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SEPTEMBER 1949 WEIRD TALES

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SEPTEMBER, 1949

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SHORT STORIES

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One FOOT
the
GRAVE

By Theodore Sturgeon

GOOD.

I WAS out in Fulgey Wood trying to find out what had happened to my foot, and I all but walked on her. Claire, I mean. Not Luana. You wouldn't catch Luana rolled up in a nylon sleeping bag, a moonbeam bright on her face.

Her face gleamed up like a jewel sunk deep in a crystal spring. I stood looking at it, not moving, not even breathing, hoping that she would not wake. I'd found that horror of a skull ten minutes ago and I'd much rather she didn't see it.

She stirred. I stepped back and sideward into a bear-trap. The steel jaws were cushioned by my heavy boot; they sliced through from instep to heel, but did not quite meet. All the same, it was a noise in the soughing silences of the wood, and Claire's eyes opened. She studied the moon wonderingly for a moment because, I presume, her face was turned to it. Then she seemed to recall where she was. She sat up and glanced about. Her gaze swept over me twice as I stood there stiff and straight, trying to look like a beech. Or a birch. I must be of the wrong family. She saw me.

"Thad . . ." She sat up and knuckled her eyes. Claire has a deep voice, and meticulous. She peered. "It—*is* Thad?"

"Most of me. Hi."

"Hi." She moved her mouth, chewing, apparently, the end of sleepiness. She swallowed it and said, "You've been looking for me."

"For years," I said gallantly. That might have been true. At the moment, however, I was in pursuit of my foot, and possibly some peace and quiet. I hadn't counted on this at all.

"Well, Lochinvar, why don't you sweep me into your arms?"

"I've told you before. You're everything in the world I need, but you don't strike sparks. Go on back to bed."

She shook her hair, forward, out and down, and then breath-takingly back. She had masses of it. In the moonlight it was blue-gray, an obedient cloud. "You don't seem surprised to find me out here."

"I'm not. The last thing I said to you in town was to sit tight, stay where you were, and let me handle this. The fact that you are here therefore does not surprise me."

"You know," she said, putting one elbow on one knee, one chin in one palm, and twinkling, "you say 'therefore' prettier than anyone else I ever met. Why don't you come over here and talk to me? Are you standing in a bear-trap?"

She was wearing a one-piece sunsuit. It was backless and sideless and the summer flying-suit, hanging on the bush at her head, plus the light nylon sleeping bag, were obviously everything in the world she had with her. About the bear-trap I said, "Well, yes."

She laughed gaily, and lay back. Her hair spread and spilled; she burrowed into it with the back of her head. She pulled the sleeping bag tight up around her throat and said, "All right, silly. Stand there if you want to. It's a big boudoir."

I SAID nothing. I tugged cautiously at the trap, moving just my leg. The boot all but parted; the moon gleamed on the steel jaws, now only an inch apart and closing slowly. I stopped pulling. I hoped she would go back to sleep. I hoped the trap wouldn't clank together when it finally went all the way through. I stood still. There was sweat on my mouth.

"You still there?"

"Yup," I said.

She sat up again. "Thad, this is stupid! *Do* something! Go away, or talk to me or something, but don't just *stand* there!"

"Why don't you just go on back to sleep and let me worry about what I do? I'm not in your way. I won't touch you."

"That I don't doubt," she said acidly. "Go

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

away." She thumped down, turned away, turned back and sat up, peering. "I just thought . . . maybe you *can't*. . . ." She flung out of the bag and stood up, slim in the moonlight. I could see her toenails gleam as she stepped on the fabric. Her right toenails, I mean. Her left foot wasn't a foot. It was a cloven hoof, hairy-fetlocked, sharp and heavy. She was as unselfconscious about it as she was of the casual coverage her sunsuit afforded her. She came to me, limping slightly.

"Go on back to—let me al—oh for Pete's sake, Claire, I'm perfectly—"

She breathed a wordless, sighing syllable, all horror and pity. "Thad," she cried, "Your—your *foot!*"

"I didn't want you to know."

"How could you just *stand* there with that—that—Oh!" She knelt, reached toward my trapped foot, recoiled before she touched it, and stayed there looking up at me with her eyes bright in the silver light, silver tear-streaks on her face like lode-veinings. "What shall I *do?*"

I sighed, "Keep your fingers away from the trap." I leaned back and pulled. The macerated leather of my high-laced hunting boot held, gave, held—and then the jaws whanged together, close-meshed. I fell back against a birch-trunk, banging my head painfully. Claire, seeing almost the entire foot dangling under the arch of the trap's jaws, started a shriek, then jammed it back into her mouth with her whole hand. I grunted.

"Oh," she said, you poor *darling!* Does it hurt?" she added inanely.

"No," I said, rubbing my skull. "It was just my head. . . ."

"But your foot! Your poor foot!"

I began unlacing what was left of the boot. "Don't bother your pretty little head about it," I said. I pulled the boot-wings aside and slipped my leg out of boot and woolen stocking together. She looked, and sat down plump! before me, her jaw swinging slackly. "Shut it," I said conversationally. "You really looked beautiful a while back. Now you look silly."

She pointed to my hoof. It was larger than hers, and shaggier. "Oh, Thad! I didn't know . . . how long?"

"About three weeks. Damn it, Claire, I didn't want you to know."

"You should have told me. You should have told me the second it started."

"Why? You had enough on your mind. You'd already been through all the treatment that anyone could figure out, and I was in on all of it. So when it happened to me, I didn't see the sense in making a federal case out of it." I shrugged. "If Dr. Ponder can't cure this no one can. And he can't. Therefore—"

Through her shock, she giggled.

"Therefore," I continued, "there was nothing left for me to do but try to find out what had happened, by myself." I saw her lower lip push out before she dropped her face and hid it. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"I—kind of thought you were trying to help just me."

CLAIRE can switch from giggles to tears, from shock to laughter to horror to fright, faster than anyone I ever met. It goes all the way down too. I said, "Don't kid yourself. I don't do things for people."

"Well," she said in a very small voice, "that's what I thought, for a while anyway."

"You better get back in that sleeping bag. You'll catch cold," I said.

She rose and crept obediently back to the sleeping bag. Once into it, she said, "Well, you care if I catch cold."

I went and hunkered down beside her. "Well sure. I might catch it."

"You wouldn't get that close!"

"Oh, I don't know. I read somewhere that a sneeze can travel thirty feet."

"I hate you."

"Because I sneaked out behind your back and got a fancy foot just like yours?"

"Oh, Thad! How can you joke about it?"

I sat back and lifted my hoof, regarding it thoughtfully. I had found it possible to spread the two halves and relax suddenly. They made a nice loud click. I did this a couple of times. "I'd rather joke about it. How frantic can you get?"

"Thad, Thad. . . . It's my fault, it is, it is!"

"Uh-huh. That's what I get for playing footsie with you in roadhouses. You're contagious, that's what."

"You're no comfort."

"I don't comfort stupid people. This isn't your fault, and you're being stupid when you talk like that. Does yours itch?"

"Not any more."

"Mine does." I clicked my hoof some more. It felt good. "What gave you the idea of coming out here?"

"Well," she said shyly, "after you said you'd track this thing down for me, but wouldn't say how, I thought it all out from the very beginning. This crazy trouble, whatever it is, started out here; I mean, it developed after I came out here that time. So I figured that this is where you'd be."

"But why come?"

"I didn't know what you'd get into here. I thought you might—might need me."

"Like a hole in the head," I said bluntly.

"And I thought you were doing it just for me. I didn't know you had a foot like that too." Her voice was very small.

"So now you know. And you're sorry you came. And first thing in the morning you'll hightail it straight back to town where you belong."

"Oh no! Not now. Not when I know we're in this together. I like being in something together with you, Thad."

I sighed. "Why does my luck run like this? If I got all hog-wild and feverish about you, you'd turn around and get short of breath over some other joker. Everybody loves somebody—else."

"You're thinking about Luana," she said with accuracy. Luana was Dr. Ponder's typist. She had taut coral pneumatic lips, a cleft chin, and a tear-stained voice like that of an English horn in the lower register. She had other assets and I was quite taken with both of them.

"If I were as honest about my feelings as you are about yours," I said, "and as loud-mouthed, I'd only hurt your feelings. Let's talk about our feet."

"All right," she said submissively. "Thad. . . ."

"Mm?"

"What did you mean when you said you'd seen me be beautiful?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Skip it, will you? What has that to do with feet?"

"Well. . . . Nothing, I guess." She

sounded so forlorn that, before I could check myself, I reached out and patted her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Claire. I shouldn't brutalize you, I guess. But it's better than stringing you along."

She held my hand for a moment against her cheek. "I s'pose it is," she said softly. "You're so good . . . so good, and—and so sensible."

"So tired. Give me back my hand. Now; let's put all this fantastic business together and see what comes out. You start. Right from the beginning, now; somewhere, somehow, there's got to be an answer to all this. I know we've been over it and over it, but maybe this time something will make sense. You start."

SHE LAY back, put her hands behind her head, and looked at the moon. She had to turn her head for this, because the moon was sinking, and there were knife-edges of light among the cords of her throat. "I still say it was the night I met you. Oh, don't worry; I won't get off on that again . . . but it was. You were just a face among faces to me then. A nice face, but—anyway, it was the Medusa Club meeting, the night we got talking about magic."

"I'll never forget that night," I said. "What a collection of neurotics! Saving your presence, Ma'am."

"That's the only purpose of the club—to find those things which frighten neurotics and stare them down, and to keep on doing it until somebody drops dead. Score to date: umpteen-odd dead boogie-men, no dead people. Hence the discussion of magic that night."

"That makes sense. And I remember Ponder's point that we are not as far removed from the days of the witches and wizards as we like to think. We knock on wood; we slip bits of wedding-cake under our pillows; we hook fingers with each other when we suddenly say the same thing together, and so on and on. And he said that perhaps this subconscious clinging to ritual was not because of a lingering childishness, but because the original magic forces were still in operation!"

"That was it," said Claire. "And a fine flurry of snorts he got for that!"

"Yup. Especially from you. I still don't understand why you got so steamed up."

"I *hate* that kind of talk!" she said vociferously. "But I hated it especially hearing it from Dr. Ponder. Ever since I've known him he's been so reasonable, so logical, so—well, so wonderful—"

I grinned. "I'm jealous."

"Are you, Thad? Are you really?" she said eagerly; then, "No. You're laughing at me, you heel . . . anyway, I couldn't stand hearing that kind of poppycock from him."

I put out my cloven hoof and snapped it in front of her nose. "What do you think now?"

"I don't know what to think . . ." she whispered, and then, with one of her startling switches of mood, continued in a normal voice, "so the next day I decided to track down some of the old superstitions for myself. Heaven knows this part of the country is full of them. The Indians left a lot, and then the Dutch and the French and the Spanish. There's something about these hills that breeds such things."

I laughed. "Sounds like Lovecraft."

"Sounds like Charles Fort, too!" she snapped. "Some day you'll learn that you can't laugh at one and admire the other. Where was I?"

"In the woods."

"Oh. Well, the most persistent superstition in these parts is the old legend of the Camel's Grave. I came out here to find it."

I SCRABBLED up some of the soft earth to make a pit for my elbow and a hummock for my armpit. I lay on my side, propped up my head with my hand, and was comfortable. "Just run off that legend again, once over lightly."

She closed her eyes. "Somewhere in this no-good country—no one's ever been able to farm it, and there's too much jimson weed and nightshade for grazing—there's supposed to be a little hollow called Forbidden Valley. At the north end of it they say there's a grave with something funny about it. There's no headstone. Just a skull. Some say a man was buried there up to his neck and left to die."

"The Amazon Indians have a stunt like that. But they pick an ant-hill for the job.

Cut off the feller's eye-lids first. After that, the potato race, ducking for apples and ice cream is served in the main tent."

"A picnic," she agreed, shuddering. "But there was never anything like that among the local Indians here. Besides, we don't run to that kind of ant either. Anyway, this skull is chained, so the story goes, with a link through the edge of the eye-socket. It's supposed to be a magician buried there. Thing is, the legend is that he isn't dead. He'll live forever and be chained forever. Nothing can help him. But he doesn't know it. So if anyone wanders too close, he'll capture whoever it is and put 'em to work trying to dig him out. The old tales keep coming out—kids who had wandered out here and disappeared, the old woman who went out of her head after she got back to town, the half-witted boy who mumbled something about the skull that talked to him out of the ground. You know."

"Why do they call it the Camel's Grave?"

"*I* don't know. Some say the magician was an Egyptian who used to ride a camel around. Some say it comes from some Indian name. The nearest I can find in the library to 'Camel' is 'ko-mai' which means the green stick they used to spit meat over a fire. But that's Winnebago, and there were no Winnebagos around here."

"Wait. You mean there were Indian legends about this?"

"Oh, sure. I dug those out. There are all sorts of stories. Some of them are shocking—I mean in a nice way." She giggled. "But they all have one thing in common—the imprisoned magician, who, by the way, was old, old as the hills. He wasn't an Indian either. They made that quite clear. And always Camel, or 'Grave of the Camel'. Just to mix that up even more for you, I looked up 'camel' in the dictionary and found out that the word is derived from 'Djemal', which is Arabic, or 'Gamal', which is Hebrew."

"Fine," I said bitterly. "Much progress. So go on with your little trip out here."

"That first time? Oh, nothing happened. I brought some chow and stayed out here about four days at the full moon, which is supposed to be the time when the Forbidden Valley can be found. I didn't see a soul but old Goo-goo running his traps. No one pays attention to Goo-goo."

"Not even people who step into one of his bear-traps? You're lucky you didn't bed down in it."

"Oh, don't blame him, Thad! He's a sweet old man, really. He's deaf and dumb, you know. He keeps out of people's way as much as he can. Comes in with a few skins every now and then and lives off the land. He could tell us a thing or two about Forbidden Valley if he could talk. But he can't even write. They say he doesn't mind the haunted hills because no one ever found a way to tell him about them. What he doesn't know can't hurt him. As for the trap, he put it where he thought it might do him some good, among the birches where bears sometimes come to hunt for bugs under the bark. Practically no one ever comes out here. When they do, it's their lookout, not Goo-goo's."

"Hey." I straightened up. "How can you be so casual about bunking out here with a wildcat or two and an occasional bear wandering around? There are copperheads too, to say nothing of a trapper who must be lonesome, to put it mildly."

"Why I—" She paused, wonderingly. "I never thought about it, I guess. Thad—nothing ever hurt me. I mean it. No dog ever bit me, no cat ever scratched me. I don't even seem to be very tempting to mosquitos. Once when I was a little girl a bull gored a hired man who was walking across a field with me. The bull bellowed and jumped and capered all around me, but he didn't touch me. I've never even been stung by a bee."

"You don't say." I considered her thoughtfully. "I begin to see why I asked you out for a beer the night of the meeting."

"Why, Thad?"

"Now don't get ideas. I just pegged you as being—different, that's all. Not better—different. You puzzled me. I've been a lot of places, Claire. Tropics. At sea. Construction jobs. I've met a lot of people, but no one like you."

"That again," she snorted. "People are always telling me that, one way or another. And what's it get me? The very first time I fall for a big dead-pan stranger, he doesn't

know I'm alive. All large muscles and bad taste."

"What do you mean bad taste?"

"Luana."

"Now look. I won't bandy her about. Stay off the subject, see?"

SURPRISINGLY, she laughed. "Temper—temper," she cautioned. "My, you roar purty. But back to the subject at hand. I was out here four days and nights, wandering around, trying to find the Forbidden Valley. Once I thought I had it. It was about midnight. The moon was bright, like tonight. I was near here somewhere. There was a little swag in the ground with a high bluff at one end. I went up to it. I tripped over something. I don't know what it was. I almost *never* fall over things but I sure did that time. I fell right on top of some little animal. I hope I didn't hurt it. I don't know what it was. It wriggled out from under me and whizzed away fast as a deer-fly. I never saw anything move so fast; a blur and it was gone. It was about as big as a chipmunk, but longer—oh, three times as long. I got a vague impression of pointed ears and the funniest broad, flat tail. It was like nothing I've ever seen."

"I thought nothing happened in those four days."

"Well—that couldn't be important. Oh; I see what you mean. *Anything* might be important. All right. Now—what else?"

"Goo-goo."

"Oh. I saw him once. Twice. The first time he was setting a whip-snare in a clearing in the woods. I waved at him and smiled and he nodded and gurgled the way he does and smiled back. The second time I don't think he saw me. He was out in the open. Early morning. He was tramping round and round in a circle in the grass. Then he stopped and faced the sun. He did something with his knife. Held it out, sort of, and touched himself on the shoulders and chin with it. I don't remember very clearly. It didn't last long. And that's all."

"Hmp." I plucked some grass and skinned it with my front teeth, to get the juice. "Then you came back to town and your foot went haywire."

"Yes. It only took about six days to get the way it is. It was awful at first. The toes gathered, and the whole foot began to get pointed. It was longer at first. I mean, my foot straightened out like a ballet dancer's, and I couldn't get my heel down. Then the whole thing thickened up and grew shorter, and the tip turned black and hardened and—"

I interrupted, "I know, I know. Had one once myself. Now, how many people did you tell about it?"

"Oh, nobody. I mean, Dr. Ponder, of course, and then you. Dr. Ponder was so—so—"

"Wonderful," I submitted.

"Shut up. So *understanding*, I mean."

"That's an odd word to use."

"Is it? Anyway, he said I had a— a—"

"Chitinous podomorphia."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"You told me, right after he told you. Only *I* remembered it. Mine began shortly afterward, and I remembered it again." I spit out my grass and selected another stem. "A brilliant diagnosis."

"Thad . . . you—sometimes you say things in a way I don't understand."

"Do I?" In the growing predawn darkness, I could feel her sharp swift gaze on me. I said, "Go on. He treated the foot?"

"HE BOUND it. It was very clever. As the foot changed shape from day to day he changed the bandages, so that it never looked any worse than a slightly sprained ankle. He seemed to know all about the trouble. He predicted the course of the trouble as it developed, and told me that it would go just so far and stop, and he kept me from getting frightened, and explained why I should keep it a secret."

"What did he say?"

"He harked back to the meeting, and the things that had been said. Especially about the readiness of people to believe in so-called mystical events. He said there was enough residual superstition in town to make life miserable for a girl with a cloven hoof. Especially for me."

"Why you especially?"

"Didn't I ever tell you? I thought I had. . . . See, my mother and father . . . they were engaged. I mean, they were each engaged

to someone else. Dad came from Scoville way. That's eight miles or more on the other side of these woods. He didn't know Mother at all. He took to coming out here at night. He didn't know why. He couldn't help it. And Mother—she was about eighteen at the time—Mother jumped up from the dinner table one night and ran. She just *ran* out here. It's a long way. Granddad tried to follow her, but she ran like a deer. When he finally came huffing and puffing into the wood—it was a white night like tonight—and stopped to get his breath back, he heard a man calling, 'Jessica! Jessica!' That was Mother's name. Granddad followed the sound. It was out here in the open somewhere. Granddad climbed a rise and looked down and saw this young man standing with his arms out, calling and calling, turning every which way as he called. Granddad was going to yell at him but then he saw Mother. She was going down the slope ahead of him, walking slowly—he used to say 'as if the meadow was a grand marble stair, and she in a gold dress, for all she was tattered with thorns.'

"The two of them stopped two yards apart and stood there staring at one another for longer than it took Granddad to get to them. He had to yell twice or three times before she even knew he was there. She kept her eyes on the young man's face and just said, 'Yes, father.' And Granddad bellowed at her to come home. She stepped to the young man—that was my Dad—and she put a hand on his arm and said, 'He'll come too.' Granddad said 'The hell he will!' He wouldn't talk to my Dad, he was so upset and angry. 'I don't even know his name!' and Mother said quietly, 'No more do I. You'd better ask him, father.' And that was how it was."

I sat up and crossed my legs, entranced. "You mean that was the first time they saw each other?"

She nodded, though by now I could barely see her, for the moon was gone and only its cold loom stood in the sky over the western hills. "The very first time," she said. "And they were together every minute they could be after that. They were married right away."

"How?"

SHE shifted uncomfortably as I asked it, and said, "By a judge. It wasn't a church wedding. It was quicker. People talked. They still talk. They have lots of ideas about what went on out here, but what I'm telling you is the truth. Anyway, Granddad got used to the idea very soon, though he was against it at first. Even the talk didn't bother him; those two lived in a world of their own. Nothing touched them. Dad made wood-carvings—clock cases and newel-figurines and so on, and Mother was with him almost every minute. Granddad used to say if you pinched the one, the other'd say 'Ouch.' He said nobody could stay mad in that house; he knew because he tried. So . . . it didn't matter what people said." She paused, and I just waited. Later, questions.

Presently she said sleepily, "And it *doesn't* matter. My mother and Dad are like that now. They always will be. Nothing can change what you remember."

I waited again. This was a long time. Finally I asked, gently, "Where are they?"

"They died."

She slept. Somehow the moon had moved around to the east again. No: it wasn't the moon. It was a cloudless dawn, a dilution; light staining the hem of the sky. I sank back with my elbow in the hole I had dug and my armpit on the me-shaped hummock, and looked at the sleeping girl. I knew now what the single thing was that made her different. She was as changeable as bubble-colors; she felt, immediately and noticeably, all the emotions except one. And that was her difference. She was absolutely fearless.

That story . . . so simply told, and then, "They died."

Cloven hooves.

"They died." People like that . . . for a time I was angrier at such a death than I was, even, at the ugly excisence that was once a foot. Dr. Ponder seemed to know a lot about these things. "Chitinous podomorphia." Oh, fine. That meant "Change of a foot into chitin—hoof, horn, and fingernail material." I hadn't gone to Ponder. I couldn't really say why. Maybe Luana was the reason for that. Somehow I couldn't take the idea of Luana writing up my case history on her neat file-cards. And there was no other doctor in town. Here was Claire with

the same trouble, and I'd been in on that from the word go. I just did for my foot what Ponder had done for Claire's, and hoped that Luana would never hear about it. What girl would give a tumble to a man with a cloven hoof?

THE SUN poked a flaming forehead over the wall of hills. By its light I studied Claire's relaxed face. She was not beautiful, by any means. She had a round, pleasant face. When she laughed, a transverse crease appeared under her nose; she was the only human being with that particular upper lip that I had ever liked. Her lashes were thick but not long, and now, with her eyes closed, half the beauty she had was cloaked, for she had the most brilliant eyes I had ever seen. Her jaw was round and small, slightly cleft. She missed being square and stocky by fractional proportions.

"I must be out of my mind," I muttered. Claire was a wonderful person . . . a wonderful person. Genuine, honest, full of high humor, and, for me, no fireworks.

But Luana, the beautiful secretary of Dr. Ponder, now, that was a different story. She had an odd, triangular face and a skin that seemed lit softly from underneath. Her cheeks were a brighter rose than the sides of her neck but you couldn't tell just where the graduations began. Her hair was the extremely dark but vivid red of black-iron in a forge just beginning to heat. Her hands were so delicate and smooth you'd think they'd break on a typewriter, and her canine teeth were a shade too long, so that her head looked like a flower with fangs. She had one expression—complete composure. Her unshakable poise made me grind my teeth; some way, somehow, I wanted it broken. I don't think she had brain one and I didn't care; it wasn't her brains I was after. Her face floated before me on the flames of the fireworks she generated in me, and there wasn't a thing in the world I could do about it. When I was in town I'd date her, when I could. On the dates we didn't talk. She danced sedately and watched movies attentively and ate pineapple frappes with delicacy and thoroughness, and I'd just sit there and bask, and count the seconds until, after I walked her to her gate, she closed it between us and leaned across for a demure kiss. Her lips were cool, smooth, and taut. Pneumatic. Then I'd stride away snarling at myself. "You're a bumpkin," I'd say. "You're all feet and Adam's apple." I'd tell myself I had a hole in the head. I called myself forty kinds of a fool. "There's no future in it," I'd say. I'd tell myself, "You know that ten years from now, when the bloom is off, she'll look like something the cat dragged in, her and her teeth." And thinking about the teeth would make me visualize those lips again, and—so cool!

Often, those nights, I'd run into Claire, who just happened to be in Callow's Friendly Drug and Meat Market buying a whodunit, and we'd get a soda or something and talk. Those were the talks where everything came out. I never got so thick with anyone so fast. Talking to Claire is like talking to yourself. And she told me, somehow or other, about the foot, right from the first. She didn't tell anyone else. Except Dr. Ponder, of course. . . .

What a strange person she was! It was inconceivable that she should not have questioned Dr. Ponder more about her foot—yet she had not. His prognosis was that the condition would stop at her ankle, and may or may not be permanent, and, for her, that was that. In the same situation anyone else on earth would be scrambling around from specialist to specialist between trips to a wailing wall. Not Claire. She accepted it and was not afraid.

A patch of sun the size of a kitten crept up the edge of her sleeping bag and nestled in her hair. After a pause to warm and brighten itself, it thrust a golden pseudopod around the curve of her cheek and touched her eyelid. She stirred, smiled briefly at what must have been a most tender dream, and woke.

"Good morning."

She looked at me mistily, and smiled a different smile. "I fell asleep."

"You did. Come on—stir your stumps. I want to show you something that I've discovered."

She stretched and yawned. "I was talking to you and I fell asleep right in the middle of it. I'm sorry."

"I'm glad. You got your beauty sleep."

Her face softened, so I added, "You need it."

"You're so sweet, Thad," she said. "Much sweeter than gall. 'Bout like vinegar, when you try hard." She slid out of the sleeping bag and idly scratched her hairy ankle. "If I had to choose between this thing with you, and my ordinary old foot without you, I think I'd keep the hoof. How do you make that noise with it?"

I SHOWED her. She tried it. All she could get was a muffled pop, like fingers snapping with gloves on. She laughed and said I was a genius, and rose and climbed into her flying suit. She had half-length booths, padded inside to support her hoof. Once they were on, no one could have guessed. While she was about these small chores, and others concerning folding and stowing the sleeping bag and breaking out some C and K rations, I rescued my amputated shoe from the bear trap and, by cutting and piecing the leather straps, made a sort of stirrup that would hold it together once it was on.

When that was done, Claire, looking shapeless and tousled in the loose-fitting coverall, handed me one of the sticky-rich candy bars from the rations. "Thad," she said with her mouth full, "you just *wouldn't* go to see Dr. Ponder. Why not? Don't you trust him?"

"Sure I trust him," I said shortly. Why mention that I was keeping away from him because of Luana? "Come on," I said.

We crossed through a neck of the forest to the rolling scrub-meadow on the other side, and down and across the first little valley.

"This is where I was last night. There's something just over the next rise that I want you to see. Last night I was afraid you'd see it."

"What's so different about today, then?"

"I found out last night you're not afraid of anything."

She did not answer. I looked back at her. She was grinning. "You said something nice about me," she half-sang.

"Not necessarily. Sometimes fearlessness is nothing more than rank stupidity."

She swallowed that silently. As we climbed the rise she asked, "Will you tell me about the time you saw me be beautiful?"

"Later," I said.

Abruptly she clutched my arm. *"Look!"*

"Where? What?"

"There!" She pointed. "No—there—there, see?" She pointed rapidly to the ground, to a rock, to a spot in midair to our left. "See?"

"What is it, Claire? A deer-fly? or spots in the eyes?"

"Just watch," she said with exaggerated patience. "The little animal I fell on that time—remember? It's all around here, and moving so *fast!*"

THERE are certain optical illusions where a missing object becomes vividly clear as soon as you know what to look for. I focussed my mind's eye on what she had described as a tapering, fan-tailed monstrosity with two front legs and a blue-black hide, and suddenly, fleetingly, there it was, crouching against the sheer side of the bluff. It blinked at me, and then disappeared, only to pop into sight for a fraction of a second right in front of us. We moved back with alacrity as if pulled by the same string.

"I want out!" I gasped. "That's the thing that gave you the fancy boot!"

Somehow we were twenty feet back and still backing. Claire laughed. "I thought that was your specialty."

"You pick the dog-gondest times . . . get back, Claire! Heaven knows what will happen to you if it gets to you again!"

She stood still, peering. The thing, whatever it was, appeared twice, once a little to the right, once—and this time, for a full two or three seconds—over against the side-hill. It balanced on two forelegs, its head thrust out, its wide fluked tail curled up over its back, and it blinked rapidly. Its eyes were the same color as its skin, but shiny. It disappeared. Claire said, "It can't hurt us. Dr. Ponder said the condition would be arrested where it is."

I snorted. "That's like saying you're immunized against being bumped by a truck because one ran over you once. Let's get out of here."

She laughed at me again. "Why, Thad! I've never seen you like this! You're pale as milk!"

"You have so seen me like this," I quavered. "the last time you called me sensible. Remember?"

The blue-black thing appeared again almost under my feet. I squeaked and jumped. Then it was by Claire, inches away. She bent toward it, hand outstretched, but it vanished.

"Thad, it seems terribly excited. I think it wants something."

"That I don't doubt," I said through clenched teeth. "Claire. Listen to me. Either you will high-tail with me out of this imp-ridden corner of hell, or you and that monstrosity can stay here and watch me dwindle."

"Oh, *Thad!* stop blithering. The poor little thing is probably ten times as frightened as you are."

"Oh no it isn't," I said with authority. "It's alive, isn't it?"

She snorted and squatted down in the grass, her hands out and close together. Simultaneously with my warning cry, the creature appeared between her hands. Very slowly she moved them together. I stood petrified, babbling. "Claire, don't, please don't, just this once how do you know what that thing might do Claire. . . . Okay—it's small, Claire. So is a *fer de lance*. So is a .45 slug. Please, Claire—"

"*Will* you stop that infernal chattering!" she snapped. And just before her closing hands could touch the beast it was gone, to reappear six inches to the left.

She rose and stepped forward gently, stooping. The poised animal—if it was an animal—waited until she was a fraction of an inch away and again bounded out of visibility and in again, this time a yard away, where it waited, blinking violently.

"I think it wants us to follow it," said Claire. "Come on, Thad!"

It moved again, farther away, and bounced up and down.

"Oh, Claire," I said at last, "I give up. We're in this together and we've got to depend on each other. Maybe you're right after all."

SURPRISINGLY, there were tears in her eyes as she said, "I feel as if you had been away a long time and just got back."

I thumped her shoulder, and we went on, we followed the strange creature up the slope to its crest, where the creature disappeared again, this time, apparently for good.

Claire had been right, we found a moment later. Distantly, sunlight flashed on the windshield of Ponder's parked convertible, which was parked where the wood road skirted the desolate flatland. Nearing the foothills where we stood were two plodding figures, and it was easy to spot Ponder, for no one else in the area had his stooped height and breadth. He was so perfectly in proportion that he made normal people look underdone. The other, I noticed with a gulp, was Luana, with her contained, erect posture, and the sunlight, after its cold journey through space, reveling in the heat of her hair.

We went to meet them. I looked once at Claire, catching her at the woman's trick of swift comparative appraisal of Luana's trim plaid skirt and snug windbreaker, and I smiled. Claire's coverall was not a company garment.

"Thad!" the doctor boomed. He had an organ voice; in conversation it always seemed to be throttled down, and his shout was a relaxation rather than an effort. "And Claire . . . we were worried."

"Why?" asked Claire. We reached them. I buzzed right on past the doctor—"Hi, Doc,"—and took both Luana's hands. "Lu."

She looked up at me and smiled. Those lips, so taut, so filled with what strange honey . . . when they smiled they grew still fuller. She said Hello, and I thought, what's language for? what's poetry for? when two small syllables can mean so much. . . . I held her hands so hard and so long that it may have been embarrassing. It was for me, anyway, when Claire's voice broke into my ardent scansion of Luana's eyes with "Hey! Svengali! Got her hypnotized yet?"

I released Luana, who looked Claire's rumpled flying suit up and down. "Hello, Claire," she purred. "Hunting?"

"Just walking the dog," said Claire through her teeth.

I met the doctor's eyes and he grinned. "Good of you to take all this trouble over Claire's trouble," he said. "She just told me you knew about it. Does anyone else?"

I shook my head, but said, "Why all the mystery, doctor?"

"I certainly don't have to tell you that this is not an ordinary medical matter."

Claire said, "Let's go on up to the Wood and sit down and talk. It's getting hot."

"I'll tote that if it's heavy," I offered, indicating Ponder's black bag.

"Oh no. Just a couple of things I brought with me, just in case."

He and Claire started back up toward the Wood, I put my hand on Luana's forearm and checked her.

"What is it, Thad?"

"I just want them to get a little way ahead. Luana, this is wonderful. What on earth made him come out here? And with you?"

"I don't know. He's a strange man, Thad. Sometimes I think he knows everything. Nothing surprises him." We began to walk. "We were working this morning—he was dictating some letters—and he all of a sudden stopped as if he was listening to something. Next thing I knew we were on our way."

"Does he really know what's the matter with Claire's foot?"

She looked at me. Her eyes were auburn and most disturbing. "I'm not supposed to talk about it."

"She told me. It turned into a cloven hoof. I've seen it."

"Oh. Then why ask?"

I hadn't expected this kind of resistance. "I mean, does he know *why* it happened?"

"Of course he does."

"Well, why?" I asked impatiently.

"Why not ask him?" she shrugged. "He's the doctor. I'm not."

"Sorry I asked," I said glumly. I was annoyed—I think at myself. I don't know why, subconsciously, I always expected this vision to melt into my arms, and was always sticking my neck out. But that's the way it is when you get fireworks.

WE WALKED on in silence. Claire and the doctor had disappeared into the Wood when we entered the edge of it. We stopped for a moment to look about. There was, of course, no path, and the windless growth muffled and absorbed sounds, so it was difficult to know which way they had gone. I started in, but Luana held me back. "I don't think they're that way."

"I'll yell," I said, but she put a hand to her mouth. "Oh, *No!*"

"Why not, Lu?"

"I'm—I don't know. You shouldn't, in here." She looked about the silent halls of the forest. "Please, Thad. Go look for them. I'll wait. But don't shout, please."

Completely puzzled, I said, "Well, sure, honey. But I don't get it. Is something the matter?"

"No. Nothing." Her arched nostrils twitched. "Go look for them, Thad. I'll wait here, in case they come back for us."

"You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Go on. Go on," she said urgently. I suddenly thought that for certain reasons I might be behaving tactlessly. I must have blushed like a schoolgirl. "Well, sure. I'll be right back. I mean, I'll find 'em and call you." I flapped a goodbye self-consciously and blundered off through the woods. That girl really threw me for a loss.

I followed the level ground until I emerged from the Wood at the other side of its narrow neck—Just what I should have done in the first place. Dr. Ponder and Claire were out in the open fifty yards away, apparently waiting for us. I went to them. "We lost you," I said. "Luana's waiting back there. She didn't want to thrash around in the woods hunting for you. Hold on and I'll get her."

Ponder's big head went up, and his eyes seemed to focus on something I couldn't see for a moment. Then, "Don't bother," he said. "She's all right. I wanted to talk to you two anyway. Let's go in the shade and sit down."

"But—will she be all right?"

"She'll be all right," he grinned. He had good teeth.

I shrugged. "Everybody seems to know what's right around here but me," I said petulantly. "All right." I led the way to a thicket at the edge of the wood and plumped down with my back against a tree. Claire and the doctor joined me, Ponder setting his bag carefully within his reach.

"Now for heaven's sake tell us," said Claire, who had kept an amused silence during my jitterings about Luana. She turned

to me. "He wouldn't say a thing until you got here."

"Tell us about what? Who knows anything?" I said resignedly.

"You know about her foot," said Dr. Ponder. He looked down. "What, speaking of feet, has happened to your boot?"

I happened to be looking at Claire, and microscopically shook my head. "Oh," I said casually, "I left it on a railroad track while I was frog hunting in a culvert. Go on about Claire." Claire's eyes widened in astonishment at this continued deception, but she said nothing. I was pleased.

Ponder leaned back. He had a long head and a big jaw. The touch of gray at his temples and the stretched smoothness of his skin told lies about each other. He said, "First, I want to thank you both—you, Claire, because you have trusted me in this matter, when I had every reason to expect nothing but hysteria from you, and you, Thad, for having kept your own counsel. Now I'll tell you what I know. Please don't mind if I seem to wander a bit. I want you to get this straight in your minds." He closed his eyes for a moment, his brow furrowed. Then he wet his lips and continued.

"Imagine a man walking up to a door which stands firmly locked. He raises his hand and makes a certain motion. The door opens. He enters, picks up a wand. He waves it; it suddenly glows with light. He says two words, and a fire appears in the fireplace. Now: could you duplicate that?"

"I've seen doors open for people in a railroad station," said Claire. "They had a beam of light in front of them. When you walked into it, a photo-electric cell made the door open."

"About that wand," I put in, "If it was made of glass, it could have been a flourescent tube. If there was a radio-frequency generator in the room, it could make a tube glow, even without wire connections."

"I once saw a gadget connected to a toy electric train," Claire said. "You say 'Go!' into a speaker and the train would go. You say 'Now back up' and it would back up. It worked by the number of syllables you spoke. One would make the train go forward; three would make it stop and back up. That fire you mentioned, that could be controlled by a gadget like that."

"Right. Quite right," said the doctor. "Now, suppose you fixed up all that gadgetry and took it back in time a couple of centuries. What would the performance look like to a person of the time—even an intelligent, reasonable one?"

I said, "Witchcraft." Claire said, "Why, magic."

PONDER nodded. "But they'd understand a kitchen match. But take a kitchen match back a couple more centuries, and you'd get burned at the stake. What I'm driving at is that given the equipment, you can get the results, whether those results can be understood by the observer or not. The only sane attitude to take about such things is to conclude that they are caused by some natural, logically explained agency—and that we haven't the knowledge to explain it any more than the most erudite scholar could have explained radar two centuries ago."

"I follow that," I said, and Claire nodded.

"However," said Ponder, "most people don't seem to accept such things that easily. Something happens that you can't understand, and either you refuse to believe it happened at all—even if you saw it with your own eyes—or you attribute it to supernatural forces, with all their associated claptrap of good and evil, rituals and exorcisms. What I'm putting to you is that everything that's happened to you is perfectly logical and believable in its own terms—but it's much larger than you think. I'm asking you to accept something much more mysterious than an r-f generator would be to a Puritan settler. You just have to take my word for it that it's as reasonable a thing as an r-f generator."

"I don't understand an r-f generator, as it is," smiled Claire. I heard the soft sound of her hoof clicking. "Go ahead, Doctor. At this point I'm ready to believe anything."

"Fine," applauded the doctor. "It's a pleasure to talk to you. Now, I'm going to use 'good' and 'evil' in this explanation because they're handy. Bear in mind that they are loose terms, partial ones: external evidences of forces that extend forward and

back and to either side in time and space." He laughed. "Don't try to follow that. Just listen.

"A long time ago there were two opposed forces—call them intelligences. One was good and one was evil. It turned out to be quite a battle, and it went on for some time. There were gains and losses on each side, until one was captured by the other. Now, these intelligences were not living creatures in the ordinary sense, and in the ordinary sense they could not be killed. There are legends of such captures—the bound Prometheus, for example, and the monster under Yggdrasail. The only way to keep such forces imprisoned is to lock them up and set a watch over them. But, just as in our civilization, it may take profound intelligence and a great deal of hard work to capture a criminal, but far less intelligence and effort to keep him in jail.

"And that's the situation we have here. Not far from where we sit, one of those things is imprisoned, and he—I say 'he' for convenience—has his jailer.

"That's the thing known as 'The Camel's Grave.' The Camel is a living intelligence, captured and held here and, if right has its way, doomed to spend the rest of eternity here."

"That's a long time," I put in. "The earth won't last that long."

"He'll be moved in time," said Ponder complacently; and that was when I began to realize how big this thing was. There was that about Dr. Ponder which made it impossible to disbelieve him. I stared at Claire, who stared back. Finally she turned to him and asked in a small voice, "And—what about my foot?"

"That was a piece of tough luck," said Ponder. "You are a sort of—uh—innocent bystander. You see, the Camel is surrounded by . . . damnit, it's hard to find words that make sense! Fields. Look: if I call them 'spells,' will you understand that I'm not talking mumbo-jumbo? If I call them 'fields,' it presupposes coils and generators and circuits and so on. In its way 'spells' is more accurate."

"I'm with you so far," I said. Claire nodded.

"Well, the Camel is conscious. He wants out. Like any other prisoner, he looks through the bars from time to time and talks with his jailer—and with anyone else he can reach. What you stumbled into, though, wasn't the Camel: he's pretty well sealed away from that. You hit one of the spells—one of the small warning devices set there in case he should begin to escape. If it had hit him, it would have stung him a little, perhaps like an electric fence. But when you walked into it, you got that hoof. Why the result was exactly that I can't say. It's the nature of the thing. It's happened before, as mythology will tell you."

"I've thought of that," I said. "Pan, and the satyrs, and so on. They all had cloven hooves. And isn't the Devil supposed to have one too?"

"One of the marks of the beast," Ponder nodded. "Now, as to what can be done about it, I'm here to do the best I can. Claire, exactly where was it that you walked into—whatever it was, and fell down on that little animal?"

"I DON'T know," she said calmly. "I haven't been able to locate it. I should be able to—ever since I was a child I've had dream compulsions to come out here, and I know this country like my own house."

"I wish you could find it. It would help." Ponder twiddled the catch on his black bag thoughtfully. "We have to try to get through to the Camel and let him know what has happened to you. He could counteract it. Well, anyway, we might be able to do something. We'll see."

"Doc," I said, "About that hoof. You're sure it was from contact with something out here. I mean, couldn't it have been something in town that caused it?"

"Positively not," he said. And I said to myself, now that is damned interesting, because I have a hoof too and I was never out here before last night.

Ponder turned to Claire. "Exactly why did you come out here that time you saw the little animal?"

"In a way it was your doing, doctor. It was that Medusa Club meeting. You made me so mad with your intimations that there were still magical forces at work, and that superstitions served to guard humanity

against them." She laughed diffidently. "I don't feel the same way now, so much. . . . Anyway, I know this part of the country well. I made up my mind to go to the most magical part of it at the most magical time—the full moon—and stick my neck out. Well, I did."

"Uh-huh," said the doctor. "And why did you come out yesterday?"

"To find Thad."

"Well, Thad? What were you after?"

"I wanted to see what it was Claire had walked into."

"Didn't trust my diagnosis?"

"Oh, it wasn't that. If I'd found anything at all, I probably would have told you about it. I was just curious about the cause and cure of cloven hooves."

"Well, I could have told you that you wouldn't find anything. Claire might, but you wouldn't."

"How so?"

"Hasn't it dawned on you yet that Claire is something special? In a sense she's a product of this very ground. Her parents—"

"I told him that story," said Claire.

"Oh. Well, that was the Camel at work. The only conceivable way for him to break out of his prison is through a human agency; for there is that in human nature that not even forces such as the one which imprisoned him can predict. They can be controlled, but not predicted. And if the Camel should ever be freed—"

"Well?" I asked, after a pause.

"I can't tell you. Not 'won't'. 'Can't'. It's big, though. Bigger than you can dream. But as I was saying, Claire's very presence on earth is his doing."

"My parents were murdered," said Claire.

I TURNED to her, shocked. She nodded soberly. "When I was six."

"I think you're right," said Ponder. "Their marriage was a thing that could cancel many of the—the devices that imprison the Camel. The very existence of a union like that threatened the—what we can call the prison walls. It had to be stopped."

"What happened?"

"They died," said Claire. "No one knew why. They were found sitting on a rock by the road. He had his arm around her and her head was on his shoulder and they were dead. I always felt that they were killed on purpose, but I never knew why."

"The Camel's fault," said Ponder, shrugging.

I asked, "But why didn't they—he—kill Claire too while he was about it?"

"She was no menace. The thing that was dangerous was the—the radiation from the union that her parents had. It was an unusual marriage."

"My God!" I cried. "You mean to say that Camel creature, whatever it is, can sit out here and push people's lives around like that?"

"That's small fry, Thad. What he could do if he were free is inconceivable."

I rubbed my head. "I dunno, Doc. This is getting to be too much. Can I ask some questions now?"

"Certainly."

"How come you know so much about all this?"

"I am a student of such things. I stumbled on this whole story in some old documents. As a matter of fact, I took the medical practice out here just so I could be near it. It's the biggest thing of its kind I've ever run across."

"Hm. Yet you don't know where the Camel's Grave is, exactly."

"Wrong," said the doctor. "I do. I wanted to know if Claire had been able to find it. If she had been able to, it would mean that the Camel had established some sort of contact with her. Since he hasn't, I'll have to do what I can."

"Oh. Anyone who can find the Grave is in contact with the Camel, then."

"That's right. It takes a special kind of person."

I VERY consciously did not meet Claire's gaze. There was something very fishy going on here, and I began to feel frightened. This thing that could shrivel a foot into a hoof, it could kill too. I asked, "What about this 'jailer' you mentioned. Sort of a low-grade variety of the Camel himself?"

"Something like that."

"That little animal—would that be it?"

A peculiar expression crossed the doctor's face, as if he had remembered some-

thing, dragged it out, glanced at it, found it satisfactory, and put it away again. "No," he said. "Did you ever hear of a familiar?"

"A familiar?" asked Claire. "Isn't that the sort of—pet that a witch or a wizard has—black cats and so on?"

"Yes. Depending on the degree of 'wizard' we're dealing with, the familiar may be a real animal or something more—the concretion, perhaps, of a certain kind of thought-matrix. That little animal you described to me is undoubtedly the Camel's familiar."

"Then where's the jailer?" And as I asked, I snapped my fingers. "Goo-goo!"

"Not Goo-goo!" Claire cried. "Why, he's perfectly harmless. Besides—he isn't all there, Thad."

"He wouldn't have to be," said the doctor, and smiled. "It doesn't take much brains to be a turnkey."

"I'll be darned," I said. "Well, now, what have we got? A cloven hoof and an imprisoned *something* that must stay imprisoned or else. A couple of nice people murdered, and their pixilated daughter. All right, doctor—how do you go about curing cloven hooves?"

"Locate the Camel's Grave," said Dr. Ponder. "and then make a rather simple incantation. Sound foolish?" He looked at both of us. "Well, it isn't. It's as simple and foolish as pressing a button—or pulling a trigger. The important thing is who does it to which control on what equipment. In this case Claire is the one indicated, because she's—what was it Thad said?—pixilated. That's it. Because of the nature of her parents' meeting, because of what they had together, because she is of such a character as to have been affected by the Camel to the extent of the thing that happened to her foot—it all adds up. She's the one to do it."

"Then anyone who's subject to this particular kind of falling arches could do it?" I asked innocently.

" 'Anyone'—yes. But that can't happen to just anyone."

I asked another question, quickly, to cover up what I was thinking. "About familiars," I said. "Don't I recall something about their feeding on blood?"

"Traditionally, yes. They do."

"Uh-huh. The blood of the witch, as I recall. Well how in time can the Camel character supply any blood to his familiar if he's been buried here for—how long is it?"

"Longer than you think . . . well, in a case like that the familiar gets along on whatever blood it can find. It isn't as good, but it serves. Unless, of course, the familiar makes a side trip just for variety. Occasionally one does. That's where the vampire legends come from."

"How do you like that," I breathed. "I'll bet a cookie that the animals Goo-goo traps are supplying blood to the Camel's familiar—and Goo-goo supposed to be guarding the jail!"

"It's very likely—and not very important. The familiar can do very little by itself," said the doctor. He turned to Claire. "Did you ever see anything like a familiar taking blood? Think, now."

Claire considered. "No. Should I have?"

"Not necessarily. You could though," he indicated her foot, "being what you are."

She shuddered slightly. "So I'm privileged. I'd as soon not, thank you."

I sprang to my feet. "I just thought . . . Luana. What could have happened to her?"

"Oh, she's all right. Sit down, Thad."

"No," I said. "I'd better go look for her."

Claire leaned back, caught her knee in her hands, and made a soft and surprisingly accurate replica of a wolf-howl. "Drop desperately ill," I said to her, and to Dr. Ponder, "That's for people you like too well to tell'm to drop dead." And I strode off.

It took only a few minutes to regain the spot where I had left Luana. She was not there.

I stood still, my brain racing. Witches, wizards, familiars . . . people who could see familiars sucking blood, and people who could not . . . one more cloven hoof than the good doctor bargained for, and a theory that such a thing came from contact with Something out here, when I knew darned well I had acquired mine in town . . . a girl who did what her dreams told her to do and another with hair like hot metal and lips bursting with some cool sweetness. And where was she?

I moved into the Wood, walking quietly more because of caution for my torn boot

than for any other reason, and peering into the mottled shadows. Once, with my eyes fixed on a distant clearing, I blundered into a nest of paper-wasps with my neck and shoulder. I started violently and moved back. The angry creatures swarmed out and around the damaged nest, and came after me as I sidled away, batting at them. They bumbled against my mouth and hair and forearms, but not one stung me. I remember thinking, when at last I was clear of them, that Claire had said something about bees . . . but before I could dredge up the thought I saw Luana.

If it had not been for the plaid skirt I couldn't possibly have seen her. She was as still as a tree-trunk in a little glade, her head bent, watching something which struggled on the ground. Moving closer, silently, I could see her face; and, seeing it, I checked any impulse I might have to call out to her. For her face was a mask, smooth, round-eyed, with curling lips and sharp white teeth, and it was completely motionless except for the irregular flickering of her nostrils, which quivered in a way reminiscent of a snake's swift seeking tongue. Slowly she began to bend down. When I could no longer see her face I came closer.

Then I could see. I shall never forget it. That was when the fireworks went out . . . and a terrible truth took their place.

At the foot of a little bush was a bare spot, brushed clean now of loose leaves, doubtless by the struggles of the rabbit. It was a large brown-brindle rabbit caught in a whip-snare which had fouled in the bush. The snare had caught the animal around the barrel, just behind the forelegs, probably having been set in a runway. The rabbit was very much alive and frightened.

Luana knelt slowly and put out her hands. She picked the rabbit up. I said to myself, the darling! She's going to help it! . . . and I said, down deeper, but a woman looks tenderly at the thing she is about to help, and Luana's face, now, whatever it was, it wasn't tender.

She lifted the rabbit and bit into it as if it were an apple.

I don't know what I did. Not exactly. I remember a blur of trunks, and dim green. I think I heard Luana make a sound, a sigh, perhaps—even a low laugh. I don't know. And I must have run. Once I hit something with my shoulder. Anyway, when I reached Claire and the doctor I was panting hoarsely. They looked up at me as I stood panting, not speaking. Then, without a word, Ponder got up and ran back the way I had come.

"Thad! Oh, Thad—what is it?"

I sank down beside her and shook my head.

"Luana? Did something happen to Luana, Thad?"

"I'll tell you," I whispered. Something trickled down the outside of my nose. Sweat, I suppose. "I'll tell you, but not now."

She pushed my hair back. "All right, Thad," she said. And that was all, until I got my breath back.

SHE BEGAN to talk then, softly and in a matter-of-fact tone, so that I had to follow what she said; and the sharp crooked edges of horror blunted themselves on new thoughts. She said, "I'm beginning to understand it now, Thad. Some of it is hard to believe, and some of it I just don't *like* to believe. Doctor Ponder knows a lot, Thad, a whole lot. . . . Look." She reached into the doctor's bag, now open, and brought out a limp black book. On its cover, glittering boldly in a sunbeam, was a gilt cross. "You see, Thad? Good and evil. . . . Doctor Ponder's using this. Could that be evil? And look. Here—read it yourself." She opened the book at a mark and gave it to me.

I wiped my eyes with my knuckles and took the book. It was the Bible, the New Testament, open to the sixth chapter of Matthew. The thirteenth verse was circled: It was the familiar formula of praise:

"Thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

"Look at the bottom margin," she urged.

I looked at the neat block lettering pencilled there. *"Ah-tay mahlkuth vé-G'boorah vé-Gédula lé o'lam, om."* I read haltingly. "What on earth is that?"

"It's the Hebrew translation of the thirteenth verse. And—it's the trigger, the incantation Dr. Ponder told us about."

"Just that? That little bit?"

"Yes. And I'm supposed to go to the Camel's Grave and face the east and say it.

Then the Camel will know that I have been affected and will fix the trouble. Dr. Ponder says that although he is evil—a "black" magician—he can have no reason to leave me in this state." She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Nor you either. You'll go with me and we'll both be cured."

"Claire—why haven't you told him I've got a hoof too?"

She looked frightened. "I—can't," she whispered. "I tried, and I can't. There's something that stops me."

I looked at the book, reading over the strange, musical sounds of the formula. They had a rhythm, a lilt. Claire said, "Dr. Ponder said I must recite that in a slow monotone, all the while thinking Camel, be buried forever, and never show yourself to mankind.'"

"Be buried forever? What about your foot? Aren't you supposed to say something about your foot?"

"Well, didn't I?"

"You did not." I leaned forward and looked close into her eyes. "Say it again."

" 'Camel, be buried forever, and never show yourself to mankind.' "

"Where's the part about the foot?"

She looked at me, puzzled. "Thad—didn't you hear me? I distinctly said that the Camel was to restore my foot and yours and then lie down and rest."

"Did you, now? Say it again, just once more, the way you're supposed to."

Obediently she said, " 'Camel, be buried forever, and never show yourself to mankind.' There. Was that clear enough? About the foot, and all?"

Suddenly I understood. She didn't know what she was saying! I patted her knee. "That was fine," I said. I stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to think," I said. "Mind, Claire? I think better when I walk. Dr. Ponder'll be back soon. Wait here, will you?"

SHE called to me, but I went on into the Wood. Once out of her sight, I circled back and downgrade, emerging on the rim of what I now knew was the Forbidden Valley. From this point I could easily see the bluff at the far end. There was no sign of the skull. I began to walk down to where it should be. I knew now that it was there, whether it could be seen or not. I wished I could be sure of a few dozen other things. Inside, I was still deeply shaken by what I had seen Luana doing, and by what it meant —by what it made of me, of Claire, of Ponder. . . .

Behind me there was a horrible gargling sound. It was not a growl or a gurgle; it was exactly the hollow, fluid sound that emerges from bathrooms in the laryngitis season. I spun, stared.

Staring back at me was one of the most unprepossessing human beings I have ever seen. He had matted hair and a scraggly beard. His eyes were out of line horizontally, and in disagreement with each other as to what they wanted to look at. One ear was pointed and the other was a mere clump of serrated flesh.

I backed off a pace. "You're Goo-goo."

He gabbled at me, waving his arms. It was a disgusting sound. I said, "Don't try to stop me, Mister America. I know what I'm doing and I mean to do it. If you get too near me I'll butter these rocks with you."

He gargled and bubbled away like mad, but kept his distance. Warily I turned and went on down the slope. I thought I heard Claire calling. I strode on, my mind awhirl. Luana. Ponder. Claire. Goo-goo. The chained skull, and the blue beast. The rabbit. Luana, Luana and those lips. . . . *Ah-tay mal-kuth* . . . and a cloven hoof. I shook my head to clear my brain. . . . *vé G'boorah*. . . .

I was on level ground, approaching the bluff "Get up, Camel!" I barked hoarsely. "Here I come, ready or not!"

Shocking, the skull, the famous mark of the Camel's Grave, appeared on the ground. It was a worn, weatherbeaten skull, worn far past the brilliant bleaching of bones merely desiccated and clean. It was yellowed, paper-brittle. The eyebrow ridges were not very prominent, and the lower jaw, what I could see of it, was long, firm. It's most shocking feature was part of it, but not naturally part of it. It was a chain of some black metal, its lower link disappearing into the ground, its upper one entering the eye socket and coming out through the temple. The chain had a hand-wrought appearance, and although it was probably as thick as the day

it was made, unrusted and strong, I knew instinctively that it was old, old. It seemed to be—it *must* be—watching me through its empty sockets. I thought I heard the chain clink once. The bleached horror seemed to be waiting.

THERE was a small scuffling sound right at my heels. It was Goo-goo. I wheeled, snarling at him. He retreated, mouthing. I ground out, "Keep out of my reach, rosebud, or I'll flatten you!" and moved around to the left of the skull where I couuld face the east.

"Ah-té malkuth vé—" I began; and something ran across my foot. It was the blue beast, the familiar. It balanced by the skull, blinking, and disappeared. I looked up to see Goo-goo approaching again. His face was working; he was babbling and drooling.

"Keep clear," I warned him.

He stopped. His clawlike hand went to his belt. He drew a horn-handled sheath knife. It was blue and keen. I had some difficulty in separating my tongue from the roof of my mouth. I stood stiffly, trying to brace myself the way an alerted cat does, ready to leap in any direction, or up, or flat down.

Goo-goo watched me. He was terrifying because he did not seem particularly tense, and I did not know what he was going to do. What was he, anyway? Surely more than a crazy deaf-mute, mad with loneliness. Was he really the jailer of a great Power? Or was he, in some way, in league with that disappearing bad-dream of a familiar?

I began again: *"Ah tay mahlkuth vé G'boor—"* and again was distracted by the madman. For instead of threatening me with his glittering blade, he was performing some strange manual of arms with it, moving it from shoulder to shoulder as I spoke, extending it outwards, upwards . . . and he stopped when I stopped, looking at me anxiously.

At last there seemed to be some pattern, some purpose, to what he was trying to do. When I spoke a certain phrase, he made a certain motion with the knife. *"Ah tay . . ."* I said experimentally. He touched his forehead with the knife. I tried it again; he did it again. Slowly, then, without chanting, I recited the whole rigmarole. Following me attentively, he touched his forehead, his chest, his right shoulder, his left, and on the final "Oh" he clasped his hands together with the point of the knife upward.

"Okay, chum," I said. "Now what?"

He immediately extended the knife to me, hilt first. Amazed, I took it. He nodded encouragingly and babbled. He also smiled, though the same grimace a few minutes earlier, before I was convinced of his honest intentions, would have looked like a yellow-fanged snarl to me. And upon me descended the weight of my appalling ignorance. How much difference did the knife make to the ritual? Was it the difference between blanks and slugs in a gun? Or was it the difference between pointing it at myself or up in the air?

Ponder would know. Ponder, it developed, did, and he told me, and I think he did it in spite of himself. As I stood there staring from the steel to the gibbering Goo-goo, Ponder's great voice rolled down to me from the Wood end of the vale. *"Thad! Not with the knife!"*

I glanced up. Ponder was coming down as fast as he could, helping Claire with one hand and all but dragging Luana with the other. Goo-goo began to dance with impatience, guggling away like an excited ape, pointing at me, at his mouth, at the knife, the staring skull. The blue beast flickered into sight between his legs, beside him, on his shoulder, and for a brief moment on his head, teetering there like some surrealistic plume. I took all this in and felt nothing but utter confusion.

Claire called, "Put down the knife, Thad!"

SOMETHING—some strange impulse from deep inside me, made me turn and grin at them as they scurried down toward me. I bellowed, "Why, Doc! I don't qualify, do I?"

Ponder's face purpled. "Come out of there!" he roared. "Let Claire do it!"

I reached down and yanked the makeshift stirrup from my boot, laughing like a maniac. I kicked off the toe of the boot with its padding, and hauled the rest up my leg. "What's she got that I haven't got?" I yelled.

Ponder, still urging the girls forward, turned on Luana. "You see? He saw you feeding! He could *see* you! You should have known!" and he released her and backhanded her viciously. She rolled with the blow deftly, but a lot of it connected. It was not she, however, but Claire who gasped. Luana's face was as impassive as ever. I grunted and turned to face the skull, raising the knife. "How's it go, little man?" I asked Goo-goo. I put the point of the knife on my forehead. "That it?"

He nodded vociferously, and I began to chant.

"Ah-tay . . ." I shifted the knife downward to my chest. Ponder was bellowing something. Claire screamed my name.

"Mahlkuth. . . ." With part of my mind I heard, now, what Ponder was yelling. "You'll free him! Stop it, you fool, you'll free him!" And Claire's voice again: "A gun. . . ." I thought, down deep inside, *Free him!* I put the knife-point on my right shoulder.

"Vé-G'boorah! There was the sharp bark of a shot. Something hit the small of my back. The blue beast stumbled from between my feet, and as I shifted the knife to my left shoulder, I saw it bow down and, with its mouth, lay something at my feet. It teetered there for a split second, its eyes winking like fan-blades in bright light, and I'll swear the little devil grinned at me. Then it was gone, leaving behind a bullet on the grass.

"Vé Gédula . . ." I chanted, conscious that so far I had not broken the compelling rhythm of the ancient syllables, nor missed a motion with the knife. Twice more the gun yapped, and with each explosion I was struck, once in the face, once on the neck. Not by bullets, however, but by the cold rubbery hide of the swift familiar, which dropped in front of me with its little cheeks bulging out like those of a chipmunk at acorn time. It put the two bullets down by the first and vanished. I clasped my hands on the knife-hilt, pressing it to my chest, point upward the way Goo-goo had done.

"Lé o-lahm. . . ." From the corner of my eye I saw Ponder hurling himself at me, and the ragged figure of little Goo-goo rising up between us. Ponder struck the little man aside with one bear-like clubbing of his forearm, and was suddenly assaulted either by fifty of the blue familiars or by one moving fifty times as fast as a living thing ought to. It was in his ears, fluttering on his face, nipping the back of his neck, clawing at his nostrils, all at once. Ponder lost one precious second in trying to bat the thing away, and then apparently decided to ignore it. He launched himself at me with a roar, just as I came out with the final syllable of the incantation: *"OM!"*

IT ISN'T easy to tell what happened then. They say The Egg hit Hiroshima with "a soundless flash." It was like that. I stood where I was, my head turned away from the place where the skull had been, my eyes all but closed against that terrible cold radiance. Filtering my vision through my lashes, I saw Ponder still in midair, still coming toward me. But as he moved, he—changed. For a second he must have been hot, for his clothes charred. But he was cold when he hit me, cold as death. His clothes were a flurry of chilled soot; his skin was brittle, frigid, eggshell through which his bones burst and powdered. I stood, braced for a solid impact that never came, showered with the scorched and frozen detritus of what had been a man.

Still I stood, holding the knife, for hardly a full second had passed; and my vision went out with that blinding light. I saw Claire thirty yards away on her knees, her face in her hands; and whether she had fallen or was praying I could not know. Goo-goo was on the ground where Ponder had stretched him, and near his body was the familiar, still at last. Beyond stood Luana, still on her feet, her auburn eyes blindly open to the great light, her face composed. She stepped forward slowly, hanging her arms, but with her head erect, her heated hair flung back. The cruel, steady light made sharp-edged shadows at the hinges of her jaw, for all they were sunlit. For a brief moment she was beautiful, and then she seemed to be walking down a staircase, for she grew shorter as she walked. Her taut skin billowed suddenly like a pillow-slip on a clothes-line, and her hair slipped down and drifted off in a writhing cloud. She opened her mouth, and it made a triangle, and she began to bleat.

They were wordless sounds, each one higher in pitch than the one before. Up and up they went, growing fainter as they grew higher, turning to rat-squeaks, mouse-squeaks, bat-squeaks, and at last a high thin whistle that was not a sound at all but a pressure on the ear-drums. Suddenly there was nothing moving there at all; there was only a plaid skirt and a wind-breaker tumbled together with blood on them. And a naked, lizard-like thing nosed out of the pathetic pile, raised itself up on skinny forelimbs, sniffed with its pointed snout at the light, and fell dead.

Claire drew a long, gasping breath. The sound said nothing for Claire, but much for the vale. It said how utterly quiet it was. I looked again at the plaid skirt lying tumbled on the grass, and I felt a deep pain. I did not mourn Luana, for Luana never was a woman; and I knew now that had I never seen her again after our last kiss over the gate, I would not have remembered her as a woman. But she had been beauty; she had been cool lips and infernal hair, and skin of many subtle sorts of rose; I mourned these things, in the face of which her lack of humanity was completely unimportant.

THE light dimmed. I dropped the knife and went to Claire. I sank down beside her and put my arms around her. She let her hands slide off her face and turned it into my shoulder. She was not crying. I patted her hair, and we rested there until I was moved to say, "We can look at him now," and for a moment longer while we enjoyed the awe of knowing that all the while he had been standing there, released.

Then, together, we turned our heads and looked at him.

He had dimmed his pent-up light, but still he blazed. I will not say what he looked like, because he looked like only himself. I will not say he looked like a man, because no man could look like him. He said "Claire, take off your boot."

She bent to do it, and when she had, something flowed from him to us. I had my hoof under me. I felt it writhe and swell. There was an instant of pain. I grasped the hairy ankle as the coarse hair fell out, and then my foot was whole again. Claire laughed, patting and stroking her restored foot. I had never seen her face like that before.

Then *he* laughed. I will not say what that was like either. "Thad, Thad, you've done it. You've bungled and stumbled, but you've done it." I'll say how he spoke, though. He spoke like a man.

"What have I done?" I asked. "I have been pushed and pulled; I've thought some things out, and I've been both right and wrong—what have I done?"

"You have done right—finally," he chuckled. "You have set me free. You have broken walls and melted bars that are inconceivable to you . . . I'll tell you as much as I can, though.

"You see, for some hundreds of thousands of years I have had a—call it a jailer. He did not capture me: that was done by a far greater one than he. But the jailer's name was Korm. And sometimes he lived as a bird and sometimes as an animal or a man. You knew him as Ponder. He was a minor wizard, and Luana was his familiar. I too have a familiar—Tiltol there." He indicated the blue beast, stretched quietly out at his feet.

"Imprisoned, I could do very little. Korm used to amuse himself by watching my struggles, and occasionally he would set up a spell to block me even further. Sometimes he would leave me alone, to get my hopes up, to let me begin to free myself, so that he could step in and check me again, and laugh. . . .

"One thing I managed to do during one of those periods was to bring Claire's parents together. Korm thought that the magic thing they had between them was the tool I was developing, and when it began to look like a strong magic, he killed them. He did not know until much later that Claire was my magic; and when he found it out, he made a new and irritating spell around me, and induced Claire to come out here and walk into it. It was supposed to kill her, but she was protected; all it did was to touch her with the mark of the beast—a cloven hoof. And it immobilized me completely for some hours.

"When I could, I sent Tiltol after her with a new protection; without it she would be in real danger from Korm, for he was bound

to find out how very special she was. Tiltol tried to weave the new protection around her—and found that he could not. Her aura was no longer completely her own. She had fallen in love; she had given part of herself away to you, Thad. Now, since the new spell would work only on one in Claire's particular condition, and since he could not change that, Tiltol found a very logical solution: He gave you a cloven hoof too, and then cast the protection over both of you. That's why the bear-trap did not hurt you, and why the wasps couldn't sting you."

"I'm beginning to see," I said. "But—what's this about the ritual? How did it set you free?"

"I can't explain that. Roughly, though, I might say that if you regard my prison as locked, and your presence as the key in the lock, then the ritual was the turning of the key, and the use of the knife was the direction in which the key was turned. If you—or Claire, which was Korm's intention—had used the ritual without the knife, I would have been more firmly imprisoned than ever, and you two would have lived out your lives with those hooves."

"What about Goo-goo? I thought for a while that he was the jailer."

He chuckled. "Bless you, no. He is what he seems to be—a harmless, half demented old man, keeping himself out of people's way. He isn't dead, by the way. When he wakes, he'll have no recollection of all this. I practiced on him, to see if I could get a human being to perform the ritual, and he has been a good friend. He won't lose by it. Speaking of the ritual, though, I'd like you to know that, spectacular as it might have been, it wasn't the biggest part of the battle. That happened before—when you and Claire were talking to Ponder. Remember when Claire recited the spell and didn't know what she was saying?"

"I certainly do. That was when I suddenly decided there was something funny about Ponder's story. He had hypnotized her, hadn't he?"

"Something very like it . . . he was in her mind and I, by the way, was in yours. That's what made you leap up and go to Luana."

I shuddered. "That was bad . . . evil. What about this 'good and evil' theory of Ponder's, incidentally? How could he have worked evil on you with a spell from the Bible?"

THERE was a trace of irritation in his voice. "You'll have to get rid of this 'black and white magic' misconception," he said. "Is a force like electricity 'white' or 'black'? You use it for the iron lung. You use it also for the electric chair. You can't define magic by its methods and its materials, but only in terms of its purpose. Regard it, not as 'black' and 'white' but as High and Low magic. As to the Testament, why, that ritual is older than the Bible or it couldn't have been recorded there. Believe me, Ponder was using it well out of its context. Ah well, it's all over with now. You two are blessed—do you realize that? You both will keep your special immunity, and Claire shall have what she most wants, besides."

"What about you?"

"I must go. I have work to do. The world was not ordained to be without me.

"For there is reason in the world, and all the world is free to use it. But there has been no will to use it. There's wilfulness aplenty, in individuals and in groups, but no great encompassing will to work with reason. Almost no one reads a Communist newspaper but Communists, and only prohibitionists attend a dry convention. Humanity is split up into tiny groups, each clinging to some single segment of Truth, and earnestly keeping itself unaware of the other Truths that make up the great mosaic. And even when humans are aware of the fact that others share the same truth, they allow themselves to be kept apart from each other. The farmer here knows that the farmer there does not want to fight a war against him, yet they fight. I am that Will. I am the brother of Reason, who came here with me. My brother has done well, but he needs me, and you have set me free."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"The earliest men called me Kamäel."

"The Camel . . . in every language," murmured Claire. Suddenly her eyes widened. "You are—an . . . an *archangel*, Kamäel! I've read. . . ."

He smiled, and we looked down, blinded.

"Tiltol!"

The tiny familiar twitched and was suddenly balancing on its two legs. It moved abruptly, impossibly fast, zoomed up to Kamäel, where it nestled in the crook of his arm. And suddenly it began to grow and change. Great golden feathers sprouted from its naked hide, and a noble crest. It spread wide wings. Its plumage was an incredible purple under its golden crest and gold-tipped wings. We stared, filling our minds with a sight no human being alive had seen—of all birds, the noblest.

"Good-bye," said Kamäel. "Perhaps one day you will know the size of the thing you have done. The One who imprisoned me will come back, one day, and we will be ready for him."

"Satan?"

"Some call him that."

"Did he leave earth?"

"Bless you, yes! Mankind has had no devil but himself these last twenty thousand years! But we'll be ready for the Old One, now."

There was more sun, there were more colors in the world as we walked back to town.

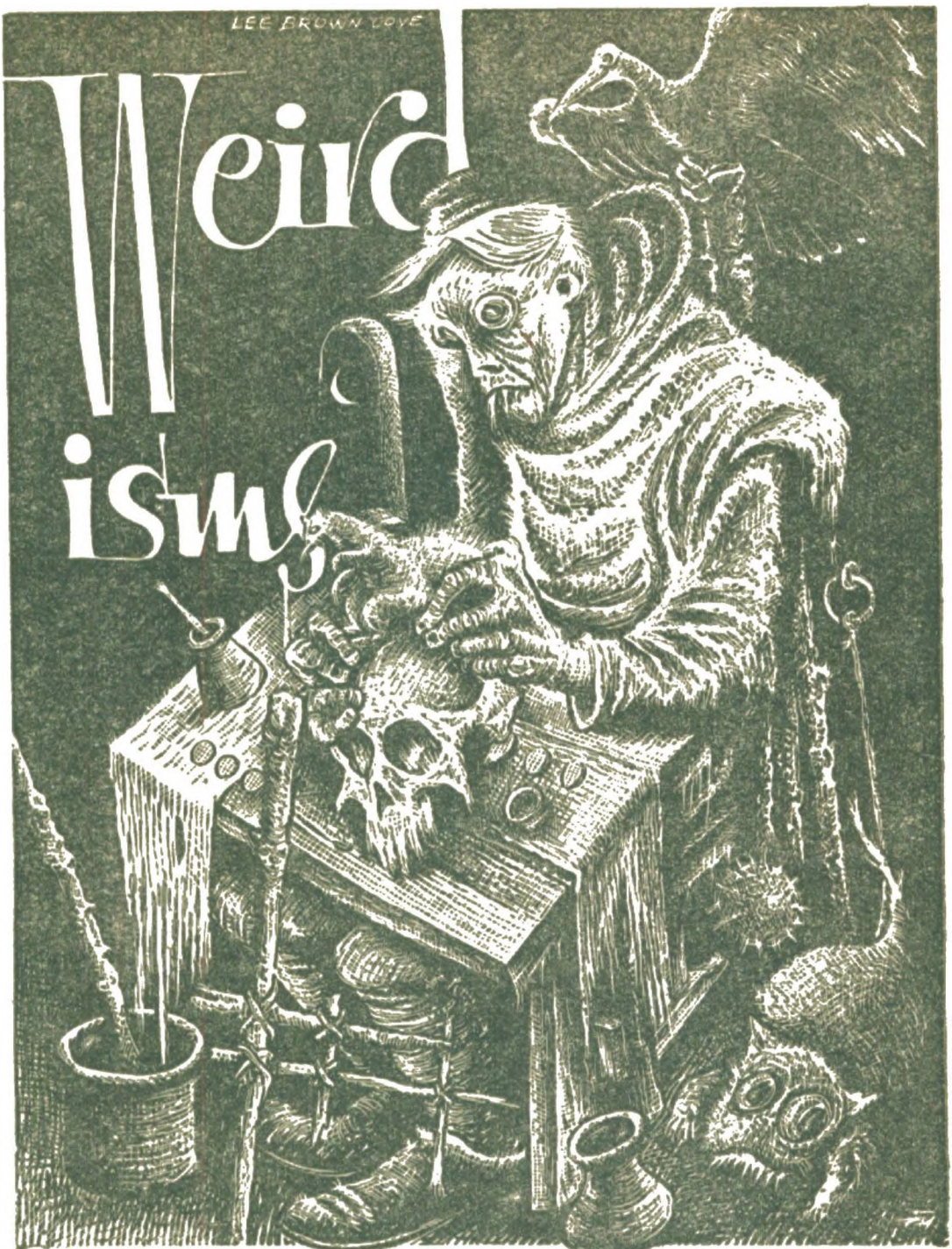
"It was the Phoenix!" breathed Claire for the twentieth time. "What a thing to tell our children."

"Whose children?"

"Ours."

"Now look," I said, but she interrupted me. "Didn't he say I was to have what I wanted most?"

I looked down at her, trying hard not to smile. "Oh, all right," I said.



ALTHOUGH WIZARDS AS A RULE WERE JOURNEYMEN, THERE WERE THOSE WHOSE ACTIVITIES CENTERED WITHIN A CELL OR CAVE FAR FROM THE HABITATIONS OF MAN. TO THESE CAN BE ATTRIBUTED MOST OF THE POTIONS & CHARMS USED BY THOSE WHO WENT ABOUT THE COUNTRY. THEIR BUSINESS IT WAS TO STUDY INTO THE BLACKARTS & BRING FORTH THE MEANS BY WHICH SPELLS COULD BE CAST. THEY WERE IN THE HANDS OF THE DEVIL, BODY & SOUL & THE TOOLS OF THEIR TRADE WERE HUMAN BONES, HAIR, BLOOD, DRUID RELICS, RATS, SNAKES, FROGS & SPIDERS. FROM THESE HORRID INGREDIENTS CAME POWDERS AND LIQUIDS WHICH IF USED UNDER PROPER AUSPICES WORKED UNTOLD HORROR.

COUNTRY fair HOUSE

BY EWEN WHYTE

IT WAS a task that women everywhere, all over the world, do thousands upon thousands of times. Nothing to mark it from those others except that this was herself, Patricia Eldridge, and she thought, and chided herself for the thinking:

"I don't really like to go up there alone! But that's silly, isn't it? Someone has to do it, and I'm the only someone!"

They'd looked so hard for a place in the country, and the house in Bellemore had been discovered by one of those accidents when the quest for just such a coincidence fitted in perfectly with its availability.

Ray, of course, couldn't get away from the office. Their old car had made the trip to Bellemore a week ago for the final decision and the signing of the lease but had sputtered home in poor shape and was now laid up in the repair shop.

Never mind, she could get somebody from the next-door apartment to stay with their three-year-old son, she told her husband. She'd take the train.

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

A strange rendezvous with the beauty of the country . . . . and the terror of the darkness!

The house was tucked away on a ridge some miles outside of Bellemore Village. It was all weather-beaten shingled with a stone chimney, ivy-covered. For companions the house had a forest that closed closely around it. The gurgling trace of a brook ran not far away from the back stone terrace. It was, as Ray Eldridge had said, a "find," and if the price they'd finally been able to compromise on was a bit above what they'd wanted to pay, the sacrifice would certainly be worth while.

IT WAS afternoon before Patricia had time to think. The sun had fallen off to the west, but its rays coming through the bare February limbs of the trees that stood near the eaves sent lengthening shadows across the barren floors. She'd arrived soon after eleven, taxied out to their house—and my, didn't that have a fine sound!—from the Bellemore station.

The day had been taken up with those innumerable little things. The measuring and sizing-up of rooms; where she and Ray would be and then where they'd put Robbie. She had some curtain samples she'd brought up from the city and she tried to decide which would look the nicest in the room that would become their parlor. For her, it was happy indecision.

She sat for a moment now, perched on a packing box in one of the upstairs rooms, still in her fur coat, for there was no heat in the house, and for the first time, she felt the chilliness. Her ears were ringing, something she'd noticed when she'd been up here with Ray a week ago. It was the silence of the country, an unaccustomed change for a city-dweller who lives amidst the scenery and sounds of constant activity. A plane flying far above the Bellemore Valley filled the winter air with its drone. And then there was a sound from outside.

Pat got up. Mrs. Brown, the real-estate agent, had said she'd drop out sometime during the day just to see how things were coming along, what with the telephone not connected yet.

As Patricia passed the mirror at the head landing, she shook her dark curls and thought that her fur coat looked just a bit shabby for folks who were buying such a scrumptious country house. But then, after all, you have to make certain sacrifices.

THE front door opened—you don't think of locking them in the country—and she took the first step of going down. The stairs crooked away and she could see nothing but a pattern of yellow light against the turn of the stairwell.

"Missus Brown?" she called. "Hello, Missus Brown!"

Of course it was Mrs. Brown. Or had the taxi man come early? It was a bit past four.

"Is that the taxi man?"

For an answer the front door—and it was a heavy one—closed with a thud, and that was punctuated by a scuffling sound that faded almost instantly, but inside the house. Patricia Eldridge felt herself tighten.

"Who is it! Who's down there!!"

Nothing. She stood poised, one foot down on the first step, her hand gripping the bannister, and the wind touching the weathervane on the top of the house counted the long seconds off by squeaking the painted metal rooster and swiveling it with an airy cold breath.

Pat very carefully withdrew her descending foot and stood at the top of the landing, afraid now to call out again, afraid to move beyond the sudden and terrible pounding of her heart. The fears of womankind came to her then. The thing she'd chided herself about.

Don't be silly, Ray! Nothing ever happens in the country! *Darling,* it's the only way to get the place fixed up.

A train in the distance whistled with faraway detachment. Its remoteness made her think of the city and of Ray. Oh Ray, honey, do you know how frightened I am now? Where *was* Mrs. Brown! She'd called down enough, of that she was certain, with the kind of true intuition that only a woman can have. Whoever it was, whatever it was downstairs knew of her presence as much as she knew of its.

There was a step. In its texture and quality it was heavy, and that put new thunder to her heart. The taxi man was smallish; Mrs. Brown's steps wouldn't scuff and clump so that the very house shook!

Slowly, slowly, Pat inched backward. She

chose the west room because, frighteningly, deepening shadows had claimed everywhere else now from the pale setting winter sun. A board under her high heels creaked, and she held her breath.

The first step on the stairs was not a surprise. She had expected it and had been listening for it so hard. Whoever it was was coming up. If she had wanted to call out now, she would not have been able to. Her mouth was dry and her throat constricted.

There was a dressing room off the west chamber. It connected with the other upstairs bedroom, and that had its own door onto the hall. By the time the steps reached the top of the stairs, she had vacated the room nearest their approach. She still tiptoed, but the time for cat-and-mouse was nearly over. The steps quickened, echoing hollowly as they crossed the bare wooden floors.

Patricia slipped through the dressing room, through the next room and out into the hall. The tempo of the steps behind her quickened even more. She gained the hall while whatever it was, like in a child's game of hide-and-seek, circled noisily through the rooms she had just left. She ran for the stairs now, all attempts at quiet gone. She ran clattering down like a frightened schoolgirl.

She made the great front door, pulled it open with desperate hands and stumbled outside into the sudden gloom of early evening. Her heels turned on the rough stone of the driveway, hurting her ankles cruelly as she ran on. Despite herself and her fear at what she would see, she turned and looked back. But only the top of the house had brightness left upon it. The lower floor was shrouded in shadow. Somebody, or something, came through the door. Of that she was sure, and as she plunged on the road into the forest that lined it, she knew that whoever, whatever it was, was after her!

PATRICIA ELDRIDGE ran as any hunted creature does, without direction, for she did not know the woods or the terrain they covered, but her instinct made her seek the darker places in the already blackening woods, and she ran agilely with all the dexterity of her slim, strong young body as though she were back thousands of years in time and in some primitive race of long ago.

The terror in her was a thing of civilization, though. The fears that crowded down upon her mind forced her heart rate even more than the strenuous activity of running. Behind, in the darkness—though now she turned not once to look as if afraid of confirming her worst fears—the crashing sounds of her pursuer were unmistakable. An outflung branch caught her across the face, cutting her cheek and her mouth but she ran on barely slackening stride, feeling the moistness of blood on her face.

Somewhere inside of her was the strong logic that if she could run far enough and fast enough, she would come out of this nightmare, come to another house, a road with cars, somewhere, anywhere, with people.

She fell then, tripped by an unseen root or rock, and sprawled heavily, full-length, the wind wooshing out of her. She scrambled to all fours, regained her feet and went on, but there was faintness in her now and lightheadedness that played tricks with whatever sense of direction she might have had. From the sounds behind, her pursuer was closer.

She thought of Ray and three-year-old Robbie and how much they needed her and loved her and of what pathetic uselessness all that was now. She came into a little clearing, and thankfully, oh God, Thankfully, there was a rude building of sorts ahead, a shack or cottage.

She breathed a prayer and threw the rest of her strength into a forward lunge, but she had overestimated her failing powers. Again she tripped and fell very heavily. Her chest was crushed. Her breath became fire, put out finally as the dark ground and the silent black trees came together beneath and over her.

WHEN Pat came to, it was to feel with relief a hard wooden floor beneath her, and the man bending over her was . . . why, he was some sort of policeman, off duty perhaps, but the midnight blue serge of his dress was unmistakable. She struggled to get up, and he helped her, his strong hands gentle despite their size.

Profound relief battled with the awful

terror and panic she felt so recently. For a while, Pat could say nothing and then—because prosaic things came so much more easily than the myriad questions in her mind—she asked,

"Can I sit on your tool box here?"

He nodded, and she sat there fighting to regain composure, seeing that her hands were still trembling and then finding the self-control to say,

"Somebody . . . something was chasing me out there. I don't know who or what. I guess I fell and fainted."

He nodded.

"You're all right now," he said.

His voice was gruff and large as the man himself, and in the largeness she felt a warm security. Here, but a few moments ago, there had been nothing in her but terror and desperation as the result of that horror and a terrible cold reconciliation when there seemed there was no escape.

Pat fluttered her hands and tried to stand up.

"Thank you so much! I wonder if you could help me. Show me how to get back to the house. I don't even know what time it is! The taxi man's coming and—." She started to rise, and weakness almost took her legs from under her. Patricia sank back on the box.

He nodded his head as though in agreement with her decision.

"You'll feel better after a bit, I dare say."

He turned to something he was brewing on a small stove, and she saw gratefully that a coffee pot percolated there. After a while, he brought a cup over to her.

"Milk's all I've got," he said apologetically.

He watched her drink the coffee, and she noticed what kind, sky-blue eyes he had. She set the cup down, thanked him again.

"You're a policeman. Is this your home, or . . . ?"

"Outpost," he supplied laconically.

She wondered if he had a pretty wife and a three-year-old like Robbie.

Patricia had enough interest now to look around the cottage. It was filled with man stuff. There were a couple of animal traps in the corner, tools, a lantern, and on the wall a rifle and a policeman's cartridge belt with what looked to be a holster. She asked him about the house, her house, theirs, Ray's and Robbie's.

SURE, he knew it, knew it well. In fact, did you know, he'd lived there once for a short piece himself. He smiled wryly. He'd lost his wife there. She was contrite even as he answered. There had been a couple of tenants since then. Families? No, no, two single folks. One a policeman. What, another policeman? She didn't think of the Law as having enough money to own a place like that. Well, you know, in some periods when houses stood untenanted. . . . Skip it.

And Mrs. LeClerc, an older woman. He became a little more loquacious. Always thought it was better to have that place empty. She could understand that and she dropped the issue, after his wife and all. Poor man, poor lonely man, with those sky-blue eyes that were wide, almost like a child's!

Irrelevantly, it made her think of that line from Gilbert and Sullivan: "A policeman's lot is not a happy one."

Patricia was feeling better. The coffee was strong and good, and its heat had spread strength through her veins and limbs.

"I think I could try getting back now," she said dutifully. "Could you show me?"

"I'd have to," the man replied.

"Gracious, it certainly *is* lonely around here! What do you suppose—?" The question had been nagging at her. "What do you suppose . . . who do you suppose it was after me out there? I shouldn't think . . ." she gave a small laugh, ". . . that Bellemore would have much of a crime problem!"

"Hard to tell," was his only reply.

She guessed he knew his job. For all she knew, he'd routed her pursuer when he'd come upon her outside this cottage.

The dial on her wristwatch nagged her. It was getting late. In fact, the taxi man would have come and gone, or come and be waiting at the house. She'd already missed the train she'd planned on taking, and Mrs. Brown might have visited and would be worried that she wasn't there.

You can't take somebody like this off his beat or duty or whatever they call it in the

country, she reasoned, and it was important to her as it would be to Ray to get off on the right foot in this community. Country people aren't the same as their urban cousins. They did things, well, pretty much when they got around to them, foregoing the feverish tempo of the city dweller.

She thought it over carefully and finally said, almost tentatively, "If you'd give me a lantern, show me the way and just start me off, I'm sure I could. . . ."

He was silent for a moment as though he mulled it over and then he shook his head determinedly.

"No," he said, "no, that wouldn't do."

She waited, thinking that chivalry was warring with duty in his case. When he said nothing more, after a reasonable length of time she put in again, "Really, I do have to start back! How far are we from the house or a road?"

HE WAS tinkering in the corner, and she rose from the tool box, almost impatiently now. He was humming to himself, and it irritated her a bit even through the gratitude she'd felt for his help earlier. It was as though her time, her appointments, and responsibilities were as nothing to him!

Oh, these country people! There was, she supposed, nothing to do but to humor them and let them take their own time. Did he think she was ungrateful or did he, like so many rural characters, resent her because she was from the city? She realized the news gets around in a small place and that by now everybody in Bellemore would know about the Eldridges—city folks—who'd bought the empty house out in the valley.

But still, this was hardly fair—he was, well, quite maddening!

"*Please!*" she said, with an edge of sharpness in her voice.

He left the corner and whatever small, irrelevant task he'd been doing there. He shrugged his massive shoulders and said, "Well, guess I've got to go to work!"

So he was going on duty perhaps and had wanted to take her at the same time. Despite herself, the toe of her highheeled shoe tapped impatiently against the oversized tool box she'd been sitting on.

He crossed leisurely to the wall and took down the cartridge belt, hooked it carefully around his great girth. She saw then that the cartridge loops were empty and what she'd supposed was a gun holster was, instead, a knife sheath from which protruded the bone handle of a hunting blade.

He turned and walked toward her slowly, one hand hooked casually under the belt where the sheath hung.

How blue his eyes were, she thought, and then he said almost apologetically before he reached her,

"You see, ma'am, I'm really *not* a policeman and that . . ." he'd reached her side then and kicked at the large tool box with his big shoe, ". . . that isn't really a tool box!"

He grasped her wrist in one huge hand and raised the lid of the box even as she murmured almost stupidly, for it seemed so trivial, "You're not a policeman?"

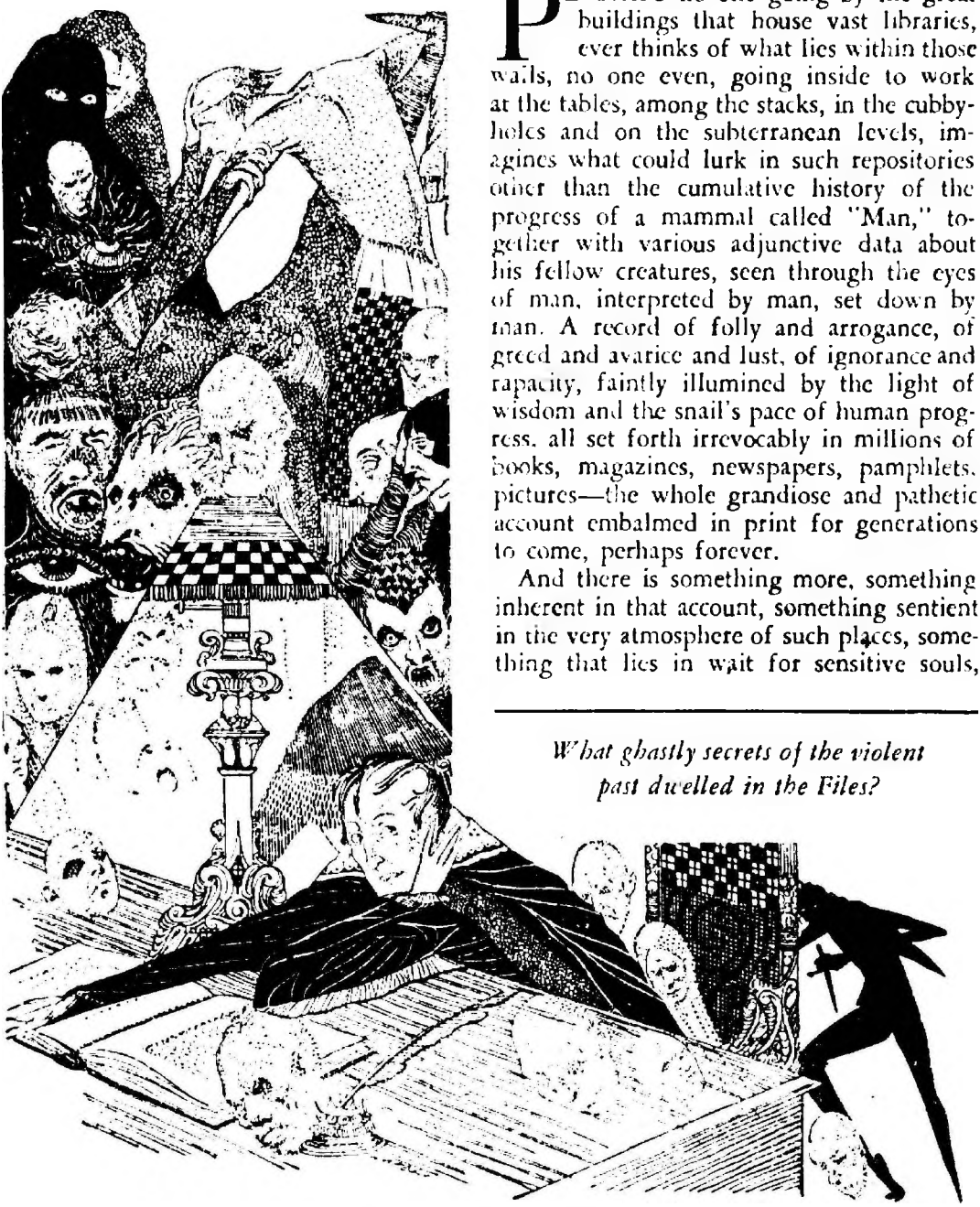
He raised the lid more and pushed her ever so gently forward to look within the chest.

"*He's* in there, ma'am, along with Missus LeClerc!"

He let the cover of the box fall with a thud and stepped closer to Patricia Eldridge. She didn't even have time to be frightened.

The Slayers and the Slain

BY AUGUST DERLETH



PERHAPS no one going by the great buildings that house vast libraries, ever thinks of what lies within those walls, no one even, going inside to work at the tables, among the stacks, in the cubbyholes and on the subterranean levels, imagines what could lurk in such repositories other than the cumulative history of the progress of a mammal called "Man," together with various adjunctive data about his fellow creatures, seen through the eyes of man, interpreted by man, set down by man. A record of folly and arrogance, of greed and avarice and lust, of ignorance and rapacity, faintly illumined by the light of wisdom and the snail's pace of human progress, all set forth irrevocably in millions of books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, pictures—the whole grandiose and pathetic account embalmed in print for generations to come, perhaps forever.

And there is something more, something inherent in that account, something sentient in the very atmosphere of such places, something that lies in wait for sensitive souls,

What ghastly secrets of the violent past dwelled in the Files?

Heading by Vincent Napoli

something that waits upon silence and solitude and the deep night to make itself manifest. . . .

Being on the staff of the great periodical library of the Wisconsin Historical Society Library in that State's capitol city, I understand better than most what cannot easily be put into words. But I knew, I understood years before, when I was still a student, when Ken Harley and I used to haunt the newspaper stacks, working late, night after night. A departure from the rules, I know; I knew it then, but it had no meaning. Since that time I have come to know that rules are seldom arbitrary, that perhaps there is a psychic force about rules, an establishment of a psychic tradition which it is better not to depart from, not to breach, lest a kind of trouble no one can expect take place.

The stacks of newspapers make up endless corridors beneath the great building, miles of them, row upon row of papers, bound and stacked to the ceilings, to the steam pipes, up along the concrete walls, newspapers from every city in the world—the *London Times*, *La Prensa*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *Ceylon Observer*, the *Melbourne Herald*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, *Le Temps*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, *Le Figaro*, the *Neues Wiener Journal*, the *Prager Presse*, the *Novoe Vrèmja*, *La Libre Belgique*, the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, *El Sol*, the *Journal de Genève*, *La Nacion*, *The Shanghai Times*, the *Asahi*—papers without end, their heavy dust-laden volumes keeping a kind of perpetual dusk within their subterranean chamber even on the brightest day.

Among these stacks the students work, but the rules close them at five o'clock. In our own student days, Ken and I scoffed at the rules, but since that time I have come more and more to feel that the rules which keep students out of the stacks at night are good and appropriate. The conservatism of age against the radicalism of youth, you may suggest. Perhaps? You never know, do you, just what factors go into the making of an opinion, an attitude, a conviction? But Ken and I know, and it is not out of pure adherence to rules per se that I always opposed any suspension of the rules, and particularly the granting of special permissions to work in the stacks after closing hours, most especially to such students as Darwin Vesper, the epitome of bookworms, sensitive, introspective, living a solitary life within himself.

ONE knows these people, or one comes to know them, working with them on the perimeter of their world. It is true that I opposed Vesper's permission to work late in the stacks with rather more vehemence than I did similar cases. My superior, old Mr. Van Orden reminded me sardonically that I had myself applied for and received that permission while I was a student at the University of Wisconsin, had I not? And why, then, this reactionary attitude? I could not tell them that it was precisely because I had been granted that permission that I opposed its being granted to others. But no one can say that I did not oppose it with every means in my power; that I failed is not to be blamed on me, certainly.

For I knew the stacks by night. I had known them many years before. And Ken Harley had known them, too. He was the other student in my class who had received the same permission I had got, though he worked there on different nights. We two knew the great dark corridors, the towering stacks, the isolated pools of light where the few globes were, the light that gave off so timid a glow against the blackness pressing in from all sides.

It was always warm there, damply warm in summer, dry with heat in winter, and dust lay there without change year after year, decade after decade; so vast was the area covered by the interminable bound volumes of newspapers that only a small army of cleaners could have kept them clean for so little a time as a week. No such army ever invaded the stacks. Even by day few students descended to them, preferring to work in the well-lit room upstairs and having volumes of papers brought up to them by the efficient clerks in the periodical room on the main floor. The period of my working there was a short one. It was in connection with an exhaustive paper for political science that I began to study the editorials in many periodicals over the years since 1850. I dallied too long, the lack of time made necessary night work in the stacks, and so I began, at first in great haste,

and then with ever-increasing leisureliness.

I had worked there but four nights when Ken Harley mentioned the stacks over luncheon one day. "Did you ever think of everything in those volumes?" he asked. "All the crime, the horror, the tragedy? All the battles, conflagrations, catastrophes? What a record of terror and death—as of a race, not just individuals!"

"Oh, come," I said, smiling, "this is a grim day for you."

"But, no, I mean it," he protested seriously. "The death of worlds, really, David—the world of the 1850's, of the 1860's, of the 1900's, of the 1700's—"

"Morbid is the word for it," I said.

"Is it? I wonder." He shook his head reflectively. "What if everything behind the printed pages could make itself felt? What then?"

"A macabre conceit," I said.

But was it? I thought of it that night, sitting alone in that vast building. The doors of the newspaper division were closed at six o'clock, but above the stacks the library continued to throb with life until ten o'clock, and by eleven the building was dark, silent, deserted. It was that time, the hours between ten o'clock and midnight, when the silence of the building was oppressive, not at all mitigated by the distant hum of traffic, the deep-throated voice of the city that rose all around, the voices of night beyond the walls offering nothing but sharp contrast to the darkness and quiet inside, with the infinitesimal sounds that echoed forever among the stacks—of pipes, of settling weight, of mice, of something more—something I had not noticed before, something only a man, alone with the history of the world tangible in row upon row of bound newspapers, would be likely to notice.

Perhaps Ken Harley's conceit was not macabre at all. What a plethora of crime and death, of murder, suicide, war, and catastrophe all around me! I thought of this increasingly with every fleeting moment, and the things I could not help seeing in the headlines I passed over came back, vitalized, given substance. When I looked up from the lit pages beneath my eyes to stare into the encroaching blackness, I wondered whose step went sibilantly down the near corridor, whose breathing sounded in the air, whose pulse made the echo of doom among the stacks? John Wilkes Booth, the dying Lincoln, the thousands dead at Gettysburg, the dying in the Alamo, Jesse James, General Custer making his last stand, the murdered Crazy Horse, the dreadful crimes of the Benders, the dead at the Peshtigo fire, at Chicago, at the San Francisco quake, Dr. Crippen—all these and more came to a kind of borderland existence in that close-pressing darkness, coming back to shadowy life, given substance, however ephemeral, in my thoughts.

My appetite for work wavered, diminished.

Who was it leaned just beyond the little pool of wan light where I sat, hunched over a segment of history, the history of man? Lizzie Borden or Henriette Deluzy-Desportes with her victims, the Duc and Duchess de Choiseul-Praslin? Little Bobbie Franks or the ill-fated Nicholas Romanov? The sinister Rasputin or Henri Landru? Murdered Mabel Young and the butchering sexton, or Professor Webster and his victim, Parkman? Desmond Taylor or poor ravished Josie Langmaid? Joseph Elwell or Dorothy King, the butterfly of Broadway? One and all lurking in the shadows. Terror and death rising up on all sides out of the gruesome accounts set down in cold type forever!

I CLOSED the volume. The hot room seemed clammy, forbidding, ominous. A tangible fear lingered in the darkness all around. I walked through the dusk to the next light and put it on. Then I walked back to where I had been working and put out the light there. Then on to the light beyond the next, and back again, and so on until I reached the haven of the great hall upstairs and had the outer door within sight, shadowed by a pair of lovers seeking that semi-darkness away from the streetlights. What a relief to escape the cloying terror below!

The folly of the imaginative! I thought it next day. I saw Ken Harley again at lunch and accused him of putting the wind up me on the previous day.

He did not smile. "You felt it, too?"

"Felt what?"

"What's down there. You know what I mean, David. All that accumulated horror, the murder and violence, the rapine and torture, the sudden death. Do you know, one night I thought I saw Burke and Hare!"

"You're exaggerating!"

"Am I, indeed? I tell you, David, words are things, thoughts are things! Can you doubt it? All those records of terror and death!"

That night the silence seemed profound. The entire darkness of that vast, crowded room seemed to wait upon events, upon the ticking away of every second, upon every pulse that coursed my veins. Even the dust seemed animated, and a kind of rustling pervaded the thick atmosphere. It was hot among the stacks, hot and oppressive. Little by little, the sounds upstairs died away, and the creeping silence invaded ever more and more of that great building at the edge of the University campus. And soon the conviction was strong upon me that I was alone in that building—and yet not alone.

For all around me something waited, waited like horrible children or terrifying beasts in mock fawning to be noticed before falling upon one to rend and tear and devour, something that grew out of the heavy volumes rising up on every side, out of the memories of words, faces, thoughts that lay within the lone student bent above that newspaper. The words below my eyes shimmered and washed away; I no longer saw, "The economy practised by the Cleveland administration. . . ." I saw instead the terrible words of the woman, Frau Seemann, testifying to the horrible butcheries of Fritz Haarmann, the ogre of Hanover, who said he had brought her a sack of bones: *"I made soup of them, but I thought the bones were too white so I threw it away."* All around me suddenly were the wretched little victims of the grotesque and incredible pervert's most horrifying perversion—the innocents slaughtered and *devoured*.

Haarmann, the horrible butcher of Hanover, yes, and Jean-Baptiste Troppmann, the mass-murderer, and George Joseph Smith, who preyed upon trusting women and slew them like rabbits and all their victims—Erich de Vries, Heinz Martin, Hermann Bock, Adolph Hannappel, Wilhelm Erdner, Hans Sennenfeld, the unfortunate Kinck family, Bessie Mundy, Alice Burnham, Margaret Lofty—all pressing forward out of the darkness, as if eager for renewed life, for another act in the eternal drama in which the murderers play ever the same role, and the victims are helplessly always wantonly slain, out of lust or brutality or greed, a recurrent cycle, as were some of them born to kill and others born to be killed. And all around, it seemed, the smell of dust and old paper fell away, and instead came the terrible cloying smell of blood, newly shed, and the sounds of that darkness resolved into the cries of the victims, unheard by any save the murderers, echoing out of the past, out of moments forever frozen by time and the printed pages looming great on every side, sentient, alive with the terrible forces which animated the slayers and the despairing lust for life which perished with the victims, the pawns of a repeated destiny. . . .

I stood up. My mouth was dry with fright.

THE act of standing up took me up past the perimeter of light streaming down to the little table at which I had been sitting. In that instant the darkness into which I gazed congealed, and there, looking out at me, were the faces, stretched limitlessly away down the corridors of time, oblivious of walls and stacks, of night and day, the brooding faces, the sinister faces, the crafty smiles, the vicious eyes, the suffering, drawn features of the dying, the anguished faces of the suddenly slain, the deceptively innocent whose bland faces promised death—they were all there—Lizzie Borden, Haarmann, Troppmann, Landru, Webster, Smith, Bessie Mundy, Mabel Young—flowing out of that darkness, pressing close and closer, reaching toward the light.

And behind me there were others. I could feel their phantom hands reaching toward me, who had given them this brief animation once again, reaching longingly out of the compact volumes on the hundreds of shelves, eager to grasp hold of life once more, to know again the quickness of breath and pulse, the anguish of dying, the agony of living in the shadow of death, the ecstasy of killing. . . .

A long sigh shuddered through the dark-

ness, and a chill like the winter's depth of cold struck me.

I cried out, stumbling backward, and fled blindly toward the stairs.

Outside at last, after an interminable time, I clung gratefully for a long time to the outer railing of the parapet. Behind me was horror and terror, fear and loathing; behind me was an imponderable, incredible life deep in the dust and mouldering paper of years out of mind. . . .

I never went back again.

Neither did Ken.

Ten years passed, almost twenty. My work took me into the familiar stacks often —but always by day, for I adhered rigidly to the scheduled hours of work, I opposed all variations from the rules. It was not often that students wanted permission to work in the newspaper stacks after closing time—and then, for the most part, it was never later than nine o'clock or so.

I knew it would be different when Darwin Vesper came. I tried to dissuade him from his insistent plan, but he was working hard for a scholarship, and nothing I could say impressed him in the least. I went so far—perhaps unwisely—as to suggest something of what had happened to me in that darkness during the late hours which he proposed to work. He laughed at me, as I had known he would, as I had laughed at Ken Harley, too, almost two decades before. He was a dreamer, an imaginative young fellow, brilliant in a way, impractical, a solitary seeking solitude.

He should never have been permitted to work in the stacks alone at night. I was afraid of what might happen, though I could not foretell what form it might take. But I knew that there was something down there eager for a brief renewal of life again, the accumulated crime and horror, fear and death of years, decades, centuries, waiting to be given renewal by the imagination, the psychic aura of the sensitive human being walking unwarily, unwittingly among those pale spectres embalmed forever in print on those yellowing pages.

HE SPOKE to me on the third day. He seemed pale and drawn then, and he asked somewhat circuitously what it was I had imagined I had seen in the stacks. I told him—and since then I have wondered how large a share of guilt belongs to me. Did I help to create what he saw? Did I suggest to him terrors and fears he did not possess? I had not known what it was he wanted to study. It was not my place to ask, it was in no way a requirement for the staff to know.

Had I known, I might have done even more to prevent his going down into the stacks at night. Because he was preparing a monograph on the psychology of the mass-murderer for his class in abnormal psychology. Studying directly the subjects his imaginative mind could conjure to life in the presence of the print-bound shadows of past crimes, the paper entities of unforgotten murderers and their victims, the psychic residue of violence and terror, of brutality and lust and greed, of sudden, horrible death.

They found Darwin Vesper in the morning of the fourth day.

He was lying only ten feet away from the table at which he had been working, one hand still at his throat, in a gesture as of defense. Dead, certainly. Dead since midnight at least, the examining coroner said. His notes were still as he had left them. Strange notes. Orthodox until almost the end, and then suddenly three hurriedly and shakily scrawled names, the last of them carried off the page in a paper-cutting pencil l i n e—*Troppmann—Landru—Haarmann.*

"Heart failure," they said. A convenient label to cover many things; there had been no previous history of hypertension or other cardiac trouble. I know the fear, the terror and the horror that killed him. I, too, saw those horrible, leering faces.

But what I do not know, what I can never know is whether they were his alone, or whether he had only renewed to more avid life those terrible phantoms of my own student hours of nocturnal study, those fearsome shadows lurking in the stacks ever since that time, waiting for another sensitive solitary, the slayers and the slain, waiting forever to act out again the tragic cycles of murder and the agony of death, of love and lust, of greed and betrayal, of the last, interminable horror of oblivion.

The Shot-Tower Ghost

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

MOST of us have nostalgic, so-dear-to-my-heart memories tucked into the back of our minds, our subconscious minds, to be coaxed out briefly now and then by some particular sound, some odor, some half-familiar sight . . .

As for me, I can not hear a whippoorwill crying at night but I go flying back through time and space to our old family "Home

A wraith will return again and again on its grim tour of duty.

place" in Wythe County, Virginia. The ferry is no longer there—replaced by a coldly efficient steel bridge that the state built. Cars and wagons, herds of sheep and leisurely riders on horseback no longer pause at the brink of New River to call across: *"Hello-o-o!"* for the stocky, smiling ferryman to raft them over to where the road to Wytheville begins again. But on the east bank, the tall square fieldstone shot-tower still broods over the green-velvet countryside—a grim reminder of a day when Virginia was wracked with civil war, and brother turned against brother.

Yes; the shot-tower is still there, a historical landmark which my family at last turned over to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, for the edification of the passing tourist. The spiral staircase that winds up and up inside the tower is new—not rotten and precarious as it was when I was there, one of the scattered cousins who came "Back Home" every summer for a visit. The sturdy beamed floor of the single room, high up against the ceiling, used to be spattered with little hardened splashes of lead, spilled eighty-five years ago by determined Rebels and loyal sweating negroes frantically making ammunition for Lee's troops. The leaden souvenirs are probably gone by now; and the square hole in the floor is fenced in by chicken wire, lest the unwary tourist fall through it into that dark matching hole in the tower's dirt floor below. This leads, well-like, into the river. I am not sure about the huge iron cauldron which caught the shot. (Molten lead formed round rifle balls when it fell, hissing, into cold water.) The pot may yet be hanging down there into the river. Once, on a dare from another visiting cousin, I climbed halfway down the slimy ladder into that chill murmuring darkness. But something slithered against my arm, and I never finished the adventure . . . especially as it was almost nightfall, and time for the Shot-Tower Ghost to appear.

Let me say here, to your probable disappointment, that there never was a "shot-tower ghost." This gruesome family-spectre was nothing more than a product of my Great-uncle Robert's imagination. He is dead now, a white-bearded irascible old bachelor of the "hoss-racin' and cyard game" school. Dead, too, is Shadrach, his stooped and gray-haired "body-servant," last of the family slaves who accepted their "freedom" with a bored sniff as the impractical notion of "a passel o' po-white Yankees." To the last day of their lives—about two weeks apart—Uncle Robert and Shadrach, respectively, remained unreconstructed and unfreed. And the fact that one of my aunts married a Northerner, bore him a fine son, got rich, and came back to buy and remodel another old countryplace adjoining the Homeplace, was a great shock to both of them. I think they were convinced that "Yankees" are a roving tribe of gipsy marauders, and incapable of fathering offspring.

That son was my Cousin Mark, who had none of the gracious charm of his mother's side of the family and all of the butt-headed stubbornness of his Connecticut father. But in those days just after World War I—"the war in Europe" as Uncle Robert verbally shrugged off any of our conflicts but the one between the States—I was a very young fluttery miss with a terrible crush on Francis X. Bushman, thence my Cousin Mark because he slightly resembled him.

This particular summer, however, another cousin of mine from the Georgia branch was also visiting the Homeplace, a red-headed minx named Adelia—she is fat and has five children now, may I add with vicious satisfaction. But she was two years older than I, and just entering the Seminary, so Cousin Mark's eyes were all for her, not for a gawky high school sophomore from Birmingham, Alabama.

Adelia was also popular with the younger set of Wytheville. Almost every night a squealing, laughing carful of young people would bear down on the ferryman, who had orders to ferry Miss Adelia's friends across free of charge. Uncle Robert and Shadrach would roll their eyes at each other and moan faintly, but a short while later my uncle would be grinning from ear to ear, seated in his favorite chair on the wide columned veranda with a bouquet of pretty girls clustered around him, begging for "ghost stories." Shadrach, his eyeballs and teeth the only white thing about his grinning ebony face, would circulate around, offering sylla-

bub and tiny beaten-biscuits with baked ham between them, or calling "rounds" for an old-fashioned reel in the big living room where the Victrola played incessantly.

COUSIN MARK was a member of this coterie more often than anyone else, and Uncle Robert always made him welcome in a formally polite manner that Adelia, giggling beside me later in our big featherbed upstairs, would mock outrageously. Mark and Uncle Robert seemed to clash as naturally as a hound and a fox, for Mark had a rather rude way of finding holes in Uncle Robert's tall tales, mostly about the supernatural.

"Did you ever actually *see* a ghost, sir?" Mark demanded once, sitting at ease on the front steps against a backdrop of gray dusk and twinkling fireflies . . . and the distant plaintive crying of whip-poor-wills.

"I have, suh!" my uncle lashed back at him stiffly. "With mah own two eyes . . . and if Ah may say so, Ah could pick off a Yankee sniper right now at fifty yards with a good rifle!"

"Unless he picked you off first," my cousin pointed out blandly. Then, with stubborn logic that seemed to infuriate my uncle: "*When* did you ever see a ghost, sir, may I ask?" he pursued. "And where? And how do you know it wasn't just an . . . an optical illusion?"

"Suh . . .!" Uncle Robert drew himself up, sputtering slightly like an old firecracker. "Suh, the Shot-Tower Ghost is no optical illusion. He is, and Ah give you mah word on it, a true case of psychic phenomena. You understand," Uncle slipped into his act —a very convincing one, in spite of Adelia's covert giggling, "you understand that, after some very dramatic or tragic incident in which a person dies suddenly, there may be left what is called . . . ah . . . I believe the American Society for Psychic Research calls it 'psychic residue.' An emanation, an . . . an ectoplasmic replica of the person involved. This replica is sometimes left behind after death occurs—the death of the body, that is. For, the circumstances under which the person died may have been so . . . so impossible to leave hanging, the ectoplasmic replica of that person lives on, repeating and repeating his last act or trying to finish some task that he strongly wishes to finish. . . ."

"Poppycock!" my cousin interrupted flatly. "I don't believe there's any such thing as an . . . 'ectoplasmic replica!' What a term!" he laughed lightly. "Where'd you dig that one up, sir? At some table-tapping seance—price ten bucks a spook?"

"No, suh, I did not." Uncle Robert was bristling now; Adelia punched me and giggled. We could all see how very much he wanted to take this young Yankee-born whippersnapper down a peg or two. "I find the term used often," Uncle drawled, "in Madame Blavatsky's four-volume work on the metaphysical. She was considered the foremost authority on the supernatural during the last century, the Nineteenth Century, when such notables as Arthur Conan Doyle were seriously studying the possibility of life after death. . . ."

"Blavatsky . . . Blavatsky," Mark murmured, then grinned and snapped his fingers. "Oh yes. I remember reading about her, something in *The Golden Bough*. Sir James Frazer says she's either the greatest authority . . . *or* the biggest fraud in the history of metaphysical study! I read that once in the library at Tech, just browsing around. . . ."

Uncle Robert choked. Most young people listened in wide-eyed awe to his erudite-sounding explanations of his "tower ghost" and certain other spook-yarns that he cooked up for our naive pleasure. But Mark was tossing his high-sounding phrases right back at him with great relish, and a covert wink at Adelia who was perched on the arm of Uncle's chair. His smug air seemed to annoy her, though, for:

"Oh, the shot-tower ghost isn't any fraud!" Adelia proclaimed tauntingly, with an affectionate pat for Uncle's gnarled old hand—at the moment gripping his cane as if he intended breaking it over Mark's head. "I've seen it, myself," she announced. "Lib has, too—haven't you, Lib?" she demanded, and I nodded solemnly.

"Now *you've* seen it!" Mark jeered, flipping a coin in the air and watching it glint softly in the mellow glow that slanted through the fan-light over the door. "Any

body else? Hmm? I've been hearing about this spook of Uncle Robert's ever since we moved here from Connecticut—but I've yet to catch a glimpse of him myself! A Confederate soldier with his legs cut off—how touching! Making shot for his comrades up to the day of Lee's surrender at Appomattox. And when the sad news comes, he throws himself off the tower into the river . . . Haha!" Mark chuckled suddenly, fastening a cold matter-of-fact young eye on Uncle Robert's face. "Come on, Unk. Didn't you make that one up out of whole cloth? It sounds like something out of one of those old paper-back dime novels I found in the attic. *Capitola, the Madcap, Or: Love Conquers All. . . .*"

"Young man!" Uncle Robert stood up abruptly, quivering. "Ah must ask you to mend yoah Yankee manners to yo' elders. suh! Are you havin' the . . . the temerity to dispute my word, you young . . .?"

At that moment Shadrach took over, gently but firmly. Throwing a light shawl around his master's shoulders, he maneuvered around beside him, preparing to help him to his feet.

"Marse Robert, hit's yo' bedtime," the old darkey pronounced. "Come along, now, Marse Robert. Tell de young folks good night, cause Ah'm fixin' to help you up to yo' room."

"Shadrach—damme, Ah'll take a hoss-whip to yo' black hide!" My uncle roared petulantly, shrugging off the shawl and banging on the porch with his cane. "Quit babyin' me, confound it! Ah'll go to bed when Ah please! Get! Get away from me! Ah'll bend this cane over youah nappy head! Ah'll. . . ."

"Yassuh," said Shadrach imperturbably. "Hit's leb'm-thirty. Time you was asleep. Come on, now, Marse Robert. . . ." He tugged gently at my uncle's arm, finally wielding his heaviest weapon, the mention of my great-grandmother. "Miss Beth wouldn't like you settin' up so late, catchin' yo' death o' dampness. . . ."

"Oh, the devil!" Uncle snapped at him peevishly. "Ah'm comin', Ah'm comin'! Soon as Ah tell these pretty young ladies good night . . . and take a cane to this young smartalec!" He glared at Cousin Mark, who grinned back at him lazily. "It's not a wise thing," Uncle Robert intoned ominously, "to joke about the supernatural or regard it as a . . . parlor-game! And one of these days, young suh, you're going to find that out in a way you'll never forget!"

WITH that, and followed by a chorus of subdued giggles, he stamped into the house, leaving Adelia and me to bid our guests farewell. At the gate, after the carful of others had rolled away toward the ferry, Cousin Mark lingered, trying to persuade Adelia to kiss him good night. I would gladly have obliged, but my red-headed Georgia cousin switched away from him coolly, tossing her long auburn mop of curls.

"No, I won't!" she said shortly. "The idea, poking fun at Uncle Robert right to his face! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mark . . . and besides, you're such a smartalec, like Uncle said! How do *you* know there's no such thing as a ghost, just because you happen never to have seen one?"

Mark laughed softly, derisively. "And neither have you and Lib," he added. "I saw you wink at each other. Did you really think I'd swallow that silly yarn about the Confederate soldier?"

Adelia nudged me all at once, a signal to stand by and back up whatever mischief she had in mind.

"I've just remembered," she said quietly, "what tomorrow is! Lib . . . it was a year ago that . . . that *we* saw the soldier throw himself off that lookout porch at the top of the tower . . . Remember? You and I were riding horseback up the hill, just at sundown. And you heard that awful scream, and we glanced up just in time to . . . to see that shadow falling from the tower into the river! On July 9, the date of Lee's surrender at Appomattox!"

"It was *April* 9!" I hissed in her ear. "You'll ruin everything. . . .!"

"Sh-h!" Adelia hissed back, giggling. "A damyankee wouldn't know *what* day it was, hardly the *year*! . . . . Oh, I'll never forget that sight," she whispered, shuddering. "Not as long as I live! The look of despair on that man's face, the glimpse I got of it as he fell down, down. . . ."

"Bah!" Mark cut her off with a snort.

"You're as big a liar as your Uncle Robert! He and his ridiculous . . ectoplasmic replica!"

"But it's true!" I chimed in solemnly. "When we told about it, they dragged the river. But no body was ever found, and none turned up at the Falls downstream. He was wearing a . . . a shabby gray uniform. And . . . and a gray forage cap." I elaborated, warming to our little hoax. "And he wasn't more than four feet tall—his legs, you know, they'd been shot off by cannon-fire. . . ."

Adelia punched me again sharply. "Don't overdo it!" she hissed, then, with a grave frightened look turned on our cousin from Connecticut: "Oh, Mark, you mustn't scoff at such things! Tomorrow is the date of the surrender. Maybe if . . . if you watch for him on the hill at sundown, you'll . . . you'll see him, too!"

MARK snorted again, and strode toward the tethered horse he had ridden across the fields to Uncle's house earlier. In tan riding pants and sports shirt open at the neck, he was the handsomest thing I had ever seen—barring, of course, Francis X. himself. I sighed faintly as Adelia and I, arms about each other's waist; watched him mount and start to ride away, then wheel his spirited little bay back to face us.

"So tomorrow's the witching hour, huh?" he laughed. "Okay, I'll be here—with bells on! But let's make this worth while, cuz!" he drawled tormentingly. "How about a little bet of . . . say, five bucks? You pay me if our ghost doesn't show up. If I see him, I'll pay you . . . and gladly!" he jeered.

Adelia stiffened. I saw her pretty chin set and her brown eyes flash, taking up the challenge Mark's cool blue eyes had thrown her.

"All right, Mr. Smartalec!" she snapped back. "It's a bet! Just be mighty sure you bring that five dollars!"

"Just you have yours in your hand!" Mark taunted, "Want to make a little side bet, huh? A kiss, maybe? That kiss you won't give me tonight?"

"That's a bet, too!" Adelia answered briskly. "That's how *sure* I am that there *is* a tower ghost, and that you'll see him tomorrow!"

"Okay, carrot-top!" our cousin laughed. "Remember, you're no Southern gentleman if you don't pay up!"

He galloped away with that, and we strolled back toward the house together, Adelia and I, listening to his lusty voice singing, out of sheer perversity, Sherman's *"Marching Through Georgia"*. Adelia stamped her foot.

"I *hate* that . . . that . . .!" she burst out, unconvincingly. "Lib, we've just got to fix his wagon tomorrow!" Her eyes began to twinkle all at once, and she ran up the curving staircase to burst into Uncle's room, where Shadrach was trying to make him drink his hot milk instead of another whiskey.

Quickly she related the bet to Uncle Robert, whose mild old eyes lighted up also with mischief. He slapped his knee, chuckling.

"We'll fix him!" he promised. "Shadrach, get me young Saunders on the phone, Bill Saunders' boy in Wytheville. He's short enough to look . . . Hmm." He tugged at his white beard, grinning. "Where's that old ratty Confederate uniform that belonged to your Great-uncle Claud, Lib? In the attic, is it? Well, get it out. . . . That Saunders boy won the highdive contest at VMI last year, didn't he? Yes. Then, jumping off that lookout porch on the tower and landing in the river won't be much of a feat for him. Yes, hmm. Then he can swim underwater, and come up inside the shot well. Hide under the cauldron until young Mark stops looking for him to come up. . . .!"

"Uncle Robert, you old faker—I *knew* you'd think of something!" Adelia burst out laughing, and hugged him, then went dancing around the high-ceiled bedroom where four generations of our kin had been born, made love, had babies, and died. "I can't wait to see that smarty's face!" she exulted. "I just can't wait!"

Shadrach, with his glass of hot milk, had been fidgetting around in the background, his wide negro-eyes flitting from one of our faces to the other. Suddenly he blurted:

"Marse Robert . . . s'posin' dey *is* a shot-tower ha'nt up yonder? Seem lak I reecollect dey *was* a little runty soldier what got one

leg shot off at Murfreesboro. Name o' Jackson . . . and he *did* make shot up yonder in de tower. And he *did* jump off and git drownded!"

"Ah know that," Uncle Robert cut him short irritably. "Knew him personally; he was in my platoon. But he didn't jump. He . . ."

"Yassuh. Got drunk and *fell* off'n de lookout porch," the old darkey recalled uncomfortably. "But dat wouldn't stop his sperrit from comin' back, if'n he took a notion. . . ."

"Oh, balderdash!" Uncle Robert roared at him. "There's no such thing as . . . as a spirit! Ghost, haunt, call it whatever you like! You know very well Ah . . . Ah simply make up these yarns to amuse the young folks."

"Yassuh." Shadrach subsided meekly; but his eyes were large and troubled in his wrinkled black face.

Adelia and I giggled and whispered half the night about our practical joke on Cousin Mark. We gobbled our waffles and wild honey as early as Aunt Cornelia would cook them, and spent the rest of the morning on the phone. Everyone in our little crowd had to be told about Uncle Robert's hoax, and since most of them rather disliked Cousin Mark for his abrupt and opinionated manner, all were looking forward to seeing him "taken down a peg."

AT NOON Bill Saunders turned up, a small freckled youth. He made two or three "practice dives" off the tower porch, disappearing from sight each time mysteriously and reappearing through the shot well, slime-covered and draped with cobwebs.

"Splendid, splendid!" Uncle Robert applauded, chuckling. "You're an excellent swimmer, my boy. . . . Well, Adelia?" His old eyes twinkled as my cousin stood with her arm about his waist, watching the performance from the point below the tower where she and I were supposed to have seen the ghost a year ago.

"It's perfect!" she laughed. "Mark doesn't know you can swim underwater and come up inside the shot well. He'll be skeptical, of course, until our spook disappears into the river! Oh, when he goes back to Connecticut to visit his father's people, he'll certainly have a tale that will curl their hair!"

The day passed slowly under the weight of our young impatience. After dinner our friends began to turn up, by twos and fours, laughing and whispering together, and winking at Uncle Robert, who was enjoying his little jest immensely. As the long Virginia twilight began to fall, Adelia and I, in fluffy organdy, proposed an innocent-looking game of croquet under the big leafy maples on the lawn. Fireflies were beginning to wink and dart among the hedges. The sun had gone down below the distant blue-gray mountains, but a queer flat light lingered in the sky, giving everything the look of a stereopticon picture.

"Don't anybody dare to snicker and give us away," Adelia ordered. "I want Mark to think this is just another evening of fun and dancing. Unrehearsed. . . . Oh, I can't wait another minute!" she giggled, consulting the tiny wristwatch Uncle Robert had given her as a graduation present. "He's late! It'll be too dark in another half-hour for him to see Bill. But I've painted him all over with luminous paint. . . . You don't suppose Mark's got cold feet and backed out on his bet?"

"Not that hard-headed stubborn Yankee!" I scoffed. "An earthquake wouldn't keep him from. . . . See?" I broke off, triumphant. "Here he comes now over the north hill!"

A solitary rider in white sport shirt and brown jodphurs was indeed coming, hell-for-leather, over the far hill that separated the Homeplace from my aunt's remodeled home. The little bay mare Mark always rode took the hill at a hard gallop and plunged down the other side without slackening speed. A narrow creek with a fence-rambling along its farther bank divided the "bottom land" where the cows and horses grazed. As we watched, holding our breath, my cousin spurred his mount recklessly to take this precarious jump, ignoring the wide-open gate further down.

"Young idiot!" Uncle Robert muttered. "Rides like a damyankee. No consideration for the hoss. . . . Hah! He'll break his fool. . . ."

Even as he spoke the words, the little bay, sailing over creek and fence, caught

a hoof on the top rail and fell head over heels. Her rider went sprawling, and did not rise, even after the mare scrambled to her feet and went galloping back home through the open gate.

Adelia and I gasped, and started to run in that direction. But as we reached the orchard gate, we saw Cousin Mark striding toward us along the narrow path past the springhouse. We waved, he waved back, and Adelia sniffed.

"He's okay," she said, almost resentfully. "Nothing could make a dent in that rhinoceros hide!"

But as he approached us, I saw that he looked very pale and dazed. There was a great dark gash across his forehead at the temple, and he limped slightly. With a twinge of remorse we beckoned, ready to call off our little joke. But Mark shook his head mockingly, and pointed to the shot-tower, turning his steps in that direction before he reached the orchard. He shouted something, but wind must have blown the sound away from us, for we could hear nothing but the faint quavering cry of a whippoorwill somewhere along the river.

Adelia stamped her foot. "See?" she exploded. "He's so smug, so sure of himself! Going to show us up for a bunch of superstitious nitwits! Just you wait . . .!"

We ran back through the orchard to join the others, lined up along the fence to watch Mark. Through the gathering dusk we could see his lone figure toiling up the hill toward the shot-tower, its bleak silhouette picked out sharply against the pale pink-and-gold of the western sky. White sheep dotted the green hillside, but as Mark picked his way among them, they did not start and run, but went on grazing, undisturbed.

WE BEGAN to laugh and chatter excitedly as my cousin reached the point where the ghost could best be seen. Uncle Robert signaled surreptitiously with a flashlight, and instantly a foreshortened figure, glowing with an eerie green radiance, appeared on the lookout porch. Laughing, we saw Mark stop short, staring up at the apparition.

Uncle Robert signaled again. Promptly a harsh quavering cry broke the evening stillness, heart-rending in its despair. The figure on the lookout porch, in gray Confederate uniform and forage cap, suddenly flung itself out into space. Screaming, it fell down, down, to disappear in the swirling river far below. We saw Mark standing on the riverbank, watching intently for the swimmer to bob up. When he did not, my cousin turned uncertainly, looking up and downstream, while we watched, bent double with mirth at his obvious bewilderment. He turned at last and entered the door of the shot-tower, evidently preparing to climb the spiral staircase and examine the lookout porch from which the spectre had jumped. We fell upon one another, rocked with laughter.

But abruptly my cousin's figure reappeared and started limping down the hill. He reached the front gate and stood there, swaying slightly, very pale and disheveled, but smiling in mocking triumph. As Adelia opened the iron gate for him, questioningly, trying to keep her face straight and solemn, Mark began to laugh silently—and held out his hand, palm up.

At that instant a second dripping figure, in soggy gray uniform and minus the forage cap, was seen slogging down the hill. Bill Saunders reached us and leaned on the fence, grinning disgustedly and coughing a bit as if strangled. Most of the phosphorescent paint had washed off, and he glowed ludicrously only in spots on Uncle Claud's faded uniform.

"Bill!" Adelia wailed, half-laughing. "Oh, shoot! What went wrong? How did Mark find out . . .?"

"Aw-w!" Saunders ducked his head sheepishly. "I did it perfectly twice before! But *this* time I had to swim up under the wrong side of the shot cauldron! Got strangled and darn near drowned! Would have, if Mark hadn't heard me splashing around and caught me by the collar. . . ."

All eyes turned on my cousin Mark then, standing there quietly in the gathering dusk, looking oddly weak and pale but smiling with sardonic satisfaction. His hand was still held out mockingly, and Adelia flounced over to him, disgruntled.

"All right, General Grant!" she lashed

out peevishly as Mark still did not speak. "Start rubbing it in, why don't you? You outflanked us! You won the bet . . . and I'm no welcher!" Her brown eyes, twinkled suddenly. "But . . . I didn't say *where* you could kiss me—just on the cheek!" She turned her pretty face up to him, at the same time thrusting a crumpled bill into his hand; I gasped as I saw that it was a worthless piece of 1864 currency we had found in the attic, along with Uncle Claud's uniform. "And here's your five," Adelia jeered. "I didn't promise I wouldn't pay off . . . in Confederate money!"

Mark smiled at her, a one-sided ironic little smile of reluctant admiration. He shrugged and bent to kiss her on the cheek. But abruptly he swayed, an expression of pain and confusion crossing his handsome face, now only a white blur against the darkness. One hand groped for the money Adelia held out, the other went to the dark gash in his forehead. And I saw my pretty cousin's face soften with tenderness.

"Oh, Mark!" she cried out. "You *were* hurt when your horse threw you! Why didn't you tell us, instead of going on with this silly bet we . . .?"

Someone screamed — a rasping high-pitched sound of utter terror. We all whirled toward the sound, startled. Shadrach, coming across the lawn gravely to find Uncle Robert, had halted abruptly. His darkey eyes were distended with horror, one black hand pointing shakily in our direction. We laughed, thinking he had seen Bill Saunders' glowing figure, and followed him into the house as he ran from us, still shricking. But he locked himself in his room and no amount of coaxing would bring him out.

IN THE hallway we noticed the phone, off the hook. Uncle Robert picked it up, and was startled by the sound of sobbing coming over the wire.

It was my aunt, a rather hysterical woman. Mark's horse, she said, had returned, riderless, to the stable. She was sure something had happened to him. Was he alright? Was he there with us?

Uncle Robert soothed her, assured her that Mark was with us, quite uninjured, then called him to the phone to convince his mother.

There was no answer, other than the eerie cry of a distant whippoorwill. Mark had vanished, left abruptly—after collecting, Adelia remarked in a covert tone of disappointment, only the money-half of their little bet. We'd phone and tease him about that when he reached home, she laughingly said. . . .

But an hour later, my aunt called back. Mark had not arrived. When she called again frantically around midnight, a search was instituted. Toward morning they found his body.

He was lying, all crumpled up, where his little bay mare had thrown him when she fell. A quick examination showed that his right leg had been broken in two places; but mercifully, he had not had to lie there suffering all night. A blow on the temple, when his head struck a rock, had killed him —instantly, the coroner said.

Mark had been dead all that time. The coroner jeered at the fantastic account we told of his saving Bill Saunders' life, then collecting that bet from Adelia. A case of mass-hypnotism, he called it, induced by the fact that we were all so anxious for Mark's presence to complete our little hoax about the shot-tower ghost. He quoted the illusion of the Indian rope-trick as an example; how a group of people in broad daylight can be made to "see" a small boy climb a rope rising in midair, and disappear before their very eyes. "Psychic residue" and "ectoplasmic replica" were terms he had never heard . . . nor did anyone ever hear of them again from Uncle Robert's lips. He and Shadrach were thereafter conspicuously silent, exchanging a long look, whenever the supernatural was mentioned. And as for me, the cry of a whippoorwill at dusk still makes me shiver uncontrollably. . . .

For, there was one little item that the coroner could not explain. There was a crumpled five-dollar bill in my Cousin Mark's dead hand when they found him—a worthless piece of currency, printed by the Southern Confederacy in 1864.

The Deep Drowse

ARTHUR HODGES had very bad hay fever. He and his wife, Frances, lived in a cheerful, white-painted wood house with a big stone chimney and a tastefully designed stone terrace out back.

That they lived in this house in the country was one of the factors that made the Hodges' place in the history of this world secure for whatever stretch of time there is ahead for the universe. Everything, of course, had to dovetail perfectly. Have you ever thought that about an accident? For instance, a man who is hit on the head by a flower pot or a brick. The man is, say, forty years old, and yet the months and days and hours and seconds of those forty years have to be perfectly synchronized to bring him to that spot on the sidewalk precisely at the time that the brick is unloosened by the wind and sent plummeting on its mission of death.

So it was with the Hodges. Then, you see, Arthur Hodges was a writer. That's important. If everything else had been perfect, but he hadn't been a writer, there would have been no record for the incredible events that follow. Likewise, everything else would have been upset if Arthur Hodges hadn't been a *successful* writer. Just being a writer wouldn't have been enough. Because his "junk," as he called it in depreciating fashion, was turned out with sufficient facility and talent to have made his name a headliner on many of the nation's biggest magazines, he had more than enough money.

Heading by Vincent Napoli

By Allison V. Harding

Money meant two new autos in the two-car garage out back. His pretty redhead wife, Fran, dressed inconspicuously, but in the good taste which signals expensive clothes. And—this is, of course, the most important part—he had what he jokingly confided to his neighbors was a hermetically sealed study and bedroom for those summer months when ragweed, timothy, and other such deadly pollens would have made his life in the country quite terrible.

They had a joke, Fran and Arthur did, from July through September. He'd take some manuscripts down to the post office to mail and also provide himself with a few other errands in town to keep him away a couple of hours. By the time he got home—depending on the length of his mission—Fran could predict almost exactly how red his eyes would be, how uncomfortable his nose.

ARTHUR had a habit of coming in with whatever packages he had collected in the village, banging the summer screen door of the porch and saying, "Funny thing, darling, I feel fine! I guess we'll turn off that damn air-conditioning unit and save on our electric bill!"

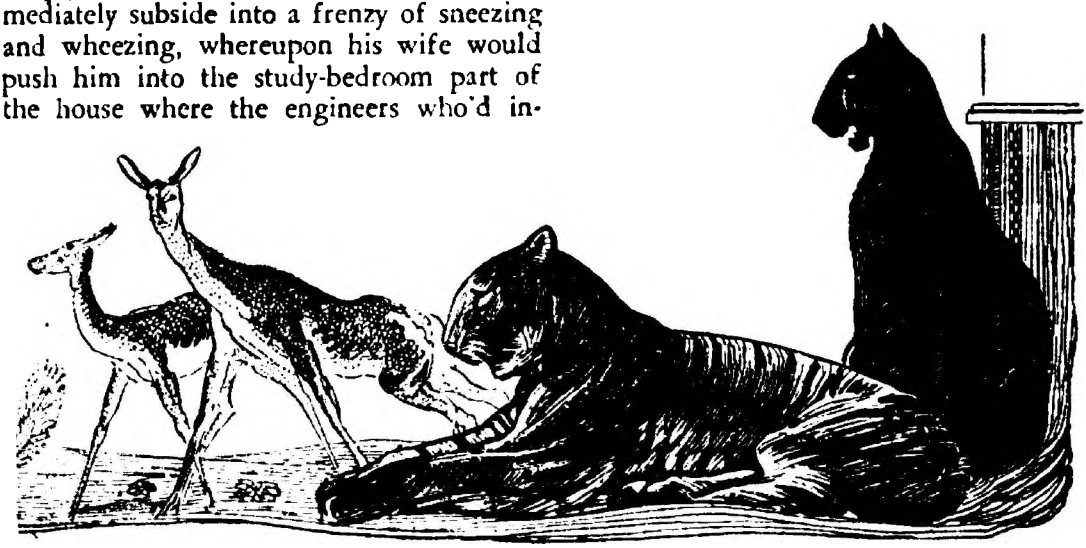
But this was always announced in a deeply nasal voice, and he would almost immediately subside into a frenzy of sneezing and wheezing, whereupon his wife would push him into the study-bedroom part of the house where the engineers who'd installed the expensive but efficient unit swore not a breath of outside air could penetrate.

Arthur worked in here most of the day except for periods of never more than a few hours, when he'd play tennis at the club or use the swimming pool there with Fran and his other friends. If there was a bridge game scheduled, it always took place in Arthur's study.

The whole business, in other words, was accepted by the neighbors, and nobody thought anything about it. If he'd been poor, Arthur obviously would have had to suffer or live in the city, as far away as possible from growing things. But his three months of travail had now been neatly gotten around by the Acme Air Conditioning Units Company, Detroit, Michigan.

Of course, it had taken extra air-proofing of the windows so that all cracks of the two rooms could be perfectly sealed, and that, in addition to the conditioning machines themselves, was expensive. But it kept them both out in the country, which they liked, and had become as much a part of their lives to be taken for granted as the dishwasher in the kitchen or the electric door on the garage.

So now it is easy to see the component parts of the whole affair. Arthur had very bad hay fever, but he liked the country.



We in our conceit consider our civilization the highest, the ultimate. But do we know for sure?

lived in the country, and got around his July-through-September agonies because he had the money to purchase for himself a hermetically sealed refuge. And he was a writer—don't forget that!

IT WAS the late afternoon of August fourteenth. Fran came back from the village in the convertible to find Arthur out on the lawn practicing with a putter. She forgot to upbraid him for his running nose and swollen eyes because of the important-looking envelope in her hand. A writer's wife gets to sense these things.

"Open it up!" she ordered.

The registered letter was from a movie company. Hodges had been dickering with them on his latest serial for one of the big magazines. The letter was good news. They were offering to buy, and at the kind of fabulous price that movies deal in.

"Well!" said Arthur, holding the opened letter in one hand and clutching for his pocket handkerchief with the other. "Well, that's pretty good!"

He tried, as always, to appear unconcerned, but Fran threw her arms around his neck, gave him a big kiss.

"You're *wonderful*, darling!" she cried gaily.

He sighed, trying not to show how pleased he was with the news and her attentions.

"At least this will pay for the air-conditioner for another summer!"

Then Fran took him by the elbow and steered him inside. "You get back into the Cave," she ordered him.

It was their pet name for that sanctified haven of pure, manufactured, pollen-free air.

The breeze died down, and with the wind gone, it grew very hot. Fran prepared a cold supper and brought it into Arthur's den. She thought it was actually much nicer here than outside, where the humidity had become oppressive. She looked out across the green country from the window of his study and noticed in the failing light the pockets of fog clinging to the lower lies of land.

"Art," she said, turning away from her contemplation of the window scene and spooning up some of her potato salad, "I think we ought to celebrate your latest triumph!"

He made a deprecating gesture with his hand.

"No, I really mean it! We haven't seen some of the old gang for a while. Jack and Cynthia, for instance. We ought to really have them out. And then there's Tim and Mary. Let's have quite a party!"

HE WARMED up to the idea. Thinking about it as she went, she took some plates into the other part of the house and got some ice cream out of the freezer to bring it back to the study.

She noticed, then, how warm the rest of the house was after the clean, cool air of the Cave.

As an after-thought, she decided first to bring a deck chair in they'd left on the terrace where she'd been sunning herself in shorts earlier that day. When Fran went outside, she noticed again the oppressive heaviness of the air. It made it hard to breathe. It made her sleepy.

With evening approaching, the darkening sky was burned with purple and orange, and she thought it probably meant another blisterer tomorrow. She went back into the Cave with the ice cream and the plates, slammed the special door which hermetically sealed it, and they started talking about their plans again.

This was the night of August fourteenth —the night which would initiate Arthur Hodges to the part he would play, which in its way, would make him as famous in the sweep of history as the names of Darwin or Columbus or—or—

Fran, aside from being pretty, was a methodical girl. She was self-appointed watchdog of the budget.

"No, darling," Fran insisted. "It would be a lot of fun to have a celebration! Next week-end would be fine." And she mentioned his very best friends, the Fisks and the Barnes. "I'm going to call them," she said resolutely.

"No use trying Tim," Arthur suggested. "He's one of those office wretches, and you'd simply remind Mary he wasn't home yet!"

"It's nearly eight o'clock!" said Fran reproachfully with a new look at the small

desk clock getting ready to tinkle the news. "I'll try Jack and Cynthia."

Doodling with the phone pad, she noted down the time, eight p.m., just as the clock chimed out musically. She asked the operator for the Fisk's number and waited for three rings.

"Cynthia!" she helloed to the feminine voice that answered. "It's Fran Hodges!"

ARTHUR could hear the other girl squeal with delight over the phone. Fran began to explain the invitation, and from his wife's expression and the noises from the earpiece, Arthur, from the other side of the room, could tell that the invitation had gone over well and the girls were about to get on all sorts of other subjects. He came over.

"Say hello to Cynthia for me and let me speak to that shyster husband of hers!"

Fran wrinkled up her nose in mock anger at this interruption of their gossip but after all, it was *his* night.

"Cynthia, where's Jack?" she relayed over the phone. "Oh, so early? Well, throw some water on him or something! Art wants to speak to him!"

She covered the mouthpiece with her hand.

"Old age has crept up on the barrister! Cyn says he's sleeping on the living-room sofa."

"Probably had one too many on the way home!" Art put in irreverently.

"Oh, Jack!" Fran's attention was called back to the phone. "Don't make your excuses to *me!* If I were your wife, I'd make you do the dishes! That would keep you awake! Here's my genius husband with a momentous word for you. It's probably a lie, Jack, about his latest golf score. Don't believe it!"

Fran handed the receiver over to her husband.

"Hello, Counselor!" said Art into the phone.

They talked and joked and then Jack relayed through Art to Fran some thought about a big case he had coming up at the end of next week. If it broke in a certain way, he'd probably not be able to make it, or at least, it would be difficult. He was hearing from the client involved as a matter of fact, later that evening. Fran made another face and took the phone from Art.

"Jack, put Cynthia back on! You men always louse everything up! Look, Cyn, after Jack has heard from this old client, you call us back tonight, will you? Oh, we'll be up till well after midnight. How is it in there? Hot? I'll bet it is! We're in the Cave now to cure Art's sniffles. I stepped outside for a minute after supper and there wasn't a breath of air even here in the country! You be sure and do that, Cyn. We'll wait for you. We're going to call Tim and Mary Barnes. We thought we'd get them 'cause you and Jack can always beat them at bridge! And Art loves Mr. Barnes because he once took him in a golf match! Hear from you later, Baby!"

Fran hung up. It was eight-thirty.

"We really shouldn't have talked so long," she reproached. "But I guess we can afford it now, can't we, Genius?"

Art ruffled her hair and then kissed an auburn curl on the top of her head.

"Night rates," he murmured. "That's what I'm counting on! Try Tim and Mary. Old Man Barnes ought to be home from his vulgar money-making pursuits by now! Gee, I'm glad I don't commute to the city every day and then come back to some suburban house that looks so much like the neighbors' on either side you have to be careful you don't go in the wrong door and kiss somebody else's wife!"

FRAN gave the suburban number that belonged to the Barnes, and Art stole the phone from her hand. The study window showed that it was completely dark outside now.

"Missus Barnes!" Arthur boomed. "These are your long-lost country cousins, the Hodges!"

He frowned a bit, and after a moment, passed the phone back to his wife. His mouth formed the words, "Think we disturbed them."

Fran carried on nobly. Tim wasn't back from the city yet? Was it beastly hot there? Couldn't be much worse off in the city. Oh, yes, Fran nodded to reassure Mary, she'd just talked to the Fisks and they'd said the city was simply unbearable. Poor Tim, what was keeping him? Well, anyway, you two

need a vacation in the country. How about next week-end? Look, we'll call again a bit later after Tim's home. She hung up.

"Funny!" Fran said it.

"What?"

"Well, I mean we lead this bucolic life of solitary splendor where you can't see your next-door neighbor's house without a telescope! We're supposed to be lazy and going to weed while our city friends and their first cousins, the suburbanites, are still supposed to be in there swinging with their eyes on the main chance!"

"What's the point?" Arthur asked.

"Nothing, exactly," replied Fran, "Except when we call these live wires, Jack's sound asleep at the end of a big career-punching day and Mary . . . well, I kind of have the sneaky feeling we woke her up!"

Art nodded. "Think you're right. Well, I always said this was the racket out here in the real country!"

"Aren't you glad I agree with you?" Fran came over to his side and rumpled his hair. "You wouldn't like it so much out here without *me.*"

"Honey," he said and kissed her. Then he had a thought. "You didn't put the garage door down, did you?"

"No, but silly . . . don't bother about it! It's not going to rain or snow tonight."

"Might as well," said Art. "Principle of the thing and all that, you know!"

"Silly, silly!" said Fran, "and you might get sneezing again."

"I hope I do," her husband replied, "so I can come back here and really appreciate what this setup is costing me!"

HE WENT out and into the un-air-conditioned part of the house. It was very warm, and almost immediately he began to sweat. God, how it must be in the city! He started out the back door and found he couldn't see a thing in the starless night. He came back and got the torch that hung in the coat closet, followed its rays to the garage.

He thumbed the "Down" switch that controlled the electric doors, and they rumbled into place. Because he got pleasure out of the accoutrements that science had designed for easier living, he thumbed the "Up" switch and watched the doors rise again. It was neat—the whole operation.

He let them descend and then stood there with the flash turned off, trying to see if his eyes would grow accustomed to the gloom. Somewhere out towards where the birdbath stood, a firefly pricked the wall of blackness momentarily. He shone the light and picked up the marble bath.

Arthur walked a few steps away from the house and the garage, past the birdbath towards the field, enjoying the freedom of these few steps as someone does who has even the relatively inoffensive restriction that he did. Things always looked different at night, he reminded himself as he torched the yellow beam of the flashlight here and there.

The trees and shrubbery had a peculiar lifeless aspect, as though they were prop scenery. From the ridge that crowned the southern horizon of his property, the faraway lights of a speeding car shoveled the gloom back for a few instants, and then with the vehicle gone on its dark errand, there was nothing but the little light in his hand and the occasional, very-seldom pinprick of a firefly off to the left or perhaps over to the right. The ground underneath his mocassins had its fine sheen of night dew; he could feel the taller blades of grass swish damply against his ankles as he walked.

From out of the endless blackness that stretched away from where he stood, across the universe something came that blinked green and red in the sky. It was the mail plane heading for the state capital a hundred miles north, and idly he turned his flash upward and pinched the switch in a staccato series, then thinking foolishly of the action flicked it off. To them, if anything, it would be as a firefly was to him—a tiny, indistinct something for an instant against the pall of darkness that covered the earth.

The plane fled from him into the northern night—fled as though afraid—and a feeling of momentous loneliness welled up inside of him, making him turn abruptly so he could see the lights of the house—their house—Fran's and his.

He walked rapidly back, and this time secured the front and back doors and the

windows for the night before rejoining Fran in the Cave.

"NOBODY'S called," she said petulantly. "Have you been outside all this time fussing with that old garage door that tickles you so?"

He nodded.

"How many sneezes?"

"Not one!" he avowed, surprised at the realization, himself.

She squinted at him dubiously.

"Upon my honor!" He put a hand on his heart and raised the other. "I don't think there's enough air out there to blow the old pollen around. Mighty stuffy!" He sank down in a chair and enjoyed the cool, pure oxygen of the room. "I tell you, Fran, this thing's worth it! I mean even if you didn't have an allergy or ghastly hay fever, or anything!"

"This is silly!" Fran said after a while longer. "I'm going to call the Fisks. They promised to call and they haven't!"

Fran picked up the receiver, and it was just past ten-thirty. Arthur went over and sat beside her, held his head close to hers.

"Eavesdropper!" she whispered.

They both had the same reaction when the voice answered, as they said afterward and as Arthur wrote it. It was Cynthia's voice, and yet it wasn't. Arthur's first thought was that she'd been drinking; Fran, more charitably, thought that she was ill.

"Darling, you were going to call! Where's Jack? You sound . . . a little funny!"

Cynthia talked, and as she talked, her voice got stronger. It was so terribly hot there in town, she apologized. Finally Jack came to the phone, groggy in voice, too. Yes, his client had called up quite a long time ago. It had been kind of unsatisfactory, but . . . hang it all, they'd come out the next weekend!

"Gee, I think we need to get away," Cynthia confided. "Jack's just worn out, and I feel pretty bushed too."

Then Fran couldn't get Cynthia's attention for a few minutes, and when the other girl came back on the phone, she had an edge of excitement in her voice.

"Can you hear that, Fran? I mean over the phone? Listen as I hold the mouthpiece this way . . . can you hear it?"

Fran listened intently, and Arthur pressed his ear as close to the receiver as he could. There was something like a hissing—a radiator or a boiler letting off steam. Cynthia came back on.

"I don't know—I think the heat's got us! We'd just love to come out to the country . . . and *stay*!"

Before they rang up, Cynthia dropped the phone once and had to pick it up. Fran hung up, worried.

"Drunk!" said Arthur.

"Don't be silly!" his wife remonstrated. "She doesn't drink! Jack, maybe once in a while, but *she* doesn't! I'm worried. I think they're both sick—like food poisoning or something."

"Well, as long as they're over it by next weekend . . ." Arthur put in. "Go ahead, try the Barnes."

Fran gave the number and waited. The connection took quite a while, and when it was made, Arthur saw his wife's face tighten.

"I can hardly hear you, Mary! What is it? Yes, it's Fran Hodges. We're calling up about next weekend. What? Mary, it's awfully hard to understand you! Must be a bad connection. What's wrong with Tim?"

Arthur was watching her expression from the lounge chair.

"Yes, he probably has been working too hard. You don't sound too spry yourself, my chicken! Listen! You both need a rest. What? Hear what?"

Fran's face blanched a bit then, and her eyes sought Arthur's.

"Now you just pack yourself into bed, young lady, and make your plans tomorrow morning with that overworked, money-making husband of yours! Come out *before* the weekend. Have Tim knock off. Come out Wednesday or Thursday. We'd love to have you anytime!"

Fran hung up slowly.

"I think our friends are all giving out. She sounded awfully funny and said . . . oh, you men are terrible! Said she couldn't seem to wake Tim up . . . that he got back from the station and just sort of collapsed!"

"Apparently it's catching!" Arthur commented. "The Barnes and the Fisks, separated by what? Fifty or sixty miles? And

your theory is they've both got food-poisoning from the same bad oysters!"

FRAN smiled. "It's funny though, Art, about one thing. *She* said something about hissing, too! Just like Cyn!"

Fran's hand came up to her mouth and her eyes got bigger.

"Darling, you don't suppose . . . you don't suppose it's any-sort of enemy attack! You know that article we read . . . about the way when war came this time. . . ."

Arthur laughed heartily. "Now wait a minute! *I'm* supposed to be the one with the imagination! *I* make money out of it and *you're* doing it for free!"

She relaxed, but he saw the puzzlement was still on her face. To reassure her he switched the radio on, and the sounds of a jazzy record filled the study. The emcee came on sounding sleepy, but then they all do and have for ages. There was certainly no momentous "We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin. . . . The President has just announced that this country has been attacked by . . ." and so forth. Nothing like that.

He saw that Fran's fright had passed, but then she said resolutely, "Turn that thing down, Art, will you? I'm going to call Jack and Cynthia again!"

"Now *look!* This time you really *are* going to wake them up! It's getting on towards midnight!"

But Art knew his wife, and when she was determined to do something, she did it. Luckily, he reflected, many times in the past it usually had turned out to be the right thing. He shrugged his shoulders and said half-jokingly:

"Well, I warned you. After this, they'll never even *think* of accepting our invitation next weekend! We'll be in their doghouse for weeks!"

Fran dialed the operator, gave the number, and in the interim before the connection was made, the quiet of the country seemed to press from the black out-of-doors around them in this lit oasis of the night.

"Takes that operator an awfully long time," said Fran aloud.

Finally the ringing commenced. It seemed interminable to Art, sitting on the other side of the room. At last there was an answer, for Fran said, "Hello, Cynthia!"

But all was not well, Art knew, from the way his wife's hand tightened to whiteness around the receiver. Fran seemed to be explaining, pleading, and finally Arthur came to her side and spoke down to her upturned face, "What's the matter?"

She shook her head. He took the phone, and a sloth's voice assailed him, droning on. Fran was sitting on the edge of her chair, terrified.

"Cynthia!" he called sharply. "What's wrong? Are you ill? Where's Jack? Put him on!"

He could barely make sense out of this thing. Cynthia was saying slowly, laboriously, as though drugged or sick, that Jack had passed out and that . . . funny . . . she couldn't seem to get any help. He listened for a moment more and then hung up quickly. He dialed for the operator, and after long seconds, she came on.

"I'm going to call Doctor McCollum in town. You remember him." Fran nodded approval.

HE WAS a physician they'd known when they'd lived not many blocks away from the Fisks. The McCollum connection seemed to take an eternity and then there was a voice at the other end.

Arthur asked for the doctor, and the voice said slowly, "Doctor McCollum . . . speaking."

Hodges identified himself and told what he thought—that the Fisks, good friends of his, were apparently unable to get aid. Could Doctor McCollum go himself or get someone?

There was a long pause, and then the voice answered,

"Funny, Hodges, damn funny! Something strange. . . ."

There was a noise and an interruption. Arthur's hellos brought no new response. He kept his back to Fran as he hung up for fear she would find fuel for her fright in his expression. He would try the Barnes.

The minutes ticked away. Their village operator was apparently—no, here she was. He gave the number, and there was another long wait and then the sound of ringing

in the city suburb. He waited no usual time but allowed fully five minutes.

Finally—he pictured the scene — the phone was dragged from its cradle. It was Tim. A lethargic Tim who slurred his words. Arthur asked Tim if Mary was all right. Asleep, was the mumbled answer.

Arthur spoke quickly then. "I want you to listen to me carefully! Call a doctor, Tim, or your local police. Do it immediately, do you hear me!" Hear you, echoed the voice weakly. "Tell them . . . tell them how you feel and ask for help! Do that, Tim, do it right away!" The voice at the other end gurgled something unintelligible.

Arthur cradled the phone. He turned squarely to face Fran.

"Something's happened, darling. I don't know what. See what you can get on the radio."

She jumped at his bidding. He was at the phone again, dialing, dialing. Finally the operator—sounding like Cynthia, like Dr. McCollum, like Tim.

"The police," he said distinctly. "Get me the police!"

The operator's fumblings were audible. He heard her mouth the word "Police" as a drunk would, but at last—her instinctive reflexes taking over, he guessed—the connection was made.

A gruff male voice mumbled what might have been, "Police Headquarters," and then subsided into a deep, long yawn before Arthur had a chance to say anything.

"Look . . . this is Arthur Hodges!" he persevered. "I've been calling some friends of mine around the country, and I don't know what it is but everybody acts kind of drugged!"

The policeman's gruff voice mumbled something about "just drunks," yawned again and became quiet.

"Hello! Hello!" shouted Arthur.

There was no response. He hung up finally.

"Darling," Fran called in a small, frightened voice from the other side of the room. "There seems to be an awful lot of silences on the air, even for past one!"

But even as she spoke, a cacophony of jazz broke into the still room, and they both brightened with the noise.

"Can't knock the jivesters down!" he said in an attempt at lightness.

They sat and waited. For what, neither knew. Fran kept looking at the telephone, and they both had their ears glued to the radio. It was a typical all-night disc jockey show—the records set up in series beforehand and automatically playing one after another—but without the emcee's comments between each. That was Arthur's fear, but he did not give words to it. He knew Fran and he knew what she was thinking. He was thinking himself. Somehow, something had happened.

The record on now was something by Andre Kostelanetz. It had a noisome, crashing crescendo at the end. The silence following it was, by contrast, even heavier. No other record, no voice making between-disc comments.

They both waited, smiled bravely inside their heads thinking the next minute, the next second—there *are* silences on the air . . . suppose you had to go to the washroom—even disc jockeys are human . . . somebody will come on. But there was nothing. Finally they knew it.

They looked at each other, and Arthur managed another smile. Fran's answering grin, like the radio, lacked life. To keep busy and to keep from saying anything, Arthur picked up the phone again. He held it free for fifteen minutes, dialing at intervals, but there was no operator and the telephone was as dead as if he must wait till tomorrow for it to be invented.

THERE were still the dial numbers left to him, and one after another, Arthur methodically dialed the numbers of friends and acquaintances hereabouts. The phones would ring, each with their different timbre, but there were no answers. Across the dark brow of the town with its mantle of night, from this valley and this ridge on across the black-shrouded lanes and vales and hills, the phones chimed and vibrated and rang and shrilled. But they stopped only when *he* admitted defeat by hanging up. Across this town and further . . . much further as he knew . . . there seemed no one!

A peculiar theory was forming in Arthur's mind. After all, *they* were all

right, unaffected apparently. There was a Mr. Hoskins, a small, bent man, who was caretaker at the movie house. He took tickets and often worked in the projection room and slept in the barnlike building at night. For *he,* like Arthur Hodges, was a hay-fever sufferer. The building was air-conditioned, even though not with the scientific perfection of the Cave. Anyway, Hoskins swore it helped him.

Arthur called the theatre, knowing that the late movie would have been out now for about an hour. The phone was downstairs—he could picture it from his and Fran's excursions there—by a window in the lobby. Hoskins' room was above.

The phone rang and rang. It was like those others. As he was about to give up, a click made it suddenly, importantly different, and there was Hoskins, his old man's quavering voice sleepy and querulous. But it made sense, and he understood when Arthur identified himself.

"Listen, Mister Hoskins! Listen very carefully! Your life may depend on it!"

The other man made some protest about, Was this a joke, but Arthur went on.

"Whatever you do . . . whatever you do, Hoskins, *don't* go—"

But the caretaker broke in, "Wait up, Mister Hodges . . . Mister Hodges, through the window here I can see into the street! There're some people *lying* there, Mister Hodges! Think there must've been an accident! I'll have to go out and see!"

EVEN as Arthur screamed at the man, screamed "No! No! Whatever you do, *don't go out!*" he knew it was too late. The phone clicked, and Hoskins was off on his errand.

There must be others like that, Arthur reasoned, in the country, in the state, and the nation. Who knew how broad this was or what it was? But had those others any chance without knowing . . . suspecting? Arthur made up his mind.

"Fran, I'm going out a minute!"

She was on her feet, her arms around him, tears very close to the surface.

"No, Art! *Please* don't! Please, please! Something's terribly wrong! *Don't* leave me!"

He held her gently and caressed her red hair "Only for a second, Fran. Honey, I'm trying to dope this thing out."

"It's war, isn't it, Art? Some kind of poison gas?"

"I don't know, honey, but it's best that I take a turn around outside. I won't go far, but we've got to know what's going on!"

"You mean—," she said hopefully, "—we might be in some sort of pocket here on the ridge that doesn't get the gas?"

"Could be," he said, but it was a forlorn hope.

He took the flashlight, and she walked him to the door of the Cave, her fingers entwined tightly in his.

"If you're not back in ten minutes, I'm coming out!"

"Don't worry, Fran."

He opened the door abruptly and shut it as quickly, walking rapidly through the other part of the house. The air impressed him immediately. It was flat and had a peculiar stale quality, although some of this he discounted as being the result of having just come from the pure oxygen of the Cave.

He didn't bother to turn on the other house lights, but used his flash instead. The bright wallpaper and the cheerful chintz on the chairs looked strangely forlorn and unreal.

Outside, the black world was very quiet . . . as quiet as any two a.m. As he stood on the terrace, he first noticed lightheadedness. A feeling of illness touched the pit of his stomach and the palms of his hands began to sweat unduly. He fought it back as best he could, listening, looking for any other sound or sign in the night around of human movement—a car light from the state highway up the ridge; a plane in the heavens; a train whistle in the distance. There was nothing—there might not have been in this chosen space of time at this hour anyway—but it was peculiarly disturbing.

His brain was suddenly dull and very lonely. He wanted to sit there and then on the terrace, to recline, to put the flashlight down, loosen his belt and collar.

He turned and sped for the door of the house, his heart pounding, lights within his head. Despite himself and the chiding that it was purely psychological, he yawned

and knew the yawn was real. Fatigue and sleepiness had struck suddenly like a heavy dose of sedative.

He found the knob and jerked it open, walked through the dark corridors of the unlit part of the house and, thankfully, reached the door of the Cave, yanked it open and went in. His face showed more than he wanted it to, for Fran came over to him and there were tears in her eyes.

"Are you all right, Arthur?"

He nodded his head and tried to smile but the heaviness was still on him. He turned his head away so she wouldn't see the yawn and sat down very suddenly. His wristwatch told him he'd been gone but eight minutes—a very short time—so that if Fran's hunch about the poison gas was right, it must be a fairly potent one to strike so fast.

In the oxygen of the Cave, Hodges soon felt better. As the small hours of the morning wore on, he made trips into the other part of the house. Quick trips, for his tolerance to the outside seemed to grow less and less. The almost incredible drowsiness became stronger, and he could stay away less long each time.

BUT in those trips he brought every bit of food in the house back to the Cave, some sterno cans and whatever other odds and ends he decided they might need. At five a.m. they held what he called a counsel of war. There was, Arthur admitted, something going on. What it was, he didn't know and couldn't guess. But they were particularly lucky for their hermetically sealed quarters and the oxygen supply.

They ran the radio dial up and down at intervals and found only silence. Arthur tried Hoskins again on a forlorn chance. There was no answer. No operator answered when he dialed the 0.

"We seem to be alone right now," he admitted.

The first threads of gray were streaking the eastern view when Arthur packed Fran on to the couch with a blanket around her and saw her drift off for a little nap. He sat at the desk and calculated the two most important items of their lives now: Food and oxygen. Of these, the latter was of prime significance. The canned goods, he felt, could be rationed to last almost indefinitely. They'd had quite a stock in the kitchen cabinets. But the oxygen—he toted up the number of fresh cylinders available—with continuous use (usually they turned the mechanism off to save on the precious stuff) their supply would last, at the most, seven or eight days. It was unthinkable that by then some explanation and solution to this whole business would not be found. At the worst, in that time, an enemy would take possession, but they would at least be free of their present dilemma.

It was daylight when Fran woke up, and the sun was a molten gold burning a hole through the hazy sky. As on the previous evening, the trees stood silent, almost too tired to hold up their limbs. No breath of air stirred. It was as though the outside—all outside—was a vacuum. They opened some cans and ate, and then Arthur went into the adjacent bedroom and slept till noon.

When he woke up and rejoined Fran in the study, her fright had surged upward again. He found out why almost immediately. She admitted she'd gone out. There was some small thing she wanted to get.

"The *feeling*, Art! It was so terrible I . . . I couldn't fight against it! It was like . . . when you take ether at the hospital and you begin to float. You fight and fight but it's stronger than you are. I just got back here . . . I almost fell outside the door but I got back."

It angered him a little for he had been asleep, and if she'd failed to get back, he wouldn't have known until probably too late. They swore not to leave the Cave hereafter at all unless absolutely necessary and then only while the other stood by inside to perform rescue work if need be.

They spent hours talking, wondering, speculating. They coaxed and wheedled the radio for sounds that would not come. Commercials and soap operas and five-piece bands became precious by their very absence, and then as a writer will under almost any circumstances, Arthur found his way to the typewriter and began tapping the keys. Fran said with mock petulance.

"My God! You're not going to do a story *now!* Darling, you've forgotten . . .

but we don't know if you have any audience left—*anywhere*!"

The joke felt flat, perhaps too frightfully true, for all they knew, to be funny.

"No, Fran," Arthur replied seriously, "I just want to put the dope down about this thing since last night—sort of a chronology, you know. You can fuss with those tin cans and sew. I like to keep busy. It might as well be this."

And he began to bang away at the typewriter.

AT FIRST, time passed very slowly, as though the weight of doubt that clouded their minds clung to the hands of the clock, slowed them so that one wondered if time too had become affected by the lethargy of the outside world.

Occasionally, Arthur or Fran, one or the other of them, would go to the phone, dial the operator or some familiar or unfamiliar number series. There was the ringing, showing that the inanimate sinews of wire and electricity and mechanical appliances were still alive, but nothing else.

And the radio hummed. The small needle that moved across the dial from low to high kilocycles, touching the familiar stations that customarily fed so much noise, both human and instrument into a nation's ear, found nothing on its course.

They spent much time at the windows of the study and bedroom off it. They looked out at the countryside so green with August, so familiar with things they had done. Why, there, see, from the window, was a divot dug in the lawn where Arthur had practiced his golf swing! Now, in the late afternoon, there was still some haze across the land, but the sun had burned part of it away. Still though, there was no wind, and all of the outside had the flat, motionless appearance of scenery.

Without giving voice to their reason, both Arthur and Fran took themselves to the window at six p.m. A four-motored commercial passenger plane always shot over just southward at that time. It was a twilight flight that impressed itself on them with the roar of its high-speed, heavy motors. Arthur had joked once that he could even feel the vibration, sitting in his bath tub. Six came and went as did six-fifteen a quarter of an hour later. Towards six-thirty Fran said matter-of-factly:

"I guess there's no plane, either."

Arthur turned from the window and translated that fact onto paper. It was after the supper out of cans that Fran, sitting cross-legged on the floor, asked suddenly.

"What are we going to do? We can stay here only so long. Suppose we're the only people. . . ." She left the sentence unfinished and her fingers went to her temples.

He boshed and pooh-poohed, but much later after she was asleep in the bedroom, he examined the oxygen supply, computed the number of full cylinders left and adjusted the flow of the precious air downward.

The days went a little faster, then, as though for spite. Arthur worked some of the time at his typewriter and Fran stood looking over his shoulder, not once again saying what she'd said first: "But darling, who's going to read this!" If it had been a joke then, it was not now.

The telephone? It might as well be that the wires were cut. Radio, likewise. It was like a detective play—Cat and the Canary—or people marooned on an island. And the most important people in their lives were the long, gray, oblong cylinders with the silver, diamond-shaped labels that said, "Oxygen. Dangerous. Inflammable." They *were* people. They lived, or at least they contributed life, and *their* two lives would last just so long.

"Darling, I've got an awful headache. I feel funny!"

And Arthur would have to turn up the oxygen supply a bit more, for it was quite suddenly seven days now—the length of time their air supply would last them—but he had husbanded it.

THEY talked less now. A few times Art came upon Fran in the bedroom crying, but she always tried to hide it and found him a smile on short notice. Towards the end of their allotted time, as Arthur could figure it—as the last cylinder hissed out its oxygen—he wondered whether it would be better to stay here in the Cave and let the stale air slowly . . . ever so slowly . . . sap their strength and their senses or

whether they should open the door and go outside into whatever there was waiting out there.

But Fran, to whom he had not wanted to bring up the subject, had thought of it too, spoke of it, and together they decided that the Known was better than the Unknown. Besides, they'd had experience out there, and the memory of that sudden melancholy and pathological drowsiness was not all pleasant.

They started on what must be the last day. Arthur announced somewhat weakly—for there wasn't much air left—that they'd stretched the oxygen out five days more than he'd figured.

"The twelfth day," murmured Fran. It reminded her of something biblical.

Arthur had finished whatever he had to finish at the typewriter earlier, with nearly the last of the strength in his fingers. The page merely gave the facts of their predicament—the supreme fact of which was that their fresh oxygen had been gone since early morning. Nobody had worried about opening a can of food this day. Instead, they found themselves arm in arm on the settee by the window.

He gave Fran an affectionate squeeze, and noted with a terrible sadness that must be controlled for her sake, how pale she looked. He knew that he, likewise, must look a fright.

They leaned their heads together, and their foreheads rested against the windowpane. It was another warm day from the feel of the thick glass, and already the temperature of the room without its fresh, mechanically cooled oxygen, had risen noticeably.

It was no day to die, Arthur thought, as men have thought of every day so marked by Destiny. He looked at the greenness outside, the sameness . . . so funny that all this had happened . . . that all this *could* have happened.

He felt very tired. His breath was shallow and unsatisfying. Fran pressed against him, and he managed to turn his head. She was crying, and he kissed her, their mouths dry except for where a tear ran down and touched their lips in union. This would be, at least, their way to die—as completely together as two people could be, and that had compensation.

He was going to tell her after the kiss how much he loved her when her head moved away from his, her eyes slid from his eyes to peer out. They widened, and a little gasp came from her mouth. He turned. It was an effort. He looked where she was looking, through the window into the outside—the lawn.

THE lifeless stage scenery had become alive, for there—hopping nonchalantly across the grass—was a plump brown rabbit! It seemed to eye their window for a moment as though it knew of the two people there, and then hippety-hopped unconcernedly on towards the terrace.

The two overwhelmed people turned from their window, uttered small, meaningless noises. They made their way to the door of the Cave as best they could. Fran reached it first, but they pulled it open and went out together, arm in arm, leaving behind the manuscript neatly clipped and piled on the typewriter table—memorandum of the twelve days—that eternity that had yet been so short.

The rest of the house burst upon their senses—the familiar furniture, the bright wallpaper. Fran was sobbing unashamedly, and Arthur, with a surge of new strength, helped her forward. After the stale, nearly airless atmosphere of the Cave, even the hot stuffiness of out here was welcome.

They made the terrace door, and their weakness was a joke to be laughed at now. They went out. They staggered onto the lawn, and the sod beneath their feet, hard and dry for lack of rain, still was a treat for their footsteps.

They had not walked far when Arthur realized, with the stabbing shock of a knife in the heart, that all was not well. The same feelings as before . . . not the weakness and suffocation of the Cave a few moments earlier . . . but the *before* when they'd been outside since this terrible thing had happened. He turned abruptly and almost fell, and they reached for each other for mutual support. He saw that Fran was so affected, too.

They had not walked far . . . but it was

too far. The stretch of lawn to the terrace, to the back door was impossible leagues uphill, dragging weights beyond measure.

They fell together and lay close, panting into one another's face. There was simply an overwhelming desire to sleep, to rest now. Arthur saw it in Fran's face, and he had not the heart to hold up her bedtime nor the strength to stay sleep in himself.

The grass was home and a mattress, and as his head came down to it, the greenness enfolded and engulfed him.

The rabbit, meantime, hopped unconcernedly around the corner of the house and perhaps wondered at the strange antics of these humans as he took his plump brown body across the lawn and into the field beyond.

THE Institute of Hieroglyphics had made an intensive study of all such data, particularly with an eye to evaluating and discovering new facts concerning that momentous change in the solar system whose influences had caused what came to be known in future eons as "The Suspension."

Amazingly enough, one of the clearest records found—for in the beginning it did not seem possible that this species could be wiped out universally and so abruptly—was one made by a biped whose confessed ability in existence was the making of hieroglyphics.

It had taken much time, of course, for the Institute and other such institutes, to understand these record-symbols of another age. But this biped whose name was A. Hodges, with his companion biped, F. Hodges, had written of the twelve days—a day being a measure of time commonly used then by biped science. It was, in its way, a classic—the sudden, far more sudden than could be imagined by the most sanguine thinking of that time, suspension of biped civilization.

This A. Hodges had told well of it in his marks, and the Institute of Hieroglyphics, along with the other learned of the age, were inclined to accept the details set down as an accurate picture of what had taken place, at least in the first twelve days of The Suspension.

From the start of this event which biped thinking would have unquestionably accepted and labeled a catastrophe to the end of the record, there was, interestingly enough, no accurate guess on the part of the one identified as A. Hodges as to the real significance of what was happening. Those who had studied tribal customs and actions of the biped world averred that in that far-away period the chief concern of any segment was that some other faction would make war upon them—a word which had vanished from the Now, but meant the violent attack with intent to destroy as much in the way of living organisms and material as possible.

Biped Hodges had concerned himself with markings referring to "atom bomb" and "poison gas." It took some time before present-eon scientists could correctly evaluate precisely what these terms meant, but both were eventually tied in by semanticists, with the tribal factionalism and the obvious intent of biped to destroy biped.

It was a most interesting report, this hieroglyphic of Hodges, for at first, it was quite difficult for these enlightened of the Now to appreciate fully what had gone on Then. An examination of the universe and the earth does not reveal everything, for after all, meanings and values themselves change.

FOR instance, much of the lore of those mist-shrouded Dark Ages had been handed on from generation to generation of the enlightened by what in the vernacular of the Then would have been called "informers" in those unions called "households" of the biped age.

Even the use of the word "biped" must be qualified, for there are, as any student knows, bipeds today. But not uniquely so, whereas in the Then, the biped was supreme and reigned over all, including the other forms of life that inhabited the planet, whose mores, abilities and true eventual place were neither understood nor even considered by the biped.

Painstakingly, information of that forgotten biped species was gathered, and of the catastrophe that had removed them from rule of the earth, it seemed apparent now that some cosmic force whose mechanization had been set in motion by the shifting of

great astral bodies, had altered not only the oxygen belt which surrounds this globe, but more subtly, altered its ingredients. Of all living things, only the biped species which then ruled the world, had been unable to adjust to it. Because of certain structural peculiarities of the cortex, the race had been stupefied, made unconscious by the withdrawal from other's atmosphere of an ingredient necessary for the retention by this species of consciousness.

The Hodges Report, and other hard-won indications, proved this beyond a doubt, and it was accepted by historians. Contrary, of course, to the hieroglyphic manuscript, there had been no poison gas as such; there had been, instead, a closing of that "conscious," and the biped species went into a state of "suspension" through sleep, though it was, in the last analysis, starvation that caused the wiping-out of that civilization. Later these atmospheric alterations had righted themselves.

Another day of considerable moment in this present eon had occurred not too long ago when outriders had brought from some remote, far cave-place a biped, who, as the last of his species, had survived. It seemed that somewhere else in the world at the time of the great Suspension, two bipeds—one of each sex—had survived through some quirk of fate and nature. They had passed on what was left of their age through children and children's children and so on through the years, but conditions were now too adverse for them to multiply and take back the earth—as they would indubitably try to, present historians surmised, had they been able.

For centuries this spark from another age had rekindled itself with new progeny reared in a cave high in a ridge of desolate mountains at the loneliest spot in the world. Atmospheric conditions in that spot, because of natural phenomena, maintained a vacuum which allowed the retention of an ozone form not antagonistic to the biped.

But the day of greatest moment was when the last biped was brought to the Administration Building. Nature, semanticists decided, had robbed this one of his last chance to prolong himself in flesh-and-blood image.

He came then to their administration halls—a strange creature on two legs making strange angry sounds, that until the wisest were summoned, could not be interpreted. As the biped stood in front of their Councils, they urged a tablet on him and a writing device, and this being thinking that perhaps his message would reach to those of his kind somewhere, some day, made markings feverishly.

Then the biped was led away. Despite his violence and his ravings, orders were given to care for him well, feed him and give attention to his every need.

Afterward, wise and aged scholars were brought to study the tablet. This, then, had been a member—the last member—of that race which had called itself "human." The "human" had written angrily and self-chiding that he had been captured by jackals and wolves and brought before a "jury" composed of a lynx, a giraffe, two squirrels, a bear and other "creatures!" His hieroglyphic markings had trailed off at the end, but there were words of obscure meaning which, the wise men decided, stood for anger markings.

Despite the best of care, the biped died not long afterward, still, according to records of the event, making loud noises at his caretakers.

In reviewings of the whole affair at Animal Institute, it was decided that this fact, far more clearly than any markings and other dead evidence that had been found, illustrated the basic unfitness of the biped civilization which had so proudly called itself "human."

"It is obvious," was the finding, "that the shortcomings of the biped were many. Likewise, it was inevitable—even many centuries before it happened at the time of The Suspension—that the biped human would vanish and that animals—these enlightened of the present eon—would inherit the earth!"

The Rainbow Jade

BY GARDNER F. FOX

- MEDIOCRE -

THE bell clanged again. Shevlin heard its vibrating peal clearly in the crisp mountain air, two thousand feet above the sun-baked Taklamakan Desert. Its notes stirred tinkling echoes from snow-capped peaks and the fir-sheathed slopes of Tokosun Gorge. His brown face tightened, listening.

Very faintly, the gong was answered by a distant baying. There were animals here that responded to the call of that gong. Not dogs, not wolves. But something so like them, and yet so—unlike—that Shevlin shuddered.

He kicked the big Karasher stallion to full gallop. The sun was a scarlet hump on the horizon, and he wanted to get off this flat stretch before the moon came up from the Gobi. He touched the walnut handles of his Army revolver for reassurance.

Shevlin was an adventurer. He admitted it, when any of his friends accused him. He told them, "I'm out for what I can get. I'm big and I'm strong. I like the feel of a horse

Heading by John Giunta

A priceless jewel; perhaps the answer to the Universe

under me, and the smell of mountain air. I can't afford that kind of thing unless I work at it. So I go out and get things for people. Things in out-of-the-way places. Maybe even things that don't exist. Sometimes I chase legends." His gray eyes lighted when he talked like that. His friends knew he was remembering some piece of tissue-thin blue porcelain he had brought out of a bandit's lair for a millionaire; or perhaps the emerald that once had been in an emperor's swordhilt, an emerald now gracing a woman's finger in San Francisco.

When news of Pearl Harbor filtered across the Himalayas, Shevlin had stolen a horse and ridden a thousand miles to join Chennault. And when the surrender was completed on the deck of the Missouri, he threw his uniform into a trashbin and joined a nomad caravan headed for Paochi. He had met Talbot in Paochi, over a gin swizzle.

Talbot showed him a broken chip of yellow jade. The man's eyes, already unnaturally bright with fever, blazed as he looked down at the translucent stone.

"Nothing like it anywhere, old man. Positively priceless. Found it back inside, around the Sin-kiang section. Rainbow jade. That's what it is." At Shevlin's polite stare, Talbot chuckled. "'S what I call it, you know. Deuced rainbow left it with Confucius, after he'd finished that *hiao-king* book."

Talbot coughed, convulsing. He apologized, and added, "Go in back there for more of it myself if the flesh weren't so weak. Got a mind to, anyhow. Not that I need the stuff. More pounds'n I know what to do with, thanks to the *pater*. I say, Shevlin! You do work like this. Finding stuff an' things. Take a commission from me, old boy. What d'you say? Fifty pounds a month and a share-and-share split if you find the yellow stuff. Eh?"

He had agreed. Why not?

And in Kashgar, after six months of fruitless search, he found Chi Ling.

SHE was leaning against the painted post of a temple, cool in thin shirt and riding breeches and boots. She was not white, nor Kirghiz, Uzbek or Tatar. Her lips were red and full, her hair black as the *Ou-ni-yao* vases. Her body was bigger than the Chinese, her breasts more full. She was the loveliest thing Shevlin had ever seen, but it wasn't her beauty that took his eye.

It was the yellow jade amulet in the form of a crescent hanging about her throat. It matched the piece Talbot had shown him in Paochi. It was so transparent he could see the fabric of her blouse beneath it.

"Where did you get it?" he asked her. "I'll buy it from you. Just tell me how much you want. I'll buy information, too. Where'd—"

He got that far when she slapped him. She turned her back and walked away; but not before, deep down in the black pools of her eyes, he had seen that she was afraid; deadly afraid.

Shevlin followed her for two weeks before she spoke to him. One night he saw her coming out of the bazaar. There was a big man with her, a man with a hooked nose and the sharp, bright eye of an eagle. He was wrapped in a dirty sheepskin, but he wore it with the ease and grace of an emperor.

Shevlin said, "Look, my name's Shevlin. The jade, now. I'll pay you—"

The girl whispered harshly, "You want the jade, yes? You will pay for it? With two horses?"

Shevlin said, "Look, my name's Shevlin. The girl put out a pale white hand, touched his briefly. Her flesh tingled against his. Shevlin scowled. He had never bothered with women, except for an occasional Eurasian or White Russian emigre on the coast. Now this girl, with electric fingers and a face that was exquisite under Kashgar moonlight—

"Not money," she told him. "Horses. *You* must buy them."

Shevlin chuckled, and the girl stiffened. Political refugees of one sort of another! The frontier towns abounded with them. Then he shrugged. It was none of his affair. The jade was what he hunted. He said, "I'll have horses. Two fleet mares. With food and water canteens. Now—tell me your name."

She looked at him as a man for the first time. Shevlin let her study the brown planes of his face, the wide, thin mouth, the level gray eyes with the white scar above the left where a snow leopard on Anne Machin al-

most clawed it out. The scars on his leg and arm that the leopard had engraved tingled faintly as her eyes met his. He grinned, "Well, what about it? Do I get to know your name?"

She shook her head and touched the amulet. "No, that was not part of our bargain. Only the amulet. It will be yours."

When he came back, thirty minutes later, she had the yellow jade in her palm, and her black hair was tucked up in a knot on her shapely head. She would ride swiftly, he thought. Somehow, he knew she was a good horsewoman.

She dropped the jade piece into his hand, swung up into the saddle. She looked down at him, laughing softly. "My name is—Chi Ling." And then she was off in a clatter of hooves on the cobblestoned street.

Shevlin ran around the corner where his Karasher roan was jingling its bit impatiently, and mounted. He followed them easily. They made good targets in the moonlight.

He trailed them from a distance, across the alkali plains between Kashgar and Tihwa, into the valley of Ili and beyond, past wind-eroded ruins and bleached skeletons of men and horses. For more than four hundred miles he followed. He lost them in the Celestial Mountains, the first night he heard the bell, and the animals baying.

HE SAT in the light of his little campfire and checked his guns, an Army .45 and a Winchester .30.30. The wind came out of the firs, fragrant and cold. Shevlin drew his big cloth cape around his shoulders, looked up at the stars. The baying was very close, now. At times he could have sworn he heard a sniffling, at not too great a distance.

Shevlin reached for the rifle, took it across his knees. Something was moving in the little copse at the bottom of the hill where he was camped. It was big as a lion, judging from its shadow. And yet the head was that of a dog. A queer mixture. Shevlin thought of the Dogs of Fo that guarded the Chin temples.

Clannng, clannng, clannng. . . .

The bell was very near, alive and vibrant. It was somewhere up above him, hidden in one of the caves that dotted the mountains, where the Buddhists had placed their magnificent murals.

Shevlin came to his feet, swearing in amazement. The animals were in the clear now, bright in moonlight, coming for him. Dogs of Fo! Huge, tawny in color, mouths slavering, that deep bay erupting from their throats.

He fired coolly. The highpowered rifle was as accurate as his skill and experience could make it. A dog—he had no other thought for it—dropped. Another fell, crawled on toward him, dying. A third leaped high in the air, crashed on a rock.

Then the others were on him. There was no room to wield a rifle, no time to draw the Colt. He went back with white fangs and a red mouth gaping for his face . . .

Clannng - clannng! Clannng - Clannng-clannng!

The bell was fierce, now. Loud and pealing! Ordering, commanding; The dogs fell away, sniffed at him, tongues lolling. Their real eyes shone green and brilliant in the darkness. The bell clanged again, louder and faster. Summoning! The dogs wheeled, trotted off.

Shevlin drew a deep breath, put his back against a rock and wriggled to his fet. His left arm was gashed and bloody. His cheek was furrowed.

"A minute more, and there wouldn't have been anything to save. But thanks anyhow," he muttered to the bell. He winced as his left arm throbbed. He had a medicine kit somewhere in his pack. He staggered toward it, knelt down.

"I think I can do it much better."

She stood in a pool of silver light between two giant firs. No longer wore the shirt and riding breeches; instead, a silken *sari* clung to her, of scarlet and green and yellow splashes that overlapped to form a weird, alien pattern. Her long black hair was bound in a startling coiffure with tiny hair horns protruding from her temple. Her sloe eyes stared at him out of the lovely creamy mask of her face.

Chi Ling moved gracefully. She strode freely, yet as easily as if she skimmed the grassstops.

She knelt, removed a yellow jade jar from the linked girdle. From the jar her long

fingers cupped a fragrant balsam; applied it to the wounds with gentle strokes. It stung at first, then soothed.

Shevlin said, "Where did you get the gown? It isn't silk or linen. It looks metallic."

"The *Shang-Ti* gave it to me. They have many unusual things."

"*Shang-Ti?* The heavenly ones. Never heard of them."

"You will. They ordered that I bring you to them. I had to plead for your life. They do not like—strangers. That is why they loose the *kalfi* here. The animals who nearly killed you. They brought them with them when they came."

Shevlin frowned. "You speak of them as if they came from . . . where do they come from?"

Chi Ling slid her eyes sideways at him. Her red lips quirked. Mischievously she lifted a finger, pointed starward. "From up there. From the stars."

Shevlin snorted, laughed. The pain was lessening. He grinned, "If they gave you that salve, I'm half convinced already . . . if they come from the stars, where's their space ship?"

Chi Ling laughed. "Space ships! Space ships are only for humans. The others, the *shang-ti,* they do not need ships. They are different. They have been here a long time. Many centuries. Only a very few suspect. The Lama in Tibet, a scholar like Charles Fort, a student or two who knows why Cambodia became a ghost city, why Ming-oi was abandoned overnight . . . but they cannot prove."

Shevlin stared into the glowing embers of his dying fire. He had read Fort, that collector of incredible and impossible news notices: lights seen on the moon, dark objects crossing the sun, tiny coffins found in Scotland, shadows cast by unseen bodies in the sky, huge glowing wheels plunging into oceans and later rising from them toward the sky.

He chuckled. "And flying discs over the States, and an aviator chasing a strange thing . . . absolutely white except for a streamer of red that appeared to be revolving before his ship disintegrated over Kentucky!"

Chi Ling eyed him warily. He reassured her, "Just something I was thinking about, in regard to Fort. But you—how come you're so friendly with these *shang-ti?*"

"I've been bred to serve them. My family for generations has been with them as they move from place to place, waiting. In their time here on Earth while they waited, they have dwelt in many places. Easter Island. Cambodia. Ming-oi. They have waited for such a long time. Soon now, they will be ready."

"Ready? For what?"

"They will tell you if they want you to know. Come! We must go to them. I've stayed away too long already."

Shevlin reached out, caught her wrist. "Suppose I don't play it that way? Suppose . . ."

She shook her head at him. She said, "You will. The *kalfi* are still out there. If they come again, the gong may not call them off."

Shevlin heard the sniffing, the panting. He shuddered and let her go. The girl arose calmly, brushing at her soft robe. Her black eyes smiled at him.

HE HAD heard of the Caverns in the Celestial Mountains from a warrior who had ridden with Ma Chung-ying. The Buddhists had sprawled their murals on rock walls in the domed hills, inside caves that stretched back into darkness. The soldier told him that a few men had explored one cave and—had not come out.

Chi Ling took him up a tier of steps cut in the limestone, through a low-portalled cave into gray dimness. Her hand in his as guide, she led him through a series of interlinked caverns that broadened onto a smooth ramp. The ramp twisted and spiralled gently downward.

There was no door, as such. One moment they stepped off the ramp into a dim grayness—

The next moment there was light and color and movement all around them. It was as if scales had been lifted from his eyes. Shevlin swore softly, staring.

There were giant caverns, many of them extending as far as he could see. Each was different. The one he was walking through,

with Chi Ling a swaying gracefulness ahead of him, was purple-walled, and floored with great plans and fungoid growths, giant creepers that lifted tangled vines and bronzine leaves toward the groined ceiling far above. It was a jungle of red and yellow and blue, of metallic bronzes and harsh silvers, of gold and amethyst and emerald . . .

The next cave was a liquid pool in whose depths queer transparencies flitted, where huge black bodies darted between trunks of coiled and rounded coral. On a slim path of stone, Chi Ling pattered between rippling waters. Shevlin followed, eying crystalline anemones and the mad coloring of fire sponge and golden corals . . .

Under the arch of the third cavern, Shevlin cried out.

Chi Ling turned, nodding. "A museum of sorts."

There were many races and men in the transparent bio-plastic cases. A Roman in cuirass and greaves. A half-naked Egyptian. A Tartar of the Mongol tribes, encased on the wooden saddle of his shaggy pony, arrow notched to bowstring. A Polynesian, in white-feathered cape, stepping into a long canoe. On the far side Shevlin made out a Persian in chain-mail, scimitar dangling from his brown hand. Beyond him, a Crusader, red cross on his white surtout.

They went through that cavern, into one where statues and wooden carvings rioted against a backdrop of bright wall murals.

Chi Ling was hurrying. Shevlin caught no more than a glimpse of the following chambers . . .

"Here," whispered Chi Ling. "Here now is the cavern of the *shang-ti!*"

Her warm hand squeezed his, then she was thrusting aside an iridescent curtain, stepping onto a polished black floor of basalt. This hall was larger than the others. Its walls seemed carved from mahogany, smoothed and polished with oil until they glittered. Tiny glowing ovals swirled and danced in the air currents high above, shedding a pale bluish-white light that was almost daylight.

And on the tier of ebony blocks, vivid white against the black—*Shang-ti!*

A solid, shimmering cube of brilliance. Eight feet in height, coruscating light against the darkness, revolving pinpoints of light within it, a hard core of glittering, blinding opalescence at its heart. Awesome, strange, and—

Cold!

Something deep inside him told him he had never known such cold. The white was the frost of a Siberian snow field, the glitter the shimmering feet of ice that rims the Alaskan glaciers. The movement inside the cube was the fantastic swirl of cosmic snows, the imponderable, frozen sluggishness of the glacier. It moved and looped and shifted in the cube, that living cold. Moved—and was still.

Chi Ling pressed his hand with cool fingers. He went with her across the basalt floor to the ebony steps.

Chi Ling whispered: "Wait!"

She went up the steps, wide-eyed; arms open to the cube. Shevlin cried out, "Be careful! That thing must be cold as—"

The cube whirled, rotated; lifted and danced in the air with bright coruscations. Swept down on Chi Ling. Wrapped and enveloped her in the opalescent garment of white hoar-frost. Faintly there was the eerie tinkle, as if ice prong touched ice-blade. A musical arpeggio, swirling up and up with cold perfection of tone—

The cube was gone.

Chi Ling stood with her back to Shevlin, hands buried in her hair. Swiftly the hands worked, changing tresses, altering the coiffure. His skin whitened, glowed. Her body altered, mistily and as in a haze; blurred, grew, shrank, flattened . . .

The girl turned, stood looking down at Shevlin from the height of the ebony steps.

IT was Chi Ling, and it was not Chi Ling. The red mouth was there . . . and the green eyes framed by the raven hair . . . but the face was altered subtly, the eyebrows arched, a pixiness in the hollow of the white cheeks, mockery in the set of the full lips, the slant of the eyes, and the flaring of the thin nostrils.

Shevlin choked: "How'd you—do that?"

The woman laughed. "You would not understand Unless—are you a scientist? Like Edison? Einstein? Lawrence?"

He shook his head. The *shang-ti* woman came down the steps, moving with facile grace. She said: "Chi Ling may have told you a little of me, of our kind. She calls us the *shang-ti*. It will do. We have come from a very far distance, across fifty million light years, from a galaxy a dozen times the size of your own milky way."

Shevlin licked his lips. He was an adventurer. He had faced a lot of odd things in the past, all the way from Nepal to northern Siberia. He told himself: Just another person, that's all she is. Nothing else than that. Keep it in mind.

"We are different from your people. You are carbon life. We are a form of life based on efficiency of energy."

Shevlin looked blank. The *shang-ti* woman laughed, crossed the room toward a row of ornate benches. Sank down on one, gesturing to Shevlin.

"I'll try and explain. Your life form is based on matter, mine on energy. You know heat as energy, but to the *shang-ti*, there is no such thing as heat. We are energy incarnate. Within ourselves there is no matter at all, only energy. Many eons ago, our life-forms came into being on a very distant planet. Pressures, a fantastic outpouring of incredible power from a blasted twin-sun, the right conditions—" Chi Ling shrugged, smiling; said simply, "All that combined to form the *shang-ti*.

"We exist at what you would call absolute zero, two hundred and seventy degrees below Centigrade zero. Your men of science have never duplicated that temperature, can never hope to do so. It is at that temperature that all matter transforms into energy. *Is* energy, and not matter. At absolute zero there is no pressure, and no molecur movement. There can be no gas, no matter, nothing at that coldness except—energy alone! Anything added to it becomes only more energy."

Shevlin blinked. He said slowly, "But if I were to use a flame-thrower on you, heat you—"

Her laughter carolled. "You can't heat me, as you put it. You forget that I am nothingness. No gas, no flesh. Nothing. And—nothing will scarcely absorb heat, will it? You can't multiply zero. Neither can you heat what does not exist. And nothing exists within me except pure energy."

"But that cube . . . the coldness . . . the whiteness . . . I saw you!"

"You saw only the frosting of the air that rimmed me. We allow that to be seen. We could always be invisible, if we chose. Permitting the air to frost also permits our intense cold to be felt."

Shevlin leaned forward. "But Chi Ling! You entered her body. I saw that. If all that cold touched her, she'd die!"

Chi Ling toyed with a rich black link of hair, smiling at Shevlin's excited face. "Of course she would, if matter that cold touched her. But only pure energy touched her, took over her body!"

"And you use her body to—"

THE woman brooded at him. "I am Chi Ling—at the moment. Her thoughts, her memories are mine. The *shang-ti* can enter any human body. While we waited here on Earth, we have amused ourselves from time to time by doing just that."

Her green eyes mocked him. "Haven't you ever wondered why science seems to spurt every once in a while? For a thousand years man will go along in the same old rut. There was Egypt, Crete and Phoenicia. Along came Athens with its brilliant upsurge of the arts and philosophy. The dark ages, and then—the Renaissance! DaVinci. Michelangelo. Bacon. Shakespeare."

Her laughter was a tinkling triumph in the great ebony hall. "You never suspected. Not once! None of your so-termed wise men ever guessed. Columbus! Napoleon! The age of science then began in the last century. Electricity! Airplanes! Even—the Manhattan Project!

"It is something to do, to play chess with an entire world. To move races and nations like pawns—with a planet for a playing board!"

Shevlin thought: You can't square a circle. An animal can't eat itself. You can't have a black white, or any other of a dozen or more paradoxes. He said: "But you—"

Chi Ling shrugged glistening white shoulders. The *shang-ti* woman said, "Many

millions of years ago, on our planet, a way was found. By Nature, in a subterranean vault where our first life forms were patterned. Cold life, Shevlin. So cold that we are perfect transmutants. In us, matter becomes energy simultaneously. There is no matter. Only energy."

"And energy," said Shevlin thoughtfully, "can't be destroyed."

Chi Ling stood up, twirled so that her skirts flew out around her legs. She threw back her head, let the long hair float in a spray of black fire. She whispered, "No one can destroy me, Shevlin. And as long as there is any matter anywhere to feed my energy . . . I will live! Life and living is a fine thing, Shevlin. You like life. I can read it in your face, in your eyes. You like Chi Ling, too . . ."

Shevlin grinned. He stood up. The *shang-ti* woman slid away, laughing. "Shevlin, you might hate me if I told you why I am here, why others like me are here on Earth. Will you hate me, Shevlin?"

"No, I guess not. Not if there's anything in it for me. I'm sorry. That's the way I am. I try not to be honest about it. I was born in a city slum, grew up fighting and scratching for a piece of bread and a glass of water. It wasn't easy. I hated the cities. When I found there were things like mountains and long stretches of steppe and tundra, and horses to carry me over them, I took adventure as my job. And I take what's in it for me."

The woman came close to Shevlin. Her green eyes flared at him. She whispered, "Soon I will let you know why we are here. And there will be something in it for you. Soon!"

Her arms were white fires around his neck. Her red mouth sank over him. She breathed, "It is fun to be human, Shevlin. I am almost sorry we are not . . . kiss me! Kiss me!"

SHEVLIN was given the freedom of the underground caverns. He swam in the depths of the blue pool, lay in the cavern of the suns, his skin drinking in the bluish radiance. He drank of cool green wines and ate of tiny honey cakes that were a succulent mixture of meat and flour and vegetables. He wandered amid great gardens where riotous blooms and bulbous flowers nodded swollen petals. He ran and exercised in a cavern where near-living vines fought him, wrestled and almost crushed him, before he could win free of them and stand panting, wet with sweat.

There was only one place he could not go. It was the last cavern, and there was an opaque veil across it that hid its interior. Once Shevlin touched that thin gossamer shroud: found it stone-hard and cool to his touch.

The *shang-ti* woman shared his days, laughing and mocking and gently loving.

He asked her: "You aren't Chi Ling. Yet you're in her body. How do you do it?"

She lay on her back, a hand sheltering her eyes from the brilliance of the sun-balls above. She said softly, "All your carbon life forms are comprised of atoms. Building blocks. They're held together by mesons. The binding stuff. Concrete between the blocks. At absolute zero, those mesons lose their adhesive strength . . . weaken . . . let the atoms separate . . . become other matter . . . or energy."

"Being energy, we can merge in a form of osmosis with other energy as soon as the mesons have been weakened by the utter cold. Reshape that energy into material form . . . appear as Chi Ling . . . or Newton . . . Bacon . . ."

Shevlin said dreamily, "Why me? How come I was allowed in here?"

The *shang-ti* woman rolled over, faced him. "You were after the yellow jade. We do not have enough of us to maintain an elaborate spy system on Earth. We have to be very careful. While we cannot be destroyed, we could be set back in our—work—for countless years.

"We make that yellow jade. It's a by-product of our—work. So we wanted to make sure . . . just why you were sent here, who sent you . . . if you were sent."

"You never asked."

Her laughter tinkled. "There was no reason to ask. You were observed, followed, when Chi Ling first reported your interest in the jade. She had been arranging for certain needed materials in Paochi. We let you follow Chi Ling. We know that no one

came after you from Paochi. And besides—

"You are hard! Different from the men we've known. I thought it might be fun to know you better before—"

Shevlin asked, "Before—what?"

She put out pink fingertips, ran them across Shevlin's lips. "We will take you back with us, Shevlin. Back to our mother planet. You will not perish. You see, we are going to smash the Earth. An experiment. As your own nation made an experiment at Bikini. This will be a cosmic Bikini. But a few life forms we will take back with us. You will be one of them."

"In a bio-plastic case?" he asked dryly.

"Alive," she laughed. "What good are you to Chi Ling or me—dead?"

"Chi Ling goes back, too?"

"Of course. And a few others. You humans are very interesting, Shevlin. So serious. Like children, sometimes, at play. It is fun, this being a human. I have learned to like it. Others of the *shang-ti* will like it, too."

Playthings. Toys. Animated slaves, to be inhabited and enjoyed as the spirit moves. Shevlin lay back and let the warm globes bathe him. So that was to be his fate! Transported across an unimaginable distance, to be a living toy. He would be bred to make more humans, more toys to be inhabited and used. Like pig or chicken!

Her slant green eyes were watching him. She mocked him softly, "Do you hate me very much?"

Easy, he told himself. Go easy here. It's a tight spot, like the time the snow leopard cornered you on a ledge of the Amne Machin. His man-will had won against the snarling cat. He had not thought to come out of that alive. He knew the same dead, useless feeling now. You can't kill pure energy as you do a snow leopard, he thought wearily.

He said, "I don't know. I haven't figured out my angle, yet. What do I get out of it?"

"You get immortality. And Chi Ling. And a life of ease or exploration with us. Adventure? I'll take you with me to planets you haven't dreamed of. I'll show you sunsets on oceans wider than the sun. Or winters on planets that are rocks, where storms are so frightful they topple mountains. There are green planets like your Earth, without people. I'll show you palaces built on planets so long ago, even the bones of the people who built them are dust."

"Yes. That sounds good. That would be heaven for an adventurer. But destroying the Earth, now. Can't you—"

"The Earth must be smashed! It is an experiment."

He recognized the determination in the cold voice. Unshakable. He was only a pawn to her. An enjoyable pawn, but still only a toy. Shevlin shrugged—

And leaped!

His big hands went out and closed on Chi Ling's throat, tightened and clung! The muscles on his arms and back bulged and rippled.

Chi Ling went limp.

And the brilliant cube of coldness that was the *shang-ti* stood sentient and brilliant, a few feet away. Flickering. Opalescent.

A voice in Shevlin's brain mocked, "Let her be, Shevlin. She is only a carbon thing like you. She cannot hurt you. I am what you want to destroy—and can not!"

Shevlin moved a hand, dragged his revolver from its holster where he had flung it to bathe beneath the sun globes.

"Shoot!" ordered the voice.

He pumped three shells into the blinding cube. It glowed around them, absorbed them. Transformed them into energy as they ate into its heart of living cold.

"I could just as easily absorb the full fury of an atomic explosion, Shevlin. What do you know that can destroy me, Shevlin? Bullets? Explosives? Rays? Atomic blasts? Those things—all matter—I can blend with. Absorb! Make mine!"

Shevlin stood by the sprawled body of Chi Ling. He said hoarsely, "I'm licked. What do I do now? Die?"

The voice said, "I told you I want you alive, Shevlin. You have a strong body. A good body for breeding."

Shevlin repressed a shudder of repulsion, staring at the eight-foot-high cube of coldness. That thing in Chi Ling! An indestructible mass of cold, of sexlessness, of brain. Ready to use him, like a toy, for entertainment.

IT was dark in the last cavern. The sun globes were far away. Here there was only a dim grayness, like a London fog. Shevlin clutched Chi Ling's smooth wrist, drew her after him.

"Let me into that last room," he told her. "Let me past that curtain! I have to see what's in that room—what they're going to do!"

"I'm afraid!"

"They're going to smash the Earth. Don't you understand that? You and I, we've got to stop them. Somehow. There must be a way."

"They are indestructible! Haven't my people tried? Years ago they tried. The tale came down to me. They used many ways. And the *shang-ti* only laughed at them. The *shang-ti* let them. Allowed it. As a lesson."

"Energy," whispered Shevlin. "They're pure energy . . . matter turns into energy at absolute zero. That's what she . . . it . . . said. But lift the veil. Let me see into the room . . ."

Chi Ling whimpered in the dimness. She stretched out a hand, touched the shrouding veil, moved her fingers in a queer pattern. The veil moved, drew back . . .

It was not as large as the other chambers. It was plain, austere. It held nothing but empty bio-plastic casings, arranged in rows, one after another, stretching into the darkness.

Empty casings—

They were not empty!

Shevlin said hoarsely, "They each hold something . . . something alive! Yes, that's it . . . each one has a *shang-ti* inside it! You see? Those whitish cores . . . very dim, as if the energy inside it were ebbing away . . ."

Chi Ling put a hand to her mouth. She shuddered. "Quick, Shevlin! Before it finds us here. Take one more look—"

Shevlin mused, "It wants to blow up the earth. Maybe create a tremendous unleashing of energy. Sure, sure. To feed those things, to bring 'em back to full life again. They're dying. Almost dead. Hundreds of 'em, waiting here like patients in a hospital for a blood tranfusion!"

The veil closed over the cavern. Chi Ling's fingers quivered in his hands as she drew him after her. They went back through the caverns like frightened children waiting for a bogeyman, hand in hand.

It was Chi Ling who felt its presence, as they stepped into the cavern of the ebony dais. She drew closer to Shevlin, whimpering, her unbound black hair a dark nimbus about her pale, wide-eyes face.

"It's here, Shevlin. *Shang-ti!* I—I can sense it . . . . feel it!"

Shevlin put a big hand on his gun, shrugged and let his fingers drop. You can't kill pure energy, he thought wearily. He looked around the room. There was nothing visible.

A voice mocked him. "I told you I could move about unseen, Shevlin. I told you I was invisible, that I only allowed myself to be seen—like this!"

Ten feet in front of him the air swirled, stirred as by a cyclonic force. Waves of sheer cold beat and bellowed, whitened, frosted. Snow crystals formed. The cube was there, shimmering in its blinding brilliance.

"Chi Ling!"

The girl moved forward, slow step by slow step, as if drugged. The cube stood still, let her walk into the frost crystals; absorbed her.

Shevlin cried out in horror. He could see through the cube faintly, see the glowing globes and the mahogany carved walls beyond it.

Chi Ling was gone!

"Come you too, Shevlin," mocked the cube.

"No. I'll be damned if I do!"

He choked out the words, taut with rage and the first fear that he had ever known. Even the snow leopard had never caused this fear. The scars on his left leg and arm tingled, as he remembered that battle, and the bloody claws of the giant white cat.

The cube was still, watching him. It said, "I am ready, Shevlin. Ready for the explosion that will smash your planet. The long years of planning, of preparing the planet for this moment—are over. I do not want you to die, Shevlin. I want to save you, show you those other worlds. You said you were an adventurer. I can show you many planets besides this. I—"

It was then that Shevlin leaped. A crazy, insane idea had sprung into his brain, sug-

gested by the tingle of his long-healed scars. Bullets would not kill this thing. Nothing would that was matter. But Shevlin had one weapon left, a weapon as intangible as pure energy. If that failed—well, there was nothing left for anyone.

He went through the frost crystals, expecting the sheer cold to freeze him solid. Instead, he felt only a slight wrench throughout his body. It was as if a million tiny hands tugged at all his atoms, throwing them apart. He was man in one moment, nothingness the next. Yet he was more than nothing. He was still himself, a mind united with a will.

A will!

In the shadow of a Burmese temple, Shevlin had seen a zealot transfix his skin with needles without pain. He knew that psychosomatic medicine was trying to unravel the mystery of the mind's effect on bodily diseases. A man could will himself to health, just as he could will himself to die. Shevlin had seen too many cases in native huts to doubt. There were medical case histories of cancers come and gone, banished by nothing but sheer will. The *x* factor of will, sometimes subconscious, was the curative agent. Army doctors had told him much, during the war.

After all, why not? What was a man but a will and an intellect linked to a lot of atoms?

Will!

He was dissolved, swept up into the white, whirling mistiness that faded into nothingness. Faintly he could see the dancing ovals in the cavern. A mighty force buffeted at him, tried to beat him down, down into passive, unknowing submission.

Will!

That was the answer. It had to be. It was the only weapon left him. His body and his strength, that had choked the snow leopard to death in three hours of bloody nightmare, were gone; lost in the mad opalescence of the *shang-ti*. His intellect was being swallowed, eaten piece-meal, by a brain eons old, educated in star-systems unknown to his world.

Just the will!

He held on. He—or whatever spark it was that remained of himself in that wild exhilaration—repeated endlessly, *I will not yield! I will not yield!* He fought the questing touch of that other-mind, fought the grasp that would swallow him utterly.

And the *shang-ti* weakened. Not by much. Just by a tiny fraction. But it was enough. It showed what he could do.

He never knew how long it took, there in the caverns beneath the Celestial Mountains. When it was over, he was alone in the cavern, invisible, a conqueror who would never be known. He realized that. He was *shang-ti*, now. All its powers were his, all its knowledge. But brooding, lost somewhere within him, lay the sullen strength of the other. At the first sign of weakness, the *shang-ti* would be back, to conquer. In the soul of him, Shevlin laughed bitterly. He had won—

And lost!

He was forever chained here, in this cube of brilliance. There was no escape. But he put all that away from him. He whirled toward the cavern gateways; sealed them, one after another. In the last cavern, where the bio-plastic cases stood, he used his newfound powers.

He took dust from the floor and made energy from it and hurled it at the cases. They powdered in vivid white flashes, and the thunder of their going split the rocks.

Then, alone, he went up through the caverns to the fresh, clean air of earth, and stared upward at the stars.

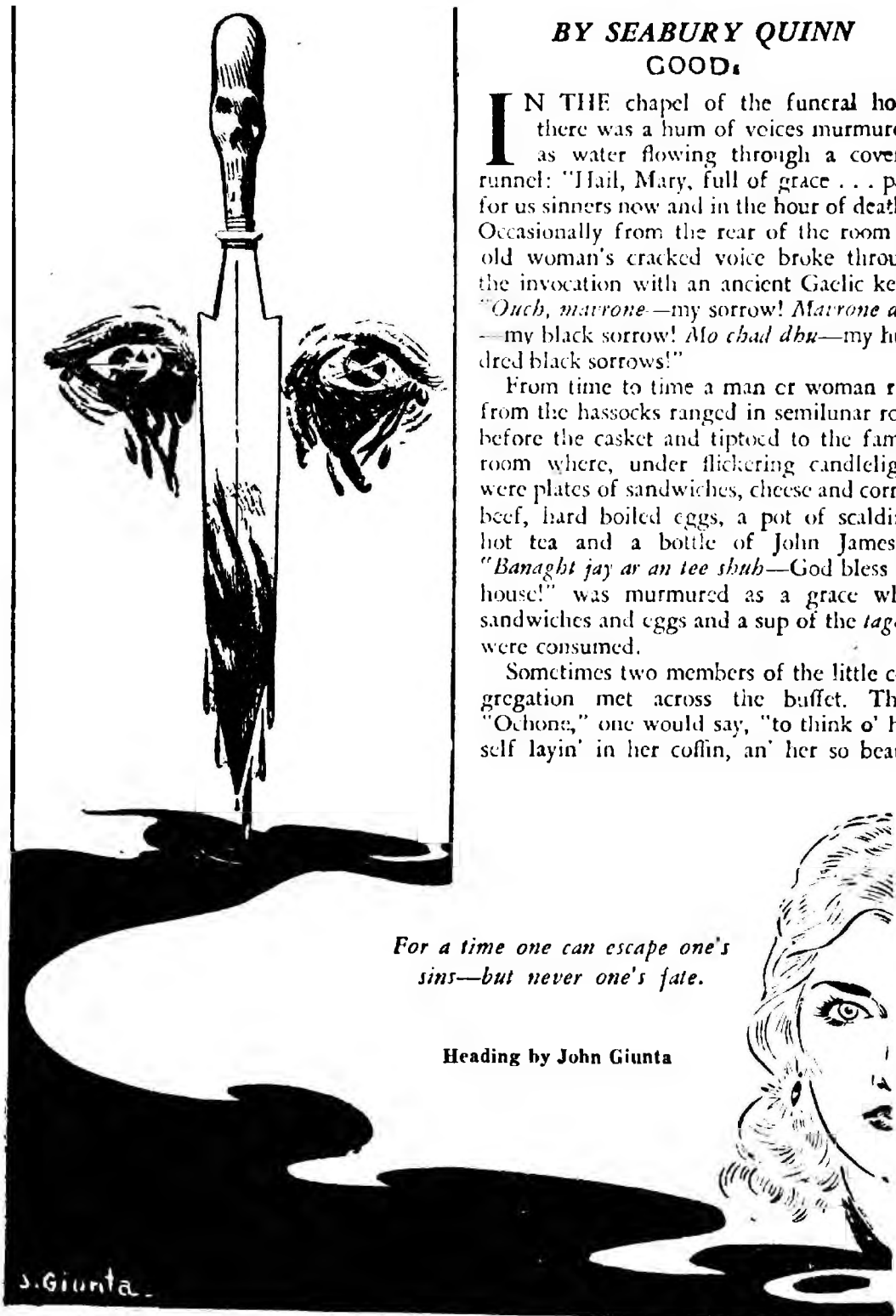
They would be his home now, those stars. For an adventurer, it was the supreme adventure. He wondered idly what they would be like. He wished for company—

"Shevlin!"

It was faint, like a half-forgotten memory out of childhood. It was the voice of Chi Ling. She was lost, there in the whirling coldness of him: all her atoms, intellect and will. Perhaps, somewhere out in that vast bowl of the heavens, he would find a planet and bring her back to life.

It was a good thought. He held it warm to his cold brilliance as he lifted with the dazzling speed of light toward the stars.

Blindman's Buff



For a time one can escape one's sins—but never one's fate.

Heading by John Giunta

BY SEABURY QUINN

GOOD:

IN THE chapel of the funeral home there was a hum of voices murmurous as water flowing through a covered runnel: "Hail, Mary, full of grace . . . pray for us sinners now and in the hour of death." Occasionally from the rear of the room an old woman's cracked voice broke through the invocation with an ancient Gaelic keen, "*Ouch, mavrone*—my sorrow! *Mavrone dhu*—my black sorrow! *Mo chad dhu*—my hundred black sorrows!"

From time to time a man or woman rose from the hassocks ranged in semilunar rows before the casket and tiptoed to the family room where, under flickering candlelight, were plates of sandwiches, cheese and corned beef, hard boiled eggs, a pot of scalding-hot tea and a bottle of John Jameson. "*Banaght jay ar an tee shuh*—God bless the house!" was murmured as a grace when sandwiches and eggs and a sup of the *tageen* were consumed.

Sometimes two members of the little congregation met across the buffet. Then, "Ochone," one would say, "to think o' herself layin' in her coffin, an' her so beauti-

ful!" And then the other's response, "Whist, man, do not be talkin' so. 'Tis kapin' her from rest you are, an' her knockin' on th' gate o' heaven!"

Sometimes the interchanges were more sinister: "Och, 'tis a black thing, so 'tis!" and the rejoinder, "It is so, an' if there's good in her she'll haunt 'im, so she will!"

WHEN she was eighteen and just out of St. Canice's High School, Regina O'Halloran left home. Her parents were in nowise remarkable. Her father, Timothy O'Halloran, was night watchman in a box factory, a sober, self-respecting, steady man with no more education than a fiddler's tyke and no ambition but to do his humble job efficiently. Her mother was a charwoman in an office building, crooked-backed from bending over miles of marble corridors, red-handed from soap powder and hot water. She was old-appearing for her forty years, but somehow there was beauty in her wrinkled face, for the simple love between her and her man imparted something neither time nor toil could take away. They lived in three rooms on the top floor of a walkup apartment where the air was never quite free of the smell of boiling cabbage, bacon-ends and frying onions, but the little flat was neat as the proverbial pin, and no collector for insurance or instalments on the furniture ever went away unpaid.

Regina grew up in these surroundings, a queerly introverted child who seemed as out of place as an oriole in a sparrow's nest, for she had milk-white skin and hair the color of new copper wire and eyes as green as moss-agate with little flecks of brownish-red in their irises. And she was grandly made, as tall as any lad her age, but with a body sweetly, splendidly feminine. She had long, slender legs, a flat back and firm breasts, a head poised proudly on a full, round throat. Like the legendary, long-dead heroines of Ireland she was, like Eimer Flame-Head, or Aoife Roe—Red Eva of the McMurroughs—who leaped full-armed from Castle Kilkenny's high keep to vanquish the O'Rourke and all his following. Heads turned and necks craned as she passed, and everything she wore seemed to have superstyle. On her a bargain-basement coat or home-trimmed hat had the distinction of mutation mink or a chapeau straight from the Rue de la Paix.

So when she was eighteen and just from St. Canice's High School she left the little flat that overlooked the railroad tracks to be a model for Madame de la Côte—who was in fact no woman, but a man, and one of most uncertain ethics—and every day she preened and posed and paraded before women who possessed or controlled fat bank accounts, dressed in clothes that represented more of value than her small soul and gorgeous body.

She never visited her parents, never sent them money or so much as a greeting on anniversaries or holy days, for she had become Regis Hall now, and strove daily and with increasing success to forget she had been reared in a slum or that her parents were Timothy and Veronica O'Halloran. She had been six months old when they had emigrated, and on this circumstance she built herself a satisfactory biography: her parents had been gentlefolk who for some reason entrusted their infant daughter and heiress to a pair of faithless, perfidious peasants who absconded with her to America. Did not all evidence point to it? Was she not beautiful and gently made, as different from the two who called themselves her forebears as a swan is from a goose? Some day her rightful kin would find her, and she would go back to the ancestral home, ride to hounds, dance at the hunt balls, attend the Leopardstown races, end by marrying a man whose title traced back to the days of Strongbow.

APRIL came to New York, clean and windy-bright, smiling and capricious as a girl. The city inhaled its freshness as a convalescent would take draughts of outdoor air after the imprisonment of illness.

Regina seemed the genius of the springtime as she walked down Fifth Avenue, swaying gracefully on four-inch heels. Her swirling-skirted dress was leaf-green and over it she wore a hip-length jacket of sheared beaver with square shoulders and bracelet-length sleeves. Her hat was a mere token headgear, just large enough to anchor a nose-veil, and her head was delightfully

empty of intention. She had been modeling lingerie that afternoon, for Cynthia Townsend was to marry Ellis VanPlant III in June and was already assembling her trousseau. That matching gown and negligée, the last thing she had modeled . . . tears started to her eyes as she remembered it, it was so beautiful, and she had looked so lovely in it. It was of *vert de mer* sheer crêpe throughout, the gown, edged at the hem with handmade lace, was accordion pleated, its long lines broken only by a band of pearl and silver which crossed the bodice in classic style. The flowing sleeves of the negligée were as long as the train; slashed at the shoulder, they were set into the robe with pearl bands like those of the gown, and the heelless sandals that went with the ensemble were matching green satin. Some day she'd have such things for herself, not show them off for other women's wearing. . . .

She halted at the curb as traffic lights blinked red, looked with casual approval at a long, black Cadillac convertible that drew up alongside her, then raised her glance to meet the smiling eyes of the young man behind the wheel. Her breath stopped with a quick, soft sob, and her eyes widened. It seemed to her that all her life she had been waiting for a man like this. His upper lip was short and his chin square, with a deep dimple in it. Gray eyes looked candidly from beneath horizontal brows and his hair, nearly black and growing well down on the forehead, curled almost as if it had been marcelled. For the rest he wore a Shetland sports coat, a silk shirt and rather baggy slacks of Oxford gray. Reginia knew her men. She studied them almost as sedulously as she did clothes. Yale, she decided at first glance, then altered her opinion. He had that vague but not to be mistaken air of *savoir-vivre* that is acquired only on the banks of the Charles. Her green eyes showed the flicker of a twinkle, and a smile pushed a small dimple in her cheek. When the lights once more became green she was ensconced beside him on the red-leather seat of the convertible.

APRIL merged into May, the orchards of Westchester and Long Island were sweet and fragrant, and everywhere among the lace-shawled boughs the birds sang. Dirk Sturdevant's convertible was parked before the de la Côte establishment persistently as a delivery truck, and on her days off they went driving in the country, lunching, dining, dancing, playing with the abandon of truant children in schooltime. When summer came and "everyone" went out of town they had the feeling that the city was all theirs, and made the rounds delightedly as tourists: double mutton chops at the Old Homestead, *low mein* at Yank Sing's, frogs legs Provençal at the Canari d'Or, theatres, movies, Coney Island, Jones Beach, carriage rides through Central Park, cocktails at the Ritz and Plaza. They had known each other almost a month before she went to his apartment.

He lived in a penthouse perched on a loft building that overlooked the East River, four big rooms facing a tiled terrace fenced with a hedge of clipped hornbeams. The walls and woodwork were a monotone of pale Williamsburg green, and the furniture was functional and modern, blond blond wood and bright chintz; the wall-lights hid behind pale-yellow parchment shades, the floor was strewn with Cossack scatter rugs, barbaric with primary colors. A lyric baritone was singing César Franck's *Panis Angelicus* softly over a Capehart.

"This demands a celebration," he told her in the cultured voice that held that superb tone of gentility she worshipped. "Which shall it be, champagne or sparkling burgundy?"

"Oh, champagne, please."

While he was taking a big gold-and-emerald bottle from the frigidaire and wrestling with its wire ailettes she dropped down on the couch and curled her graceful legs under her. This was what she'd always dreamed of, luxury, sophistication, all the indicia of gentle living . . . now she had it in her grasp—almost.

The visionary family home in Ireland—hunt balls, race meets, fox hunts—blurred and receded. She'd settle for a penthouse, and, perhaps, a country place near Greenwich or Westport. . . .

He came in, arms held high in exaggerated imitation of a stage butler as he bore the Sheffield tray with one glass and

the bottle on it. "Drink, pretty creature, drink!" he ordered, proffering the salver.

She took the glass, then, "Where's yours?" she asked. "Don't tell me you'll drink out of the bottle!"

"Mais non, Ma'mselle; de votre pantoufle adorable!"

Her high school French was sketchy, but she gathered he was saying something about her "adorable slipper," and when he knelt and plucked the suède wedgie from her left foot she caught her breath in an astonished, ecstatic gasp. He was going to drink from her shoe, like one of those bewigged beaux in a costume movie. "Why, Dirk, how romantic!"

He filled the slipper to the brim, drained it, refilled it. "This a night for romance, *chérie!*" He snapped the electric switch, and the moonlight poured into the room like molten silver . . . cold molten silver, maddening as the wine that frothed and bubbled in her glass, and in the slipperr he raised to his lips.

He turned the dial of the Capehart, and Franck's sweet, spiritual tune died to be replaced by a seductive air with strange, compelling rhythms moving secretly beneath its surface, compulsive tomtom throbbings and the thin, insinuating notes of violins and muted trumpets creeping through the melody.

"Yes, Regis darling," he whispered as he dropped down beside her, "this night was made for romance." Then, in a voice so low that she could scarcely hear, "And so were you."

She inhaled sharply, but remained as still as a statue, except for the parting of her lips. "Did you hear me?" he asked softly, and, as she remained silent, "I love you, Regis Hall."

The words drained her of all resistance. She leant forward across his knees and reached up, drawing his face down to hers. Her skin felt taut as a stretched drumhead as she yearned toward him. Her lips were avid, ravenous, as she put them to his mouth.

MORNING came, lovely and cool, with limpid, dancing air and sunlight sparkling over everything. Dirk made coffee, toasted English muffins, scooped marmalade from a glass jar into a silver dish. "Happy, beautiful?" he asked as they finished breakfast.

Her wide eyes searched his face, half frightened, half pleading. "Do you love me —truly—Dirk?"

"Love you, angel-pie? I'm mad about you."

"You swear it?"

"Of course, if it'll make you happpier."

She drew at the thin golden chain that hung about her neck and tugged the little cross her "foster parents" had given her at her first communion from her bodice. "Take it," she ordered, and as he took it in his hand, she said the old Gaelic oath, the oath that cannot be broken: *"Ta fhios ag Iosa Criost . . ."*

"What's it mean?" he grinned as he completed stumbling through the unfamiliar syllables.

"I swear on the most Holy Rood that all my life I will see only Regis Hall, and no other woman." Obedient to her gestured command he raised the little cross to his lips and kissed it.

SPRING grew into manhood, into the maturity of summer, into early-autumn middle age. He had given her a key to the penthouse, the elevator operators knew her; she came and went as she pleased.

One afternoon she finished work early, slipped out of the blue lamé semi-formal evening gown she had been modeling, and into a man-tailored suit of Harris tweed, cut snugly about sleek hips and generously over full, high breasts. Bright golden sunbeams angled between the tall buildings, westward-facing windows were like sheets of burnished copper; life seemed to have laid down her flying shuttle for an hour, an air of quiet, almost somnolence, was over everything. Her heart sang like a caged song bird as she alighted from the taxi, nodded brightly to the elevator boy and hurried toward the penthouse. The negligée, that lovely negligée she had been modeling the afternoon she met Dirk, was hers at last. He had bought it for her; it was hanging in the blond-wood wardrobe of the bedroom; soon she would feel the caress of its silkily-soft crêpe about her shoulders. . . .

She slipped her key into the lock, pressed back the door.

It opened slowly, like a curtain going up upon a stage. In the big living room stood Dirk . . . Dirk had a girl, and he was holding her in his arms . . . kissing her. . . .

She took a step back, almost fell against the doorpost. Her lips opened, then shut again.

"Oh!" said the girl as she released herself from Dirk's embrace, stepped back and readjusted her small, pert hat.

"Hullo, Regis," Dirk greeted. His face was red, his eyes looked everywhere about the room, except at her, and his lips trembled, almost as if he had been a little boy about to cry. Then he recovered, mumbled inarticulately, finally brought out: "Miss Alcock—Nancy—this is Miss Hall. Regis, this is Miss Alcock."

The girls looked at each other a long moment, and nothing moved in either of their faces. They were an even match, different, yet strangely like. Nancy Alcock stood perhaps an inch shorter than Regina, but what she lacked in height she made up in superb carriage. Silken, light-brown hair crowned a head of pleasing proportions; blue eyes, a red-lipped mouth of generous size, a firm chin pitted with a small dimple, made her face one to remember, and her skin was beautifully sun-tanned. Her cheeks, her slim, patrician neck, seemed carved of smoky amber; her hair, her lips, her eyes, all borrowed increased enchantment from the tawny, gold-bronzed skin. Her clothes were perfect to the last small detail; everything about her was as right as a picture in *Town & Country* or *Harper's Bazaar*. Of the three she was the first to recover aplomb.

"Don't think I go about kissing men promiscuously, Miss Hall," she begged. "The fact is Dirk and I are engaged, and I've been out of town since April—White Sulphur, then Orr's Island and Agunquit. I just blew in this afternoon, and"—she raised her shoulders in the faint suggestion of a shrug and smiled engagingly—"you know how it is."

Regina answered slowly, making her lips function by sheer power of will: "I—used—to." The she turned on Dirk. "Is this true?"

"Is what true?"

"What she says. Are you engaged to this—to her? Were you engaged to her when you—we—"

"Be quiet, for God's sake, Regis! Don't—"

Somewhere in Regina's ancestry there must have been a Dublin apple woman, and that remote forebear's talent for vituperation boiled to her lips in an ebullient froth like hydrochloric acid over marble-grit. Glittering epithets like explosions of a rocket. Every possible scandalous analogy from animal and vegetable kingdoms was applied to the life, habits and character of Dick Sturdevant.

Dirk's face grew red and redder, and the glaze of tears of pure fury shone in his eyes as she voiced her diatribe, but Nancy Alcock's smile was half amused, half coldly contemptuous. At last, when Regina came to a momentary pause for want of breath rather than lack of words, she spoke her curtain line with the precise polish of an accomplished actress: "We're both adults, Dirk. If you want to have a little fun while I'm away I don't suppose there's any way to stop you, but really, my dear, I had given you credit for better taste."

THE sun was going down, and purple shadows washed the bases of the buildings as she made her way toward Avenue A. She moved slowly, ambling more like a hurt animal than a woman; like a stricken animal that seeks a quiet spot to die. She turned left, northward, toward 103rd Street. There, by the market, grimy children played shrilly among the offal, cats slunk noiselessly from garbage tin to garbage tin, in a gap between the low buildings two goats feasted on melon rind, raising horned and bearded heads to eye her sardonically.

Now she was at the pier. The water lapped against the pilings with a sound like secret laughter and the air was damp and chill. There was something in it that choked her, made it difficult to breathe. No matter. She brushed a hand across her eyes . . . all the radiance of summer come to this drab end. . . .

The Boston boat went creeping by the Queens side of the river, long shafts of

orange light shot from its portholes, making litle paths to Spain upon the darkening water. Now the rollers from the propellers crossed the stream and lisped and murmured round the piles.

She drew the little cross from her blouse and laid it on the stringpiece of the pier. It was an inexpensive, small thing, bought for two dollars—saved a dime and nickel at a time—by Timothy O'Halloran and his wife for her first communion. She hadn't even thanked them for it when Veronica had hung it round her neck and called her "pulse of my heart." She'd wanted a new dress, and was heartsick when it had not been forthcoming. Other girls had gone to the altar rail in frilly new white dresses and satin shoes. She had only a length of mosquito netting for a veil, and the small cross. Why should she return thanks for *that*?

A brindle cat, full-fed on salvage from the market, lay curled in a small knot by the stringpiece, nose, tail and paws together, regarding her incuriously with round, yellow eyes. She clenched both hands, shut both eyes tightly, and stepped into space.

The yellow-green East River flowed softly on its way to New York Bay, softly and murmurously, with a sound like far-away prayer. Presently the cat uncoiled herself, rose slowly, arched her back, then made it into a concave as she yawned cavernously. She went up to the little gold-plated cross, sniffed hopefully at it, found it inedible, and turned away, her mottled body merging indistinguishably into the shadows.

"VIRRA, Father," Veronica O'Halloran twined work-worn fingers in her lap, " 'tis a black thing she has done. To kill herself entirely. Now she can't be buried in th' praste lines, nor have Mass celebrated—*Mavrone dhu*, O child o' me body, vein o' me heart, why ever did you do it at all?" She rocked herself from side to side as she whispered the lament through which the priest's voice cut like a whipstroke.

"What's on you, woman? Holy Church regards self-murder as a heinous crime, but only when committed by the sane. 'Tis said on very best authority that one may be insane, yet not show any sign of it. Impulsive madness, they call it, and it leads its victims to do things contrary to their disposition, character and desire. I'm telling you the poor *grawl* was as daft as Clancy's goat when she did the rash act, and 'tis meself will see her laid in consecrated ground."

"Then we can have a *berrin* from th' church?"

"Have I not said so? Now be off with you. There's much to do and little time for it."

DIRK STURDEVANT sat hunched in his chair, inert as though pushed there by the weight of his conscience. On the desk before him was the packet that the mail man delivered fifteen minutes earlier. A registered parcel from Nancy Alcock. No note had come with it, no explanation, nor had any been needed. Inside was the four-carat diamond he had slipped on her finger at the February graduation dance at the Copley Plaza. Its return spelled an ending definitely as the act of drawing the sheet over the face of a corpse. He felt lonely, forsaken, betrayed. Was it his fault if—

A small, sad sound of sobbing came from the far corner of the room, and when he raised his eyes he saw her standing there, just as he'd seen her hundreds of times. She wore the gown and negligée he'd given her, the lovely sea-green creation she'd modeled on the afternoon they met. But that could not be so. He'd taken it from the wardrobe that very morning, bundled it into a wad, and thrust it down the shaft of the incinerator. Yet there she stood in it, her big green eyes shadowed and tragic, her face as colorless as whey.

He shook his head to clear it. This was—this had to be—an illusion born of weariness and lamplight.

She did not move, she did not speak; she just looked at him with a steady gaze that searched as deeply as a surgeon's probe.

"Regis!" He half thought, half breathed the name. "What do you want here?"

She made no answer, but her fixed, reproachful gaze was terrible in its steadiness.

"Are—are you a ghost?" he managed to bring out the question by a supreme effort.

The breeze that wafted up from the East

River stirred the cretonne hangings, making the light waver like a candle in the wind, and he saw her shadow against the wall. There was his answer. Ghosts do not cast shadows. "Regis!" he exclaimed, incredulously. "They told me you were—you had—" The breath clogged in his throat. If only she'd say something, do something, not just stand there looking at him like . . .

Insensate anger coiled in him like a live thing, like a snake coiling for a strike. He snatched the heavy glass-globe paperweight from the desk, hurled it at her with all his strength. He didn't see her dodge or even stir the smallest fraction of an inch, but somehow the missile missed its mark, shattering on the wall and dropping to the floor with a thin, spiteful tinkle.

He rose, took a step toward her, halted as if at a command, and rushed from the room. Across town he registered at a hotel, paying in advance because he had no luggage, ordered whiskey and soda, and dropped into a chair, head cradled in his hands. Regina stood beside the dresser, looking . . . looking. . . .

All night he rode in taxis, in the subway, on the Staten Island ferry. There was no hiding place. Only in flight, in motion among crowds, could he be rid of her. Almost exhausted, he dropped down on a bench in Bryant Park, and in a moment she was coming toward him, ethereal as moonlight, lovely as a figure Botticelli might have dreamt of, yet not a spirit, not a ghost, for he could see the shadow she cast on the freestone walk.

Fatigue was marrow-deep when he returned to his apartment and began to pack. He'd take a ship or plane or bus or train—take anything to get away from those reproachful, steady eyes, the silent accusation of that steady, gentle gaze.

'Damn it, Regis," he stormed, "you know dam' well I took as big a chance as you; you knew I wasn't serious—" The fixed, unwavering gaze pursued him, never left him for a moment, an instant.

'Leave me alone!" he begged. "Say what you want me to do; I'll do it. Is it Masses for your soul you want? I'll see the priest, pay him to—"

The weight of her eyes bore him down, choked out the words he mouthed, lay on him like an incubus, like the Old Man of the Sea or Sinbad.

By God, I know what I'll do!" he raved. "I'll fix it so I can't see you!" He seized the ivory paper knife; drove it into his right eye.

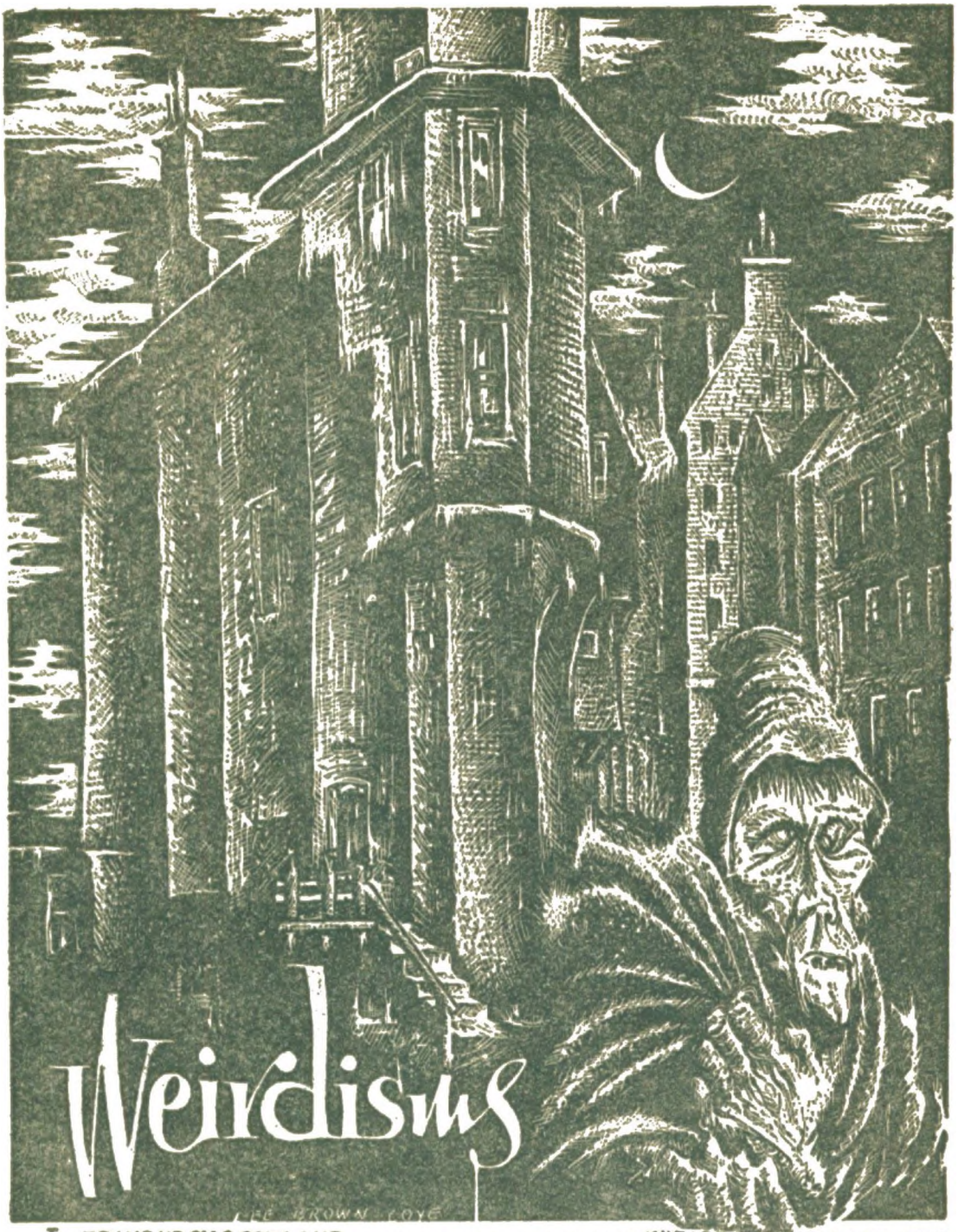
The pain was sharp and bitter as a witch's curse, but mingled fear and anger made an anodyne for it. He thrust again with the small poniard, and blackness, utter and impenetrable as the darkness of the Cimmeri, was on him like a hood.

The stridulation of his laugh was like a spiteful paean in the formless dark that bound his maimed eyes with impermiable blackness.

He wheeled and pirouetted crazily across the room. He had escaped—outwitted—her! He couldn't see her now, he couldn't see. . . .

Like someone playing blindman's buff he stumbled through the French doors to the terrace, spread his hands wide for some guiding landmark, found none, and tripped across the tiles and through the thigh-high hedge of clipped hornbeam that served as a parapet.

The street was fourteen stories down.



IN EDINBURGH SCOTLAND IS THE HOUSE OF A FAMED WIZARD MAJOR WEIR HE HELD THE RANK OF MAJOR IN THE CITY GUARD IN 1649 ¢ WAS NOTORIOUS FOR THE HORRORS HE INFLICTED ON THE ROYALISTS THAT FELL UNDER HIS CHARGE. HE WAS RARE IN HIS PROFESSION IN THAT HE USED PRAYERS TO SEND HIS SPELLS ABROAD. HE CARRIED A STRANGE STICK THAT RESEMBLED A CANE ¢ IT WAS OFTEN NOTED THAT WHEN HE WAS WITHOUT THE STICK HIS PRAYERS BECAME PIOUS ¢ ALMOST SINCERE. THIS FACT LED TO HIS DISCOVERY ¢ HE WAS HUNG. BUT BEFORE THE TRAP WAS SPRUNG HE CONFESSED HIDEOUS CRIMES ¢ SPITEFULLY CRIED THAT HIS CONFESSIONS WERE ONLY A SMALL PART OF THE HORROR HE HAD SPREAD.

Thinker

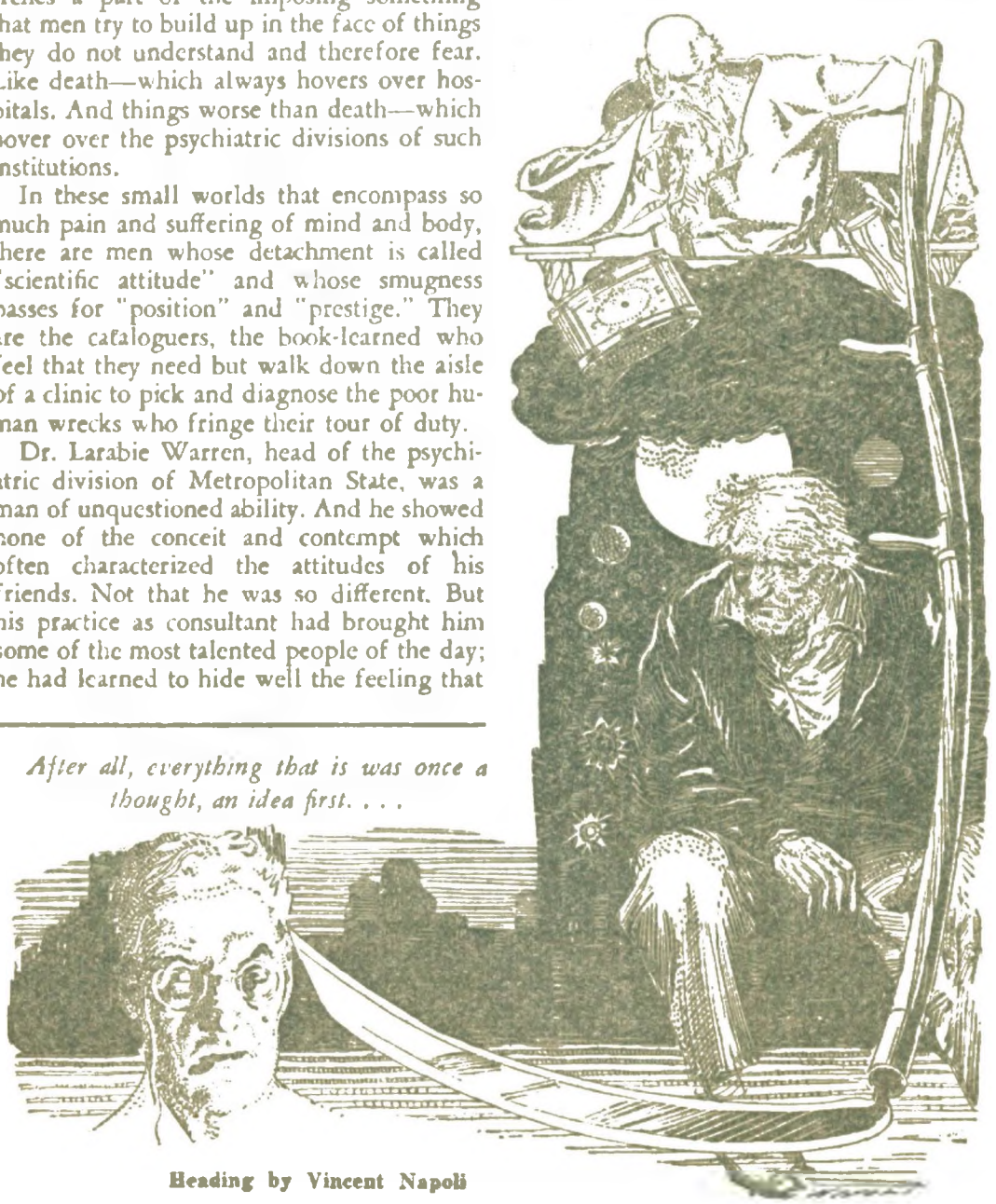
BY MALCOLM KENNETH MURCHIE

THE building sat on cliff haunches looking west across the rolling river. Its gray-whiteness was appropriate for a hospital; its columns and arches a part of the imposing something that men try to build up in the face of things they do not understand and therefore fear. Like death—which always hovers over hospitals. And things worse than death—which hover over the psychiatric divisions of such institutions.

In these small worlds that encompass so much pain and suffering of mind and body, there are men whose detachment is called "scientific attitude" and whose smugness passes for "position" and "prestige." They are the cataloguers, the book-learned who feel that they need but walk down the aisle of a clinic to pick and diagnose the poor human wrecks who fringe their tour of duty.

Dr. Larabie Warren, head of the psychiatric division of Metropolitan State, was a man of unquestioned ability. And he showed none of the conceit and contempt which often characterized the attitudes of his friends. Not that he was so different. But his practice as consultant had brought him some of the most talented people of the day; he had learned to hide well the feeling that nearly every doctor, consciously or unconsciously has. The feeling of contempt for and superiority over the patient.

From where he sat in a richly leathered



After all, everything that is was once a thought, an idea first. . . .

Heading by Vincent Napoli

chair behind his wide maplewood desk, he could see the river flowing by and beyond, as it curved against the grand silhouette of the city. This scene stimulated him; the plumes of smoke against the blue sky, the plane flights that regularly dotted the distant horizon from nearby Central airport, the fussy tugs and rusty freighters on the water below; the excursion boats in summer. It was a thought that pleased him that he would only confess to himself, but he wondered how many people here in this great metropolis knew him and his work. Perhaps not many, judged by the standards of a radio or movie star, but he, Larabie Warren, was known in most of the circles that counted. He was, beyond even a detractor's doubt, an outstanding success in his line.

HIS desk buzzer sounded discreetly. Warren frowned at the interruption, glanced automatically at the folding clock. It was three. Oh yes, he was to see somebody of Machlen's, a disturbed ward case, penniless and therefore charity. Warren had a mind good at filing things, even unimportant ones like these. This particular patient was to be granted a visit with the "Chief" for a very special reason. As Warren remembered the details, the man had been picked up in the squalid Tri-State Bridge district. The policeman who had helped the oldster aboard the Metropolitan ambulance raised his eyebrows at the interne and tapped his temple significantly.

The complaints hoisted first upon the law and then relayed faithfully by the patrolman to the cynical ears of the interne were of a not untypical nature. The very old man, the stories went, "frightened" children, "cast spells," "stopped" people and made dire predictions. All these accusations poured forth in a variety of excited tongues and languages. The old man confirmed his "craziness" by not having a name and shaking inquiries about it off, although from reports he seemed most articulate about all other matters. He was registered at the disturbed ward of the psychiatric division merely as a case number.

But the special reason that was to enable what the entrance doctor mentally catalogued as an old, dirty lunatic to enter the inner medical sanctum, that would grant him a few most precious moments with none other than Larabie Warren himself, was a simple report handed in by the ambulance physician. It might be added that the interne doubted the whole thing himself—but he'd heard it—and passed it on. On his ride uptown from the ramshackle tenement district which had been so glad to see him incarcerated in the white-painted ambulance and borne away from them by this red-eyed, shrieking monster, the oldster had turned to the interne and said, oh clearly, so there could be no mistake, "So now I shall see Machlen and Warren."

It was wholly incredible that this ancient flop bum had mentioned the chief of psychiatry at the hospital, plus one of his assistants (who would probably get this case). But even more unbelievably, the old man seemed then concerned with the attendant's discomfort and said gently, "Don't be surprised, Greenwald."

The interne, Greenwald, who'd never laid eyes on his charge before this call, had reported this to Machlen, whose case in Disturbed Ward it turned out, sure enough, to be. Greenwald added his own and unasked for comment: "There's something creepy about the guy, Doctor Machlen!"

Machlen who had scoffed away this irrelevant comment as being the "impressionism" of the young, had come, through the days, to take a different view. The old man who had no name "knew" things he *couldn't* have known. Of course he was quite insane, but. . . .

"I'd suggest you see him for a moment or two," Machlen relayed to Warren. "Chief, it's weird how much that man knows about the damndest things! He's uncanny, with that sharpness of mind you see in some types of mental unbalancement. Why, just the other night when I was making rounds, I stopped at his bedside—there's been some trouble in the ward again about the food—and this old codger started to talk about the hospital budget and," Machlen's voice lowered discreetly, "your administration of it! It's all uncanny, I tell you! You'll see."

So Dr. Larabie Warren, head of the psychiatric division, saw for himself. At

precisely three p.m., when his desk buzzer rang and he remembered who was waiting to see him, he was much of the opinion that this demented man had won himself this prized interview with a series of "guesses" and "coincidences" which had foolishly rattled attendants and physicians alike downstairs. Totally aside from a certain grudging curiosity about the man, Warren knew it looked well for him, every now and again, to see one of these "hardship" cases.

Warren signalled his secretary, and the door of his office opened to let in one of the oldest men the head psychiatrist had ever seen. As the ancient came into the room, Larabie purposefuly ignored the meaningful look directed at him by his subordinate from the disturbed ward who'd accompanied the case to this floor.

"That'll be all, Machlen," Warren murmured, reaching for the case chart and gesturing the patient to a chair before him. The other doctor withdrew.

"Now then, you haven't given us a name so I hardly know what to call you."

The old man inclined his head as though he had no quarrel with that. His face was lined and wrinkled; his hands veined and long-fingered.

"Tell me, tell me how you knew my name was Warren and that you would also be under a Dr. Machlen and ride in the ambulance with an interne named Greenwald?"

The ancient smiled, and though the expression was a gentle one, it irritated Warren. He, not the patient, was the one who did the smiling. . . .

"I know many things, Doctor Warren. Some of which I speak, others . . . I do not."

Grudgingly, Warren admitted the man spoke well. Too well for one of his decrepit appearance and appalling background. It was probably a case of one who had fallen on evil times from a higher plane.

"You have made some other statements," Warren said softly. The room was quite soundproof, but these things were better whispered or not said at all. "Some remarks about the money affairs of my division here at the hospital. Critical remarks. Pray, old man. what is your meaning on this?"

Larabie Warren fixed the patient with his cold, blue eyes, but his gaze was met steadily and squarely. The silence was most uncomfortable until it wore itself out. The elderly man spoke.

"If you refer to certain remarks I have made about the management of your division of the hospital. . . ."

"And I do. What do *you* know of it?" The psychiatrist's meaning was plain. What did the old man know about *anything!*

There was another of the uneasy silences.

THEN softly, so softly that Warren found himself straining to hear, the old man replied: "I know a great deal about a great many things, Doctor. You see, one's creator usually understands one, or at least recognizes if not understands, for the way of life is strange. . . ." His voice trailed.

Warren rustled some papers on his desk and felt with discomfort and anger that he was not in as much control of the situation as he would wish. He took the offensive, lightening the usually resonant timbre of his voice only so that no whisper should go beyond these walls.

"I have a report here, Doctor Machlen's, in which, replying to questions about how you knew the identity of certain persons who certainly had never crossed your path before, you said, and I read. . . ." Dr. Warren did. . . . " 'I created them, therefore of course, I know them.' "

Warren looked up, and the ancient met the physician's smirk with a nod.

"That is so. I said it. It is so."

"You mean to sit there, old man, and tell me that *you* created Greenwald, Machlen, *and* myself?"

"And a great deal more, Doctor. You see, all things are thoughts before they are realities. I can explain this by reminding you that a bridge, for instance, is first a dream, an idea; then it is created on a drawing board. Only after that does it take substance and shape men call reality."

The ancient spoke all the while in a soft and gentle manner, but Warren's rising anger with this decrepit old man, who managed an air of dignity despite his drab hospital attire, knew no bounds.

"By some freak of coincidence, you have been able to impress guileless and poor minds with your abilities, your so-called powers!"

The old man nodded. "Naturally, Doctor."

Despite his studied control, Warren burst forth, "What do you mean, man, 'naturally?' "

"I mean, naturally you would say just that, and as a product of my own thought processes, nothing you could do would really surprise me."

This moulding, decaying old folk, with the big words he had no right to, with knowledge he must have partially guessed or gleaned through some weird quirk of fate, was the exasperation of all the ages!

Larabie Warren forced himself to study some laboratory reports on his desk. This man's greatest danger was his nuisance value to other rational human begins. And that would soon be over and done with.

But the old man was talking again, this time without prompting or urging, softly, without rancor and despite himself, Warren was listening, almost as though he would hear something he should know.

"You see, my dear Doctor Warren, one creates in the mind. Not in the biology laboratory. Not the science of the genes, the atom, but of the mental. And yet, alas, so many things turn out in unusual patterns, quite unforeseen, quite unavoidable. It is for one to create but not direct."

THE man had a god complex. Every psychiatric hospital is familiar with the species. Their fanaticism knows no bounds; and why may it not on occasion be accompanied by coincidence to lend dignity to the ravings? For that was precisely what had happened here.

Warren's main reason for seeing this patient was to plug any possible loophole. And, as admitted, curiosity. The old man had said some extraordinary things about methods and other matters at the hospital. Things the papers, the mayor and perhaps the board of governors would like to know . . . and not like to hear. But who would take the ravings of an insane man? Still. . . .

The ancient's voice was droning on, but Warren had been busy for a few minutes with his own thoughts. He was impatient now to bring this "charity" interview to a speedy close.

He glanced again at the medical and laboratory reports on his desk. Here was the factor that made everything else all right. This was, of course, his final trump. In fact, it was a distinct pleasure to play it. He opened his mouth to speak.

But the ancient said the words, said them first, taking the sting and impact and cheating the doctor of his moment.

"I am going to die. You were about to tell me that, Doctor Warren? I know it, and it must be so for there are many powers greater than mine. This is a small thing, Doctor Warren, in the eternity of the mental. An instant, you and I, and all our surroundings. Meaningless, tiny grains in the limitless sands of forever."

Warren puffed with annoyance at the linking of identities. "You have guessed what I was going to say. Nothing supernatural; a pre-med student would arrive at the same conclusion. Is it unfortunate that you place such a low valuation on yourself? Although in that, you are quite probably right. I am, of course, different."

He bit his lip. Why did he allow himself to be maneuvered into this position of the explaining defensive?

"You are dying. Nothing can save you . . . although I realize that in your mental condition my words mean very little as tangible symbols." Warren rose, signifying the meeting was at an end.

"I quite understand, Doctor. It is precisely what I knew."

"I suppose," Warren sneered, "that you also created my desk clock, the river outside here, the sun and the sky!"

The elder inclined his head even as he rose to his feet. Dr. Warren's nurse, Miss Benstead, ushered the old man out of the chamber afterward. Warren smiled at her in his most charming manner. "Really, one of the most advanced and amazing cases of mental aberration I've seen in a long time!"

The nurse sniffed disdainfully in agreement and as though the air itself might be polluted by the old man's visit.

IT WAS in mid morning four days later that Dr. Warren's intercom buzzed. It was Machlen downstairs. About the old man. He was bad, very bad. And sinking. Maybe

an hour or so, but possibly at any minute. He couldn't last the morning.

Warren listened dispassionately. It was allowable and at the discretion of the chief to have so seriously ill a patient taken out of the psychiatric ward and put, for the time it took to die, in semi-private or private. Also, it was quite possible that the chief might wish to have someone else called in from the regular hospital. They were, after all, psychiatrists.

"Shall I get someone else from Medical, Chief?" Machlen asked.

It afforded Warren considerable pleasure to snap back, "No!"

An hour later Machlen called again. His voice, Warren thought, was unduly dismal as he relayed the news. "He's dying!"

Larabie Warren snapped sharply, "Well, what of it! Don't bother me again about this, Machlen! You'd think he was somebody important the way you're going on!" And Warren slammed up the intercom.

The desk clock said eleven-thirty and it was stuffy in the room. The chief crossed to his French windows overlooking the water and threw them open. He liked to watch the river flow by, the great, oily swells and eddies. The nearly noon sky was bright over the city, and the May sun touched his face warmly as he looked south.

He stood there for a few minutes, long enough for the cloud that hadn't been there before to creep up on the horizon. He studied it even as the finger of sun on his face lost its warmth. To the south, following the sweep of the river, the city's skyscrapers looked stark and naked in the new light.

Dr. Warren turned his eyes to the river again. He knew nothing of the tides, but it must be getting to the flood, the turn, for the swirling currents had abated. The wind plucked at the window and was suddenly cold. He started to close it, but something made him stay his hand.

It was a peculiar sky. Streaked and mottled, it was, and rapidly darkening . . . such a pity on a lovely spring day . . . black, but not like a thunderstorm . . . the sun had gone. . . .

LARABIE WARREN felt some of the clouds in himself. He turned abruptly from the window, lit the room lights automatically and sat down in his leatherette office chair. Been working too hard lately . . . let's see, he had an appointment at noon.

He looked at the desk clock. Studied it and suspected it. Miss Benstead hadn't wound it . . . but yes, on holding it to his ear there was a faintly discernible tick. Irregular, slower in tempo than rightfully.

He rose then again, not knowing just why. The window drew him. And the sky and sun and river outside. The city stood unhealthily white around him, the buildings praying to a sky that was thunderous, but blacker now than thunderhead . . . he hadn't noticed with the room lights on . . . there was no sun, no trace, ray or hint . . . but as though gone or never been . . . and the river . . . the river . . . was . . . not . . . right . . . either.

Warren staggered from the window. The inertia of the river, the blackness of the sky and the deadness of the sun already in him. With both hands he grabbed the desk clock and held it to his head. The beats were slower, slower . . . more and more irregular . . . slower, slowing the ticks as though numbered . . . and the square that was the window, opening now not out onto sky but neuter, neutral *nothingness* . . . still holding the clock in one hand. Listening to the measured tick . . . the accompanying pound in his head and heart . . . irregular and slowing. . . .

Dr. Larabie Warren reached the master key of his intercom with an effort . . . with an effort he keyed the downstairs number.

The river, the sky, the sun and the desk clock all in his head, all in his being . . . the number . . . the number. There, that clock . . . connection.

"Machlen," he croaked with a stranger's voice. "Machlen! That old man. Machlen, get Medical! Right away, understand. I want everything done! *Everything! That man must not die*!"

But Machlen did not hear. Of course it was too late.

The Woman on the Balcony

BY DOROTHY QUICK

FAIR

SHERRY thought she had never seen anything more beautiful than the Villa del Quisce.

White and shining it nestled halfway up one of the Italian foothills like a snowy flower sheltered by greenery. The glass glistened in the sunlight. Its marble columns were perfection and at its foot was the violent blue of a lesser lake than Como but having the same intense loveliness. Green lawns, lemon trees, oleanders and flower beds sloped down from the Villa to the sandy shore. Tall cypresses outlined the road that curved upwards. Small spring flowers grouped around the roots of the trees. Violets sprinkled the grass in abundance.

"It looks like some heavenly stage set designed by Bel Geddes," Sherry thought, "too beautiful to be real." Then, suddenly looking at Gio sitting tall and straight beside her, "But it *is* real, and it's ours—our honeymoon house—"

Just at that moment Gio slowed the car and turned to her, "Do you like it, my darling?" he asked.

The soft musical tones of his voice that held the depths of his love for her filled her with glory as it always had from the moment of their first meeting. "Oh, Gio, yes. I couldn't like it more. It's—it's—" She searched for the right word, "It's heavenly."

He pressed his cheek against hers and the usual thrill that any contact with him gave shivered through her. "I am happy that you like it, my loved one, and behind those

Was she of his past, or of some more remote and exotic dimension?

Heading by Vincent Napoli

walls are American bathrooms, which I assure you is something to treasure. The brochure said the last owner renovated it quote 'for modern comfort without disturbing the ancient charm' unquote. It looks as the brochure said. At first I was nervous taking it sight unseen as the price seemed low." He exerted pressure and the car shot forward at a good speed again, eating up the steady incline of the road with no effort.

"Is it very old?" Sherry asked.

"It belonged to the Quisce's in the Thirteenth Century. One of them, Cardinal Alessandre de Quisce built it. The family enjoyed it for several hundred years, then the strains petered out. Twenty-four years ago there were no De Quisce's left except a cousin who descended from a female De Quisce who had married an Englishman in 1760. Her heirs had never been to Italy and the family villa meant nothing to them.

"So they sold it through the agent I got it from. It's passed through several hands since then. Mostly rentals. The man who bought it and made the improvements didn't stay here long to enjoy them. He was called back to America and then the war came. It was a Nazi headquarters at one time, then was rented again. Fortunately it was free so I took it—for you, my darling. You won't be bored here?"

"Oh, no, Gio—never with you—and the villa is so—heavenly." As she repeated the adjective the look on her face was aesthetic.

THE villa, on close inspection, was even more enchanting than it looked. The Quisce's had sold the family furnishings along with the estate so the furniture was authentic, as well as charming. "They are museum pieces—with comfort," Sherry exclaimed. Indeed, the whole place was ravishing.

Gio nodded, "Each room is a picture. I cannot understand why the rent is so reasonable—"

"The servants are good too." Sherry had lost her heart to Quilletta, the slim Raphael Madonna who was to be her personal maid. Antonia, the cook, was fat and jolly. Beurio, the butler, and general factotum left nothing to be desired and old Angelo, gardener and houseman, had won their hearts at once. The agent had staffed the place and the servants had been lined up at the front doors of thick wood decorated with finely carved iron to welcome the bride and groom. They had made an immediate mutual good impression.

It had been Beurio's task to show them around and he did it with all the flourish of his race, pointing out the special advantages, particularly proud of the baths. There were three on the second floor, complete with porcelain and nickel; made from what had probably originally been dressing rooms. They were large and spacious. Even Gio was impressed by their elegant modernity.

The front of the house, facing the lake, had two enormous rooms joined together by one of the baths, and further linked by a balcony that went straight across the front of the house.

Sherry went through the long window onto the balcony and feasted her eyes on the superb view. "Gio," she called, "you must share this."

A second later he stood beside her, his arm around her shoulders, warmly intimate. "We can have breakfasts here."

"I shall never want to leave. Do we have to?" she asked.

"Not until you wish. I have taken it for three months, but I can extend the lease. If you like I'll buy it for you, Scamperino." It was his pet name for her.

"I'd love it to be ours forever," she said simply.

"Then it shall be so." He kissed her. For a few minutes time stood still and there was only joy in the world, shared vicariously by Beurio who watched from the golden room, so called because of the rich yellow damask that predominated in the decor.

As Gio released her the sun vanished with the suddenness that it reserves only for Italy. A cold dampness smote at Sherry. She shivered.

"Come indoors," Gio drew her back to the brightness of the yellow damask, shutting the long window behind him. "The twilights are chilly," he remarked. Then, "Have you chosen the room for us."

"This one, of course."

"The contessa's things can be brought here, Beurio," Gio commanded. "Put mine

in the other bedroom on this balcony. Then no one else will intrude upon it. I will use the room for a dressing room. There are plenty of beautiful suites on the other side and in the wings, though not of such magnificent size." He grinned, then added as Beurio bustled off importantly, "I shall have to hold you very tight, my darling so you will not be lost. Both of these rooms are big enough to be a house, or an apartment. The De Quisce's did themselves very well. I expect this belonged to the Cardinal, who, I believe, according to history, was quite a man."

SHERRY was sure of it when the next morning she pulled aside some wall draperies of the yellow damask on the far side of the room and discovered murals that might have illustrated Arentino's work.

"I suppose they couldn't bear to paint over them so left the damask in place," Gio explained. "The Cardinal couldn't have them viewed by his more godly guests, hence the curtain—from its feel I'd bet it's the original."

"No wonder that bed makes one feel erotic," Sherry laughed. "Now that I look close at the carving it's full of nymphs and satyrs doing unmentionable things."

"Scamperino! I wondered when you'd notice." Gio laughed and caught her in his arms. After all, they'd only been married a few weeks.

EXCEPT for breakfasts the balcony was mostly used by Gio who came back and forth to the golden room from the other bedroom where he kept his things. That was called The Madonna's Chamber. Sherry thought the name had a religious connotation but when she said so Gio laughed, "More likely the Cardinal kept his mistress there. Handy like. Madonna was the name for any woman in those days. They called Lucrezia Borgia Madonna, my love, and her reputation was none of the best."

It was the day after that conversation Sherry saw the woman on the balcony for the first time.

She was in her room sitting in front of the gorgeous dressing table using the great silvergilt mirror that stood upon it as a guide for her pancake make-up when she saw a shadow moving across the smooth surface. She leaned forward and there reflected in the mirror was a figure—a misty figure—because the glass in the silver frame was old.

"Gio," she called, but there was no response.

She got up and turned. She'd been sitting with her back to the balcony. There was no one there. She rushed to the long windows and out on the balcony. Just in time to see a flair of white silk disappearing into the Madonna's Chamber. Gio had a white robe he sometimes wore. So the incident passed with her thinking Gio had been walking on the balcony and had not heard her call.

But the next morning she actually saw the woman.

She had awakened early with the sunrise throwing roseate light around her. She had raised up on one elbow to tell Gio to look at the sky which resembled a Turner painting. But Gio was not there. She was alone in the mammoth bed. At that moment a shadow cut through the rosy glow. Sherry looked out the window and there, in profile, was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She was tall, with burnished red-gold hair that rippled in waves of splendor down her back. She wore white silk which floated around her feet like sea foam and hugged her torso close, revealing its perfection. The face was beautiful. In a second it turned towards Sherry, long enough for her to see deep-set black eyes, heavy-lidded, that seemed tragically sad as they regarded her.

It was only a brief moment, then the woman walked on. Once again Sherry reached the balcony in time to see the floating white silk vanish into the Madonna's Chamber—Gio's room, the room he had selected for a dressing room.

Sherry's heart was a dead weight inside her, like the heavy brass pendulum of a clock swinging to and fro, mechanically. Gio had wanted to keep his things in a separate room. At the time she had thought it a considerate gesture but now—jealousy was rampant thrusting thousands of green-edged darts into her— Now she thought it was on account of the woman.

All the tales she had heard of foreign

men—their mistresses—came back to plague her. It was as though the sight of the woman, the connotations of her being here in the villa, had released hundreds of monstrous thoughts that she had never suspected of existence.

She hadn't known Gio long—only a month before they were married. She had met him at a U. N. reception. One look at him, tall, handsome and full of charm, and she had loved him. Afterwards he had said it had been the same way with him. "I looked into your lovely blue eyes and my heart was at your feet," was how he had put it. He had proposed to her after a whirlwind courtship. They had been married almost immediately.

What had she known about him? Very little, except he came from one of the best Italian families, that he had visited America on a mission of some importance and he stood high in his country's estimation, that he had plenty of money, an old castle near Pavia where his mother, the Contessa, and his sister lived. "We will not go there until our honeymoon is over," he had told her. "They want to know you and will love you as I do. You will like them, but I do not want to share you yet."

SHE had had a letter from the Contessa welcoming her into the family, a letter plainly written by an aristocrat—and that was the sum of her knowledge of Gio. That he loved her she was sure. And yet, was she? If he had already installed a mistress in their honeymoon villa he couldn't love her very much. She began remembering what her family lawyer had said, "Why don't you wait until you know him better? Visit his people. Be engaged, but don't marry until you've given time a chance."

She'd brushed that aside. Wait, when every nerve in her body cried out for Gio, when to be his wife was the goal of all her dreams. Of course, she wouldn't wait and until this moment she had been deliriously happy.

Her mind swept over the past weeks, picked out the golden moments and cherished them.

"I am a fool," she told herself sternly. "Of course Gio loves me. I'm imagining all this. The woman is probably from the village, maybe she's Beurio's girl friend." She giggled to herself at the thought of Beurio, stately and very much the grand serviteur, with a mistress. Then Gio called, tip-toeing into the room from the balcony.

"You're awake?" he said.

"And you were gone." There was reproach in her tones.

"I couldn't sleep. I had the strangest feeling as though someone were looking at me. So I went to my room and worked on my report. The High Powers wanted more detail. They said they'd never had such a brief report from me before. They didn't know I could think of nothing but you as I wrote it. Madonna, you are so lovely." He swept her into his arms and Sherry forgot about the woman.

But from that moment she disliked the balcony. Even when the sun was shining she felt chilly there. That very day she suggested they go down to the loggia for their morning meal. "It's so lovely looking out at the garden." She explained to Gio. He apparently had only one desire to do what she wanted, and agreed that the loggia would be charming.

Beurio was only too pleased not to carry trays upstairs. So the routine was established.

For several days Sherry forgot the woman. But then one night she saw her again. Gio had admitted he had a sore throat and said he'd sleep in the Madonna Chamber rather than risk her catching it.

The minute the words were out of his mouth Sherry was suspicious. "I don't catch things," she said.

"You are too precious to risk my beloved," Gio told her, and went over her protestations.

She couldn't sleep. She tossed restlessly in the big bed. Suddenly she felt eyes upon her. She turned towards the windows and there on the balcony was the woman framed by the graceful curves of the arched window and spotlighted by the moon.

She was remote, beautiful and the intensity of her gaze was somehow frightening. Sherry felt all her energy draining from her. "Who are you? What do you want?" she cried.

THE woman turned, walked away from the window, lost to vision. Sherry knew she was going towards the Madonna Chamber, that her draperies would be billowing about her like waves from the sea. She was going to Gio.

She leaped out of the bed. This was more than she could stand. She would follow the woman to Gio's room and have a showdown. As she thrust her feet into the satin mules she had purchased at Delman's for her honeymoon she was full of anger, rage at the woman for looking at her, disgust at Gio for allowing this to happen, annoyance at herself for being involved in such sordidity.

As she raced across the room her mood changed. She was remembering Jane Eyre, and Rochester's mad wife who had come to stare at Jane in the night—much as the Woman had stared at her. Could it be that Gio had found himself in some such situation, and, enmeshed in love for her, gone ahead with their marriage? Or was the Woman the skeleton in his family closet—a mad sister perhaps.

But there hadn't been madness in those deep-set velvety eyes. Unutterable sadness, ingrained tragedy, but not the glare of lunacy.

Sherry fled along the balcony, clutching her pale pink robe around her, tying the belt as she ran. There was no sign of the Woman, but of course she had had plenty of time to gain the shelter of the Madonna Chamber—and Gio—

Almost afraid to look, Sherry stood framed by the arched window of the Madonna room just as the Woman had stood in her window. She could see the bed plainly. The massive gilded frame with its four uprights, the damask cover and Gio's dark head on the white pillow. He was sound asleep, and it was no simulated sleep, either, for he was breathing heavily with his mouth open. His face was flushed. He looked ill. A man sick with fever, not one indulging in an amorous intrigue.

There was no sign of the Woman anywhere.

But Sherry decided to make sure. She tiptoed into the room. Gio remained undisturbed while she searched. She missed nothing. She looked behind the curtains, inside the Venetian wardrobe and even lifted the lid of the chest that stood at the foot of Gio's bed. There was no one there; when she went to the door leading to the hall she found it locked from the inside.

The Woman was not there—unless—she lifted the bed draperies and peered underneath. Nothing but darkness, no flicker of white draperies and the surface of the bed, except where Gio's body raised the covers, was quite flat.

The Woman wasn't here. Then where could she be? She wasn't on the balcony, that, it was plain to see in the clear moonlight, was empty. Well, perhaps she had climbed over the rail down to the ground. It didn't seem possible, especially with those flowing white draperies. However, it was, so far as Sherry could see, the only solution—unless she had dreamed the intruder. But she knew she had not. The Woman had been real. She had actually seen her.

She leaned over and bestowed a kiss on Gio's forehead. He was still asleep and she thought his forehead felt hot. Not wanting to disturb him she went silently back to the other bedroom. In the morning she would examine the balcony more closely, see if it were possible to climb down from it.

BUT when morning came Gio was delirious with fever and for the next few days she thought of nothing but Gio and the infection that racked him.

It was the morning of the fifth day when penicillin had once again performed its miracle and Gio was recovering that he asked, "Why did you stand in the window last night and look at me, then when I called, run away?"

She was sitting beside him, her fingers lying loosely in his. They tightened their grasp. "But my darling, I didn't. I slept like a crocodile in the sun. I was exhausted with worry over you. Knowing you were all right and out of danger I relaxed and made up for all the sleep I'd lost. I never raised an eyelid all night."

"But I saw you in the window. So did Miss Onatelli." Miss Onatelli was the night nurse.

It was at that moment Sherry remem-

bered the Woman on the balcony. "Did you see my face?"

"No. There was a cloud over the moon but your figure was plain, and I didn't dream it because Miss Onatelli saw you too."

"What did I have on?"

"White?"

"Have you ever seen me in white?"

"Come to think of it, no—except once or twice on the balcony when you've always run away from me." Gio's lip twisted. "It hurt my feelings—I didn't mention it before because I was hurt. I thought you were evading me."

"Gio—as if I could—" She kissed his hand and cradled it against her cheek. "But I've thought worse things of you. I've seen a Woman in white coming in here. I thought maybe you had a mistress, or a mad wife—or" She stopped short at the expression of shock on his face.

"That is why you were cold to me. But Sherry, how could you—"

"But I couldn't help it. Listen—" She recounted the whole story. She kept nothing back, not even her misgivings which in the light of the present circumstances and the love gleaming from his eyes sounded pretty silly.

When she had finished Gio looked serious. "It's either a ghost or Beurio is up to something."

"A ghost—I never thought of that." Sherry remembered the cold feeling and the sensation of the energy being drained from her. "Oh, Gio, I wouldn't like it to be a ghost."

"Well, it could be Beurio's girl friend—or perhaps a crazy member of the De Quisce family he's sheltering. It's possible. These old houses hide strange things. There's no use asking him. He'd only lie. Listen, Scamperino, stay in here tonight. You and I and Miss Onatelli. It's her last night. We might as well make use of her. We'll watch."

"Oh, yes," Sherry agreed, "and now while you nap I'll investigate the balcony climbing possibilities."

When she returned later it was to report that nothing short of wings could get on or off the balcony except from the two bedrooms. The wings of the Villa had no connection with the balcony, which was only on the front facade.

"A mountain goat couldn't make it, let alone a woman." Sherry announced.

Miss Onatelli, imported from Rome, obviously didn't approve of Sherry's spending the night in her patient's room. "It is rest that is needed."

WHEN the reason for her staying was explained Miss Onatelli was still more disapproving, but she made no further protests. She even allowed herself to umpire a game of dominoes. But she was quite firm when it came to the time Gio should sleep. "We will watch, but you must not lie awake." She pronounced and turned out the light. Sherry relaxed in a large chair big enough to be a couch in any ordinary home. After settling her patient for the night Miss Onatelli sat in a chair beside Sherry. There was no sound in the room, but their even breathing.

Sherry knew Gio was not asleep. She could feel his thoughts winging toward her and her love went forth to meet his. All her doubts of him were resolved and she was completely happy once more. Curious for the explanation of the Woman on the balcony of course, but in an impersonal way now.

The hours wore on. The moonlight lay a great band of silver across the balcony. The soft-scented air drifted in like a caress. It was one of those moon-drenched Italian nights which are indescribably lovely and seem made for romance.

Sherry was thinking of Gio and how wonderful it would be when he was quite well again when she heard Miss Onatelli gasp and a sound of movement from the bed as Gio raised himself. Her eyes went at once to the window.

There was the Woman. The white draperies swirling about her as though they were made of mist. She was nearer, or the moonlight was more revealing, for Sherry could see her face more distinctly than on the previous times. The skin was camellia textured, and waxen pale, the eyes deep-set and sad, fringed with fear and a terrible yearning. The full lips trembled while the red-gold hair framed the face as old mahogany might one of Titian's masterpieces. The Woman was a great beauty, she was also horribly distressed and full of longing. One graceful hand clutched at her slender throat.

Suddenly Sherry heard her own voice, strangely calm above the disordered beating of her heart—"What can I do for you. I am your friend." Into the simple words she put a world of meaning.

The Woman half turned as though to leave, but hesitated.

Sherry spoke again, "I want to help you--because I know what love means I want to help you--because I love there is a bond between us. Tell me what to do."

Full-faced towards her now the Woman gazed deep into Sherry's eyes.

For a second it seemed to Sherry that the Woman was appraising her, and afterwards Gio and Miss Onatelli told her they had thought the same thing.

Then Sherry said, and the words seemed

to come through her from some other volition than her own, "All those who love are one. So your sorrow is my sorrow. You are blameless, but if it were not so, your sin would be mine, and your repentance. Through me you are free. I do not quite know why except my love for Gio makes it so, enables me to give you peace."

THERE was a long silence. During it a wonderful thing happened. The deep longing, the intensified yearning left the Woman's face as though it were being wiped off with a sponge. The three people in the room watched the tragedy die out of the Woman's eyes, saw torture leave them and peace take its place, a serenity that was beyond description.

Then a smile curved the Woman's full lips, a smile first radiant with a deep inner joy, then a smile of gratitude directed to Sherry. At the same time the white slender hand tore at something on her neck. There was a tinkling sound as though some metallic object struck the stone of the balcony and then the Woman was gone—vanished into the night from which she had come—One minute she was there—the next there was nothing.

Sherry gave a little gasp, tried to move, but found she had no strength—an inertia possessed her unlike anything she had ever known. She wanted to call Gio, but she could make no sound. She was cold, the very blood seemed frozen in her veins. From far off she could hear Gio's voice, "It was a ghost, there's no other explanation." And Miss Onatelli's answer, "I shall never forget the pain fading from her face and the blessed, blessed peace that took its place."

Sherry tried to describe her own feelings but she could make no sound. Faintness swirled about her as the white draperies the Woman had worn had swirled—ebbed around her like a mist. She tried to pierce through the fog that cut her off from Gio. She took an uncertain step and fell heavily to the floor. The rest was blackness.

The sun was shining when she came to her senses, and Gio was sitting beside her bed holding her hand as she had done for him, the positions reversed. She smiled at him, and his face brightened as though

it had been suddenly spot-lighted. "My darling," he said, "My darling."

"What happened?" she asked, and then she remembered. She sat up straight in bed. "The Woman on the balcony! She was a ghost?"

"Yes, my love, and you saved her from whatever curse she was doomed with. You—or someone speaking through you. Do you know you have been unconscious three days? Nurse Onatelli and I have looked after you."

"Three days?"

"Three days! Lie down, beloved." Gio bent over her, "And I will tell you everything. The doctor said when you came to you would be well again and should know what happened. He wasn't sure you'd remember."

She lay back, still holding her husband's hand. "The Woman vanished. I tried to speak. I couldn't, I was cold. I guess I fainted."

"You lapsed into a coma. It was the strain, and the fact that occult forces had used you to release her from torment, or your own innate goodness. We'll never know which, but I do know about her."

"Tell me, Gio." Sherry was full of impatience to share his knowledge.

"She was Bianca Torello and she was the great cardinal's mistress. The Cardinal De Quisce who built this villa—for her. She was young and beautiful. He was old and corrupt. Her father was his friend. He told the Count Torello he would put his daughter in a convent, that she had an avocation. Instead, he brought her here for his pleasure. He lavished everything upon her but she hated him. She had truly wanted to be a nun, but he made her a courtesan."

"How horrible—Where did you learn all this, Gio?"

"From the estate man. She's haunted the villa for centuries. Of course he didn't tell me until I broke him down."

"What's the rest?" Unerringly Sherry knew there was more.

"There was a young gardener here at the Villa who worshipped Madonna Bianca from afar. Gradually she got to know this and her warm nature and her misery re-

sponded to the lad's adoration. There was nothing wrong between them. Bianca was truly pure at heart, but she was unhappy and lonely, a sad captive. The Cardinal was away much of the time so she and the boy grew to be friends. They often sat in the rose garden and talked together. One day the Cardinal found them so and being an evil man saw evil where there was none. He sent her to the Madonna Chamber under guard. He had the boy tortured in his own chamber for better enjoyment as he lay in bed.

"Bianca broke out of her room, ran along the balcony and burst into the Cardinal's room, just as the boy breathed his last. His frail body could bear no more. Bianca was like a mad woman. She cursed the Cardinal and the De Quisce's for all time to come. Then the Cardinal, in his turn, did some cursing too. He said she'd have to walk the balcony until love expiated her crime.

"She shrieked there had been no crime but his, whereat he picked her up and threw her over the balcony rail to her death.

"He was far gone in wine, sadistically aroused by the torture, but later when he went to see her crumpled, lifeless body, still beautiful in death, he wept bitter tears and would have undone his curse.

"But it was too late. Words spoken with force have power. The Cardinal knew that. In those days they were closer to elemental things. But to make amends he hung his great jeweled cross about her neck and gave her a fine funeral and a tomb."

Sherry was hanging on his words: "What happened after that?" she asked eagerly.

"She haunted the balcony, and, some say, drove the Cardinal towards insanity. At any rate, he died raving that the villa would know no peace 'til the cross came to it again. For years the haunting has continued. The Woman in white, or poor Bianca Torello, roamed the balcony, miserably unhappy, frightening everyone. The De Quisce's had to put up with her and her tragic agony, but none of the other tenants could. That's why the villa changed hands so frequently and was so cheap. But the curse has been lifted now, by you my darling—Bianca Torello walks no more."

"You haven't seen her since?"

"No, and I am sure no one will ever see the Woman on the Balcony again."

"But why? I did nothing. I only wasn't afraid of her and spoke words that seemed to be put into my mouth."

"By the Cardinal, the young gardener who loved her, or your own sweet self?" Gio looked at her gravely. "We will never know, but she hasn't been seen since, and Beurio says that has never happened before.

"But I have another way of knowing that her poor, unhappy ghost has found peace, even if I hadn't seen it on her face." Gio smiled and broke off, then continued on a different key, "Tell me, Scamperino, does all this make you hate the villa?"

SHERRY looked out at the balcony. "No, I love it—and I feel no fear now—only that sense of peace."

"Then you won't mind if I buy it? I want it, and I, too, feel that as always happens in time evil is purged and only good remains. It is so here."

Sherry inclined her head. She was completely happy. "I've always wanted the villa to be ours from that first minute I saw it. But now, Gio, do we know she's gone for good, that there *is* only peace?"

"Because she left you a present—" Gio dug into his pocket and held out his hand.

On it lay a gleaming golden cross set with precious stones. Hanging from it a broken golden chain.

"The Cardinal's Cross. She gave it to you, my love. She pulled it from her neck. I found it on the balcony. The cross that brought peace to the villa."

Sherry took the cross into her own hands. It was a magnificent thing from another world. As she held it she knew a feeling of release and freedom from all fear—and the prescience of future happiness.

Gio was speaking again. "There was a drawing of the cross in a history of the De Quisce's. It is identical. I am sure if we exhumed Bianca Torello's body we would not find the cross that was buried with it."

Sherry raised the cross and laid it on her neck where she would wear it always. "And I am sure too," she said slowly, "that we would find on her face that blessed expression of peace."

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