to flaunt Clay's company to the world.

After years of dining in shabby tea-rooms at a deuce-table next to the swinging doors of the kitchen it was

pure heaven to walk into a good restaurant on the arm of a handsome man and be wined and dined in style. A childish vanity, childish phrased, but it meant a lot to the woman in Ruth. And Ruth was increasingly conscious of her womanhood. Once she assured herself that Clay seemed to possess ample funds, she had no further scruples about his extra-curricular attentions. She accepted the pleasures, enjoyed them.

And that, of course, was the cause of her downfall.

Came the inevitable night when she and Clay bumped into Harold Ferris and Ann Corwin. The manual-training teacher and his colleague were out on the town. At first Ruth looked upon the meeting as the climax of her personal triumphs. She enjoyed the astonished look on Harold Ferris's face when introduced to Clay, and was just catty enough to relish the poorly-concealed envy of Ann Corwin when she covertly contrasted her aging escort with Ruth's handsome pupil.

But after Harold and Ann joined them at their table and had a few drinks, Ruth began to regret the affair. Particularly when Clay asked the younger woman to dance.

Harold Ferris was asking her questions about Clay, and she answered impatiently, her eyes and mind intent on the couple circling the floor. They moved perfectly together; the tall, youthful man and the tall, youthful blonde. Youthful. That's what they had in common—youth. They were talking and smiling at one another, and all at once Ruth realized the truth. She wondered if Harold Ferris had any inkling of it; that these two belonged together.

Apparently he did not, for he said nothing and exhibited no sign of jealousy. And there was just the bare possibility that there was no reason for being jealous, either, for when Clay and Ann returned to the table they behaved quite decorously.

When Clay escorted Ruth home that evening, it was as if nothing had changed. He never even spoke of the blonde girl. For a moment Ruth was relieved. Maybe she was just imagining things. As usual, under these circumstances, she began the old interior debate again—should she ask him in? For the corny nightcap, the corny clinch? She'd never dared, knowing it was corny; knowing, at the same time, that she wanted just that. Perhaps tonight was the time.

He was standing outside the door now as she fumbled for her key; he was looking down at her and smiling, and his eyes were warm. She had only to look up and say—

But he said it first.

"I shall not be seeing you to-morrow night."

"No lesson?"

He shook his head. "We will resume the night after, yes? It is that I have a former—no, a previous—engagement. Yes, other plans."

"Oh."

"It is with your friend, the Miss Corwin."

"Oh," said Ruth again, and what she wanted to do was cry and curse at the same time, what she wanted to say was, *Damn it, did you have to tell me, don't you even care enough about me to lie about it?*

What kind of a man was Clay anyway, to brush her off, come out with it in cold blood, and still stand there and smile at her? So he was a foreigner, he was from Martinique; weren't Frenchmen supposed to be gallant?

"She is very pretty, Miss Corwin. And I have a feeling I may learn much from her, too. The Social Sciences, you know."

"Yes," said Ruth. "The Social Sciences." She stooped and inserted the key in the

lock. "And now will you please go away? I'm very tired."

"Tired?" A frown creased Clay's forehead. "But I was hoping we might still talk. There is a thought I wished to express, about the—what is the word?—sexual relationships of society."

Ruth wanted to laugh in his face. No, that wasn't true; she wanted to cry in his face. Instead she straightened up and said, very quickly, "Anything you want to learn in that department you can find out from Miss Corwin. She's an exceptionally competent instructor."

Then she walked inside and slammed the door.

The next forty-eight hours were the hardest. It was bad that first night, it was worse the next day, it was almost unbearable the night following, and the succeeding day was utter agony.

But by the time the third evening arrived, Ruth had faced up to everything.

She sat before the mirror after her lonely supper and made her summation. "I should have known nothing would come of it, really. I'm too old for him, for one thing. Besides, I know next to nothing about the man, the whole affair is utterly ridiculous. If

he shows up tonight I'm going to tell him to go to hell. Only—*I love him.*"

She could have skipped the rest. But the rest was true, too, and the rest was important. Any good Social Science teacher could tell you that. But at the moment, Ruth was not a good Social Science teacher. She was a frightened, middle-aged woman in love. No, not even a woman—just an emptiness, an emptiness which waited to be filled, wanted to be filled, *had* to be filled in spite of rhyme or reason. An emptiness sitting on the edge of the bed, gazing into a blank mirror and poised for the sound of footsteps which were going to come this way, *must* come this way.

They came.

And Ruth rose, and went to the door, knowing what she would say to him, knowing what she would do. She'd not ask questions, she'd not demand answers. She'd just hold out her arms and nothing else would matter.

The girl ran into the room.

"Ann! What are you doing here?"

"Where is he? Where is he?"

"I don't know. If it's Clay you mean, he has a room—"

"Yes. I went there first. I

told the police to look for him there."

"Police?"

"Oh, God, I'm so frightened—"

Ruth looked at her. She'd been crying and her face was drawn. Her lips trembled as she spoke.

"He's crazy, that's what's the matter," Ann was murmuring. "Last night we went out, and then afterwards, in his room—but you know, too, don't you? I mean, he must have—" She broke off abruptly, shuddering.

"No," said Ruth, softly. "I don't know. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"It wasn't so much what he did. It was the way he *talked* to me, the way he *looked* at me—and the *questions*. I mean, you don't ask *questions*, not unless you're a maniac. That's when I knew he was crazy. And then I saw the six toes, and he said yes, other things were different, too, and he *showed* me—" She shuddered again, her voice breaking. "He's a maniac, that's what he is, and I went to the police, and I wanted to warn you. If he comes here, you'd better call them right away." She hesitated. "*Is* he coming here?"

It was Ruth's turn to hesitate. "I don't think so," she said, at last.

"All right. They'll catch him anyway, at his room when he goes back. They know there's something wrong. I guess they investigated. Harold told me not to worry. I'm going to see him right now, he's waiting for me. But, Ruth, be careful! Please!"

Ruth nodded.

Long after Ann left she was still nodding, nodding to herself and to her reflection in the mirror.

Then she stopped nodding as *he* came. And she opened the door, and she did not hold out her arms. She just sat there and stared at the floor and said, "The police are looking for you. Ann told them. They know all about you, now."

"All about me?"

"Well, what they don't know, they'll find out. So you might as well tell me, too. Your name isn't Clay, is it? And you're not from Martinique, either. And you have six toes, and—"

"Six toes? Did *she* tell you that?"

"She told me everything." Ruth looked at him for the first time and was surprised to find him blushing. "How could you?" she sighed. "How could you do it? She thought you were crazy, staring at her and

asking her questions. Questions, for heaven's sake! Why on earth—?"

"Because I wanted to learn," he said, softly. "Didn't you say she could teach me? That is why. Because I wanted to learn on earth. Learn everything."

He moved closer and gazed down. "I am not altogether ignorant, you know. I read books first, many books, before I dared make contacts. And I remembered the advice of some of your anthropologists. They say the best way to learn about a different culture is to find a native woman, and discover the customs of the country. That is why I sought Ann."

"Why her, why not me?" Ruth snapped.

"There was a reason."

"I'm too old."

"Old?" The frown appeared on his forehead. Then he smiled and shook his head. "Old? As you reckon time, you are thirty-seven, no?"

"Yes," Ruth admitted.

He took her hand. "That is as I thought. So there is no problem. I, as you reckon time, am four hundred and twelve."

"But—"

"You're not afraid, are you? Because of the age, because of the six toes? Otherwise, basically, we are very much alike. That is why I was sent here,

because we discovered how similar you were to us. I came to learn your ways. No, not with any idea of conquest in mind—merely understanding. There is much that your culture can contribute to ours. I found that out from your teaching. At the outset the thought was that I would learn and return home, to become a teacher to my own world. Now I have another idea. If your police are seeking me, it is best if I leave at once. But there is no need for me to go alone. Will you come with me?"

"As a teacher?"

"Yes. He took her other hand. "And as my—what is the word—wife?"

"That's the word," Ruth said, softly. "And there are other words." She stared at him for a moment.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Then that's settled." Ruth stood up. "How do you leave?

What does one pack for a trip in a flying saucer?"

He chuckled. "No saucer. Just hold my hands. It is a psycho-physical process which we call *ezorgy*. Oh, there will be much for *you* to learn now, too."

"I'm sure of it, darling."

Ruth grasped his hands.

"Now?" she asked. . . .

There was quite a scandal over Ruth's disappearance with the handsome foreigner. Both Harold Ferris and Ann Corwin were particularly upset.

Unfortunately for their peace of mind, Ruth never reported her whereabouts. It was quite impossible, due to the limitations of the postal system. And even if she could have managed it, she hesitated to send them a card to say that she and her star pupil were honeymooning on far Arc-turus.

THE END

ON SALE IN DECEMBER FANTASTIC—SEPT. 29th
KEITH LAUMER'S stunning sequel to *AXE* and *DRAGON*:
THE SHAPE CHANGER, BRIAN ALDISS: *CARDIAC AR-*
REST, R.A. LAFFERTY'S—*BEEN A LONG TIME*, BARRY
N. MALZBERG'S—*THE NEW RAPPACINI*, plus other new
stories and features.

ENEMY BY PROXY

MATING SEASON

By WILTON G. BEGGS

Arnalla was a violent world.

*But no more so than the violence that
remained hidden in the
hearts of men—and women.*

IN less than a month," Mary Gibbs whispered, hating the circling beasts. "Thank God I won't be alive to see it again."

Mary had awaked only moments before, but the twin Arnalla suns were already hot above the jungle fronds. The sky was harsh and metallic, a bilious green inverted over a rank world of silence. Through a window Mary watched the gray creatures wheeling in the distance.

Their movements had a nightmarishly somnolent quality. The huge, leathery wings flapped so slowly that it seemed the beasts would lose momentum, and fall into the smoking lake beneath them. There were no placid cries, no calling to one another. The animals of Arnalla had not risen above a semireptile stage of evolution. They were voiceless, except during the mating season,

when the females' screams pervaded the jungles from pole to pole.

"Devils." Mary rose painfully from the sweat-soaked bed. Taking her dress off the back of a chair she slipped the rotting material over her head. She swayed as she worked. "In less than a month the'y'll make this planet even more a hell."

Mary had witnessed the spectacle ten times, but she had never accepted it. The thing was too ghastly, too insane. It was in no way like the animal courtships of Earth.

"Why are the females the aggressors?" Mary had asked her husband that first year, ten years ago, while the colonists were still living in the wrecked spaceship that had brought them to Arnalla. She had cowered with the others, awed by the raging hor-

ror outside, waiting for an end to the weeks of death.

"Arnalla isn't Earth, darling," James had said back then, his handsome face untroubled by the shrieking, and the guts and blood on the transparent portholes. "It's a different world, but this is basically the old story of the survival of the fittest. The strong females kill off the weaklings. That way, only the best eggs are laid."

Mary had accepted this explanation of the annual carnage during her first season on the planet. She did not accept it later. Often, she had noticed, some battle-scarred veteran would become so fierce that she lived for years. Too old for egg-laying, the veterans killed hundreds of healthy but inexperienced young females before they finally drowned in their own blood. From the safety of the spaceship, where the colonists took refuge each mating period, Mary had seen these aged murderesses killing right and left for days on end. It was as if the ancient beasts were determined to annihilate their entire race.

"They are as I am," Mary said dully, staring at the once-pretty face in the mirror beside her bed. She held up her pale hands, from which the flesh seemed in the process of melting away. "But where are my claws and fangs?"

She sighed and looked out at the far-off, circling beasts.

Though not the largest of Arnalla's animals, they were gigantic creatures, with wingspreads of at least thirty feet. From the armor-plated dragons of the northern seas, to the jungle behemoths, all the animals of Arnalla were monsters. Even the swamp vegetarians possessed crocodilian teeth and claws of iron.

"They have to be terrible," her husband, James, had told Mary long ago. "No defenseless group could survive the mating. The madness hits every animal at the same time, on the same indefinite day. The males are always weaker. After performing their duty they are immediately killed. For several weeks the females will attack anything that moves. Most of them die in combat, and the victors lay millions of eggs. The new generation hatches with incredible swiftness. By the end of the Arnallan year the youngsters are full-grown. The planet teems with life, and the cycle is repeated."

Mary shuddered, turning away from the window. This morning the pain in her stomach blazed with the force of lightning. She bent double. She moaned as the agony became more intense.

A door opened, the rusted hinges screeching. "Darling?" Mary's husband strode to her across the warped floor. Glowing with health he lifted her in his muscular arms. He was naked,

Illustrator LUTJENS



LUTJENS-

MATING SEASON

123

for the majority of the colonists had stopped wearing clothes after their third year on Arnalla. The humid, hot atmosphere ruined cloth, shredded it, made the briefest skirt or trousers sticky and uncomfortable. Mary was of the few who had refused to discard the rotting Earthian garments.

"Are you ill again, darling?" James's sun-bronzed face was concerned. "I wanted you to sleep as long as possible. Last night . . . Perhaps I shouldn't have . . ."

Mary put her wasted fingers over her husband's mouth. "Don't apologize. You hadn't treated me like a woman for such a long time."

She started to say more, then bit her colorless lips. She did not blame him because his love-making had been born of guilt rather than of desire. Held against his deep chest Mary could almost feel the vibrant life pounding through her husband's hard young body.

It is not his fault, she told herself grimly.

The pain eased, and Mary stood up, using James's arm for support. "I wonder why it's progressing so slowly. I just hang on, don't I? The others went faster. They . . ."

"Don't," said her husband. "Don't, darling."

Mary smiled sadly, thinking of the others. They, too, had con-

tracted this Arnallan disease without a name, this strange sickness the hostile climate produced. They, too, had experienced pain, and had lingered until they were shells of their former selves. Then they had died, and not any of the medical knowledge brought with the colonists from Earth had eased that dying by one iota.

"You've not been resting enough lately," James said, forcing a cheerful tone. "You're . . ."

"Of course I can't rest!" The anguished words were out before Mary could dam them back. "Don't you think I know what's in your mind?"

They glared at each other a moment, wildly, miserably. The twin suns were beating upon the room. It was being changed into an oven. Perspiration darkening her dress Mary ran to the window. Her arms were outstretched, as if in homage to the winged obscenities circling in the bilious green sky.

"They would understand," she said, choking. "Those scarred old demons would understand how I feel."

Far below Mary, a few hundred feet beyond a strip of jungle, the lake shore began. A stone pier jutted into the water down directly opposite the window. A dugout was tied to the pier. The bubbling surface of the lake was hazy with smoke.

"I'm sorry," Mary said after a while, gaining control of herself. "The approach of the mating season always sets me on edge." Shielding her eyes she could barely see the great spaceship through the smoke. Rusted and stained it sat upright where the colonists had crash-landed ten years before, on a small volcanic island out in the lake. "Susan and I are going over this morning to prepare the quarters for this year's refuge. I'm too weak for the heavy tasks, but she wants me to show her where the cleaning utensils are."

Mary swung about. She stared at her husband, daring him to speak, begging him mutely. He blanched beneath the golden tan. His mouth opened, but no sound came forth.

They left the room and went into the upstairs hall of the immense house. The big, rambling building had been erected by the colonists during their first months on the planet, before they recognized the trap into which they had plunged themselves. There had been one hundred of them then, the original number. Few of them were over thirty at the time, and they had built grandly, for the future, for the overflow of babies expected within the next decade.

"I hate the house," Mary said, leaning on James as they walked toward a staircase at the end of

the long hall. "To me it is the symbol of our failure in this awful world." Desolation lay on both sides of her. All the generous rooms by which she and her husband passed were empty of people, the handmade furniture moldy and mildewed, gaping doors fallen inward, or hanging by a rusted hinge. "On Earth it would have taken a century to make this havoc. But Arnalla! Arnalla is Hell!"

They went down the creaking stairs carefully, avoiding the steps ready to give way under a heavy weight. Sometimes it seemed to Mary that nothing they had built on this planet, or brought with them, had lasted more than a score of weeks. Something in the air, something in the exhalation of the very soil, hastened all forms of decay and death. The colonists' powerful weapons and work tools had worn out years ago, though everything of this sort had been almost indestructible on Earth.

"I wish I had died with my mother and father," Mary said bitterly. "Don't you wish we had lived in dignity, until the bombs fell?"

Her husband lowered his head, but made no reply, and Mary realized he did not wish the thing at all. Dreadful as Arnalla was, he clung to his life. For some reason he thrived in the malevolent atmosphere. He accepted each de-

gradation, the hunger and fear, the Adamic nudity, the advancing loss of every vestige of Earthian civilization. He accepted, and he had bloomed while the others wilted and perished.

Mary remembered James's excitement on the day far in the past when the famous explorer, Enno Arnal, invited them to be among his settlers on this bizarre world. "Think of it!" James had exulted to her that evening. "My family's old friend has stumbled upon the only hospitable planet besides Earth that man has found in the Galaxy. He wants us to go. He needs strong young men and girls. Marry me, darling. Give our children a chance. I'm certain the next war is going to wipe out the human race on Earth."

So Mary had married the boy she loved, not because she believed Earth doomed, but because he would have gone without her if she had refused him. She was eighteen, and he barely twenty, and the tears of her parents had been forgotten during the long, long honeymoon through space.

"Anral promised us so much," Mary said, struggling for her breath at the foot of the moldering staircase. "But I've stopped hating him, James. I envy Arnal, that the beasts snatched him away before we stopped hoping."

She chuckled without humor, remembering how the optimistic

young settlers had maintained their high spirits after their leader was killed by a lake caco-demon during the first mating season. After the sickness began, and the crashed spaceship proved unrepairable, they had still hoped. Even after the tools and weapons fell apart in their hands, their hope had remained, and even after they were reduced to hunting food with spears and axes. In the beginning they expected the overdue ships that were to bring fresh supplies and new people. Then, when four years of wretchedness slipped by, and five, and six, the remnant left alive had searched the green sky just for a rescue vessel to take them off the planet of death.

No ship came, however, and finally the shrinking emigrant band had experienced the full horror of their abandonment. They could question no further whether the ultimate war which must not happen, had happened, or whether the rockets which must never be loosed, had obliterated the cities of Earth. They the dying prisoners of Arnalla, were the last human beings alive in the universe.

"It seems incredible yet," Mary said, as she and James walked across the rubble covering the ground floor of the house. Through a hole in a wall created by some night monster, she could see a girl bending over a

fuming cook fire. The girl was nude, and no more than sixteen by the Earthian age scale. She was auburn-haired and very pretty. "You and I and Susan. The last of our kind anywhere, James."

The girl glanced up on hearing Mary's voice. She waved artlessly, but Mary did not miss the unspoken signal that sang between the nubile child and the man. The pain and nausea of her illness rose in Mary like a sword. She fought it sternly, sorrowfully amused by her husband's boyish expression of lust.

No effort had been made in years at keeping the ground floor repaired. The big room Mary and he traversed was filthy with a brown, noisome fungus. It was spread across the boards like a carpet. Pulpy bunches of the blight reared in balls upon the crumbling tables and chairs. Mary and James went outside into a tiny area of packed dirt beside the house.

"Breakfast," the naked child said, turning a rickety spit slowly over the fire. She removed a lump of meat gingerly, and handed it to James. The greasy mass was half-raw. He tore it with his gleaming teeth. Mary declined her portion, shaking her head and shoving her trembling fists deep inside the pockets of her sweat-dampened dress.

"Aren't you hungry?" Juice

trickled down the girl's dimpled chin as she ate. "James may not kill anything today."

Mary leaned against the house wall. "It doesn't matter." The exterior of the building was tortured to the roof by a thick mat of blackish, mosslike plants. Mary rested against the rubbery substance gratefully. "After the weapons ruined, and it became so difficult to get our food, I used to be starved all the time. But the sickness takes care of that. Like the others, I've lost my appetite."

Instinctively the girl and the man looked behind them into the tangle of primitive trees and ferns and vines abounding toward the west. In that direction lay the cemetery. It was submerged by the sultry wilderness, but once the region about the house had been cleared for miles. The clearing had extended to the beast barrier that had kept animals away except during the insanity of the mating season. Now the barrier was inoperative, and the jungle was tightening a noose about the building, pushing at it everywhere with mushrooming varieties of trees and ferns that grew several inches in a single day.

"Are you ready to help me at the ship?" the girl said to Mary with a cordiality ludicrous in its falseness. "I don't think we should wait about preparing for the annual move. The rage may

hit the beasts early this year. Those metal doors will look good to us in a couple of weeks."

James shuffled his bare feet uncomfortably, and Mary resisted an urge to slap the pretty, lying face. "Really, Susan," she said, "one would think you're afraid."

Mary knew this was not the case. Susan was fearless. Often, when some lake or jungle animal invaded the ground floor at night, the girl left the safety of the upper apartments and accompanied James down the stairs to scare the creature away with nothing but flickering torches.

Susan had been the only child among the colonists on the flight to Arnalla, and she scarcely remembered Earth. Following the early death of her parents the new planet had become her natural home. She had entered adolescence in excellent health, untouched by the misfortunes overwhelming her elders. James alone matched her in determination to carve out some sort of future for themselves despite all odds. He and she seemed physically immune to the effects of the inhuman struggle and the poisonous air.

"A wounded swamp dragon was on yonder side of the lake yesterday," James said, sorely ill at ease. He bit his lip and looked vaguely toward the east. "If it's weak enough, maybe I can get some more meat for us."

Mary watched the naked pair intently. She was struck, not for the first time, by a dazed sensation that she was dead already, that this graceful man and girl were a latter-day Adam and Eve, and Arnalla the hellish Eden from which another tribe of reptilious brutes would eventually spring. Again she caught a flash of understanding leaping between the two, as James turned to go.

Mary was not certain how long her husband and Susan had been lovers. The affair stretched back some months, toward the death of Lois Jones, the ninety-seventh human victim of Arnalla. Lois was of the older colonists, and she had mothered the child at night, when the four of them were alone in the upstairs apartments they shared with ninety-six ghosts and Lois's bright memories of a Texas childhood. Afterwards, the drawing Southern voice silenced forever, Mary had grieved for Susan.

"We must be gentle," she had told James many times in the weeks that followed. "We recall our Earthian happiness. Susan was too young. She knows nothing but this torment."

Mary had not realized until much later that the girl was contented with her lot. Only when the initial stages of the familiar sickness had fastened upon Mary, and she would awake in the mid-

dle of the night to find James absent from their bed, did she begin to suspect the betrayal in Susan's room down the hall. She examined the girl through different eyes then. What she found had alarmed Mary as no beast of Arnalla ever had. In Susan, Mary saw the first truly Arnallan woman, physically desirable to any virile man, but a woman devoid of conscience. A soulless female as cold-blooded in her passions as the semireptiles of the Arnallan jungles.

"I'll walk with you a little way, James," Mary said tensely. He was picking up his hunting ax from a crude bench beside the fire. By endless polishing they managed to keep the blade partially free of rust. "I want to be with you this morning. Perhaps I'll not see you again."

She said the quick sentence purposely, to test them. Their reaction showed her beyond any lingering doubt that she was not mistaken. She heard Susan's startled gasp, and James had almost dropped the ax. He was stupid with confusion, his cheeks reddening, the sleek muscles of his torso strained and taut.

"I always worry when you track for food," Mary continued, as if unaware of the consternation she had provoked. "I'm afraid you'll be killed someday."

James relaxed, the flush draining from his face. "There's no

real danger just before the mating. All of them are sluggish till the madness hits."

Even then Mary did not blame him. An intolerable burden was on her heart, but no hatred. He had loved her once with the affection of an idealistic young bridegroom. She had never forgotten his tenderness; she could not condemn him now. She knew the prime mover in the plot against her was not he.

"Don't go far, Mary," Susan said anxiously. "We should cross to the island before the noon geysers boil. It's going to take at least until nightfall to get the compartments ready for occupancy."

Mary gazed at the mature child with genuine sadness, thinking of the naive high-school belle Susan would likely have been at this age, in the old days. Whatever Earth might have produced, it would not have been this lovely and precocious fiend.

They went down the steep slope together, away from the black and rotting building. At a number of places James hacked out a path for them through the undergrowth that had shot up during the night. Overhead, the twisting, evil-smelling ferns rose in a canopy eighty feet thick. They shut out any trace of light. Everywhere there was a pall of silence in a world without birds or insects.

Under the burning suns again, Mary and James left Susan stamping her feet impatiently beside the stone pier. The two of them walked slowly off, along the strip of sand between the jungle edge and the smoky water of the lake. Steam rose about them, pushing up from fissures leading downward into the bowels of the planet. The pain was so cruel, and Mary's legs trembled so much that she feared her husband would notice, but he was preoccupied in his own misery.

She did not speak until a backward thrust of the lake had hidden them from Susan at the pier. "I can't go farther," she said, taking his hand and holding it to her breast. She stared at him wearily, thinking how beautiful he was, his long-lashed eyes downcast, the moistness weaving ringlets in his curly hair. "Let me rest a minute, James. Then do you wish me to go back to her? To Susan?"

Once more he started and glared at her wildly. He groaned, and suddenly, without warning, she was comforting him in her wasted arms as though he were a bewildered child. Through a gathering mist of agony she took the ax from his grasp. He shut his eyes and sank upon his knees before her. The angry sound of masculine weeping hung heavily on the clouded air.

"It's Arnalla." Inch by inch

Mary raised the ax to her shoulder. "Arnalla poisons everything. I've known for a week Susan intends to murder me at the ship today."

"God," said the man. "Oh, god!" His broad back was twitching beneath the scourge of her words, and he buried his face in her dress. At first Mary thought he would beg forgiveness, but when he spoke she knew he was lost to her for eternity. "You'll live too long," he said thickly. "You'll live into the mating season, and be in our way. Time is so short. Each year is precious. Don't you see, darling? Susan and I are the only chance our race has left. Why is it she and I alone have escaped the sickness? It's because Arnalla has accepted us, somehow. If our babies are conceived during the proper procreative season, we're convinced the planet will spare them, and gradually alter and absorb their descendants into her scheme of life."

Above Mary the twin suns were blotted out by a flapping leather wing. She looked up, and saw a trio of filthy, lizard-headed monsters circling in the sky. They were not dangerous, with the mating orgy so near, but she shuddered nevertheless. Two were young, male and female, but the third was a nightmare of sterility and scars and grinning teeth.

"When the madness strikes," Mary said to James quietly, "the barren one will kill both of them before an egg is laid. In her own poor witless way she'll try to rob this planet of its powers. And she'll be right, for Arnalla is Hell, and the Arnallan way of existence should be opposed by any method possible."

The man pushed away from Mary abruptly, and his handsome face was crazed and stubborn. "No!" he said, admiring the beasts in the sky. "Arnalla is our adopted mother. No matter what she does to my offspring, I know they'll owe her their gift of life."

Dark visions burst at Mary then, specters of the future bubbling in her frightened brain like the water in the lake. "The human race?" she cried, loathing him at last. "Can we not welcome doomsday possessing the souls and the minds and bodies of our ancestors? Would you let Earth's noblest achievement grovel finally on all fours, in the ooze?"

He was beginning to straighten himself distrustfully when she hit him with the ax. It was a surprising blow, swifter and stronger than she had any reason to demand of her feeble frame. He

gave a barking scream as he slumped forward. She struck him twice more, and the blood concealed his expression of pain and incredulity.

"The only way," Mary said, stumbling blindly. "The human way!"

She kissed her husband's hands and spread sand over the crimson mask that had been his countenance. With infinite tiredness she sat down on a slimy boulder near him. Heat shimmered along the ground. The humid jungle was behind her, the lake in front, and steam rose around the stone on every side. In the air three shadows wheeled, the oldest beast rising and falling between the unscarred youngsters.

"I am a daughter of Earth," Mary said softly, addressing the entire, listening planet. "And a jealous woman. And my mother's priceless children will never belong to you."

She waited, calm and resolute. She fought grimly each time the pain flamed at her in an attempt to block her from the kindness she must now perform. Soon Susan would come to investigate the prolonged absence. Mary held the ax ready in her lap.

THE END



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