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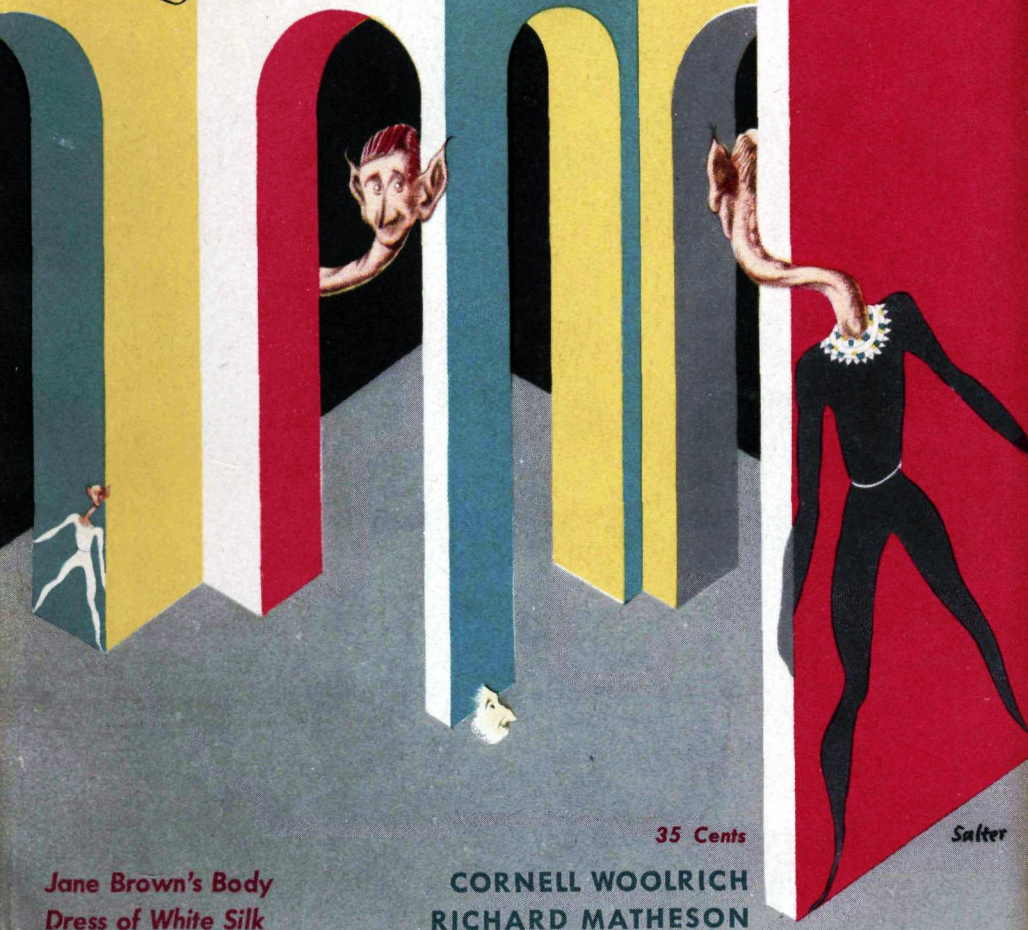

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Jane Brown's Body — CORNELL WOOLRICH

Dress of White Silk — RICHARD MATHESON

Of Time and Third Avenue — ALFRED BESTER

The Man Who Sold Rope to the Gnoles — IDRIS SEABRIGHT

also L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT, J. H. GAGE, and others

A selection of the best stories of fantasy and science fiction, new and old

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 2, No. 5 OCTOBER, 1951

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CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD, noted novelist, says of science fiction:

"*It is easy to understand why science fiction, and more particularly space-travel-fiction, should be enjoying a revival of popularity at the present time. Faced by probable destruction in a third world war, we turn naturally to dreams of escape from this age and this threatened planet. But that is not the whole of the explanation. For, while the* realistic *two-fisted action-story is going through a phase of imaginative bankruptcy, the science-fiction story grows more prodigious, more ideologically daring. . . .*"

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy and Science Fiction brings you in its next issue (on the stands in mid-October) a moving science-fiction allegory by FRITZ LEIBER, *When the Last Gods Die.* Other features in the forthcoming issue:

the first in a notable series of stories by MANLY WADE WELLMAN based on American folk ballads, *O Ugly Bird!;*

a successor by HOWARD SCHOENFELD to his memorably zany *Built Up Logically*, entitled (and logically) *Built Down Logically;*

plus another of H. NEARING, JR.'s accounts of Professors Ransom and MacTate; a first published story by ZENNA HENDERSON; and stories by ROBERT ARTHUR, MARGARET IRWIN, CLEVE CARTMILL, JAMES S. HART and others — and something completely new in the way of science fiction art work by KENNETH R. DEARDORF.

Alfred Bester has written regrettably little science fiction in recent years; radio is (one of your editors speaks from the heart) as much more profitable as it is less enjoyable. But those who remember such Bester classics as Adam and No Eve (*possibly the most ingenious solution ever offered to the last-man-on-earth gambit) will be happy to learn that he still retains his skill at giving a fresh twist to familiar problems. Here he treats the always fascinating paradox of the power bestowed by possession of, in the simplest form, tomorrow's newspaper. A World Almanac for 1990 is an even more provocative object; and in the course of unraveling its implications, Bester shows that there are facets of Third Avenue which even John McNulty doesn't know.*

Of Time and Third Avenue

by ALFRED BESTER

WHAT MACY HATED about the man was the fact that he squeaked. Macy didn't know if it was the shoes, but he suspected the clothes. In the backroom of his Tavern, under the poster that asked: WHO FEARS MENTION THE BATTLE OF THE BOYNE? Macy inspected the stranger. He was tall, slender, and very dainty. Although he was young, he was almost bald. There was fuzz on top of his head and over his eyebrows. When he reached into his jacket for a wallet, Macy made up his mind. It was the clothes that squeaked.

"MQ, Mr. Macy," the stranger said in a staccato voice. "Very good. For rental of this backroom including exclusive utility for one chronos —"

"One whatos?" Macy asked nervously.

"Chronos. The incorrect word? Oh yes. Excuse me. One hour."

"You're a foreigner," Macy said. "What's your name? I bet it's Russian."

"No. Not foreign," the stranger answered. His frightening eyes whipped around the backroom. "Identify me as Boyne."

"Boyne!" Macy echoed incredulously.

"MQ. Boyne." Mr. Boyne opened a wallet like an accordion, ran his fingers through various colored papers and coins, then withdrew a hundred-dollar bill. He jabbed it at Macy and said: "Rental fee for one hour. As agreed. One hundred dollars. Take it and go."

Impelled by the thrust of Boyne's eyes, Macy took the bill and staggered out to the bar. Over his shoulder he quavered: "What'll you drink?"

"Drink? Alcohol? Never!" Boyne answered.

He turned and darted to the telephone booth, reached under the pay-phone and located the lead-in wire. From a side pocket he withdrew a small glittering box and clipped it to the wire. He tucked it out of sight, then lifted the receiver.

"Co-ordinates West 73–58–15," he said rapidly, "North 40–45–20. Disband sigma. You're ghosting . . ." After a pause he continued: "Stet. Stet! Transmission clear. I want a fix on Knight. Oliver Wilson Knight. Probability to four significant figures. You have the co-ordinates. . . . 99.9807? MQ. Stand by. . . ."

Boyne poked his head out of the booth and peered toward the Tavern door. He waited with steely concentration until a young man and a pretty girl entered. Then he ducked back to the phone. "Probability fulfilled. Oliver Wilson Knight in contact. MQ. Luck my Para." He hung up and was sitting under the poster as the couple wandered toward the backroom.

The young man was about twenty-six, of medium height and inclined to be stocky. His suit was rumpled, his seal-brown hair was rumpled, and his friendly face was crinkled by good-natured creases. The girl had black hair, soft blue eyes, and a small private smile. They walked arm in arm and liked to collide gently when they thought no one was looking. At this moment they collided with Mr. Macy.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Knight," Macy said. "You and the young lady can't sit back there this afternoon. The premises have been rented."

Their faces fell. Boyne called: "Quite all right, Mr. Macy. All correct. Happy to entertain Mr. Knight and friend as guests."

Knight and the girl turned to Boyne uncertainly. Boyne smiled and patted the chair alongside him. "Sit down," he said. "Charmed, I assure you."

The girl said: "We hate to intrude, but this is the only place in town where you can get genuine stone gingerbeer."

"Already aware of the fact, Miss Clinton." To Macy he said: "Bring gingerbeer and go. No other guests. These are all I'm expecting."

Knight and the girl stared at Boyne in astonishment as they sat down slowly. Knight placed a wrapped parcel of books on the table. The girl took a breath and said: "You know me . . . Mr. . . .?"

"Boyne. As in Boyne, Battle of. Yes, of course. You are Miss Jane Clinton. This is Mr. Oliver Wilson Knight. I rented premises particularly to meet you this afternoon."

"This supposed to be a gag?" Knight asked, a dull flush appearing on his cheeks.

"Gingerbeer," answered Boyne gallantly as Macy arrived, deposited bottles and glasses, and departed in haste.

"You couldn't know we were coming here," Jane said. "We didn't know ourselves . . . until a few minutes ago."

"Sorry to contradict, Miss Clinton," Boyne smiled. "The probability of your arrival at Longitude 73–58–15 Latitude 40–45–20 was 99.9807 percent. No one can escape four significant figures."

"Listen," Knight began angrily, "if this is your idea of —"

"Kindly drink gingerbeer and listen to my idea, Mr. Knight." Boyne leaned across the table with galvanic intensity. "This hour has been arranged with difficulty and much cost. To whom? No matter. You have placed us in an extremely dangerous position. I have been sent to find a solution."

"Solution for what?" Knight asked.

Jane tried to rise. "I . . . I think we'd b-better be go —"

Boyne waved her back, and she sat down like a child. To Knight he said: "This noon you entered premises of J. D. Craig & Co., dealer in printed books. You purchased, through transfer of money, four books. Three do not matter, but the fourth . . ." He tapped the wrapped parcel emphatically. "That is the crux of this encounter."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Knight exclaimed.

"One bound volume consisting of collected facts and statistics."

"The Almanac?"

"The Almanac."

"What about it?"

"You intended to purchase a 1950 Almanac."

"I bought the '50 Almanac."

"You did not!" Boyne blazed. "You bought the Almanac for 1990."

"What?"

"The World Almanac for 1990," Boyne said clearly, "is in this package. Do not ask how. There was a mistake that has already been disciplined. Now the error must be adjusted. That is why I am here. It is why this meeting was arranged. You cognate?"

Knight burst into laughter and reached for the parcel. Boyne leaned across the table and grasped his wrist. "You must not open it, Mr. Knight."

"All right." Knight leaned back in his chair. He grinned at Jane and sipped gingerbeer. "What's the pay-off on the gag?"

"I must have the book, Mr. Knight. I would like to walk out of this Tavern with the Almanac under my arm."

"You would, eh?"

"I would."

"The 1990 Almanac?"

"Yes."

"If," said Knight, "there was such a thing as a 1990 Almanac, and if it was in that package, wild horses couldn't get it away from me."

"Why, Mr. Knight?"

"Don't be an idiot. A look into the future? Stock market reports . . . Horse races . . . Politics. It'd be money from home. I'd be rich."

"Indeed yes." Boyne nodded sharply. "More than rich. Omnipotent. The small mind would use the Almanac from the future for small things only. Wagers on the outcome of games and elections. And so on. But the intellect of dimensions . . . *your* intellect . . . would not stop there."

"You tell me," Knight grinned.

"Deduction. Induction. Inference." Boyne ticked the points off on his fingers. "Each fact would tell you an entire history. Real estate investment, for example. What lands to buy and sell. Population shifts and census reports would tell you. Transportation. Lists of marine disasters and railroad wrecks would tell you whether rocket travel has replaced the train and ship."

"Has it?" Knight chuckled.

"Flight records would tell you which company's stock should be bought. Lists of postal receipts would tell you which are the cities of the future. The Nobel Prize winners would tell you which scientists and what new inventions to watch. Armament budgets would tell you which factories and industries to control. Cost of living reports would tell you how best to protect your wealth against inflation or deflation. Foreign exchange rates, stock exchange reports, bank suspensions and life insurance indexes would provide the clues to protect you against any and all disasters."

"That's the idea," Knight said. "That's for me."

"You really think so?"

"I know so. Money in my pocket. The world in my pocket."

"Excuse me," Boyne said keenly, "but you are only repeating the dreams of childhood. You want wealth. Yes. But only won through endeavor . . . your own endeavor. There is no joy in success as an unearned gift. There is nothing but guilt and unhappiness. You are aware of this already."

"I disagree," Knight said.

"Do you? Then why do you work? Why not steal? Rob? Burgle? Cheat others of their money to fill your own pockets?"

"But I —" Knight began, and then stopped.

"The point is well taken, eh?" Boyne waved his hand impatiently. "No, Mr. Knight. Seek a mature argument. You are too ambitious and healthy to wish to steal success."

"Then I'd just want to know if I would be successful."

"Ah? Stet. You wish to thumb through the pages looking for your name.

You want reassurance. Why? Have you no confidence in yourself? You are a promising young attorney. Yes. I know that. It is part of my data. Has not Miss Clinton confidence in you?"

"Yes," Jane said in a loud voice. "He doesn't need reassurance from a book."

"What else, Mr. Knight?"

Knight hesitated, sobering in the face of Boyne's overwhelming intensity. Then he said: "Security."

"There is no such thing. Life is insecurity. You can only find safety in death."

"You know what I mean," Knight muttered. "The knowledge that life is worth planning. There's the H-Bomb."

Boyne nodded quickly. "True. It is a crisis. But then, I'm here. The world will continue. I am proof."

"If I believe you."

"And if you do not?" Boyne blazed. "You do not want security. You want courage." He nailed the couple with a contemptuous glare. "There is in this country a legend of pioneer forefathers from whom you are supposed to inherit courage in the face of odds. D. Boone, E. Allen, S. Houston, A. Lincoln, G. Washington and others. Fact?"

"I suppose so," Knight muttered. "That's what we keep telling ourselves."

"And where is the courage in you? Pfui! It is only talk. The unknown terrifies you. Danger does not inspire you to fight, as it did D. Crockett; it makes you whine and reach for the reassurance in this book. Fact?"

"But the H-Bomb . . ."

"It is a danger. Yes. One of many. What of that? Do you cheat at Solhand?"

"Solhand?"

"Your pardon." Boyne reconsidered, impatiently snapping his fingers at the interruption to the white heat of his argument. "It is a game played singly against chance relationships in an arrangement of cards. I forget your noun. . . ."

"Oh!" Jane's face brightened. "Solitaire."

"Quite right. Solitaire. Thank you, Miss Clinton." Boyne turned his frightening eyes on Knight. "Do you cheat at Solitaire?"

"Occasionally."

"Do you enjoy games won by cheating?"

"Not as a rule."

"They are thisney, yes? Boring. They are tiresome. Pointless. Null-Co-ordinated. You wish you had won honestly."

"I suppose so."

"And you will suppose so after you have looked at this bound book.

Through all your pointless life you will wish you had played honestly the game of life. You will verdash that look. You will regret. You will totally recall the pronouncement of our great poet-philosopher Trynbyll who summed it up in one lightning, skazon line. '*The Future is Tekon*,' said Trynbyll. Mr. Knight, do not cheat. Let me implore you to give me the Almanac."

"Why don't you take it away from me?"

"It must be a gift. We can rob you of nothing. We can give you nothing."

"That's a lie. You paid Macy to rent this backroom."

"Macy was paid, but I gave him nothing. He will think he was cheated, but you will see to it that he is not. All will be adjusted without dislocation."

"Wait a minute. . . ."

"It has all been carefully planned. I have gambled on you, Mr. Knight. I am depending on your good sense. Let me have the Almanac. I will disband . . . re-orient . . . and you will never see me again. Vorloss verdash! It will be a bar adventure to narrate for friends. Give me the Almanac!"

"Hold the phone," Knight said. "This is a gag. Remember? I ——"

"Is it?" Boyne interrupted. "Is it? Look at me."

For almost a minute the young couple stared at the bleached white face with its deadly eyes. The half smile left Knight's lips, and Jane shuddered involuntarily. There was chill and dismay in the backroom.

"My God!" Knight glanced helplessly at Jane. "This can't be happening. He's got me believing. You?"

Jane nodded jerkily.

"What should we do? If everything he says is true we can refuse and live happily ever after."

"No," Jane said in a choked voice. "There may be money and success in that book, but there's divorce and death too. Give him the book."

"Take it," Knight said faintly.

Boyne rose instantly. He picked up the parcel and went into the phone booth. When he came out he had three books in one hand and a smaller parcel made up of the original wrapping in the other. He placed the books on the table and stood for a moment, smiling down.

"My gratitude," he said. "You have eased a precarious situation. It is only fair you should receive something in return. We are forbidden to transfer anything that might divert existing phenomena streams, but at least I can give you one token of the future."

He backed away, bowed curiously, and said: "My service to you both." Then he turned and started out of the Tavern.

"Hey!" Knight called. "The token?"

"Mr. Macy has it," Boyne answered and was gone.

The couple sat at the table for a few blank moments like sleepers slowly awakening. Then, as reality began to return, they stared at each other and burst into laughter.

"He really had me scared," Jane said.

"Talk about Third Avenue characters. What an act. What'd he get out of it?"

"Well . . . he got your Almanac."

"But it doesn't make sense." Knight began to laugh again. "All that business about paying Macy but not giving him anything. And I'm supposed to see that he isn't cheated. And the mystery token of the future . . ."

The Tavern door burst open and Macy shot through the saloon into the backroom. "Where is he?" Macy shouted. "Where's the thief? Boyne, he calls himself. More likely his name is Dillinger."

"Why, Mr. Macy!" Jane exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"Where is he?" Macy pounded on the door of the Men's Room. "Come out, ye blaggard!"

"He's gone," Knight said. "He left just before you got back."

"And you, Mr. Knight!" Macy pointed a trembling finger at the young lawyer. "You, to be party to thievery and racketeers. Shame on you!"

"What's wrong?" Knight asked.

"He paid me one hundred dollars to rent this backroom," Macy cried in anguish. "One hundred dollars. I took the bill over to Bernie the pawnbroker, being cautious-like, and he found out it's a forgery. It's a counterfeit."

"Oh no," Jane laughed. "That's too much. Counterfeit?"

"Look at this," Mr. Macy shouted, slamming the bill down on the table.

Knight inspected it closely. Suddenly he turned pale and the laughter drained out of his face. He reached into his inside pocket, withdrew a checkbook and began to write with trembling fingers.

"What on earth are you doing?" Jane asked.

"Making sure that Macy isn't cheated," Knight said. "You'll get your hundred dollars, Mr. Macy."

"Oliver! Are you insane? Throwing away a hundred dollars . . ."

"And I won't be losing anything either," Knight answered. "All will be adjusted without dislocation! They're diabolical. Diabolical!"

"I don't understand."

"Look at the bill," Knight said in a shaky voice. "Look closely."

It was beautifully engraved and genuine in appearance. Benjamin Franklin's benign features gazed up at them mildly and authentically; but in the lower right-hand corner was printed: Series 1980 D. And underneath that was signed: Oliver Wilson Knight, Secretary of the Treasury.

Almost a quarter of a century ago, H. R. Wakefield's THEY RETURN AT EVENING *(Appleton) revealed a new master of the English ghost story, a man who, in his development of a great formal tradition, stood in somewhat the same relation to the Old Master M. R. James as James to the still Older Master Sheridan LeFanu. Now James is long since dead and Wakefield is himself the respected Old Master; but many connoisseurs have felt that his later work, despite occasional startling flashes such as the incomparable* The Frontier Guards, *rarely sustained the level of that extraordinary first volume, which contained such stories as . . .* And He Shall Sing *and* Professor Pownall's Oversight *(the latter recently reprinted here, as you'll remember). Now however, thanks to August Derleth (perhaps the only man to whom we'll yield in our status as Wakefield-fanciers), we're able to present for the first time anywhere one of Wakefield's newest and finest stories, as subtle and complex as anything he's done, and a notable illustration of that little understood key truth of fantasy:* What *happens, no matter how strange and fascinating, is not the most significant part of your fiction; what makes it a story is:* to whom *it happens.*

The Gorge of the Churels

by H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

"Mr. Sen," said the Reverend Aloysius Prinkle, "I am going to take a holiday tomorrow. I'm feeling a bit jaded. I thought we'd have a picnic, if it's fine. You must come with us, of course."

"A pleasant idea, certainly," smiled Mr. Sen. He was a Bengali babu, aged about thirty, who acted as secretary and general factotum to the incumbents of the Mission Station. Mr. Prinkle had taken him over from his predecessor three months before. He was a slightly enigmatic young man, habitually smiling and obliging, but not quite as "open" as he might be, was Mr. Prinkle's verdict. His enemies called him a "Rice Christian," meaning he had found the Christian side of the bread the better buttered. His friends replied, "Very sensible of Mr. Sen, if he is right about the rice." His English was fluent and personally idiomatic, his intonation precise.

"Have you yet decided on a site for the occasion?" he added. "Possibly my advice may be welcome; possibly not."

"Well, Mrs. Prinkle and I passed what we considered an ideal spot the other day. It's a little gorge off the Kulan Valley. It's known, I understand, as 'The Gorge of the Churels.' You know where I mean?"

Mr. Sen didn't reply for a moment. He continued to wear that smile, but it contracted somewhat as though he were moved by some not entirely pleasant reflections. At length he remarked, "Yes, I am familiar with the locality you mention, but is it not rather a long way to go? Just a suggestion, of course."

"Not a bit of it!" laughed Mr. Prinkle; "just three-quarters of an hour in the car and a beautiful drive in the bargain."

"Did you consider taking the youngster with you?" asked Mr. Sen slowly.

"Why, naturally! He'll love it, and it'll give his Ayah the day off."

"It is not perhaps a very satisfactory place for young children," said Mr. Sen.

"Why ever not! Snakes?"

"No, I was not thinking so much of snakes," replied Mr. Sen aloofly; "those are, in a way, everywhere and easily avoided, terrified, or destroyed."

"Then what *are* you thinking about?" asked Mr. Prinkle. His voice was benignly patronising.

"There is a good deal of water there; a stream and a pool, and so on. All this may be dangerous for the tender-yeared, of course."

"Of course *not*!" laughed Mr. Prinkle. "We shall see Nikky doesn't come to a premature and watery end! It is not good, you know, Mr. Sen, to be too nervous about children. It makes *them* nervous, too. 'Fear and be slain!' There's a lot of truth in that, you know!"

"There is, also, of course," smiled Mr. Sen, "the Heavenly Father on guard."

Mr. Prinkle glanced at him sharply. Was he being a shade sarcastic? One could never be quite sure with Mr. Sen. A pity he couldn't be more *open*!

"Now, Mr. Sen," he said, "I don't think you're being quite candid with me. I don't think those are your real reasons. Now tell me quite frankly, please, why you dislike going to this place, for I can see you do."

"Oh, I don't mind really," said Mr. Sen with a quick little giggle. "I was perhaps reverting to type, if you know what I mean, just being foolish, a silly primitive Indian."

"I *suppose* I know what you're getting at," said Mr. Prinkle quizzingly. "The place has some sort of evil repute; is that what you mean?"

"Since you press me on the matter, that is so. Quite absurd, of course!"

Mr. Prinkle saw fit to issue a rather roguish reprimand.

"You mean, Mr. Sen, it is thought to be haunted by spirits of some kind?"

"That is what I may term the rough idea," replied Mr. Sen. "I do not

desire to discuss or argue the matter at further length, if you do not mind."

"But I *do mind*, Mr. Sen. I have instructed you that the only evil spirits are in the hearts of men. To suppose they can materialise themselves and infest certain localities is a childish superstition, primitive, as you say. Such ideas distract and confuse men's minds; they must be eradicated. I am rather surprised at you, Mr. Sen, after all you've been taught. It doesn't seem to have sunk in, for in spite of your protestations, I can see that you still in some ways share these barbarous notions. We *will* go to this gorge and enjoy ourselves thoroughly — *all* of us! Come now to my bungalow and give me my Urdu lesson, and let's have no more reversion to type!"

Mr. Sen smiled and did as he was told, but behind the mask he was charged with a great anger almost perfectly controlled. So during the next hour he delicately permitted Mr. Prinkle to realise he considered him a person of lethargic wits and quite devoid of linguistic ability; that instructing him was a considerable strain on the patience and by no means a labour of love. And later he quite refused to obey the pious injunction not to let the sun go down upon his wrath, for he lay long awake that night, his fury festering, because he had been ridiculed, humiliated, and reproved, and it was like a rodent ulcer in his spirit.

Mr. Prinkle was very young, earnest, pink-and-white and naïvely self-confident. Though he had landed at Bombay but fourteen weeks before, he felt he already knew India and the Indian mind pretty well, and the chapter headings of a book dealing with the Missionary problems of the sub-continent were already in his notebook. His wife, Nancy, was very young and earnest too, but much more pleasing to the eye and by no means so confident. In her heart she thought India a frightening place, and that she and her husband were really strangers in a very strange land, unwelcome strangers to ninety per cent of its inhabitants, at any rate those of the northern Punjab. She was an intelligent girl and her little boy Nicholas was an intelligent child. He was a charming, small, blond boy, much too young for the climate, pronounced the pundits. He was inclined to solemnity, too, and it seemed the genes of earnestness were already busy within him.

The next morning, September 13th, was spotlessly fine and not wickedly hot, for the scimitar edge of the summer sun was by now mercifully blunted.

Punctually at eleven the four of them packed into the V 8, and Mr. Prinkle facetiously exclaimed, "Chai! Chai!" as though urging on an elephant, for he was very proud of his few words of the lingo. So soon they were speeding through the tea-gardens and raising a dense, low-lying, light ochre dust.

At length they reached the chotal, or head of the little pass, and there below them was the Kulan Valley, the river like a sapphire necklace in an

emerald case, and above it the glossy, sparkling silver of the gods of the Hindu Kush stroked the sky. They paused a moment to revel in this view, though only Nancy really recognized how flabbergastingly well composed it was, and how brilliantly it just escaped the obvious. Then they began coasting down to the vale.

"What is the meaning of the word Churel, Mr. Sen?" asked Nancy turning round in the front seat to face that person.

Mr. Sen paused before replying. He was still angry and indignant, and this was a very dangerous question, of which he'd have preferred to have received notice. He decided it was a moment for the exercise of that gift for sarcasm on which he prided himself, and which was often a good defensive dialectical weapon. With him sarcasm and verbosity went arm in arm.

"The word Churel," he remarked in his most "sing-song" tone, "is a typical example of the poor superstitious Indians' ineradicable tendency to charge vague and fearful notions with materialist implications."

"Very likely," said Nancy, trying not to laugh, "but what does it mean?"

"The poor primitive Indians," replied Mr. Sen, "cherish fearful ideas about women who pass over in giving birth to their young. They fondly imagine that the spirits or ghosts of such unfortunate females continue to haunt the earth, with a view to seizing the soul of some living child and carrying it off to the void to comfort them. Then, if they are successful in this morbid ambition, they are content, and roam their favourite places no more. Such ghosts are called 'Churels', and this gorge we are visiting is one of such favoured places. It is all very absurd, of course."

"I think it's a strange and sad idea," said Nancy; "the child dies, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, naturally," smiled Mr. Sen; "its vital principle has been removed."

"*You* don't believe such stuff, I hope," said Mr. Prinkle insinuatingly.

Mr. Sen, who believed it with fearful intensity, replied, "Naturally, since my conversion to the True Faith and the instruction of two reverends, I regard the concept as wholly fatuous."

"It is queer," said Nancy frowning, "how such ideas ever get into people's heads. I mean someone must have *started* the Churel idea. Why? Does the word mean anything else, Mr. Sen? Has it any secondary meaning?"

"Oh, no, indeed. Just what I have informed you. Just a silly Indian notion, altogether."

"Then I can't quite understand it," said Nancy.

Mr. Prinkle decided it was time a superior intellect was brought to bear on the topic. Pulling out the Vox Parsonica stop, he proclaimed authoritatively, "My dear girl, it is one of a myriad such fantasies connected in some

way with procreation, which is always a kinetic mystery to the primitive mind. Once formed, the fantasy is *named*, inevitably. These encapsuled animistic relics in the human mind are very hard to eradicate, but I'm going to do my best to cleanse the midden; I regard it as an essential part of my mission to India."

Mr. Sen maintained his bland grin, but behind it a formidable seethe of emotions was writhing: contempt, rage, hate, a growing fear and a horrid hope. He glanced at little Nikky, who was regarding him in a steady, searching way. Mr. Sen wriggled uneasily; for some complex reason he was perturbed by that appraising stare.

"What are you talking about, Mummy?" asked the small one.

"Oh nothing," replied Nancy. "We shall soon be there."

The Gorge of the Churels ran up from the eastern flank of the valley. It was a re-entrant from the low, limestone cliff which lined the vale. It had been burrowed out during countless aeons by a hard-running little stream, which rose somewhere in the foothills and fed the Kulan half a mile away. The entrance to it was narrow and stark, but it widened out to a breadth of some five hundred yards and was a mile or so in depth. At its eastern ending the burn fell over a steep bank, died for a moment in a deep circular basin, and poured out again from its western rim. The gorge was full of deodars, peepuls and kikars, and a few great dominating teaks. The surface was thick grass interspersed with bamboo. It was a very shady, aloof place, death-quiet, save for the splash of the fall, the murmur of the burn, and the occasional cry of a bird.

They parked the car just inside it and then strolled about for a while.

"It is rather a sombre spot," said Nancy, "though," she added hurriedly, "quite lovely of course."

Mr. Sen grinned.

Mr. Prinkle said, "Now *you're* getting fanciful, my dear. I don't find it sombre in the least; quite charming. Remote, no doubt, and cut off from the busy world of men; but what a relief that is! If it were in England, it would be coated with orange peel and old newspapers, and cacophonous with gramophones and loud-speakers. Let's have lunch."

They spread out the cloth in the shade of a mighty deodar. Little Nikky was very quiet during the meal and not as hungry as usual. His eyes kept wandering in the direction of the pool.

"You'd like to fish in there, wouldn't you, darling?" said Nancy.

"Yes, Mummy," he replied listlessly.

"Before we come again we must get a little rod for you," said Nancy.

Nikky just smiled in a perfunctory way.

After the feast they smoked a cigarette, chatted for a while, and then

Mr. Prinkle yawned and said, "I feel like a nap. Most unusual for me, the reaction from a very hard week I suppose."

"I do, too," said Nancy. "Would you like forty winks, Nikky?"

"No, thank you, Mummy."

"Well, what would you like to do?"

"Just play about."

"Then don't go near the pond! What about you, Mr. Sen?"

"I do not wish to sleep, thank you," grinned that person. "I will watch over the young shaver, if that is what you imply."

"That's very kind of you. Just see he doesn't get into mischief. Now remember, darling, be good and *don't* go near the pond!"

"All right, Mummy."

Mr. and Mrs. Prinkle then stretched themselves under a long branch of the deodar, hung out like the groping arm of a blind man. They put handkerchiefs over their faces, wriggled into comfortable positions and soon slept.

Mr. Sen squatted down in the open whence he could keep Nikky in view, and began to think in his own tongue. He didn't like this place; it stirred ancestral forebodings. These callow, impercipient Europeans were fools to have come here — with a child. Because they were blind they thought there was nothing to see. Yes, he really hated them, despised them from the bottom of his heart. Let him be open with himself for once — wide open! Of course it paid him — not well, but enough — to pretend to like and respect them and their idiotic gods, but they were blind and insolent and conceited fools. If they were not, they would worship Brahma, the greatest of all god-ideas. Not, he thought to himself, that I am really greatly impressed even by Brahma, for what does he *do*? Now that I am being open, I will confess he seems to *do* nothing, and evil spirits freely defy him.

He would like to see these people punished for their vanity and stupidity. What would be the worst punishment they could suffer? The loss of the child, of course, and this was a fearful death-trap for children. No woman would bring her child near the gorge by night, and not even by day unless protected by some appropriately powerful charm. He ran his tongue across his lips. What was the little Nikky doing? He was kneeling down and staring across towards the pool, an oddly intent look on his face. Mr. Sen watched him for a few moments and then followed the direction of his gaze. He leaned forward, peered hard, and drew in his breath with a quick hiss. His face became set and rigid with terror. Just to the left of the basin was a circular grove of mulberry trees, and at the centre of this circle was something which had no business to be there; at least so it seemed to Mr. Sen. The sun's rays, coiling between the leaves, dappled and as it were camou-

flaged this intruder, so that it appeared just a thing of light and shade; like every other visible entity in the world, of course, yet somehow this was essentially incorporeal, not linked to earth, but painted thinly on the freckled air. It was this appearance which little Nikky seemed to be observing so intently, yet intermittently.

Sometimes he would look down and pretend to be playing with the grass and flowers, and then he would glance up swiftly and stealthily and become quite still and taut. He was, Mr. Sen decided, trying in an innocent way to deceive anyone who might be watching him. And Mr. Sen knew why he was doing this, and trembled. He pulled up the sleeve of his right arm where, round the biceps, was what resembled a large leather wrist-watch strap, but in the container was a piece of narrow scroll on which a very sacred text was inscribed. For this was a charm, idolatrously obtained by Mr. Sen from an extremely ancient and holy Sadhu, and, though not a protection against the full power of certain demons, a great shield for sure against most dangers and evils. He touched this charm and muttered to himself.

Presently little Nikky toddled slowly forward in the direction of the grove. Then he knelt again and nervously plucked up some blades of grass.

After a while the child glanced quickly up and moved forward again. He was now about fifteen yards from the grove. Mr. Sen began to tremble violently, not only with fear, but from some subtle emotion, atavistic and nameless. His teeth chattered and he clutched the charm. Again little Nikky glanced up from his feigned play and stared hard in front of him. Mr. Sen could see he was smiling in a vague, rapt way. It was very quiet, the light toss of the fall, the stir of the brook seemed but to join the stillness and intensify it. But Mr. Sen was aware of a horrid tension in the air.

Suddenly Nikky uttered a happy little cry and ran forward as fast as his chubby legs would carry him. As he reached the verge of the grove, it seemed to the entranced and quivering Mr. Sen as though the thing of light and shadow moved forward to meet and greet him. The little boy threw out his arms and in another moment the two would have mingled.

And then Mr. Sen, as the odd and pregnant saying has it, "came to himself." He leapt to his feet and ran headlong towards the grove, fiercely clutching the charm and uttering repeatedly, loudly, and hoarsely some words of warning or incantation. Little Nikky paused, glanced round and fell on his face, and the thing of light and shade seemed to lose its form and pass into the stippled air.

Mr. and Mrs. Prinkle came running out.

"What's the matter?" they cried in unison to Mr. Sen, who had taken Nikky in his arms.

"The little chap fell down," he said shrilly. "Perhaps a touch of the sun."

Nancy seized the child, who had fallen into a deep sleep.

"We'd better get him home," said Mr. Prinkle urgently. And soon they had packed up and were hurrying on their way.

Presently little Nikky stirred from his deep doze, opened his round blue eyes, smiled and said, "Pretty lady!" and went to sleep again.

"He's quite all right," laughed Nancy in relief.

"Just a little tired perhaps," said her husband resignedly. "Just a false alarm. Rather spoilt our day!"

"Why did you shout, Mr. Sen?" asked Nancy.

"Ah!" grinned that person. "I am ashamed to confess it, but *I* had a snooze too. Very negligent of me, but I was properly punished, for I had a very bad dream, I assure you!"

"What did you dream about?" asked Mr. Prinkle mockingly. "Those bereft and acquisitive Churels?"

"Ah, no," replied Mr. Sen with a protesting smile, and slipping his left arm up his right sleeve; "it is not fair of you, Mr. Prinkle, to pull my legs so, and remind me of the ridiculous superstitions of us poor, ignorant, primitive Indians!"

Larroes catch philologists

In our April issue we published a chiller by Manly Wade Wellman entitled *Larroes Catch Meddlers*, and asked your help in tracking down the origin of the strange title phrase, which we and Mr. Wellman had heard all our lives without quite understanding. Now we learn from your letters and from the very few lexicographers who recognize the phrase (it is not in the enormous 13-volume OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY!) that the proper form of the first word is assumed to be *lay-overs* (or *layer-overs*), which may mean A) switches laid over young behinds or B) branches laid deceptively over a pitfall. But the word takes uncountable different forms; Wright's ENGLISH DIALECT DICTIONARY lists 10 (from almost every shire) and Wentworth's AMERICAN DIALECT DICTIONARY gives 8 (chiefly from the South), while a fascinating compilation by Lowry Axley in "American Speech" (June, 1927) furnishes 19 forms! These lists hardly overlap each other, and your letters provide several further variants not in any of them. Lost in this profusion of *leddloes*, *lie-lows*, *lay holes*, *lee roys*, *lee oters*, *lee o'ers*, and *leodables*, and markedly unsatisfied by either of the *lay-over* explanations, we're inclined to think that all of these variants stem from some totally lost word . . . and even to wonder if that word belonged to any human speech.

Mr. Deming has developed so neatly an idea so fresh and striking that we feel no introduction is necessary. Go ahead to this completely new kind of time-travel story, with a concept that will stick in your mind through all your future reading of science fiction.

The Shape of Things That Came

by RICHARD DEMING

HAD GEORGE BLADE been a scientist like his Uncle Zeke, who invented the time-nightshirt, instead of merely a writer, he would have submitted to the College of Physicists an impersonal report on his trip fifty years into the future. And though in the year 1900 he was but twenty-three and possessed none of the literary fame he was destined to acquire, he probably would have been believed. Not because he was a writer, of course, but because he was the nephew of the late Dr. Ezekiel Herkheimer, the mere mention of whose name was enough to obtain audience with any scientist in the world.

But since he was a professional writer, strange experiences to George were material for fictional stories. It never even occurred to him he should report his trip as fact. He made it a love story about a man from 1900 and a girl from 1950.

He was rather proud of the story. As he waited in the outer office of Mr. Thomas Grayson, his editor, in response to a note from that gentleman, he anticipated nothing but friendly congratulations and a substantial check. When the secretary finally told him he could go in, he smoothed the long sideburns which added so much dash to his appearance, gave his heavy mustache a final tweak and opened the door with a smile of confidence on his face.

The smile died the moment he saw the editor's expression.

"You didn't like it," George said flatly, without waiting to be told.

"Sit down, Mr. Blade," Thomas Grayson invited.

George seated himself on the edge of a chair, leaned forward to grip the head of his stick and resigned himself to the bad news.

Thomas Grayson was a round, cherubic man who looked too kindly to be an editor. As a matter of fact he *was* kindly, a quality he found a handicap in his work, for it caused him to waste much valuable time explaining

in detail to disappointed authors just why their manuscripts were unacceptable.

"You obviously put a lot of work into this story, Mr. Blade," the editor said. "And you have quite a fanciful imagination. But, to put it bluntly, your background is entirely implausible."

"Implausible!" George echoed, having expected Mr. Grayson's criticism to center around the story's plot, or perhaps a defective style. "But, sir, I assure you the background is authentic to the last detail."

Mr. Grayson looked puzzled. "We must be talking about two different scripts. I refer to *The Time-Nightshirt*, which I have here before me." He emphasized his statement by rapping the manuscript with his knuckles.

"And so do I, sir."

The editor narrowed his eyes, cleared his throat and said with a touch of impatience, "If you mean that the scientific wonders you describe are theoretically possible, I won't argue with you, for my scientific background is too limited to judge. I am concerned solely with potential reader reaction. The average reader simply won't believe in your year 1950."

George said, "But Mr. Grayson, I meant it literally when I said the background was authentic. I was there."

Mr. Grayson's head snapped up and he stared at the young author in astonishment. Realizing the strange effect of his remarkable statement, George hastened to explain.

"You see, sir, my Uncle Zeke . . . Dr. Ezekiel Herkheimer, the physicist, that is . . . died January twelfth last, and since he died intestate, I inherited his entire belongings. Among them, in one of the trunksful of laboratory equipment, I found the time-nightshirt described in my story."

"You mean," Mr. Grayson asked incredulously, "there actually is such a piece of equipment?"

"Exactly as described, sir. In shape it is a common enough nightshirt, the head opening having the regulation two buttons to hold it snugly against the throat and keep out the night air. But the material seems to be some kind of odd metal . . . a metal so soft and pliable, the garment folds into a bundle small enough to fit a coat pocket. And the two buttons are not merely buttons, but movable dials. I do not understand the pages of technical notes I found with it, explaining my late uncle's theory of time-space travel, but the operation of the nightshirt is very simple. The top dial projects you fifty years into the future, and the bottom dial returns you again."

For a long time Mr. Grayson examined George without saying anything. When he finally spoke, it was in the unnaturally calm voice of a man humoring a maniac. "Why fifty years, particularly?"

George shrugged. "I don't know why. But it has only one speed forward and is entirely incapable of penetrating the past. Something to do with 'areas of limitation' as nearly as I can make out from my uncle's notes. I was rather disappointed when I discovered this, for at first I had visualized trips millions of years into the future and millions of years into the past. But even with its limits, you have to admit it's a remarkable invention."

"Yes, it is that," the editor said nervously. "But now if you will excuse me, Mr. Blade . . ."

It suddenly registered on George that the man did not believe him.

Nettled, he said coldly, "I assure you I am in full possession of my faculties, Mr. Grayson. Nor am I trying to play a practical joke. I actually have the time-nightshirt, and I actually leaped from the year 1900 to the year 1950. I was gone nearly two weeks."

"I'm sure you were," the editor said hastily.

George eyed him with suspicion. In a belligerent tone he said, "It was the most amazing two weeks I ever spent." He added with less belligerence and more reflectiveness, "And the most embarrassing, in a sense."

"Embarrassing?" Mr. Grayson asked cautiously.

"Embarrassing," George repeated. "In the first place, Uncle Zeke's notes contained no provisions for taking along anything but myself and the night-shirt. Consequently I arrived in the year 1950 a pauper and suitably attired only for bed."

Mr. Grayson emitted a strained laugh.

"Fortunately I was able to remedy this situation almost immediately. But my embarrassment persisted during my entire stay for a different reason."

"What was that?" Mr. Grayson asked, apparently deciding George was a harmless lunatic, and beginning to become interested.

George said, "I have what is supposed to be an excellent education, and always imagined that if I got up against it, I could make a living in any number of genteel ways. But in the year 1950 I was fitted to perform only the most menial tasks. In order to live I had to work, and the only work I could find which I was capable of performing was as a common laborer digging a sewer line."

This time Mr. Grayson's laugh, while still unbelieving, was not even strained. "How did you manage to clothe yourself on arrival?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I stooped to theft," George admitted. "You see, I live in a suite at the Chelsea, and since it is a relatively new building, I assumed it would still be standing in fifty years. I therefore made the time leap in my own bedroom, picking midnight as the best hour to arrive in 1950. Fortunately the tenant occupying the suite which had been mine fifty years

before was out when I materialized. Finding his clothing an approximate fit, I shamelessly appropriated what I required. Probably the man is still puzzled, for I returned the clothing two weeks later, when I transmitted myself back to 1900. Incidentally, my second impression of the year 1950 was amazement that aside from boots, trouser widths and cravats, men's styles had remained unchanged for fifty years."

"Your second impression?" Mr. Grayson said. "What was your first?"

"Also a feeling of amazement. The room was dark when I arrived, and I automatically felt for the gas mantle near the door. Instead my hand encountered a flat metal plate from which a tiny switch handle protruded. Experimentally I pushed it, and light sprang into the room."

The editor looked at him blankly.

"They had perfected the incandescent lamp," George explained.

The lamp over Mr. Grayson's desk began to sputter at that moment, distracting the attention of both men until the flow of gas again became even.

"How did you manage to live until you obtained your sewer-digging job?" Mr. Grayson asked finally.

"For the first day I was on charity . . . under false pretenses, I am afraid. After stealing the clothing, I sallied right out into the street. Or rather I 'sallied' as far as the front door of the Hotel Chelsea, after which my mode of progress is perhaps better described as a stagger. The impact of New York City in 1950 was so tremendous on a mind conditioned to 1900 that I could later recall nothing that happened from midnight, when I passed through the hotel's front door, until two A.M., when I stumbled into a Salvation Army Hotel in a state of shock and was shown to bed by a kindly captain who apparently mistook my condition for alcoholism."

A series of small explosions from the street outside interrupted George's story. At the same moment the door flew open and the secretary excitedly burst into the room. She beat the two men to the window.

Along the cobblestoned street rolled an astonishing vehicle. Open-carriaged and high-seated, it was piloted by a creature so begoggled and so encased in a dust-wrapper that its sex was indeterminate. At ten miles an hour it roared past the building, the noise of its exhaust drowning all other sound in the area except the voice of a watching pedestrian who yelled, "Get a horse!"

Long after it had disappeared from sight, the secretary continued to lean out the window and peer after it. Finally she withdrew her head with reluctance.

"That's the third one I've seen," she said in an awed voice.

Shooing her from his office, Mr. Grayson resumed his chair and waved George back to his.

"Frankly, Mr. Blade," he said, "I find your story of visiting 1950 as implausible as the script which you based on it. But I have to admit I find it interesting. What caused the state of shock you were describing when we were interrupted?"

"The same thing that excited your secretary, Mr. Grayson. Suppose when we rushed to the window a moment ago, instead of a single horseless vehicle, we had seen thousands travelling at five times the speed. Wouldn't your eyes bug out?"

"They probably would," Mr. Grayson admitted.

"I have a vague recollection of thousands of glittering metal and glass vehicles roaring along streets on which I was accustomed to seeing only sedately trotting horses; of strident voices, clanging bells, screaming horns, and mingled with all these noises a strange overtone which I can only describe as the drone of a million cogs moving in the complicated machinery of a mechanical city."

"You used that same description in your story," Mr. Grayson remarked.

George said, "After the initial shock, I gradually became sufficiently acclimated to exist in this strange environment, but for the full two weeks of my visit I remained in a constant state of amazement. Some of the mechanical wonders I saw are described in my story, but not nearly all. There seemed to be no end to them. In 1950 nothing was done by people anymore . . . except the digging of sewers . . . even the theater having substituted for actors a huge screen upon which by some kind of electrical lighting effect the illusion of real performers was produced, complete with color and sound. But the progress in transportation was the most astounding. I rode great trains through tunnels under the earth, and travelled in horseless carriages at incredible speeds. I even took a ride in one of the streamlined flying machines described in my story."

Mr. Grayson, still obviously unbelieving, brought the conversation back to its original subject.

"This is all very entertaining, Mr. Blade. But even if I conceded your background is based on authentic observation, that is hardly enough to satisfy the reader. Your story has to *sound* plausible. But what have you given us? An incredibly advanced civilization where nearly everything is done by machine. A civilization which travels between continents in spaceships at hundreds of miles an hour, and has warships which move at nearly the speed of sound. The homes of your hyper-civilization are a mass of implausible gadgets run by buttons. Buttons are pushed to bring light, clean rugs, wash clothes, and even to squeeze juice from fruit. Every home has built-in entertainment which picks music, talk and pictures from the air. Heat comes from the walls instead of from stoves, and water, both hot and

cold, comes in unlimited amounts from spigots which merely have to have their handles twisted instead of being pumped. And the warfare you describe! A single bomb disintegrates an entire city! Don't you see how implausible it all sounds?"

"But it actually *was* that way," George said sullenly.

The editor smiled indulgently. "Perhaps life will be as you describe it in one million A.D. But no reader would accept such tremendous scientific advance in a mere fifty years. What you seem to have overlooked, Mr. Blade, is that the children of today will be the leaders of your fantastic future world. You yourself may quite likely still be alive. The whole world has fresh in its mind Andree's balloon attempt, yet you expect your readers to believe such enormous air progress as you describe will take place during their own lifetimes! And your war weapons! Warfare has advanced tremendously in the past few decades — the revolver, the automatic rifle, the ironclad warship — but a Napoleonic marshal could almost instantly master these modern developments. Are we to expect that in fifty years war should take on a shape that Napoleon himself could not comprehend?"

Mr. Grayson's smile became more gentle. "But your worst error in plausibility is related to the first I mentioned. Your leaders of 1950 are living now. Yet in your story they are adjusted to their incredibly mechanized life as though it had always existed. They are not even surprised at civilization's progress. It simply isn't plausible that people *would take such a life for granted*."

Title Contest Announcement .

The $100 prize for a title to Ford McCormack's story in the June issue of *F&SF* has been awarded by our judges to Edward Wellen of New Rochelle, New York. Honorable mentions, each with a year's subscription, go to L. G. Boyd of Belmont, Massachusetts; George W. Ellis of Flushing, Long Island; and Pfc. Donald Ehrhardt of Storrs, Connecticut.

Of all forms of folk entertainment, few are as much sheer fun as the tall tales of America; compare, for example, Vance Randolph's admirable Ozark collection in this month's Recommended Reading. *But certain purists will insist that these are not, properly speaking, fantasy, in our sense of the impossible-made-convincing. America herself is so gigantic and fabulous that who is to draw the line between the possible and the impossible in her legends? Now, however, Joseph H. Gage (like Walt Sheldon in his memorable* A Rope for Lucifer) *has found a way to blend the Western tall tale with the supernatural fantasy of older cultures, producing a spang-new and exceedingly funny form. We don't wish to hint further at the plot of this fine fantasia; but we will tell you that Mr. Gage has promised further revelations of equally extraordinary goings-on in Bonedry.*

Achilles Had His Heel

by JOSEPH H. GAGE

PECOS BILL? Why, sure; everybody's heard about him. He was considerable of a jasper, for a fact, but he still wasn't in it with Hogjaw Harrison.

There wasn't no real comparison, to tell the truth. Pecos Bill stacked up plenty high as a man. Hogjaw didn't; he was just something scraped off the bottom of the barrel. What made him famous around these parts was his bein' invulnerable. Bullets bounced off'n him like rain would off'n a duck, if there was any ducks in this country and it was ever to rain.

I recollect the first day I ever seen this Mr. K. Ronn, who was the cause of the whole thing. It happened a long time ago, while I was workin' for Old Man Barker, who had the Turkey Track brand.

One of the boys had played a trick on Ah Chow, the Chinee cook, said trick bein' to load some chips with gunpowder. Wherefore the Old Man had to send off to Kansas City for a new stove, and when he figured it was due to come in he sent me to the railroad after it.

I went in the spring wagon and took Hogjaw along, the stove figurin' to be too heavy for one man to wrangle. This Hogjaw was one of the Old Man's riders, and was about as purty as you might guess from his name. He had a long nose and a upper lip that stuck 'way out, and there wasn't much chin to his under jaw. He was a lazy cuss, and sometimes I wondered

why the Old Man kept him around. Had he been run off like he ought to, though, I wouldn't ever have got to see an invulnerable man.

The train come along every Tuesday if it wasn't late. It was on time that week; they stopped and put off some stuff for the Old Man. We started loadin'. This Mr. K. Ronn must have got off the coach, but we didn't see him until the train had pulled out. Then we noticed him standin' there, lookin' like a dogy which has lost the herd.

"Dang drummer," Hogjaw mutters, his mouth hangin' open like always. "Look at them store clothes and hard hat."

The stranger stood there for a while, sort of puzzled and uncertain-lookin', and then ambled over our way, carpetbag in hand. I could see he wasn't no drummer.

"Pardon me," says he, though he hadn't done nothin'. "Is this Bonedry?"

"It is," I tells him. "Both by name and by nature."

He was a little man, dried out and wizzled up like he'd been prospectin' over in Suicide Canyon or up in the Panamints somewheres, but he wasn't no prospector. His hide was as wrinkled as seventeen prunes and about the color of a buckskin shirt after it's been wore a couple of years. I'd have said, offhand, he was about seven years older'n Diablo Peak, but he still seemed spry enough.

"Tell me," says he, standin' there and lookin' all around, "does it ever rain here?"

"They claim it did once," I answers. "But that was before my time."

"Excellent," says he. "Excellent! I had hoped for something like that. You see, I picked the name at random from a map," he explains, and then looked sort of puzzled. "But is there a town?"

"Over that there swell about three mile. You can't see it from here."

"Excellent," says he again. "And there is a hotel, I presume?"

"Well, yes." There was Snake River Sam's Palace, which was a combination saloon, gambling hell, restaurant, and hotel with women.

"Very good," says he, noddin'. "And it never rains?"

"Not even on Leap Year Day."

"I do not like water," he states, flat and plain. "I hope I never again see anything but dry land." He talked American like a book with a accent, but I be dogged if I could say where he come from.

"Then you'll fit right in at The Palace," I grins, it bein' well-knowed for the quality of its wobble-juice.

It looked like the jasper was goin' to be among us for a while, so it was only neighborly to invite him to ride along to Bonedry. He chucked his carpetbag into the spring wagon, climbed in after it, and we pulled out.

He seemed friendly enough; he said his name was K. Ronn. I told him folks called me Handy, and then I sort of run out of conversation. Hogjaw had been skitterin' around all the time, starin' and battin' his eyes and sizin' up the gent, and by then he'd got too curious to keep still any longer. He started talkin' at Mr. Ronn, mainly tryin' to find out something about the man, but we didn't learn much. The jasper was as hard to unravel as a string of Ah Chow's writin'.

There was something about him that gave me the spooks. It wasn't nothin' he said or did, which was mighty little. All the same I got a feelin' like there was a cold wind blowin' across the back of my neck, which was a plumb foolish notion to have in that country.

We left him off at Snake River's and went on about our business, which we transacted mostly at Kansas Charlie's saloon, him bein' a sensible man about extendin' credit.

"I'd sure like to know where he come from," Hogjaw says about the third round. "Let's drift back to the hotel and have us a squint at the book."

Which we did, but we couldn't make a thing out of it. The ink had crawled off'n the grease spots on the page, and what writin' there was left didn't make sense. There was X-a-p and then some funny-lookin' squiggles, but it sure didn't spell K. Ronn. That wasn't nothin' to hold against the gent, though; most of the boys around Bonedry had had different names at different times and places.

Snake River had charged for a week in advance, and Mr. Ronn had dipped into a heavy sack and paid him with gold coin like nobody around those parts had ever seen before. Snake River was still eyin' it; he bit it, rung it on the counter, weighed it, and finally decided it was good, even if it wasn't American.

The boys rode wide around Mr. Ronn. The gent was a greenhorn, and yet he wasn't. Ordinarily we was a mite rough on greenhorns, us not havin' much in the way of amusements, but that K. Ronn was one jigger we never done more'n to roll a eyeball at. One and all admitted that when he was around they got that chilly feelin' across the back of the neck, wherefore Mr. Ronn was allowed to go his way in peace.

He showed up at the Turkey Track a couple of weeks later, which was a surprise. Maybe he got lonesome around Bonedry; I dunno. Anyway, Old Man Barker come back from town in his buckboard one day, and Mr. K. Ronn was with him. They'd got thick as thieves somehow, and they was both as boiled as a weddin' shirt. But if he hadn't come around, Hogjaw wouldn't have got to be invulnerable.

Mr. Ronn moved into one of the 'dobes out back that the Old Man

built for his friends that come down from up north in the winter. There wasn't none of them around at that time, of course, so Mr. Ronn moved right in and made himself to home.

He didn't show much interest in anything around the spread. Mostly he just sat around the 'dobe, outside, and in that heat it was plumb discombooberatin' to see him keepin' in the sun. Hogjaw and Slim and Red and Walleye and the rest of the boys was as curious as a old maid with new neighbors.

"Watchin', watchin', always watchin'," says Hogjaw. "You notice that? Don't tell me. He's hidin' out and expectin' somebody to come lookin' for him."

"Where do you reckon he's from?" Walleye wonders. "He talks American good enough, but there's a funny twist to his lingo. Furriner, all right."

"Likely enough," Red opines. "Well, it's his own business if he's on the dodge."

It got to be sundown after while, and the Old Man and Mr. Ronn come down to the crumb shack to supper. Bein' a widower, Barker ate with the boys except when he had special company.

"What sort of business you in?" Hogjaw asks Mr. Ronn while we were eatin'. He was downright plain about it, even if it wasn't good manners to ask a man personal questions around Bonedry.

"None just now," Mr. Ronn tells him. A muscle started jumpin' in his cheek, and his eyes was like two deep holes with nothin' at the bottom. "I have been operating a ferry. At present I am absent — without official leave, you might say."

"There ain't no barges around here. You must have come from a different country than this."

"Oh, yes; much different." He passed right over the bait and left it layin' there. Hogjaw didn't find out anything more.

A real peculiar thing happened a day or two later. Hogjaw and me was fixin' the windmill one mornin'. He was up on the tower, disconnectin' the pole, and I was in the blacksmith shop gettin' the fire started when I saw Mr. Ronn headin' over that way from his 'dobe.

He was just passin' the corner post of the horse corral when I looked up. The sun wasn't too high yet, so the post throwed a strip of shade, and in that shade there was a big old rattler snoozin'. Mr. Ronn never spotted him at all. Maybe they didn't have snakes where he come from.

Before I could yell that old buzz-tail looked up, seen a leg right in front of him, and took a whang at it, immediate. You know yourself that when a rattler's in a hurry he don't wait to blow charge on his bugle before he gets movin'.

I sifted over that way, unlimberin' my hogleg as I went. Mr. Ronn was still amblin' along, dreamy-like, and I swear I don't believe he even knew he'd been bit. I drawed a bead on that snake's head, but I didn't shoot right away because his actions was so funny I had to stop and watch for a minute.

That rattler was battin' his eyes, as much as a snake can, and makin' faces like he'd grabbed a scorpion by mistake. He flapped his jaws, twisted his neck, and backed off a little. And then, by grab, he spit out four busted fangs into the dust.

That stopped me, flatfooted. I didn't know whether to believe my eyes or not. I figured to check on it later, so I shifted my aim a little and busted him one right back of the ears so's his head wouldn't be spoiled.

"Get movin', quick!" I yells at Mr. Ronn. I grabbed him and hustled him back to his shack, hollerin' for Ah Chow as we went. The Chinee was already on the way with the whiskey jug, him havin' seen what was goin' on, and Hogjaw come sailin' down off the tower to help.

We poured a good stiff slug into Mr. Ronn and throwed him in the middle of the floor. Ah Chow and Hogjaw set on him while I got out my knife and yanked up his pants leg. Mr. Ronn was kickin' and sputterin' in some sort of language, but we didn't stop to listen. I got the calf of his leg laid bare and started to make a slash with my knife.

I rocked right back on my heels. There wasn't a sign of a bite anywhere in that leathery hide. I just squatted there, bluffed to a standstill, thinkin' about those fangs the snake had spit out.

I got up on my hind legs. Ah Chow and Hogjaw let Mr. Ronn up. The gent stopped his clatterin' and got around to talkin' American, and I gathered that he wanted an explanation. Which I give him. He didn't *sabe* rattlesnake, but he got the general idea and said something about asps and vipers.

"And whiskey's the number-one remedy for snakebite," I reminds him in conclusion.

"Entirely unnecessary," he assures us. "I wasn't bitten."

"So I noticed," I admits. "Pass the jug, Ah Chow."

"No more, thank you," says Mr. Ronn, sort of owly-eyed from what we had already poured into him. "I don't need it."

"I know that," says I. "You don't need it, but, by grab, I do!" And I rolled the jug up over one elbow and took a little for the jumps that was workin' on my nerves.

"The water of the sticks has great power," says Mr. Ronn, lookin' up at a bottle on a shelf. "Perhaps you know what it did for Achilles."

"I don't," I says, flat. "And as far as power is concerned, this here fire-

water has got plenty for me." By that time the back of my neck was as cold as a dead dog's nose, in spite of the wobble-juice. I took another good belt at the jug, handed it back to Ah Chow, and got out of there, leavin' Hogjaw standin' starin' at the sticks bottle.

I dunno what he meant about water from the sticks. A man could pull up all the brush in that country and run it through a cane mill and he wouldn't have enough juice to paste down the flap of a cigarette. That talk about Achilles was a lot of gabble, too. I knowed all about him. He was a Greek who had a restaurant over to Split Rock and water never did anything to him. It ain't water that gives a man the delirious tremblin's.

I went back to the rattler and had a good look, pryin' his mouth open to make sure. Every one of his fangs was busted off short, like he'd nailed him a gun barrel instead of a leg. I got to thinkin' then that mebbe there was something to that sticks business, whatever it was. Mr. K. Ronn must have been a big medicine-man in his tribe.

Nothin' happened then till Sunday. We didn't ride on Sundays durin' the slack season. Hogjaw and me wandered out along in the afternoon and got some tin cans off the pile back of the cook shack and burned a little powder at a dime a shot, just to kill time.

Mr. Ronn eased over to see what the ruckus was about. Hogjaw was ahead about four bits, and it was his nature to be nasty when he was winnin'. Mr. Ronn stood around and listened to him crow for a while and then horned in.

"Would you like to make a little bet, Mr. Hogjaw?" he inquires, innocent-like.

"A bet?" Hogjaw got cautious right away. "What kind of a bet?"

"Ten dollars that you cannot shoot a hole through this tin can."

"What distance?"

"Any distance."

"Ump." Hogjaw grunts, as suspicious as a tomcat in a strange alley. "You mean that?"

"Certainly. Any distance you choose."

That hit Hogjaw right between the eyes. "Any odds on it?" he asks, sniffin' at the bait.

"Shall we say two to one?"

Hogjaw licked his chops. It was powerful bait, but he was sure there was a hook in it somewhere. He shied off and stepped around for a while, but it was the odds that got him.

"Five against ten," he says, takin' it at a gulp.

Mr. Ronn took a little bottle out of his pocket. It was the one that had been settin' on the shelf in his 'dobe. He poured some water in his hand and

rubbed it over the can. Hogjaw squalled like he'd got his thumb caught in a dally with a steer in his loop.

"Nothing but a little water to wash off the dust," says Mr. Ronn, placid as a old plug in a field of oats. Hogjaw was still suspicious; he put in a good five minutes lookin' the can over, but finally he shelled out a half-eagle. I held stakes.

Hogjaw hung the can on a greasewood stub, backed off a little, and let fly. There was a *blong!* and the can flew about thirty feet.

"Pay me." Hogjaw grinned and shoved out a palm.

"One minute," Mr. Ronn requests. He trotted over, picked up the can, and brought it back with one of his sly little grins.

"I been took!" Hogjaw howls. There wasn't even a scratch on the can, let alone a hole in it. "You switched cans on me!"

"Remember the terms of the bet. Try again." Mr. Ronn grinned, happy as a cat with his whiskers stuck full of quail feathers.

Hogjaw set up the can again and took another shot. This time he went after the can himself. There wasn't a mark on it.

"The power of the sticks," says Mr. Ronn, tickled pink. Then he thumbed his longhorn mustache and told us a tall yarn about that feller Achilles and him bein' invulnerable until some buck jumped the reservation and shot him in the heel with a poisoned arrow.

"Sheep dip," growls Hogjaw. He took another crack at the can, but he couldn't put a hole in it. He kept on shootin' and cussin' even after I'd handed the money over to Mr. Ronn. He'd hit the can and knock it flyin', and then he'd walk up on it and shoot again. The last we saw of him he was goin' over a hump about two miles off, still pursuin' that can. He never come back until some time in the night.

Hogjaw and me didn't get along so good after that. . . .

Mr. K. Ronn lit out that same night, without sayin' yes, no, or maybe. Just raised himself a dust between sundown and sunup and was gone. Never took any of his gear with him, as far as we could tell. The sticks bottle was missin' off the shelf where it had been settin', but after what happened later I knowed Hogjaw stole it.

There was a powerful funny smell around the 'dobe, like somebody had been strikin' sulphur matches or something. The boys made a lot of guesses about Mr. Ronn, rememberin' how he kept watchin' his back-trail as if he expected somebody to be huntin' him. We cut sign all around the 'dobe, bein' plumb curious, but there wasn't nothin' but some fresh steer-tracks around the door. Mr. Ronn had lit himself a shuck; we never seen him again or found out where he had went.

Then Red told a funny story about Hogjaw takin' a bath. Claimed he

saw him out back of the horse-barn washin' himself all over with a rag. Nobody believed Red; they might have if he had told it about anybody but Hogjaw. But I reckon the story was true enough; Hogjaw was usin' the sticks water he had stole.

Hogjaw never said a word about what he had done. And then, one night, he undertook to trim his fingernails while we were settin' around, but he couldn't cut them.

A couple days later Red tried to cut Hogjaw's hair. He spoiled our shears and a pair of tin snips before he give up. I reckon Hogjaw had been some juberous about the power of sticks water up till then, but his eyes started to bug out when he looked at the tin snips.

"By hell," he says under his breath. "Reckon that old galoot really was tellin' the truth? Mebbe I *am* intolerable, after all."

"Ain't no doubt of it," says Red. "But nobody'd notice it much if you was to keep your mouth shut."

"Don't be so danged ignorant," yelps Hogjaw. "A dumb ranny like you wouldn't know nothin' about bein' intolerable, nohow!"

"Oh no?" Red snarls, him bein' sort of touchy. "Why, you mangy, prong-snouted baboon, you call *me* ignorant!" He throwed down the comb he'd been usin' and grabbed for his gun where it was hangin' by his bunk. Invulnerable or not, Hogjaw wasn't ready for that kind of a test. He went out through the window in a shower of glass.

We got Red cooled off. Hogjaw come back after a while, and there wasn't a scratch on him in spite of his divin' through the window. He was just about convinced by that time that nothin' could faze him. We all offered to bounce a few bullets off'n him to make sure, but the power of his convictions didn't run that strong.

He got his proof in Bonedry. He set into a game at Snake River's one night while the rest of us was propped up against the bar in the other room. The Turkey Track crew was all in town, it bein' payday, so we seen what happened.

They'd been playin' for quite a while. All of a sudden there was a crash in the gamblin' room. Somebody let out a yell, and the furniture started bouncin' off the walls. There was a lot of skirmishin' around and trampin' back and forth, and then the shootin' started.

Hogjaw come backin' out the door. He stopped just inside the bar room and snapped a shot at somebody in the gamblin' room. A couple of guns answered. There was a *blong blong* like somebody hammerin' on a anvil and slivers of lead whistled around the saloon. We scattered and holed up.

Hogjaw stood there, shootin' slow and careful, with the bullets bouncin' off'n him like hail off'n a tin roof. There was upset slugs whizzin' and flyin'

all around the bar, bustin' bottles and slammin' into things. Every time a bullet hit Hogjaw the wallop set him back on his heels; it was like he was bein' clubbed, even if the lead didn't stick in him.

He never needed no more proof of bein' invulnerable. There must have been anyway twenty slugs glanced off'n him while he stood there.

Snake River Sam was one of the dead ones we drug out after it was over. The Palace had always been a one-man layout, and Sam's cashin' out didn't change it none. He was finished with it, so Hogjaw moved in. He never went back to the Turkey Track a-tall. He took over the Palace, lock, stock, and barrel.

He lived easy after that, just by nickin' the curious who come around. Fellers come from all over the country and paid five dollars a head for the privilege of takin' one shot at him. Hogjaw just stood there, grinnin'.

The Duke heard about him and come over from the Dollar ranch where he was stayin'. The Duke — I disremember his right name — was from England. His folks thought so much of him they sent him a wad of money every three months, even if he didn't ever go home for a visit.

"Unbelievable," says he, watchin' Hogjaw shed bullets. "An illusion."

"Illusion, hell!" snorts Hogjaw. "Didn't you ever hear of sticks water? Well, that's what I used."

"Really!" says the Duke, his eyebrows climbin' up under his hat. "Oh, I say, now! You wouldn't be pulling one's leg?" And then he got thoughtful-like. "But even Achilles had his heel," he says. "And Siegfried missed a spot between his shoulder blades. One can't —"

"Haw, haw!" Hogjaw bellers. "Maybe them fellers wasn't so smart. I didn't miss no spots, mister, because I heard about that Achilles. If you know so dang much, take this here knife and see for yourself."

The Duke was game. He grabbed the bowie and went at it like he was fightin' wasps, but it wasn't no use. "You satisfied now?" Hogjaw asks a while later, after the Duke had tried everything he could think of.

"Oh, quite. Quite." He acted sort of dazed. "One really must sober up," says he to himself, and then he walked off, shakin' his head.

"Haw, haw!" Hogjaw was like to bust himself. "Strong medicine, this bein' intolerable!"

I left, too, about that time. Hogjaw was tellin' more truth than he knowed.

The bullet business petered out after a while, and Hogjaw settled down to steady gamblin'. By that time his fingernails was so long he couldn't deal the cards, so he kept a houseman to do it for him. Gamblers come from all over to play against him, but he couldn't be beat.

He never packed a six-shooter no more. His fingernails was too long to

let him handle one. But he didn't need it. If some jigger got suspicious of his luck and started shootin', Hogjaw just reared up on his hind legs, walked in, and cut the obstreperous individual's jugular with a gouge of his long thumbnail.

He got to be plumb nasty, for a fact. The boys figured it would come to where he had to be got rid of, but nobody could think of a way to get it done. We was still hashin' it over when Silk Judson come in from Denver to try to lift some of Hogjaw's loot.

They set down and went at it. The story of that game is still bein' told. It lasted for two days and nights with never a break. There was three others in it besides Hogjaw and Silk, with the houseman settin' by to deal for his boss. Luck kept sawin' back and forth, and nobody was much ahead when it got near daylight of the third mornin'.

Hogjaw and Silk both had good hands on that last round. The others got raised out as the bettin' went on, but Hogjaw and Silk kept nudgin' back and forth till there was a boodle of coin on the table when the showdown come.

Silk called. Hogjaw was laughin' in his long black whiskers as he spread his cards on the table. Silk took one look and moved as quick as the cat which was sleepin' behind the stove when the coffeepot boiled over. Mebbe it was because Hogjaw showed a ace that Silk had discarded before the draw. Anyway, Silk whipped out a sticker and drove it down on Hogjaw's hand, aimin' to nail him to the table.

That was plumb foolish in the head. The point of the knife snapped off. Silk sat there for a second, just starin' at it.

Silk dropped the knife and pulled a little double-barreled derringer out of his sleeve. He fired; the bullet hit Hogjaw in the chest, bounced back all flattened out, and landed in the middle of the table.

Hogjaw didn't make a hostile move himself, knowin' that he could take his own good time in reachin' for Silk's neck.

"Help yourself, Mister," he howls. "You don't know it, but you ain't got a chance. Go ahead and shoot all you want!"

Silk's face got whiter and whiter, and his eyes was wild. Hogjaw just set there, his hands pushin' against the table, his head throwed back while he laughed fit to kill.

And that's just what his laughin' did to him. Silk tipped up his derringer and touched off the second barrel. His bullet glanced off'n Hogjaw's under lip, ripped up through his palate, and plumb addled his brains before it stopped rattlin' around inside his skull.

Exit Hogjaw. Achilles had his heel; Hogjaw had his own big mouth. Mebbe he should have used some of that sticks water for a chaser.

Another brief flash of horror from that master of compression, David Grinnell. If "heat and moisture and greasy chemical compounds" once combined to make life, the laziness of a slattern landlady might cause them so to combine again. In that case, the results would not be pretty.

The Rag Thing

by DAVID GRINNELL

It would have been all right if Spring had never come. During the winter nothing had happened and nothing was likely to happen as long as the weather remained cold and Mrs. Larch kept the radiators going. In a way, though, it is quite possible to hold Mrs. Larch to blame for everything that happened. Not that she had what people would call malicious intentions, but just that she was two things practically every boarding-house landlady is — thrifty and not too clean.

She shouldn't have been in such a hurry to turn the heat off so early in March. March is a tricky month and she should have known that the first warm day is usually an isolated phenomenon. But then you could always claim that she shouldn't have been so sloppy in her cleaning last November. She shouldn't have dropped that rag behind the radiator in the third floor front room.

As a matter of fact, one could well wonder what she was doing using such a rag anyway. Polishing furniture doesn't require a clean rag to start with, certainly not the rag you stick into the furniture polish, that's going to be greasy anyway — but she didn't have to use that particular rag. The one that had so much dried blood on it from the meat that had been lying on it in the kitchen.

On top of that, it is probable that she had spit into the filthy thing, too. Mrs. Larch was no prize package. Gross, dull, unkempt, widowed and careless, she fitted into the house — one of innumerable other brownstone fronts in the lower sixties of New York. Houses that in former days, fifty or sixty years ago, were considered the height of fashion and the residences of the well-to-do, now reduced to dingy rooming places for all manner of itinerants, lonely people with no hope in life other than dreary jobs, or an occasional young and confused person from the hinterland seeking fame and fortune in a city which rarely grants it.

So it was not particularly odd that when she accidentally dropped the filthy old rag behind the radiator in the room on the third floor front late in November, she had simply left it there and forgotten to pick it up.

It gathered dust all winter, unnoticed. Skelty, who had the room, might have cleaned it out himself save that he was always too tired for that. He worked at some indefinite factory all day and when he came home he was always too tired to do much more than read the sports and comics pages of the newspapers and then maybe stare at the streaky brown walls a bit before dragging himself into bed to sleep the dreamless sleep of the weary.

The radiator, a steam one oddly enough (for most of these houses used the older hot-air circulation), was in none too good condition. Installed many many years ago by the house's last Victorian owner, it was given to knocks, leaks, and cantankerous action. Along in December it developed a slow drip, and drops of hot water would fall to seep slowly into the floor and leave the rag lying on a moist hot surface. Steam was constantly escaping from a bad valve that Mrs. Larch would have repaired if it had blown off completely but, because the radiator always managed to be hot, never did.

Because Mrs. Larch feared drafts, the windows were rarely open in the winter and the room would become oppressively hot at times when Skelty was away.

It is hard to say what is the cause of chemical reactions. Some hold that all things are mechanical in nature, others that life has a psychic side which cannot be duplicated in laboratories. The problem is one for metaphysicians; everyone knows that some chemicals are attracted to heat, others to light, and they may not necessarily be alive at all. Tropisms is the scientific term used, and if you want to believe that living matter is stuff with a great number of tropisms and dead matter is stuff with little or no tropisms, that's one way of looking at it. Heat and moisture and greasy chemical compounds were the sole ingredients of the birth of life in some ancient unremembered swamp.

Which is why it probably would have been all right if Spring had never come. Because Mrs. Larch turned the radiators off one day early in March. The warm hours were but few. It grew cold with the darkness and by night it was back in the chill of February again. But Mrs. Larch had turned the heat off and, being lazy, decided not to turn it on again till the next morning, provided of course that it stayed cold the next day (which it did).

Anyway Skelty was found dead in bed the next morning. Mrs. Larch knocked on his door when he failed to come down to breakfast and when he hadn't answered, she turned the knob and went in. He was lying in bed, blue and cold, and he had been smothered in his sleep.

There was quite a to-do about the whole business but nothing came of it.

A few stupid detectives blundered around the room, asked silly questions, made a few notes, and then left the matter to the coroner and the morgue. Skelty was a nobody, no one cared whether he lived or died, he had no enemies and no friends, there were no suspicious visitors, and he had probably smothered accidentally in the blankets. Of course the body was unusually cold when Mrs. Larch found it, as if the heat had been sucked out of him, but who notices a thing like that? They also discounted the grease smudge on the top sheet, the grease stains on the floor, and the slime on his face. Probably some grease he might have been using for some imagined skin trouble, though Mrs. Larch had not heard of his doing so. In any case, no one really cared.

Mrs. Larch wore black for a day and then advertised in the papers. She made a perfunctory job of cleaning the room. Skelty's possessions were taken away by a drab sister-in-law from Brooklyn who didn't seem to care much either, and Mrs. Larch was all ready to rent the room to someone else.

The weather remained cold for the next ten days and the heat was kept up in the pipes.

The new occupant of the room was a nervous young man from up-state who was trying to get a job in New York. He was a high-strung young man who entertained any number of illusions about life and society. He thought that people did things for the love of it and he wanted to find a job where he could work for that motivation rather than the sort of things he might have done back home. He thought New York was different, which was a mistake.

He smoked like fury which was something Mrs. Larch did not like because it meant ashes on the floor and burned spots on her furniture (not that there weren't plenty already), but there was nothing Mrs. Larch would do about it because it would have meant exertion.

After four days in New York, this young man, Gorman by name, was more nervous than ever. He would lie in bed nights smoking cigarette after cigarette thinking and thinking and getting nowhere. Over and over he was facing the problem of resigning himself to a life of gray drab. It was a thought he had tried not to face and now that it was thrusting itself upon him, it was becoming intolerable.

The next time a warm day came, Mrs. Larch left the radiators on because she was not going to be fooled twice. As a result, when the weather stayed warm, the rooms became insufferably hot because she was still keeping the windows down. So that when she turned the heat off finally, the afternoon of the second day, it was pretty tropic in the rooms.

When the March weather turned about suddenly again and became chilly about nine at night, Mrs. Larch was going to bed and figured that no one

would complain and that it would be warm again the next day. Which may or may not be true, it does not matter.

Gorman got home about ten, opened the window, got undressed, moved a pack of cigarettes and an ash tray next to his bed on the floor, got into bed, turned out the light and started to smoke.

He stared at the ceiling, blowing smoke upwards into the darkened room trying to see its outlines in the dim light coming in from the street. When he finished one cigarette, he let his hand dangle out the side of the bed and picked up another cigarette from the pack on the floor, lit it from the butt in his mouth, and dropped the butt into the ash tray on the floor.

The rag under the radiator was getting cold, the room was getting cold, there was one source of heat radiation in the room. That was the man in the bed. Skelty had proven a source of heat supply once. Heat attraction was chemical force that could not be denied. Strange forces began to accumulate in the long-transformed fibers of the rag.

Gorman thought he heard something flap in the room but he paid it no attention. Things were always creaking in the house. Gorman heard a swishing noise and ascribed it to the mice.

Gorman reached down for a cigarette, fumbled for it, found the pack, deftly extracted a smoke in the one-handed manner chain smokers become accustomed to, lifted it to his mouth, lit it from the burning butt in his mouth, and reached down with the butt to crush it out against the tray.

He pressed the butt into something wet like a used handkerchief, there was a sudden hiss, something coiled and whipped about his wrist; Gorman gasped and drew his hand back fast. A flaming horror, twisting and writhing, was curled around it. Before Gorman could shriek, it had whipped itself from his hand and fastened over his face, over the warm, heat-radiating skin and the glowing flame of the cigarette.

Mrs. Larch was awakened by the clang of fire engines. When the fire was put out, most of the third floor had been gutted. Gorman was an unrecognizable charred mass.

The fire department put the blaze down to Gorman's habit of smoking in bed. Mrs. Larch collected on the fire insurance and bought a new house, selling the old one to a widow who wanted to start a boarding house.

With this somewhat disturbing story, we introduce another of F&SF's discoveries. Richard Brookbank is a teacher, a linguist, a traveler, a connoisseur of food, drink and music, a former operative of a top secret anti-Fascist underground railway, a good friend of such favorite writers of ours as Christopher Wood and Q. Patrick, and a man capable of once sending us a long letter explaining how we should answer a telegram which he had not yet sent but which we would receive before the letter. The individuality and even madness of his stories are fortunately of a more logical sort. You'll meet Brookbank in various odd moods in later issues of F&SF; try him first with this curious study of the manner in which, on other planets, psychological symbols may take the most physical forms.

The Cocoon

by RICHARD BROOKBANK

"I'LL HAVE things ready in a jiffy, sir," said Lieutenant Sharpley.

Irritably, Captain Woolser watched him set up camp. Sharpley's well-groomed fingers clicked open the snaps of neat little kits where everything fitted snugly into place. Not a movement was wasted. Woolser sat down wearily on the hard, granite surface of the plain and watched, feeding his hatred. Even after three days of travelling on foot through this blazing and desolate waste, Lieutenant Sharpley looked as if he'd just stepped from a fresh cold shower where he had used the best personal detergent and hummed some neat little tune. Now he was setting up their defensive electro-screen in a circle around them, neatly, fussily, somehow boy-scoutishly. Woolser scratched at his week's growth of beard, stifled a yawn, and watched Sharpley with narrowing eyes. Of all people to be rescued by! The realization that he would like to kill this man came as a mild shock. Did one of those damned little kits contain his missing diga tablets? No. If Lieutenant Sharpley had sneaked them, he'd have them in a pocket. Old be-prepared Sharpley always did the right thing. How the captain longed for just one soothing diga!

"If you want to shave, sir, I have one of those new type razors. It might make you more comfortable." He stepped over and respectfully handed Woolser a miniature shaving kit.

"Never did like these gadgets," said Woolser heavily.

"We will be at the ship tomorrow noon, sir," reminded Sharpley.

You'd think, Woolser said to himself, that the damned ship was to be the scene of the Interplanetary Ball. And here was Sharpley pertly telling him what to do! He turned the kit over in his hands. "Shave-aire," proclaimed the glittering letters on the top. "Gets the whiskers at the root, with compressed air. No blades, no fuss, leaves skin fresh and smooth."

Fresh and smooth, like Sharpley's. Comely, clipped, and contained. His very body sheathed him like a neat box, nicely planed and sanded. Fine workmanship, no flaws visible — to anyone else. But Woolser knew. The entire appearance was one big flaw. What if the cocoon-makers got at *him?*

He laughed aloud at the thought and Sharpley started, then glanced quickly away.

"Camp's set up now, sir," he reported. "I've infused water and dissolved some gamma tablets for supper." He smiled despite himself, in bashful pride. "Been saving them all along for the last night, sir."

Woolser sat silent. If he expected to be commended, let him wait for it, or let him break out the intoxicating diga tablets. But Sharpley's confidential humor persisted.

"You know sir, I'll be glad to get back to the ship. Er — perhaps I haven't told you, Captain Woolser, that I'm to be assigned a wife as soon as we return to earth. I know her, too. I arranged it myself."

The captain made no response. He was toying with that phrase of Sharpley's about reaching the ship tomorrow noon, and its implied reproof at his appearance. The gall of the man! He decided he'd be damned if he'd shave. There had been humiliation enough in being rescued by this boy scout who stole diga from you and secretly despised you.

"She's really such a nice girl, sir, and she admires you a great deal. I've never understood why they put her in the unassigned class. Of course she does look — well, a little sultry —" he paused and blushed — "but then anybody who knows her at all knows she'll make a model wife. I had the devil of a time getting her out of that class and assigned to me."

Woolser wished he would shut up. What did he care about assigned or unassigned women? That was the business of the Assignment Bureau. Of course Sharpley would stick his impudent nose in and tamper. But the captain was willing to bet that the Morals Police wouldn't let him get away with it.

"I'm sure Roberta would love to have you visit us, sir," Sharpley went on.

"Roberta!" Captain Woolser almost yelled.

"Why yes, sir," said the lieutenant, startled. "Roberta Contini. She told me you had met —"

Woolser tossed the shaving kit away in disgust and turned his back.

"Lieutenant, are we *never* going to drink that gamma solution, so I can get some sleep?" he managed to get out at last.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, sir, I'm afraid it slipped my mind for an instant." He jumped to his feet and brought over a cup of steaming broth. Woolser took it absently, his brain leafing feverishly through memories.

Roberta! Sultry, moist-eyed, slumberous, volcanic Roberta Contini, assigned to this automatic jackass! Her indolent, slightly hoarse voice whispering sweetly at his scrubbed ear, and his answer in his robot-tenor. Her lazy, honeyed beauty assigned to an aseptic box of pigeonholes! The thought made him tremble, the gamma broth turned sour in his mouth. This was the final blow. This was the ultimate crime be-prepared Sharpley had "innocently" committed against him. No, but this he would never get away with, never! Woolser shook his head violently.

"Bertram," he remembered Roberta's whisper, "come now, my pet —" and here she had kissed him on the ear, and nipped it lightly with her teeth, "what's on my Bertram's mind? Tell big sister all about it!"

It was that awful combination of Roberta's, kissing your ear so you nearly went crazy, and then calling herself your "big sister." And since the big sister just didn't *go* with a kiss on the ear, he had been reduced to a bewildered little brother, and only just got away in time not to make a fool of himself. He remembered her throaty chuckle when he left in confusion.

Snap, click! Sharpley was undoing the sleeping kits. Woolser felt that if he heard another such neat sound he would beat the ground and howl. But no, there were no more of them. The lieutenant merely rolled out the beds at a respectful distance and slipped into his.

"Well, sir, good night!" he said crisply, and turned on his side.

But Woolser could see his eyes were still open. Of course he would be thinking about Roberta. His little mind was probably already phrasing the concise way in which he would tell her all about how he had rescued his Captain Woolser from the awful cocoon-makers of Vispra. Woolser touched his paralysis gun for reassurance, smiled grimly, and waited. He knew that sleep came quickly to pigeonhole minds. To Sharpley's correct little brain, staying awake would probably appear messy and disorderly, once you'd put yourself to bed.

The darkness that spread about them was red, with Vispra's peculiar atmospheric dust. There was no sound, aside from the lieutenant's breathing and the faint hum given off by the electro-screen, its glow revealing the dim plain stretching immensely into the night. The ship tomorrow at noon, thought Woolser. The ship and the eyes of the crew and of that security-service Sergeant Bowler, waiting for his explanation of why he had bailed

out and abandoned his ship when no apparent danger threatened. The lives of everyone aboard had been placed in jeopardy by this pointless irresponsibility, his report would intone. Woolser wondered what he could say. How could he describe the panic and despair, the deliberate overdose of diga tablets, the hallucinations? Sharpley had gotten nothing from him; neither would they. Words might describe events, but not a state of soul.

He thought of Frieda, his own assigned wife. No choice had been granted to him, a captain of major space expeditions for over ten years, a man entrusted with greater responsibilities than that bird-brain Sharpley could ever hope for. But then he had enemies everywhere, and he was despised and suspected by everyone, even by his wife. And to top it all, he was positive now that his heavy, domineering Frieda Schutt was a member of the secret security service, set to watch him.

In Roberta, more than in any of the unassigned group, he had hoped to find consolation at last. His position would have enabled him to have her placed on the reserve list, with her own living quarters. If she had wanted it. Woolser had been too afraid of a refusal to ask her. Frieda must have known about that idea, though, and she must have connived with Sharpley to work out this ingenious little arrangement. As a matter of fact, he suspected that brief assignment to Earth's moon. It was clearly a frame-up. He had gone out there on orders to observe the test flight of a new-type space ship, a ship that hadn't even been completed when he got there! Then three weeks of waiting. His every movement had been watched, too, he was sure. He had taken to diga tablets; everybody there took them — it was a moon specialty. They intoxicated, but he was so used to them by now he hardly felt them.

And then, on the day the new ship was to make its flight, word came that he was to be assigned a special mission to Vispra, in a ship which could reach the astonishing speed of a light year every four minutes. But why Vispra? Frieda must have wanted more time. Vispra, an earth-like planet supporting two Earth colonies, hadn't been visited for years. One of the main reasons was its tremendous distance, 3,600 light years away. Of course his ship could make the trip in ten days, but then why hadn't he been called back to Earth to take over? Why had they sent his ship to the moon, where Lieutenant Sharpley turned the command over to him? Why the sudden rush? He was certain Frieda had her finger in the pie somewhere. Now she would be pawing through his things, with that grin of hungry malice on her face. She would uncover his journals, of course, and cart them down to dinner with her, where she would eat and laugh over them. Before very long, she would be bound to come upon the desperate and heart-sick letters to Roberta, letters of entreaty he had always postponed sending. Frieda would

scour his room with deliberate Teutonic system, searching away with those quick little blue eyes that were never still for more than a second. Then she would think of the books. He saw her going through every page of every book on his shelves until the unhappy outpourings of his most intimate tenderness fell out into her big hands. And how beefy her satisfaction would be! She would, of course, memorize the choicest passages and mouth them at him again and again, in hearty derision. Or she could turn them over to the Morals Police, just for the record. Or even give them to Roberta, with a friendly grin. His thoughts veered away from the idea.

Bailing out of a ship over the Vispran wastes. Just bailing out suddenly. Why? He didn't know.

Captain Woolser sighed wretchedly and looked out into the red night. They couldn't be very far from the desert's edge and the largest city, New London, with its pleasant parks and gay night life. There were friendly Earth colonies at both poles of Vispra, pleasantly watered, with an affable climate. Trees imported from Earth grew luxuriantly; he remembered them; it was only this central vast belt of waste granite that bred a hostile species. At least it was contained by its climate. If ships occasionally fell, unequipped to defend themselves, they rotted here while their passengers disappeared. The cocoon-makers . . .

Captain Woolser warmed at the thought. Quietly he got up and stole over to Lieutenant Sharpley's neatly-folded jacket. With infinite care he slipped his fingers into the breast pocket. A smile of triumph and contempt spread over his face as he pulled forth the phial of diga tablets. He took three, a moderate dose, put the phial into his own pocket, and stole back again to sit where he had been before. Where was he? The cocoon-makers.

When he had bailed out in that sudden hopeless hysteria, his gravity neutralizer had brought him gently down onto the granite plain. Here, on the vast stretch of hardness and red darkness, he had stumbled for hours, curiously unafraid, glad to be alone at last. His hysteria gave away almost at once to a soothing calmness. Tired at last, he had stretched out and fallen asleep, hoping the night would last long. It was a deeper, cooler sleep than he had had in a long time. But when he awoke it was to reality and terror.

They had him.

The famous cocoon-makers of Vispra, tiny, termite-like life forms of the wasteland, had tied him to the spot with their fine mesh of web. Just above his head he could dimly perceive the arch of his cocoon, the whole surface moving and undulating with the swarming life of the builders. The daylight outside penetrated thickly in a dim red glow where the walls were still thin. Yet even as he watched, the light grew dimmer as the cocoon-makers sealed him in with incredible speed.

Panic seized him and he strained at his bonds with all his might. The sweat rolled off him, but he could not budge an inch. The cocoon thickened, and the darkness was more than darkness. It was sheer, unbroken black, moving with thousands of busy insects. Woolser gasped for breath, and realized that his senseless struggle was using up the air. Yet as he breathed he realized that some kind of ventilation had been provided, or he would long since have suffocated. Then he remembered the accounts he had read of these cocoons, of how men had been kept alive in them for years. Those few who had been rescued told of regular feeding and blood-letting, of being kept perfectly clean. He thought of his chances of rescue, and decided at first that they were fairly good. Space hatches on the ship would register the time they were opened, from which it would be easy to compute the exact location over which he had bailed out. He wore spoor-boots, which a spoor-detector could easily follow to this spot. But would Sharpley, now in command, be likely to rescue him? He almost laughed at the thought.

Then he was suddenly aware of a general movement, incredibly subtle, over his entire body. Avenues of delicate irritation across his body revealed the routes chosen by the termites. Focus where he would, millions of black dots danced in a thick impenetrable mass. He was suddenly maddened by it, by the inability to move, while his body swarmed with the delicate vibrations of a thousand unseen crawling things. He cried out in anguish and struggled again to move. At last he gave up and lay still.

In a little while he realized that something new was happening. A constant tickle on his lower lip revealed that large numbers were congregating there. He shut his lips tight, but something that had been deposited trickled through, a kind of sweet-tasting broth. He was obliged to swallow. It was not unpleasant stuff at all, and being hungry, he finally opened his lips to take in more. It was constantly supplied there at the lower lip and he swallowed it every few minutes, almost automatically, from then on.

The blood-letting he had feared proved to be almost painless after all. A tiny wound kept open in his back allowed for a regular but very moderate loss. He found himself calculating, oddly, that he must be losing about a quarter of the amount they were giving him in the form of broth.

Time passed, a great deal of time it must have been, he guessed. He was kept clean, his supply of air and broth never failed. His spasmodic struggles, like a fly in a spider web, he had long since given up in a drowsy luxury of surrender. It was like returning to the womb, he thought, back, far back, to the womb. Everything was taken care of. The temperature of the cocoon never varied, and the first cramped annoyance of being constantly in the same position soon passed away. He was reduced to a mere machine of metabolism, he realised; yet he comforted himself with the thought that

he was vital to thousands of creatures, that he supplied them with the sustenance of their lives, a sort of Great Mother for which they repaid him by attending to his own needs. Drowsily he conceded that it seemed a fair exchange.

After a time he thought no more at all, but slipped off into a pleasant vacuity that was timeless. The darkness and the warmth were pleasant, the constant broth was good to the taste. The days and the nights could pass by overhead unheeded, there was nothing to worry about, nothing to be done, nothing he could do — everything was taken care of. He came to admire his captors, even to feel grateful to them. The cocoon was a snug refuge, its walls protected him.

And so it was that when the roof was ripped off his cocoon and the light of day exploded into his face, he was too stunned to know, at first, what was happening. It was a long time before he could bear to open his eyes, and when he finally did and saw that his rescuer was Sharpley, he was less pleased than a rescuer has some right to expect. Then came the lieutenant's little speech, which seemed to pass all limits of presumption.

"I came for you alone, sir," Sharpley had said, "because I felt you would rather be found in this — er — state by a friend. I knew you were going through an awful lot if you decided to bail out, and I thought you needed time to collect yourself before you were interrogated by Sergeant Bowler."

And he had probably already stolen the diga tablets when he was making this little Eagle-scout speech!

Woolser looked over to where the lieutenant lay sleeping. Then he remembered something else Sharpley had said.

"It must have been horrible, sir. You know, you said you didn't want to be rescued, and you were talking to *them* when I dug you out!"

Now he tried to imagine a cocoon over Sharpley, where he lay over there, and chuckled. If he loved neatness so, it would be the neatest thing that ever happened to him!

Woolser swallowed another diga tablet and took out his paralysis gun. He put the adjustor onto "total paralysis" and moved the time indicator to twenty-four hours. The electro-screen would run out in twelve. He paused. Might as well give the fool an even chance. He changed the indicator to twelve and one half hours and stole over to the lieutenant's side. He stood there a moment, then pointed the gun and fired. Sharpley didn't even move.

Woolser took off his spoor-boots, shielded the electro-screen, and stepped through.

"I'm coming, you little bastards!" he shouted, running and feeling his freedom like a heady tonic.

He ran a long way before he finally lay down to wait.

This sly pastiche is a gay departure from Idris Seabright's usual work. Readers will quickly recognise that giant of fantasy whose style Miss Seabright has so penetratingly taken off. If there be any sales managers among them, we hope these will also recognise — and heed — her warning that there are types of customer reaction which no man in the field has yet been properly trained to handle.

The Man Who Sold Rope to the Gnoles

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

THE GNOLES have a bad reputation, and Mortensen was quite aware of this. But he reasoned, correctly enough, that cordage must be something for which the gnoles had a long unsatisfied want, and he saw no reason why he should not be the one to sell it to them. What a triumph such a sale would be! The district sales manager might single out Mortensen for special mention at the annual sales-force dinner. It would help his sales quota enormously. And, after all, it was none of his business what the gnoles used cordage for.

Mortensen decided to call on the gnoles on Thursday morning. On Wednesday night he went through his *Manual of Modern Salesmanship*, underscoring things.

"The mental states through which the mind passes in making a purchase," he read, "have been catalogued as: 1) arousal of interest 2) increase of knowledge 3) adjustment to needs . . ." There were seven mental states listed, and Mortensen underscored all of them. Then he went back and double-scored No. 1, arousal of interest, No. 4, appreciation of suitability, and No. 7, decision to purchase. He turned the page.

"Two qualities are of exceptional importance to a salesman," he read. "They are adaptability and knowledge of merchandise." Mortensen underlined the qualities. "Other highly desirable attributes are physical fitness, a high ethical standard, charm of manner, a dogged persistence, and unfailing courtesy." Mortensen underlined these too. But he read on to the end of the paragraph without underscoring anything more, and it may be that his failure to put "tact and keen power of observation" on a footing with the other attributes of a salesman was responsible for what happened to him.

The gnoles live on the very edge of Terra Cognita, on the far side of a wood which all authorities unite in describing as dubious. Their house is narrow and high, in architecture a blend of Victorian Gothic and Swiss chalet. Though the house needs paint, it is kept in good repair. Thither on Thursday morning, sample case in hand, Mortensen took his way.

No path leads to the house of the gnoles, and it is always dark in that dubious wood. But Mortensen, remembering what he had learned at his mother's knee concerning the odor of gnoles, found the house quite easily. For a moment he stood hesitating before it. His lips moved as he repeated, "Good morning, I have come to supply your cordage requirements," to himself. The words were the beginning of his sales talk. Then he went up and rapped on the door.

The gnoles were watching him through holes they had bored in the trunks of trees; it is an artful custom of theirs to which the prime authority on gnoles attests. Mortensen's knock almost threw them into confusion, it was so long since anyone had knocked at their door. Then the senior gnole, the one who never leaves the house, went flitting up from the cellars and opened it.

The senior gnole is a little like a Jerusalem artichoke made of India rubber, and he has small red eyes which are faceted in the same way that gemstones are. Mortensen had been expecting something unusual, and when the gnole opened the door he bowed politely, took off his hat, and smiled. He had got past the sentence about cordage requirements and into an enumeration of the different types of cordage his firm manufactured when the gnole, by turning his head to the side, showed him that he had no ears. Nor was there anything on his head which could take their place in the conduction of sound. Then the gnole opened his little fanged mouth and let Mortensen look at his narrow, ribbony tongue. As a tongue it was no more fit for human speech than was a serpent's. Judging from his appearance, the gnole could not safely be assigned to any of the four physio-characterological types mentioned in the *Manual*; and for the first time Mortensen felt a definite qualm.

Nonetheless, he followed the gnole unhesitatingly when the creature motioned him within. Adaptability, he told himself, adaptability must be his watchword. Enough adaptability, and his knees might even lose their tendency to shakiness.

It was the parlor the gnole led him to. Mortensen's eyes widened as he looked around it. There were whatnots in the corners, and cabinets of curiosities, and on the fretwork table an album with gilded hasps; who knows whose pictures were in it? All around the walls in brackets, where in lesser houses the people display ornamental plates, were emeralds as big as your

head. The gnoles set great store by their emeralds. All the light in the dim room came from them.

Mortensen went through the phrases of his sales talk mentally. It distressed him that that was the only way he could go through them. Still, adaptability! The gnole's interest was already aroused, or he would never have asked Mortensen into the parlor; and as soon as the gnole saw the various cordages the sample case contained he would no doubt proceed of his own accord through "appreciation of suitability" to "desire to possess."

Mortensen sat down in the chair the gnole indicated and opened his sample case. He got out henequen cable-laid rope, an assortment of ply and yarn goods, and some superlative slender abaca fiber rope. He even showed the gnole a few soft yarns and twines made of cotton and jute.

On the back of an envelope he wrote prices for hanks and cheeses of the twines, and for fifty and hundred foot lengths of the ropes. Laboriously he added details about the strength, durability, and resistance to climatic conditions of each sort of cord. The senior gnole watched him intently, putting his little feet on the top rung of his chair and poking at the facets of his left eye now and then with a tentacle. In the cellars from time to time someone would scream.

Mortensen began to demonstrate his wares. He showed the gnole the slip and resilience of one rope, the tenacity and stubborn strength of another. He cut a tarred hemp rope in two and laid a five foot piece on the parlor floor to show the gnole how absolutely "neutral" it was, with no tendency to untwist of its own accord. He even showed the gnole how nicely some of the cotton twines made up in square knotwork.

They settled at last on two ropes of abaca fiber, $\frac{3}{16}$ and $\frac{5}{8}$ inch in diameter. The gnole wanted an enormous quantity. Mortensen's comment on these ropes, "unlimited strength and durability," seemed to have attracted him.

Soberly Mortensen wrote the particulars down in his order book, but ambition was setting his brain on fire. The gnoles, it seemed, would be regular customers; and after the gnoles, why should he not try the Gibbelins? They too must have a need for rope.

Mortensen closed his order book. On the back of the same envelope he wrote, for the gnole to see, that delivery would be made within ten days. Terms were 30% with order, balance upon receipt of goods.

The senior gnole hesitated. Slyly he looked at Mortensen with his little red eyes. Then he got down the smallest of the emeralds from the wall and handed it to him.

The sales representative stood weighing it in his hands. It was the smallest of the gnoles' emeralds, but it was as clear as water, as green as grass. In the outside world it would have ransomed a Rockefeller or a whole family of

Guggenheims; a legitimate profit from a transaction was one thing, but this was another; "a high ethical standard" — any kind of ethical standard — would forbid Mortensen to keep it. He weighed it a moment longer. Then with a deep, deep sigh he gave the emerald back.

He cast a glance around the room to see if he could find something which would be more negotiable. And in an evil moment he fixed on the senior gnole's auxiliary eyes.

The senior gnole keeps his extra pair of optics on the third shelf of the curiosity cabinet with the glass doors. They look like fine dark emeralds about the size of the end of your thumb. And if the gnoles in general set store by their gems, it is nothing at all compared to the senior gnole's emotions about his extra eyes. The concern good Christian folk should feel for their soul's welfare is a shadow, a figment, a nothing, compared to what the thoroughly heathen gnole feels for those eyes. He would rather, I think, choose to be a mere miserable human being than that some vandal should lay hands upon them.

If Mortensen had not been elated by his success to the point of anaesthesia, he would have seen the gnole stiffen, he would have heard him hiss, when he went over to the cabinet. All innocent, Mortensen opened the glass door, took the twin eyes out, and juggled them sacrilegiously in his hand; the gnole could feel them clink. Smiling to evince the charm of manner advised in the *Manual*, and raising his brows as one who says, "Thank you, these will do nicely," Mortensen dropped the eyes into his pocket.

The gnole growled.

The growl awoke Mortensen from his trance of euphoria. It was a growl whose meaning no one could mistake. This was clearly no time to be doggedly persistent. Mortensen made a break for the door.

The senior gnole was there before him, his network of tentacles outstretched. He caught Mortensen in them easily and wound them, flat as bandages, around his ankles and his hands. The best abaca fiber is no stronger than those tentacles; though the gnoles would find rope a convenience, they get along very well without it. Would you, dear reader, go naked if zippers should cease to be made? Growling indignantly, the gnole fished his ravished eyes from Mortensen's pockets, and then carried him down to the cellar to the fattening pens.

But great are the virtues of legitimate commerce. Though they fattened Mortensen sedulously, and, later, roasted and sauced him and ate him with real appetite, the gnoles slaughtered him in quite a humane manner and never once thought of torturing him. That is unusual, for gnoles. And they ornamented the plank on which they served him with a beautiful border of fancy knotwork made out of cotton cord from his own sample case.

Gavagan's Bar needs no introduction to readers of F&SF. You all rank by now as old habitués, before whom Mr. Cohan will set your regular tipple without the foolish formality of a verbal order. But there's something a little different about this fifth account of that Village vortex of improbabilia; it may make you go a little lighter on your drinking for a while. Or, at that, will it? Young Campbell Van Nest did, of course, find himself pursued down Manhattan sidewalks by a spectral tarsier (with an unconventional spectrum); but it can well be argued, with your elbows firmly on the bar at Gavagan's, whether his fate was really unenviable . . .

Beasts of Bourbon

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT

MR. GROSS leaned about two hundred of his pounds on the edge of the bar, so that part of him bulged over it, and said: "Mr. Cohan, I feel like variety this evening. How about a purple jesus?"

The tall, saturnine-looking man said, "You better be careful. It's the queer drinks like that that end you up with the d.t.s."

"Not no more than the rest," said the bartender, mixing away. "It's all how you take them. Funny that you would be mentioning d.t.s along with a purple jesus, now, Mr. Willison. The very last one I mixed in this bar was for that Mr. Van Nest, the poor young felly. The animals was after him, he said, and he needed a drink. But he acted sober when he came in here. As long as a man can behave himself he can have a drink in Gavagan's."

"Ah, it's a shame when a man has to take so much liquor he gets d.t.s," said Gross. "I got a nephew knew a man like that once. He cut off one of his own toes with a butcher knife, saying it was a snake trying to bite him. But he was one of them solitary drinkers."

"Campbell Van Nest wasn't a solitary drinker," said Willison. "Just a solitary guy. Though he had to be after his animals started coming alive on him."

"Huh?" said Mr. Witherwax, almost choking on the olive from his Martini. "What animals? How did they come alive?"

"The animals out of his d.t.s," said Willison. "I saw them. So did you, didn't you, Mr. Cohan?"

"Never a one," said Mr. Cohan, swabbing the bar. "That was why he came here, because they would not follow him into Gavagan's. But there's plenty would swear on the blessed sacraments they did see them. Like Patrolman Krevitz, that my brother Julius says is one of the steadiest men on the force. Not to be mentioning yourself, Mr. Willison."

"You say the animals from his d.t.s came alive?" said Witherwax. "I'd like to hear about this. I was just reading in a book about something like that. They call it materialization."

"Well, I don't know," said Willison. "The few of us who knew him have always rather kept it quiet. . . ."

"You can tell them," said Mr. Cohan. "No harm to anybody now the poor young felly is dead and gone, and his animals with him."

"Mmm. I suppose you're right," said Willison. "Well — fill me up another rye and water, Mr. Cohan, and let's see. I want to get this straight. . . ."

Campbell Van Nest was one of those natural-born square pegs, I guess. Nice-looking chap, nothing remarkable about him in any way, but it was as though he and the world had made an agreement not to get along together. Everything he tried went wrong somehow. Not in a spectacular way, but a little off the beam, so he was always being disappointed.

He traveled in toys. It will give you an idea of what I mean about the disappointments, when I tell you that although he was good at it and made plenty of money, he didn't like the life, rushing around and meeting people and going to conventions. He liked to stay home and read — a lot of things like astrology and Oriental lore. The part of the toy business that really interested him was designing toy animals — woolly pandas that would walk, and so on. But there isn't much of a full-time job in designing, so they'd only let him do it a week or so at a time, and then send him out on the road again.

He was always falling in love, too; not that he was a woman-chaser. He'd get into real deep, off-the-end-of-the-dock love with some girl, who always turned him down in the end. You've heard of people being hard-boiled? Well, I would say Campbell Van Nest was too soft-boiled. It broke him all up when one of these girls said no, and he'd go off on a two-day binge.

As near as I can make out, this business started with a day when everything went wrong at once. Van's latest girl threw him down, somebody got into his car and stole all the accessories, and a store to which he had made a big sale went broke, so he lost the commission. He went off on a bender that made the rest of them look like tea-parties. It lasted three days, and the

worst of it was that it wasn't public, either. He just kept buying bottle after bottle of whisky and sat there in his room, loading up on it and reading these Oriental books. His landlady called me up on the third day, and I went up there and found the place a shambles, with bottles and books mixed up together all over the floor.

I got him into bed and picked up some of the things, and while I was doing it I noticed that Van hadn't been merely reading while he was on this particular toot. The place was filled with papers on which he had apparently been sketching designs for new animal toys, and some of them would nearly turn your stomach to see.

That was all I could do at the time, so I left. The next part of the story comes from Van himself. When he came to about noon the next day, this thing was sitting on the foot of his bed. I only got a glance at it later, but it looked like some kind of monkey, only bigger, with eyes like saucers and enormously long fingers. I don't know whether it resembled any of the designs Van had made while he was pie-eyed or not. It had what you might call an evil expression.

(A stocky pug-nosed man with glasses, who had been consulting a daiquiri spoke up: "I think that would be the spectral tarsier."

"Yes?" said Willison, facing him. "Are they blue?"

"I know of one that was," said the stocky man. "But that . . . Sorry to interrupt your story, old man. There may be a connection. Go on.")

Van had never had d.t.s before, and his first idea was that this was something that had escaped from a zoo. But with his hangover and all, he didn't like the idea of trying to capture it. An animal like that can give you a nasty bite. So he got himself a Bromo-Seltzer and some clothes, figuring that when he was outside, he'd call up the zoo or the S.P.C.A. and have it taken away. This spectral what-is-it just sat there quietly on the foot of the bed, following Van with its eyes.

It was so quiet that he thought he'd slip out for a cup of coffee before phoning. But when he opened the door, with his reflexes not under very good control, the thing leaped down and was through it like a flash. Van expected it to run. It didn't; it came hopping along down the hall and then down the stairs, always keeping about the same distance behind him. Every time he turned around toward it, it would retreat, and then follow him again as soon as he went on. It seemed attached to him.

That made Van think — as well as he could think through the fumes of his hangover — that he might be having a case of heebie-jeebies and not really seeing this thing at all. So he decided to ignore it and started down the street. Then he began to notice other people when he passed them: they'd do a double-take and give a grunt or a squeak or something, and

when he looked over his shoulder, there the thing was, coming along behind him, and other people seemed to be seeing it too. He began to walk faster and faster. Pretty soon he passed a girl who was going in the same direction he was, and when the animal hopped past her feet, she looked down at it, and let out a good loud shriek. That did for what was left of poor Van's nerves, and he started to run.

You know how it is when anyone runs down the street. People look to see who's chasing who, and with a little encouragement, they'll join in. This time they had lots of encouragement, with that monster coming along behind Van in big jumps. Some yelled: "It's after him!" and in about half a minute, he had twenty or thirty helpful citizens rolling along behind.

Sheer force of habit, he said later, brought him here to Gavagan's, and he dived in, to get away from all those people and that animal. You remember the day, Mr. Cohan?

("Indeed and I do," said the bartender. "The poor felly came through the door there like one of them fancy ice-skaters you see in the show, and stood hanging onto the bar. 'It's brandy you need, my lad,' I said, and poured one for him while the rest of them people come milling around, some of them inside and some out, after this animal. But no animal did they see, because none had come in with him. All they saw was Mr. Van Nest having a drink of brandy and his hand shaking. Some of them said it got away over the roofs, but you're telling me that's not true now, aren't you, Mr. Willison?")

Another rye and soda (said Willison). No, it certainly isn't true. The thing just disappeared. A couple of the people who had followed came in to ask Van about it, and they got to talking. Well, there's only one way you can conduct a conversation in a bar — that is, with a drink in your hand. Presently Van was drinking a purple jesus and feeling better, and then first thing he knew it was evening, and he'd spent the afternoon in here.

Now I won't say he was really drunk, not like he had been the day before, and besides, Mr. Cohan wouldn't permit it. But you can't work all day on brandy and purple jesuses and nothing to eat without getting a little high. What did you say? Oh, he had a roast pork sandwich. So he had a roast pork sandwich and a couple more drinks, and went home and had a couple of nightcaps, and then I guess he was a little more than high. So he tumbled into bed; it was late when he got there.

When he came to, toward noon the next day, this spectral monkey-thing was there again. And this time there was another monster with it, a thing like a lizard with a long tail and thin fingers and something that looked like a big ruff around its neck, as you sometimes see in old ancestor portraits. It was a dark maroon red.

("*Chlemydosaurus kingi*, the frilled lizard," said the pug-nosed man, "in an interesting chromatic variation."

'You know about it?" asked Willison.

"Yes. My name's Tobolka. I'm a biologist. May I buy you another?")

Thanks, I will have one (said Willison). I don't want you to get the idea that Van was stupid. He could put two and two together, even with the bells ringing in his head, and he was perfectly certain that if he got out on the street again those two horrors would be right with him. So he called me up and asked me to come over.

By the time I got there, he was working on a pint he had sent for to steady his nerves. The animals were there all right, both of them. I saw them. They were about so big. Every time I tried to approach one, it was out of reach like a flash, and then it would settle down and look at Van. He seemed depressed.

"I can't understand what makes this happen," he kept saying.

I told him about putting him to bed a couple of nights before, and the shape I'd found the room in, with the books and weird animal drawings scattered around. "What kind of Hindu magic have you got mixed up with?" I asked him.

That made him more depressed than ever. "That's just the trouble," he said. "I haven't any idea. A good many of these books deal with the occult and materialization phenomena in one form or another, but I'm afraid I had rather a lot to drink that day, and I don't know what I tried to do."

We agreed that the only sensible thing to do was to reverse the process, so I went out and got something to eat on a tray, and then we sat down with his books. Those two animals watched us all the time. I couldn't make head or tail of what I was reading, and he couldn't seem to find anything that was of the least use. About five o'clock I gave up and went home, arranging for dinner to be sent up to him. The only thing we were hopeful about was that the animals might go away during the night. He had finished the pint, but that wasn't anything to a fellow of Van's capacity.

But he called up the next morning to say that they were still here on the foot of his bed, staring at him. What was worse, the office was calling. They didn't mind his staying out a couple of days, but this made five now, and he was due for a trip through the Middle West. The idea of going out on a sales trip with those two beasts mixed up with his samples didn't strike him as the way to win friends and influence people.

I went over after dinner and we talked the whole thing upside and down. Finally, I said: "Look here. There are two parts of this business that may be connected. Aren't those two some of the animals you drew while you were having that toot?"

He dug out the drawings, and, although his hand had been pretty unsteady when he made them, this frilled lizard and spectral monkey were recognizable.

"All right," I said. "You remember the first one disappeared when you went into Gavagan's? Now I'll get a taxi and shoot you over there quick, and while you're gone, I'll destroy these drawings."

He said it seemed farfetched, but couldn't think of anything better, and the second day of consulting his books hadn't turned up anything, so he agreed. I had the cab waiting with its engine running when he came dashing downstairs with the two monsters after him. The lizard one rode on top. I went back up and dug out every one of those drawings he'd made and burned them, for good measure adding some designs he'd made for toys that didn't look like monsters at all.

Then I came over here. It seems quite a few people had seen Van with his monsters. Not so many as the first time, but enough to make a good deal of conversation, so that practically everybody in the place was buying Van a drink and trying to get him to talk about it. You can imagine what happened. He was as boiled as a fifteen-minute egg by the time I got him out of here; and next morning he had three pets instead of two.

Only it was worse this time. The new one didn't look like anything I remembered seeing in the drawings; it didn't look like anything I ever saw, and Mr. Tobolka, I don't think it looked like anything you ever saw. It looked like an enormous centipede, with the head of a cat. Van called me up and I went over again and saw it. The office had been after him again, and he told them he was sick. I stayed with him a while, trying to work out something more from the books, but while I was out getting something to eat, he got so he couldn't take the stares of the three animals any more, summoned a taxi by telephone and was off here to Gavagan's again. It was the only place where he felt safe.

("The poor felly said he would clean the cuspidors if he could only stay here in a blanket on the floor," said Mr. Cohan. "I put it up to Gavagan myself, but he wouldn't hear a word of it.")

I hadn't heard from him (continued Willison), but I worked my way into his place on maybe the fifth day after it started. The office had sent around a basket of fruit and then one of flowers by a special messenger. I had to knock four or five times before he let me in, and then it was with a suspicious look, peeking around the corner of the door. He hadn't shaved in God knows when, and there was a fifth in his hand, about three-quarters empty. By that time there were six of these animals in the room, all of them but the first two looking as though they had been put together out of spare parts of real animals and beasts from a child's picture-book. I couldn't get

near any of them, but I was spared the trouble, because Van waved the bottle at me, said, "See?" took a swig and fell down across the bed, with all those incredible creatures looking at him.

He collapsed across the bed, and I looked at him and thought. He was obviously on the way out in some direction, and if I could do anything to help him, I figured it would be pure gain. There were the parts of an evening newspaper strewn around the place, so I picked them up and found the ad for a Caribbean cruise. I called the line; the ship was sailing in three-quarters of an hour and fortunately they had a vacant cabin, since there had been a cancellation. I got him into a cab and took him down to the pier and poured him aboard, and I've always been sorry, because that ship turned out to be the *Trinidad Castle*.

"That's the one that was lost?" inquired Witherwax.

"Correct," said Willison. "Ran on a reef in the Bahamas during a hurricane and went down with everybody on board."

"I doubt it," suddenly said the stocky little man Tobolka.

"I beg your pardon," said Willison, with some disfavor.

"I beg yours. No offense meant, old man. I wasn't questioning your word, merely the accuracy of your data. When you mentioned a blue spectral tarsier, I said there might be a connection with a case I know of; now I'm certain of it. Your friend Van Nest did not go down on the *Trinidad Castle*. If Mr. Cohan will kindly provide me with another daiquiri, I'll explain."

(He turned round, with a gesture.) Gentlemen, the story has not been broadcast outside the scientific world for much the same reasons that persuaded Mr. Willison to keep it quiet. I am a biologist and have been rather closely associated with several members of the Harvard Marine Life expedition to the Bahamas. You may or may not know that its purpose was to collect specimens of marine life on Jackson Key, which is rather a miserable little sand-spit off Great Abaco Island, but does have peculiarly interesting forms of minor marine fauna.

You may have seen photographs of the expedition at work. If you have, the center of the picture was almost certainly occupied by a young lady clad in shorts and performing some scientific task. She is blonde and extremely photogenic, and her name is Cornelia Hartwig.

The morning after the *Trinidad Castle* disaster she found a survivor of that ship who had floated into the surf of Jackson Key on a grating. I think there can be very little doubt that it was your friend Van Nest, though he gave his name as Campbell. He was not in good condition when discovered, though not in serious danger. Restoratives were applied, but there could be

no question of sending him to the mainland at once, because the expedition's supply ship made only periodic visits, and neither of the two small motorboats was adequate.

My friend Professor Rousseau says that when the young man recovered consciousness and was informed of this, he did not appear to object. He was looking at Cornelia Hartwig, and with an almost equal intensity she was looking at him. I should perhaps explain about her. She is a highly competent biologist, but, like your friend Van Nest, may be described as always falling in love. On field expeditions like the one to Jackson Key, it is her usual habit to select one of the older and more thoroughly married members of the scientific staff, and this has caused some trouble in the past. In fact, the members of the expedition were waiting with some apprehension to see who would be the victim on this occasion, and it was with relief that they observed her spending the entire day with the castaway.

In the evening, when Campbell, or rather Van Nest, was able to be up and about, and had eaten something, Cornelia took him to the opposite side of the island from the camp, where there were some palm trees, to look for ghost crabs by the light of the full moon. I don't know whether they discovered any ghost crabs; but as they sat there under the palms, the extraordinary series of animals you describe appeared as if from nowhere and formed a circle around them at a respectful distance. Including a blue spectral tarsier and a frilled lizard of a rich maroon color.

There is no doubt that Cornelia was enchanted. At the sight of so many species unknown to science, I would have been myself. The couple did not return to camp until long after all the rest were in bed. When Cornelia told her story in the morning, it was received with a certain amount of skepticism, and even of merriment, by the other members of the expedition. I am not surprised. The behavior of Van Nest's animals at Jackson Key was somewhat different from that you describe in the city. Not one of them was visible that morning. They had disappeared with the night.

This reception of her story irritated Cornelia exceedingly, and on the following evening she persuaded Professor Rousseau himself to accompany them to the palm trees. He says the animals appeared to come out of the undergrowth and their description tallied with that you gave, Mr. Willison. He threw a flashlight on them and dispelled any idea that they were hallucinations, for they had solidity; but all his efforts to collect a specimen failed because of their agility.

After this, Cornelia and Van Nest went to the palm grove every evening, often taking along a sketch-pad and a flash, and she produced some remarkable drawings. The pair rather rudely discouraged efforts of other members of the expedition to go with them, and seemed so much in love

with each other that everyone was content to leave them in privacy. However, Professor Rousseau observed that after about three weeks Cornelia — whose daytime work suffered severely by the amount of time she spent out at night — appeared to be growing cooler toward the young man.

Seeking the cause, he concealed himself near the palm grove before dark. The moon was now in its second quarter, and he had some difficulty in seeing; but when Campbell and Cornelia arrived and the animals began to come out, it was at once evident that something was wrong. There were only four of them, and these not of the most eccentric character. Moreover, though he was not near enough to hear what was being said, Professor Rousseau declares there was no difficulty in making out the tone of the voices. Cornelia was upbraiding the young man, and he was pleading with her.

(Willison put out his glass for another refill. "I think I get it," he said. "That sea air and exercise were getting the booze out of his system. That's what I told him he ought to do.")

Such was evidently Campbell's own conclusion (continued Tobolka). On the morning after this, while the members of the expedition were at work, Campbell raided the stock of whiskey, drank almost an entire bottle of it, and was found in his cot in a stupor. Professor Rousseau was very much annoyed and reproved Campbell severely. However, the object of his maneuver was attained. Cornelia accompanied him to the palm grove once more, and next morning appeared radiant, with sketches of an entirely new and very aberrant form of *Limulus*.

After this he persuaded Cornelia to obtain whisky for him. The process did not last long, for the base ship soon arrived, and the work of the expedition was completed. At this point Professor Rousseau encountered a difficulty, for Cornelia absolutely refused to leave the island until she had seen some more of Campbell's animals. With equal vehemence, he refused to leave her; and they could not come back together because of those same animals.

Director Rousseau decided that they were both adults, entitled to make their own decisions, so he left them some tents and supplies and arranged for a boat to make periodic calls at Jackson Key. He tells me that as Cornelia doesn't have a great deal of money and Campbell had none at all when he was cast on the beach, they were finding it difficult to pay for liquor; so when last seen, they were trying to ferment coconut milk. Perhaps we may learn some day whether they succeeded.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Tobolka," said Willison "Maybe I ought to arrange to send his books down there. What do you think?"

Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

ANYONE WITH THE FACULTY of short range precognition could have picked up a nice bit of change in New York publishing circles only two or three years ago by betting that five hard-cover science fiction anthologies would appear within a two-month period in 1951.

This unexpected cluster of anthologies contains a total of 79 stories, adding up to 560,000 words — enough to keep the omnivorous fan happy for some time. And even the more selective reader will find most of the material stimulating and rewarding.

Best value of the five, both in total wordage and in average quality, is Groff Conklin's POSSIBLE WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION (Vanguard) — a fine solid lot of stories on all conceivable aspects of extra-terrestrial existence which is probably the best yet of the prolific Mr. Conklin's many collections. Another of the standard anthologists, August Derleth, is regrettably a little below par in his latest, FAR BOUNDARIES (Pellegrini & Cudahy). An introductory section of obscure primitives, from 1787 to 1889, will delight the connoisseur and collector; but the more recent material, despite some strong highpoints, does not sustain Derleth's previous high editorial standards.

Kendell Foster Crossen's ADVENTURES INTO TOMORROW (Greenberg) is an extremely attractive group of lively fresh concepts in well-written stories, and further distinguished by the editor's excellent brief survey of the history and present state of science fiction. Murray Leinster's GREAT STORIES OF SCIENCE FICTION (Random) also contains a good introduction by the editor (plus a rather ponderous prestige piece by Clifton Fadiman) and a notable collection of stories — far too many of which, however, are already available in other hard-cover volumes.

The Conklin and the Crossen are musts, and the Derleth and the Leinster recommended for any science fiction bookshelf. The fifth recent anthology is Donald A. Wollheim's EVERY BOY'S BOOK OF SCIENCE-FICTION (Fell), of which we'll say only that no boy of ours is going to be introduced to this noble field by means of archaic and subliterate pap.

Longer than most of these anthologies and very nearly as varied in material is the outstanding fantasy novel of 1951 to date: John Dickson Carr's THE DEVIL IN VELVET (Harper), which manages to combine the logic of time travel, the politics of the Restoration, black magic, swashbuckling

romance, and a pure deductive detective story into one miraculously successful whole.

Especial credit goes to Mr. Carr for considering the linguistics of time travel — an aspect totally neglected by most writers, including the usually meticulous Clifford D. Simak in his TIME AND AGAIN (Simon & Schuster; serialized as TIME QUARRY). A few such inconsistencies and an excess of wordiness and involutions weaken a potentially strong future melodrama.

Even stronger potentially is Eric Frank Russell's DREADFUL SANCTUARY (Fantasy Press), with its vivid whodunit plotting and its magnificent concept of Terra as an asylum for the insane of other planets . . . until a ridiculously anticlimactic ending all but removes it from the science fiction category.

Flaw-pickers will have a galactic holiday with Raymond F. Jones's RENAISSANCE (Gnome), tearing apart everything from its multiple implausibilities to its almost obscene machinolatry. But with all its flaws it does possess a tremendously compelling narrative power and a number of powerfully reasoned scenes that entitle it to the rare qualification of true *science* fiction — an imperfect masterpiece, but a masterpiece nonetheless . . . particularly in contrast to the rather routine batch of Jones novelets published as THE TOYMAKER (Fantasy Publishing Company).

Three of the best novels from "Unknown" have at last reached hard covers. Gnome Press offers two of L. Ron Hubbard's in one volume: TYPEWRITER IN THE SKY, an entertaining adventure-farce badly in need of editing; and the classic FEAR, which still seems a nearly perfect psychological terror novel, and by far the best writing we've ever seen from Hubbard. L. Sprague de Camp's THE UNDESIRED PRINCESS (Fantasy Publishing Company) explores a world of strict two-value Aristotelian logic with that splendid absurd rigorousness which distinguishes such other vintage de Camp items as the Harold Shea series.

In the very small group of modern science fiction books which have not previously appeared in magazines, a high place goes to Jack Williamson's DRAGON'S ISLAND (Simon & Schuster), an excitingly twisted melodrama with much fascinating extrapolation of "genetic engineering" — closer to DARKER THAN YOU THINK in its small-scale impact than to Williamson's usual hypergalactic opera.

The theological allegories of Charles Williams seem about equally to fascinate and to repel the average fantasy reader; to the unrepelled, we strongly commend THE PLACE OF THE LION (Pellegrini & Cudahy) as one of the most daringly conceived and stunningly visualized of all his novels. More conventionally and even sentimentally religious is Ruth Feiner's A MIRACLE FOR CAROLINE (Coward-McCann), an "if" novel of some charm.

Two important new non-fiction books are both, in different ways, slightly disappointing. Arthur C. Clarke's INTERPLANETARY FLIGHT (Harper) is a brief but comprehensive study of astronautical problems which will prove invaluable to students and especially to writers; but much of it is so heavily technical that the average reader may despair. Kenneth Heuer's MEN OF OTHER PLANETS (Pellegrini & Cudahy) is an admirably well-intentioned effort to correct the limited anthropomorphic thinking of too many "authorities"; but its own thinking is none too cogent, and its attempts at literary style and grace prove rather unfortunate.

Best of recent non-fiction is Vance Randolph's uproarious WE ALWAYS LIE TO STRANGERS (Columbia University), a grand collection of Ozark legends and monsters, written, like his great OZARK SUPERSTITIONS, with that blend of sound scholarship and deadpan zest which is Randolph's copyright secret. Another university press book, Paul Fatout's AMBROSE BIERCE: THE DEVIL'S LEXICOGRAPHER (Oklahoma) is strong in fresh source material on Bierce's peculiar life, weak in any comprehension of his fiction (for which Fatout shows a marked distaste). Despite its title, Sara Gerstle's FOUR GHOST STORIES (Adrian Wilson) also comes under non-fiction, but adds nothing of evidential interest to psychic research, despite a quiet pleasantness and an extraordinarily attractive job of printing and designing.

In addition to the new books, two reprints demand your attention if you've previously missed them: Grosset & Dunlap's reissues of two of the finest science fiction novels of all the modern crop, Robert A. Heinlein's BEYOND THIS HORIZON and Fritz Leiber's GATHER, DARKNESS!

Cornell Woolrich launched his writing career in the '20s with such novels of boom-time gilded youth as CHILDREN OF THE RITZ. *In the '30s he began to develop in the pulps his true talent as a purveyor of terror; and in 1940, with* THE BRIDE WORE BLACK, *he started a long series of the most purely breathtaking of modern suspense novels. A few of these, such as* THE NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES, *have appeared as by George Hopley; and many of the most notable, including the classic* PHANTOM LADY, *as by William Irish — a pseudonym which has become perhaps even more celebrated than the author's own name. Possibly only Dashiell Hammett has seen so many of his early pulp writings revived and finally given proper critical recognition in book-form; but despite nine volumes of collected stories to date, there are still wondrous Woolrich treasures buried deep in the pulp files of the '30s. So far as we know, however, only once during that period did Woolrich attempt science fiction — in the never-reprinted short novel from "All-American Fiction" (March-April, 1938) which we bring you here. You'll find the theme familiar enough: elixir of life, beautiful guinea pig, mad scientist . . . but you'll find too that none of these conventional elements is used precisely as you might expect, and that the whole is infused with the unbearable tension of suspense, the sheer horror of the tiny detail, that lends such terrible impact to the best of the Woolrich-Hopley-Irish crime novels. (The length of this story is, frankly, an editorial experiment. You've told us you want largely short stories, with an occasional very strong novelet. Let us know how this short novel strikes you; if you approve, we'll try more.)*

Jane Brown's Body

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

THREE O'CLOCK in the morning. The highway is empty, under a malignant moon. The oil-drippings make the roadway gleam like a blue-satin ribbon. The night is still but for a humming noise coming up somewhere behind a rise of ground.

Two other, fiercer, whiter moons, set close together, suddenly top the rise, shoot a fan of blinding platinum far down ahead of them. Headlights. The humming burgeons into a roar. The touring car is going so fast it sways from side to side. The road is straight. The way is long. The night is short.

The man hunched at the wheel is tense; his eyes are fixed unblinkingly on the hem of the black curtain that the headlights roll up before him. His eyes are like two little lumps of coal. His face is brown; his hair is white. His figure is gaunt, but there is power in the bony wrists that grip the wheel, and power in the locked jaws that show white with their own tension.

The speedometer needle flickers a little above eighty. . . .

The rear-view mirror shows a very tired young woman napping on the back seat. Her legs are tucked up under her, and the laprobe has been swathed around her from the waist down. One black-gloved hand is twisted in the looped cord dangling from the side of the car; it hangs there even as she sleeps, of its own weight. She sways with a limpness, a lack of reflex-resistance, that almost suggests an absence of life.

She has on a tiny pillbox-hat with a fine-meshed veil flaring out all around below it. The wind keeps pushing it back like a film across her face. The contact of her nose makes a funny little knob on it. It should billow out at that point with her breathing, at such close contact. It doesn't, just caves in as though she were sucking it through parted lips. She sleeps with her mouth slightly open.

The moon is the only thing that keeps up with this careening car, grinning down derisively on it all the way, mile after mile, as though to say, "I'm on to you!"

A scattering of pinpoint lights shows up in the blackness ahead. A town or village straddling the highway. The indicator on the speedometer begins to lose ground. The man glances in his mirror at the girl, a little anxiously as if this oncoming town were some kind of test to be met.

An illuminated road-sign flashes by.

CAUTION!

MAIN STREET AHEAD — SLOW UP

The man nods grimly, as if agreeing with that first word. But not in the way it is meant.

The lights grow bigger, spread out on either side. Street lights peer out here and there among the trees. The highway suddenly sprouts a plank sidewalk on each side of it. Dark store-windows glide by.

With an instinctive gesture, the man dims his lights from blinding platinum to just a pale wash. A lunch-room window drifts by.

The lights of a big bus going his way wink just ahead. He makes ready to swerve out and get past it. And then there is an unlooked-for complication. A railroad right-of-way bisects the main street here. Perhaps no train has passed all night until now. Perhaps no other will pass until morning. Five minutes sooner, five minutes later, and he could have avoided the delay. But just as car and lighted bus approach, side by side, a bell starts ringing, zebra-striped barriers weighted with red lanterns are slowly lowered, and the road is blocked off. The two cars are forced to halt abreast while a slow procession of freight cars files endlessly by. Almost simultaneously, a large milk-truck has turned in behind him from the side road, sealing him in.

The lights of the bus shine into the car and fall on the sleeping woman. There is only one passenger in the bus, but he is on the near side, and he looks idly out the window into the neighboring machine. His eye drops to the sleeping woman and remains there, as any man's would.

There is a terrible rigidity about the man at the wheel now. White shows over his knuckles. His eyes are glued on the mirror, in which he can see the bus-passenger gazing casually into the rear of his car. A shiny thread starts down his face, catches in one of its leathery furrows. Sweat. A second one follows. His chest is rising and falling under his coat and he breathes as if he has been running.

The man at the bus window keeps looking at the woman, looking at her. He doesn't mean anything by it, probably. There's nothing else for him to look at. Why shouldn't he look at a woman, even a sleeping one? She must be beautiful under that veil. Some men are born starers-at-women, anyway.

But as the endless freight cars click by ahead, as the long scrutiny keeps up, one of the white-knuckled hands on the wheel is moving. It leaves the polished wooden rim, drops to its owner's lap. The whiteness goes out of it. It starts crawling up under his coat, buries itself between the buttoned halves, comes out again, white over the knuckles again, gripping an automatic.

His eyes have never once left the rear-view mirror, never once left the reflection of the bus-passenger's face. He acts as if he is waiting for some expression to come into it. Some certain, telltale expression. He acts as if, then, he will do something with that gun on his lap.

But the caboose has finally terminated the endless chain of freight cars, the bell stops ringing, the barriers slowly rise. The bus-driver unlimbers his clutch, the line of lighted windows start to edge forward. The gun vanishes, the hand that held it returns to the wheel empty. A moment later bus, and passenger, and face have all spurted ahead. The touring car hangs back a moment, to give it a good start. The milk-truck signals impatiently for clearance, then cuts out around the obstacle, lurches ahead.

The leathery-faced man at the wheel has his under lip thrust out, expelling hot breath of relief up past his own face. He touches the two liquid threads the drops of sweat left on his face, blots them.

He goes on into the night, along the arrow-straight highway, under the peering moon. The lady sways and dreams, and puckers her veil in.

A long slow rise begins, and now the car starts to buck when he gives it the accelerator. He looks at the gauge; his gas is dwindling fast. The tan washes out of his face for a moment. He's on a main road, after all. All he has to do is pull over, wait for a tow-line, if he runs out of gas. Why that fleeting panic on his face?

He nurses the car forward on the dregs of gas remaining. Zigzags it from side to side of the highway, to lessen the incline that might defeat it. It goes by fits and starts, slower all the time, but he's near the crest now. If he can only reach it, he can coast down the dip on the other side without an engine.

The car creeps up over the rise, hesitates, about to stall. Before him the road dips downward under the moon for miles. In the distance a white glow marks a filling station. He maneuvers the wheel desperately in and out, the momentum of the descent catches at the machine, and a moment later it's coasting along at increasing speed.

The filling station blazes nearer, an aurora borealis in the middle of the dark countryside. He dare not go past, yet he's very tense as the car rolls within the all-revealing light. He glances anxiously in the mirror. He wonders about the window-shades, but leaves them the way they are. There's nothing that draws the human eye quicker than a suggestively lowered shade.

He turns aside, inches up the runway, brakes to a stop. An attendant jumps over.

"Five," he says, and sits there watching the man hook up the pipeline. Watching him with utter absorption. The gun is in his lap again, bedded under the hem of his coat.

The grease monkey approaches the front window. "Wash your windows, chief?"

The driver stretches his lips into a grin. "Leave 'em."

The monkey grins back, and his eyes wander on past the driver to the girl in the back of the car, rest there for a minute.

"Dead tired," the man at the wheel says. "Here's your money; keep the change." The car moves out of the yellow radiance into the sheltering gloom again. Secrecy wells up into its interior once more, like India ink.

The flabbergasted attendant is shouting something after him. "Hey, mister, that's a twenty-dollar bill you —"

The car is racing along again now. The man at the wheel tenses. What's

that peppering sound coming up behind him? A small, single beam of light is seesawing after him. If the man was frightened by the bus and by the filling station, what word can describe the look on his face now, as his mirror shows him a state policeman on his tail? Teeth bared in a skull-like flash, he fights down an impulse to open up, to try to race for it. He pulls over to the side, slows, stops. Again the gun comes out, and again it is bedded under his thigh with the butt protruding in readiness on the side away from the window. Then he sits grinding his fist into the hollow of his other hand.

The motorcycle flashes by, loops awkwardly around, comes back. The rider gets off, walks over, planks his foot down heavily on the running-board. He ducks his head, leers in at him, beetle-browed.

"What's your hurry, fellow? I clocked you at eighty."

"Eighty-four," corrects the leathery-faced man, with a dangerous quietness that cannot be mistaken for humility.

"Well, fifty's the limit around here. Lemme see your license."

The driver takes out his license with his left hand; the right is lying idly beside his right thigh, on cold black metal.

The state cop reads by the dashboard-light, leaning even further in to do so. His own weapon is way out behind at his hip; the window frame would block his elbow in a sudden reach. "Anton Denholt. Doctor, eh? I'm surprised at you, all the more reason you oughta have more sense! Next state, too, huh? You people are the ones give us the most trouble. Well, you're in my state now, get that; you didn't quite make that state-line marker down there —"

Denholt glances along the road as if he hadn't seen the marker before. "I didn't try to," he says in that same toneless voice.

The cop nods thoughtfully. "I guess you could have at that," he admits. "What were you doing eighty-four for —?"

Perhaps Denholt can't stand waiting for the man to discover the girl sleeper in back, perhaps his nerves are so frayed by now that he'd rather call attention to her himself and get it over with. He jerks his head toward the back seat. "On her account," he says. "Every minute counts."

The cop peers back. "She sick, Doc?" he asks, a little more considerately.

Denholt says, "It's a matter of life and death." And again he is speaking the absolute truth, far more than the trooper can guess.

The cop begins to look apologetic. "Why didn't you say so? There's a good hospital at Rawling. You must have passed by there an hour ago. Why didn't you take her there?"

"No. I can make it where I'm going, if you'll only let me be on my way. I want to get her home before the baby —"

The cop gives a low whistle. "No wonder you were burning up the road!"

He slaps his book closed, hands Denholt back his license. "You want an escort? You'll make better time. My beat ends at that marker down there, but I can put in a call for you —"

"No, thanks," says Denholt blandly. "I haven't much further to go."

The touring car glides off. There is a sort of fatalism in Denholt's attitude now, as he urges the car back to high speed. What else can happen to him, after what just did? What else is there to be afraid of — now?

Less than forty miles past the state line, he leaves the great transcontinental highway and turns off into a side-road, a "feeder." Presently it begins to take a steady upgrade, into the foothills of a chain of mountains. The countryside changes, becomes wilder, lonelier. Trees multiply to the thickness of woodlands. The handiwork of man, all but the roadway itself, slowly disappears.

He changes his course a second time, leaves the feeder for what is little better than an earth-packed trail, sharply tilted, seldom used. The climb is steady. Through occasional breaks in the trees of the thickly wooded slopes that support the trail, he can see the low country he has left below, the ribbon of the trunkroad he was on, an occasional winking light like a glowworm toiling slowly along it. There are hairpin turns; overhanging branches sway back with a hiss as he forces his way through. He has to go much slower here, but he seems to know the way.

A barbed-wire fence leaps suddenly out from nowhere, begins to parallel the miserable road. Four rungs high, each rung three strands in thickness, viciously spined, defying penetration by anything but the smallest animals. Strange, to want privacy that badly in such an out-of-the-way place. A double gate sidles along in it, double-padlocked, and stops abreast of him as his car comes to a halt. A placard beside it reads in the diamond-brightness of the headlights: "Private Property. Keep Out." A common-enough warning, but strange to find it here in this mountain fastness. Even, somehow, sinister.

He gets out, opens both padlocks, edges the freed halves of the gate inward with his shoe. Instantly a jarring, jangling sound explodes from one of the trees nearby. An alarm bell, wired to the gate. Its clang is frightening in this dark silence. It too spells lack of normality, seems the precaution of a fanatic.

The car drives through, stops while the man closes and fastens the prickly gate behind it. The bell shuts off; the stillness is deafening by contrast. The car goes on until the outline of a house suddenly uptilts the searching headlight-beams, log-built, sprawling, resembling a hunting-lodge. But there's no friendliness to it. There is something ominous and forbidding about its look, so dark, so forgotten, so secretive-looking. The kind of a house that

has a maw to swallow with — a one-way house, that you feel will never disgorge any living thing that enters it. Leprous in the moonlight festering on its roof. And the two round sworls of light played by the heads of the car against its side, intersecting, form a pear-shaped oval that resembles a gleaming skull.

The man leaves the car again, jumps up under a sort of a shed-arrangement sheltering the main entrance. Metal clashes and a black opening yawns. He vanishes through it, while pulsing bright-beamed car and sleeping lady wait obediently outside.

Light springs up within — the yellow-green wanness of coal-oil, shining out through the door to make the coal-black tree-trunks outside seem even blacker. The place looks eerier than ever now.

Homecoming?

The man's shadow lengthens, blacks out the doorway, and he's ready to receive the patient lady. He kills the engine, opens the rear door and reaches in for her with outstretched arms. He disengages her dangling wrist from the intertwined support-strap, brushes off the laprobe, cradles her body in upturned arms, and waddles inside with her, like someone carrying something very precious. The door bangs shut behind him at a backward thrust of his heel, and darkness swallows up the world outside.

II

He carries her through the building into an extension hidden from view from the outside. There is a distinct difference between it and the rest of the rambling structure. Its walls are not log, but brick, covered with plaster, that must have been hauled to this inaccessible place at great trouble and expense. It's wired for electricity, current supplied by a homemade generator. Dazzling, clinical-white light beats down from above in here. And there are no chairs here, no rough-hewn tables, anything like that. Instead, retorts and bunsen-burners. A zinc operating table. Solution pans. A glass case of instruments. And across one entire side of the room, a double tier of mesh cages, each containing a rabbit.

He comes in swiftly with his burden, puts her down on the zinc table. She never stirs. He turns back and closes the door, bolts it both at top and at bottom. He strips off coat and shirt and undershirt, slips into a surgeon's white jacket. He takes a hypodermic needle out of the instrument-case, drops it into a pan of antiseptic solution, lights a flame under it. Then he goes back to the table.

The girl's figure has retained the doubled-up position it held all during the long ride; it lies on her side, legs tucked-up under her as they were on the car-seat, arm thrust out, wrist dangling just as the strap held it. Den-

holt seems to have expected this, yet he frowns just a little. He tries to straighten out the stiffened limbs; they resist him. Not all his strength can force them into a straight line with the torso. He begins to do what he has to do with frantic haste, as if every moment was both an obstacle and a challenge.

This is so. For rigor is setting in; the sleeping lady has been dead the better part of the night. . . .

Denholt tears her things off arm over arm, with motions like an overhand swimmer. Hat and veil, black dress, shoes, hosiery, fall about the floor.

The girl was evidently pretty; she must have been quite young too. The rouge she put on in life still frames her parted lips. Her figure is slim and shapely, unmarred by wounds. There is no blood on her at all. That is important. Denholt races up with a jar of alcohol, douses it all over her with a great slapping splash.

He seizes the hypo from the scalding pan, hurriedly fills the barrel at a retort of colorless liquid, turns the huddled dripping figure over on its face, sweeps the nape-hair out of the way with one hand. He poises the needle at the base of the skull, looks briefly at the whitewashed ceiling as though in prayer, presses the plunger home.

He stands back, lets the hypo fall with a clash. It breaks, but that doesn't matter; if it has failed, he never wants to use one again.

The needle's tiny puncture doesn't close up as it would in living tissue; it remains a visible, tiny, black pore. He takes a wad of cotton, holds it pressed there, to keep the substance just injected from trickling out again. He is trembling all over. And the seconds tick into minutes.

Outside it must be dawn, but no light penetrates the sealed-up laboratory. It must be dawn, and the last breath went out of this body on the table — how long before? Irretrievably gone from this world, as dead as though she had lived a thousand years ago. Men have cut the Isthmus of Panama and joined the two oceans; they have bored tunnels that run below rivers; built aluminum planes that fly from Frisco to Manila; sent music over the air and photographs over wires; but never, when the heart-beat of their own kind has once stopped, never when the spark of life has fled, have they been able to reanimate the mortal clay with that commonest yet most mysterious of all processes: the vital force. And this man thinks he can — this man alone, out of all the world's teeming billions!

Five minutes that are centuries have gone by. There has been no change in her face or body. He lifts the wad of cotton now because his thumb and forefinger ache from holding it so steadily. And then —

The black puncture has vanished. The indented skin has closed up to erase it. Denholt tries to tell himself that this is due to the moisture of the

serum itself or to the pressure of his fingers; but he knows that only life can do that — neither moisture nor pressure if there isn't life. Shrinking from facing disappointment, he whispers aloud: "It's still there; I don't see it, that's all. My eyes aren't sharp enough."

Tottering, he moves around the zinc table, picks up a small mirror, comes back with it. He turns her head slightly, holds the glass to the rigid mouth. Something wavers across it, too nebulous for the eye to discern at first. It comes again, stronger. Like a flurry. The glass mists, then clears. Then it mists once more, unmistakably now.

"The nervous exudation of my own fingers, holding it," he whispers. But he knows better. He drops the mirror as he did the needle. It clashes and shivers into pieces. But it has told him all it could.

There remains the heart to go by. If breath has done that to the glass, the heart will show it. Without the heart, no breath.

He turns her over completely now, on her back once more. His hand slowly descends to her chest, like a frightened bird spiraling to rest. It leaps up again spasmodically, as though it has received a galvanic shock at what it felt. Not alone a vibration, but warmth. Warmth slowly diffusing around the region of the heart; a lessening of the stone-coldness that grips the body elsewhere. The whole chest-cavern is slowly rising and falling. The heart is alive, has come back to life, in a dead body. And life is spreading, catching on!

Awed almost beyond endurance — even though he has given up his whole life for this, believing he *could* accomplish it, believing some day it *would* happen — he collapses to his knees, buries his head against the side of the table, sobs broken-heartedly. For extreme joy and extreme sorrow are indistinguishable beyond a certain point. Denholt is a very humble, a very terrified man, at the moment, almost regretting what he has done — he has set God's law at bay, and he knows it. Pride, triumph, the overweening egotism that spells complete insanity will come later.

He rouses himself presently. She still needs help, attention, or he may lose her again. How often that happened with the rabbits until he learned what to do. The warm radiations from the heart have spread all over the body now, and it is a greater warmth than that of his own body. A ruddy flush, a fever-redness, has replaced the dead-white hue, especially over the heart and on the face and throat. It needs a furnace-temperature like this to cause the once-stagnant blood to circulate anew. He snatches up a thermometer, applies it. One hundred and five degrees, high enough to kill her all over again a second time. But death must be burned out and new life infused at molten heat, for this is not biological birth — but pure chemistry.

He must work fast.

He opens the door of the electric refrigerator, removes a pail of finely chopped ice he had prepared. The fearful heat of almost-boiling blood must be offset or it will destroy her before she has begun again to live. He wraps a rubber sheet around her, packs her body with the chopped ice, rolls her tightly up in it. He tests her temperature repeatedly. Within five minutes it has gone down considerably. The ice has all melted, as if placed on a hot stove. As he opens the sheet streams of water trickle out of the four corners. But the heart and the lungs are still going, the first danger has been met and overcome, the process of revivification has not in itself destroyed her. A delirious groan escaping her lips is the first sound she makes in this second life of hers; a feverish tossing from side to side the first movement. She is in full delirium. But delirium is the antithesis of death; it is the body's struggle to survive.

The laboratory has done all it can for her; from now on it is a matter of routine medical care, nursing, as in an ordinary illness. He wraps her in a thick blanket, unbolts the door, removes her from the cold zinc table and carries her to a bed in a room in another part of the house.

All through the long hours of the day he sits by her, as a mother sits by her only child in mortal illness, counting each breath she takes, feeling her pulse, helping her heart-action with a little digitalis, pouring a little warm milk and brandy down her parched throat from time to time. Watching, waiting, for the second great mystery to unfold itself. A mystery as great or greater than the one he has already witnessed. Will reason return full-panoplied, or will the brain remain dead or crippled in an otherwise living body? Will she be some inarticulate, idiot thing better left unrevived? Or will she remember who she was, what went before — be the first human to bridge the gap of death, to tell the living what awaits them on the other side of the shadowy border?

All through the day the fever-reaction induced by the serum continues — and unconsciousness with it — but she lives. Undeniably she lives! At nightfall the fever increases a little, but then all fevers do; any doctor knows that. At midnight of this second night, a full twenty-four hours after she died, there is a sudden, unexpected break in her heavy breathing, and before the watcher has quite realized it, her eyes are wide open for the first time. She has regained consciousness! For the first time he sees the color of her eyes — blue — as the lids go up. Blue eyes, that have seen death, now looking into his. Calmly, undilated, unfrightened, peaceful.

He hastily takes her temperature. Normal. The serum has at last been accepted by her system. All that remains now is the answer to the second mystery. In medieval terms, has he saved her soul as well as her body? In modern scientific ones, have the accumulated memories of the past existence

been carried over into this one, or were her brain cells damaged beyond repair?

The blue eyes fix themselves on him, stare unblinkingly. He says softly, almost afraid of the sound of his own voice, "Good evening." The blue eyes continue to stare. He waits, trembling. He knows that she was an American, knew the language. He whispers it over again, "Good evening, young lady."

A change is coming over her face. The staring blue eyes fill with tears that presently overflow and stream down her face. The eyes themselves narrow in a squint. The lips that knew rouge, cigarettes, and men's kisses, pucker into infant's whimper. A feeble bleating cry, the wail of a new-born child, escapes from her. The wordless, pitiful sound that any nursery knows.

The shock, the disappointment, is terrific; his gaunt face pales, he clutches his chair to keep from slumping off it, lets out a long sighing breath. Then presently, somewhat recovered, he takes out a shiny gold watch from his pocket, dangles it before her eyes. The light flashes from it. The tears stop, the wailing breaks off short. Her eyes sparkle with interest. She reaches toward it with ten fingers whose nails still bear adult nail-lacquer; her mouth wreathes in an infantile grin. She says, "Da!" and crows with pleasure. Reason is back — at least in its primary stages. For if she were a newborn infant, this would be a highly precocious reaction. Her faculties are intact. It is not as bad as he thought.

He will have to teach her to speak, to walk all over again, as one does any child, that is all. Intelligence has returned, but not memory. Her memory went into the grave. He murmurs to himself, "Her body is twenty-two, but she is in the infancy of a second life. I will call her Nova, the New One." He rubs his hand over his eyes.

Exhausted by his long vigil he slumps to the floor beside the bed, goes to sleep with his head resting against its edge. Above him the resurrected woman's hands stray gropingly to his thick white hair, clutch playfully at it like a child in its crib. . . .

III

The plane is a hopeless wreck, and even in the act of crawling out into the blinding rain, Penny O'Shaughnessy wonders dazedly why he's still alive. Dazedly, but briefly. O'Shaughnessy is not the kind to waste time wondering. Just one more lucky break, he supposes. His whole adult life has been an unbroken succession of them. His given nickname itself is a token of this, dating from the time he was sighted flying in from the open Caribbean after a particularly devastating hurricane had turned half the Lesser Antilles upside down.

"I just went up over it and waited till it went by below," he explained, alighting midst the splinters of the airport-hangar.

"A bad penny always turns up," someone muttered incredulously.

Who else had ever met the business-end of a bolt of lightning in mid-flight, as he had just now, flying blind through a storm, lost a wing, managed to come down still alive even if it is on a wooded mountainside, to cut the contact at the moment of crashing so that he wasn't roasted alive, and crawl out with just a wrenched shoulder and a lot of cuts and bruises? He couldn't bail out because he was flying too low, hoping for a break through the clouds through which to spot something flat enough to come down on; he doesn't like bailing out anyway, hates to throw away a good plane.

This one lying all over the side of the mountain around him is not so good any more, he has to admit. The first thing he does is feel in his pocket, haul out a rabbit's foot, and stroke it twice. Then he straightens up, hobbles a short distance further from the wreck, turns to survey it. Almost instantly the lightning, which already stunned him once in the air, strikes a nearby tree with a bang and a shower of sparks. It cracks, comes down with a propeller-like whirr of foliage, and flattens what's left of his engine into the ground.

"All right, you don't like my crate," O'Shaughnessy grumbles, with a back-arm swing at the elements in general. "I believed you the first time!"

He trudges off, neck bowed against the rain, which forms a solid curtain around him. He hasn't the faintest idea where he is, because he was flying blind a full forty minutes before the crash. There is no visibility to speak of, just a pall of rain and mist, with the black silhouettes of trees peering through all around. The sharp slant of the ground tells him he's on a mountainside. He takes the downgrade; people, houses, are more often to be found in valleys than on mountains.

The ground is muddy soup around him; he doesn't walk as much as skid on his heels from tree trunk to tree trunk, using them as brakes to prevent a headlong fall. Rain water gets in between clothes and skin; the cuts and welts tingle; the wrenched shoulder pounds, and the thickening of the gloom around him tells him it is night.

"All set," he mutters, "to spend a quiet evening at home!"

The tree trunks blend into the surrounding darkness, and it gets harder to aim for them each time; he has to ski-jump blindly and coast with outspread arms, hoping one will stop him before he lands flat on his face. He misses one altogether — or else it isn't there in the first place — goes skittering down in axle-grease mud, wildly spiraling with his arms to keep his balance, and finally flattens into something that rasps and stings. A barbed-wire fence.

All the air has been knocked out of his stomach, and one of the wicked spines just missed his left eye, taking a gouge at his brow instead. But more than that, the jar he has thrown into the thing has set off an electric alarm-bell somewhere up in one of the trees nearby. Its clamor blasts through the steady whine and slap of the rain.

His clothing has caught in ten different places, and skin with it in half of them. As he pulls himself free, swearing, and the vibrations of the obstacle lessen, the alarm breaks off. He kicks the fence vengefully with his foot, and this elicits an added spasm or two from the bell-battery, then once more it stops.

He is too preoccupied for a minute rubbing his gashes with his bare hands and wincing, to proceed with an investigation of this inhospitable barrier. Suddenly a rain-washed glow of murky light is wavering toward him on the other side of the fence, zigzagging uncertainly as though its bearer were picking his way.

"What the —" Somebody living up here in this forsaken place?

The light stops flush against the fence directly opposite where he is standing and behind it he can make out a hooded, cloaked figure. O'Shaughnessy must be practically invisible behind the rain-mist and darkness.

"That yours?" he growls, balling a fist at the fence. "Look what it did to me! Come out here and I'll —!"

A musical voice from below the hood speaks softly: "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"A girl!" O'Shaughnessy gasps, and the anger leaves his voice. "Sorry, I couldn't make you out. Didn't mean to tear loose that way, but I'm clawed up." He stares at her for a long minute. Twenty-three, pretty, he can see that much. Blue eyes gaze levelly back at him from under the hood she is wearing as he steps up closer to the fence. "I cracked up further back along the mountain, the plane came down —"

"What's a plane?" she asks, round-eyed.

His jaw drops slightly and he stares at her with disapproval, thinks she is trying to be cute or something. He keeps waiting for the invitation to shelter that a dog would be given, in such weather, at such an out-of-the-way place as this. It isn't forthcoming.

"Got a house back there?" he says finally.

She nods, and drops of rain fly off her hood. "Yes, straight back there." Just that, answered as asked.

He says with growing impatience, "Well, won't you let me in a few minutes? I won't bite you!" The reason he thinks she's playing a part, knows better, is that her voice is city-bred, not like a mountain girl's.

She says helplessly, "It's locked and *he* has the keys. No one ever came

here before, so I don't know what to do. I can't ask him because he's in the laboratory, and I'm not allowed to disturb him when he's in there."

"Well, haven't you got a telephone I can use at least?"

"What's a telephone?" she wants to know, without a trace of mockery.

This time O'Shaughnessy flares up. Enough is enough. "What kind of a person are you anyway? All right, keep your shelter. I'm not going to stand here begging. Would it be too much to tell me which direction the nearest road or farmhouse is from here, or would you rather not do that either?"

"I don't know," she answers. "I've never been outside this" — indicating the fence — "never been out there where you're standing."

It's beginning to dawn on him that she's not trying to make fun of him. He senses some mystery about her, and this whole place, but what it is he can't imagine. "Who lives here with you?" he asks curiously.

"Papa," she answers simply.

She's already been missed, for a voice shouts alarmedly: "Nova! Nova, where are you?" And a second lantern looms toward them, zigzagging hurriedly through the mist. A blurred figure emerges, stops short in fright at sight of the man outside the barrier, nearly drops the lantern. "Who's that? Who are You? How'd you get here?" The questions are almost panic-stricken.

"Papa," thinks O'Shaughnessy, "doesn't like company. Wonder why?" He explains his situation in a few brief words.

The man comes closer, motions the girl back as though O'Shaughnessy were some dangerous animal in a zoo-cage. "Are you alone?" he asks, peering furtively around.

O'Shaughnessy has never lacked self-assertiveness with other men, quite the reverse. "Who'd you think I had with me, the Lafayette Escadrille?" he says bluntly. "Why so cagy, mister? Got a guilty conscience about something? Or are you making mash back there? Did you ever hear of giving a stranger shelter?" He swipes accumulated raindrops off his jaw and flicks them disgustedly down.

The hooded girl is hovering there in the background, looking uncertainly from one to the other. The man with the lantern gives a forced laugh. "We're not trying to hide anything. We're not afraid of anything. You're mistaken," he protests. A protest that rings about as true as a lead quarter to O'Shaughnessy's experienced ears. "I wouldn't for the world want you to — er, go away from here spreading stories that there's anything strange about this place — you know how folks talk, first thing you know they'll be coming around snooping —"

"So that's it," says O'Shaughnessy within his chest.

The man on the other side of the fence has taken a key out, is jabbing

it hurriedly at the padlocks. So hurriedly that now he almost seems afraid O'Shaughnessy will get away before he can get the gate open. "Er — won't they send out and look for you, when they find out you're overdue at the airport?"

O'Shaughnessy snaps briefly, "I wasn't expected anywhere. I was flying my own time; the crate belonged to me. What d'ye think, I'm somebody's errand-boy, or one of these passenger-plane pilots?" He expectorates to show his contempt, his independence.

The black shoe-button eyes opposite him gleam, as though this is an eminently satisfactory situation, as though he couldn't ask for a better one. He swings the gate-halves apart. "Come in," he urges with belated insistence. "Come in by all means! Get back in the house, Nova, you'll get soaked — and see that you close *that* door! I'm Doctor Denholt, sir, and please don't think there's anything strange about us here."

"I do already," says O'Shaughnessy, bluntly, as he steps through the enclosure. He cocks his head at the renewed blare of the alarm-bell.

Denholt hastily closes and refastens the gate, shutting off the clangor. "Just an ordinary precaution, we're so cut off here," he explains.

O'Shaughnessy refrains from further comment; he is on this man's domain now. He has one iron-clad rule, like an Arab: Never abuse hospitality. "I'm O'Shaughnessy," he says. They shake hands briefly. The doctor's hand is slender and flexible, that of a skilled surgeon. But it is soft, too, and there is a warning of treachery in that pliability.

He leads his uninvited guest into the lamp-lighted house, which looks mighty good to O'Shaughnessy, warm and dry and cheerful in spite of its ugly, rustic furniture. The girl has discarded her cape and hood; O'Shaughnessy glimpses her in the main room, crouched before the clay-brick fireplace readying a fire, as Denholt ushers him into his own bedroom. Her hair, he sees now, is long and golden; her feet are stockingless in homemade deerskin moccasins, her figure slim and childlike in a cheap little calico dress.

At the rear of the room is a door tightly closed. The flyer's trained eyes, as they flicker past it, notice two things. It is metal, specially constructed, unlike the crude plank-panels of the rest of the house. A thread of platinum-bright light outlines it on three sides, too intense to be anything but high-voltage electricity. Electricity in there, coal-oil out here.

He hears the girl: "He's in the laboratory, I'm not allowed to disturb him when he's in there."

He hears the man: "See that you close *that* door."

He says to himself: "I wonder what's in back of there."

In Denholt's sleeping-quarters he peels off his drenched things, reveals

a bodyful of livid welts, barbed-wire lacerations, and black grease-smudges. His host purses his lips in long-forgotten professional inspection. "You *are* pretty badly scraped up! Better let me fix up some of those cuts for you, that barbed-wire's liable to be rusty. Just stand there where you are a minute." He takes the water-logged clothing outside to the girl.

O'Shaughnessy crooks a knowing eyebrow at himself, waiting there. "Why not in the laboratory, where he keeps all his stuff and the light's better? See no evil, think no evil, I guess."

Denholt hurries back with hot water, dressings, antiseptic. O'Shaughnessy flinches at the searing touch of it, grins shamefacedly even as he does so, "Can't take it any more, I guess. In Shanghai once I had to have a bad tooth pulled by a local dentist; his idea of an anaesthetic was to have his daughter wave a fan at me while he hit it out with a mallet and steel bar."

"Did you yell?"

"Naw. Ashamed to in front of a girl."

He catches Denholt staring with a peculiar intentness at his bared torso and muscular shoulders. "Pretty husky, aren't you?" the doctor remarks, offhandedly. But something chilly passes down the flyer's back at the look that goes with the words. O'Shaughnessy wonders what it means. Or do all doctors look at you that way, sort of calculatingly, as though you'd do nicely for some experiment they had in mind?

"Yep," he answers almost challengingly, "I guess I can take care of myself all right if I have to."

Denholt just looks at him with veiled guile.

IV

Outside afterward, at the rough pine-board table set in the cheerful glow of the blazing hearth, Denholt's borrowed clothes on him, he has a better chance to study the girl at closer range. There is nothing strange about her in the least; she is all youthful animation, her face flushed with the excitement of having a stranger at their board; sits there devouring him with her eyes, as if she never saw an outsider before. But in her talk and in her movements there is perfect rhythm, harmony, coördination, balance, call it what you will; she is an utterly normal young girl.

The old man on the other hand — O'Shaughnessy characterizes him mentally thus — the old man has this brooding light in his eyes, is spasmodic and disconnected in his talk and gestures. The isolation, the years of loneliness, have done that to him perhaps, O'Shaughnessy thinks.

"All right," he says to himself, "that's his own business. But why does he keep a lovely kid like that cooped up here? Never heard of a plane, a telephone. What's he trying to do to her? Darned shame!"

Denholt catches him watching the girl. "Eat," he urges, "eat up, man. You need strength after what you went through."

The flyer grins, obeys. Yet something about the way it was said, the appraising look that went with it, makes him feel like a fowl being fattened for slaughter. He shakes his head bafflledly.

Lightning keeps flaring like flashlight-powder outside the windowpanes every half-minute or so; there is an incessant roll of celestial drums all up and down the mountainside, so deep that O'Shaughnessy can feel it in his chest at times; the rain on the roof sounds like a steak frying.

Denholt is staring abstractedly into his plate, fingers drumming soundlessly on the table. O'Shaughnessy turns to the girl, to break the silence. "Have you lived here long?"

"Two years."

His eyebrows move a little, upward. She doesn't know what a plane is, a phone? "Where'd you live before then?"

"I was born here," she answers shyly.

He thinks she's misunderstood. "You look older than two to me," he says with a laugh.

The point seems to baffle her too, as if it has never occurred to her before. "That's as far back as I can remember," she says slowly. "Last spring, and the spring before, when I was learning to talk and walk — that's two years, isn't it? How long ago did you learn to talk?"

He can't answer; a chunk of rabbit has gone down whole; he's lucky he doesn't choke. But it isn't the bolted rabbit that stiffens the hairs on the back of his neck, puts a needle of fear through his heart.

"That'll do, Nova," says Denholt sharply. There's a strain around the eyes. His fork drops with a clash, as if he has just had a fright. "You'll find — er, some cigarettes in a drawer in my bedroom for Mr. O'Shaughnessy." And as soon as she's left the table, he leans forward confidentially toward the flyer. "I'd better give you a word of explanation. She's not quite — right." He touches his own head. "That's why — the fence and all that. I keep her secluded up here with me, it's more humane you know. Don't take anything she says too seriously."

O'Shaughnessy won't commit himself on this point, not even by a monosyllable. Just looks at his host, keeps his own counsel. It sounds reasonable enough, Lord knows, but he can't forget the girl's clear, sane eyes, nor Denholt's hungry, probing, almost gloating, stare. If anyone is crazy in this house — the little chill plays on his spine once more, and his flesh crawls under the borrowed clothes.

They have very little to say to one another, after that, while they sit there puffing away and the fire in the hearth slowly dies down into itself.

The girl is in the adjoining room, washing the dishes. The waning fire throws the two men's shadows on the walls, long and wavering. Denholt's, in particular, looks like that of a monster breathing smoke out of its nostrils. O'Shaughnessy grins a little at the idea.

He crushes out his cigarette. "Well," he says, "looks like the storm'll keep up all night. Guess I better make a break for it."

Denholt stiffens, then smiles. "You're not thinking of leaving *now?* You'll spend the rest of the night wandering around in circles out there in the dark! Wait till daylight at least, maybe it'll let up by then. There's an extra room back there, you won't be any trouble at all."

The girl says from the doorway, almost frightenedly, "Oh, please, don't go yet, Mr. O'Shaughnessy! It's so nice having you."

She waits for his answer.

O'Shaughnessy gives them both a long look in turn. Then he uncrosses his long legs, recrosses them the other way around. "I'm staying, then," he says quietly.

Denholt gets up. "I've a little work to finish — something I was in the midst of when — er, your arrival interrupted me. If you'll excuse me for a few minutes — You can go to bed any time you feel like it." And then, with a covert glance toward the kitchen doorway, "Just bear in mind what I said. Don't take anything she says too seriously."

The girl comes in after the doctor has gone, sits shyly down on the opposite side of the cleared table. That strange hungry look of hers rests steadily on his face, as if she never had seen anyone like him before.

"I'm glad you're staying," she murmurs finally. "I wanted you to because — well, maybe if you're here, I won't have to take my injection."

O'Shaughnessy droops his lids a little. "What kind of an injection?" he says with almost somnolent slowness.

She turns her hand up, down again. "I don't know, I only know I have to take them. About once a month. He says it's bad for me if I miss any. Tomorrow would be the day, if you hadn't come." She screws up her eyes at him pathetically. "I don't like them, because they hurt so, and they make me feel so ill afterward. Once I tried to run away, but I couldn't get through the fence."

There's something a little flinty in O'Shaughnessy's eyes that wasn't there before. "And what'd he do when he caught you?" His own hand on the table flexes a little.

"Oh nothing. Just talked to me, told me I had to have them whether I liked it or not. He said it was for my own sake he gives them to me. He said if I went too long without getting one —"

"What would happen?"

"He didn't say. Just said something pretty awful."

O'Shaughnessy growls to himself deep in his throat. Drugging, eh? Maybe that's why she can't remember further back than two years, and why she says such weird things from time to time. But on second thought, it can't be that, either. The infrequency of the injections argue against it. There wouldn't be pain, if it were some kind of a drug. And if it were something able to affect her memory of the far past, why not the recent past as well? O'Shaughnessy's no medical man, but he's knocked around enough to know a little something; in the Orient and South America he's seen the telltale traces of almost every known narcotic under the sun. There is absolutely no sign of it about Nova. She is as fresh as that rain falling from the sky outside.

He only asks her one question, to make sure. "Do you dream — dream about pretty things — after you've had one of these shots?"

"No," she shudders, "I feel like I'm all on fire. I woke up once and there was all ice around me —"

Not a drug, then. Maybe he has Denholt all wrong; maybe she really does need these treatments — vaccine or serum it sounds like — maybe she had some ghastly illness that robbed her of her memory, the use of her limbs, two years ago, and these injections are to speed her recovery, guard her against a relapse. Still, Denholt did try to pass her off as mentally unbalanced, when she isn't at all. No, there's something the man is up to — something secret and — and ugly. The barbed-wire fence, the alarm-bell show that too. Why bring her way up here when she could have far better care and attention — *if* she needs any — at a hospital in one of the big cities?

"Did you really mean what you said about only learning to walk and talk the spring before last?"

"Yes," she says. "I'll show you one of the copy-books he taught me out of." She comes back with a dog-eared primer.

He thumbs through it. "C is for Cat. Does-the-Cat-see-the-Rat?" He closes it, more at sea than ever.

"Were you as big as now when he taught you to walk?"

"Yes. I wore this same dress I have on now, that's how I can tell. I learned by myself, mostly. He used to put me down on the floor over there by the wall, and then put a lump of sugar on a chair all the way across the room, and coax me to walk over to get it. If I crawled on my hands and knees, he wouldn't let me have the sugar. After awhile I got so I could stand up straight —"

"Stop!" he says, with a sudden sharp intake of breath. "It's enough to make a person go crazy just trying to figure out! There's — there's crazi-

ness in it somewhere! And I know on whose part. Not yours! God knows what he did to you the first twenty years of your life to make you forget everything you should have known —"

She doesn't answer. She can't seem to understand what he means. But her eyes show fright at the force of his speech. He sees he may do more harm than good by telling her other people aren't like she is. She's grown up, and she's been held here in some kind of mental thralldom — that's the closest he can get to the answer. And the man that would do that to another human being is a monster and a maniac.

His voice hoarse with pity and anger, he says, "Tell me now, did you ever see any other man but me and the doctor before in your life?"

"No," she breathes, "that's why I like you so much."

"Didn't you even ever see another girl — have someone like yourself around you to talk with?"

"No," she murmurs again. "Only him. No one else at all."

He rises as if he can't stand any more of it, takes three quick turns around his chair, raises it, bangs it down again.

She watches him timidly, not speaking, with just that fright in her eyes. He slumps down in his chair again, looks at her broodingly. Somehow he knows he's going to take her with him when he leaves, and he wonders if he has any right to. What'll he do with her afterward — turn her loose like a lamb among wolves? Drag her around with him from bar to cantina to bistro, when he's not up in the air risking his neck for some Chinese war lord or Nicaraguan outlaw? His kind of a life — At least she has peace here, and a sort of security.

The bolts shoot back behind the laboratory door. He sees her glance past him, but doesn't turn his head to look. On the wall opposite Denholt's long wavering silhouette appears more ominous now than before. Madman, criminal, samaritan — which? Playing the role of God to this girl — in some obscure way that O'Shaughnessy cannot fathom even yet — which he has no right to do. Better the cantinas and the tropical hell-holes of his own life. If she has anything in her, she'll rise above them; this way she hasn't even a chance to do that.

Her quick whisper reaches him while Denholt is in the act of closing the door after him. "Don't let him give me another injection. Maybe if *you* ask him not to he'll listen to you!"

"You've had your last!" O'Shaughnessy says, decisively.

Denholt approaches the table, looks suspiciously from one to the other. Then a smile crosses his face. "Still up, eh? How about a nice hot toddy for both of us before we turn in?" Nova makes a move to leave her chair and he quickly forestalls her. "I'll fix it myself."

O'Shaughnessy doesn't miss that. He stares up into the other's face, takes his time about answering. "Why not?" he says, finally, jutting out his chin.

Denholt goes into the kitchen. O'Shaughnessy can see him pouring whiskey into two tumblers, spooning sugar, from where he is. The doctor keeps looking obliquely out at him from time to time, with a sort of smirk of satisfaction on his face.

O'Shaughnessy says quietly to the girl, sitting there feasting her eyes on him with a doglike devotion: "Go over there to my coat, hanging up over the fireplace. You'll find an oil-silk packet in the inside pocket, full of papers and things. Take the papers out and just bring me the folder. Don't let him see you."

He thrusts the moisture-proof oblong down just under the collar of his shirt, buttons the neck over it, stretches the collarband out as far as it will go, to create a gap. Then he bends forward a little, sticks his elbows on the table, rests his chin on his hands. His upthrust arms obscure his chest and neck. He drawls something she doesn't understand — one more of the many incomprehensible things he is always saying: "I can smell a Mickey a mile away."

Denholt comes in with the two toddies, says to her, "You'd better go to your room now, Nova, it's getting late, and you're going to need all your strength. *Tomorrow*, you know."

She shivers when she hears that, slowly withdraws under the compulsion of Denholt's stare, sending appealing looks at O'Shaughnessy. A door closes after her somewhere in the back.

Denholt has noticed the telegraphic communication between them. "I don't know what my ward has been telling you —" he begins.

O'Shaughnessy is not showing his cards yet. "Not a thing, Doc," he says. "Not a thing. Why? Is there something she *could* tell?"

"No, no, of course not," Denholt covers up hastily. "Only — er, she gets delusions about injections and things. That's why I don't allow her in the laboratory any more. She caught me giving a rabbit an injection one day, and she'd be perfectly capable of telling you that it was *she* I gave it to, and what's more, believing it herself. Let's drink up, shall we?"

He hands his guest one of the two glasses. O'Shaughnessy takes it with one hand, keeps the other cupped along the line of his jaw. He hoists it an eighth of an inch. "Here's to *tomorrow*."

Denholt's piercing gaze transfixes him for a minute. Then he relaxes into a slow, derisive smile. "Here's to *tonight*," he contradicts, "tomorrow will take care of itself."

O'Shaughnessy thrusts the rim of his glass up under his lower lip, slowly

levels it until it is horizontal — and empty. The forked hand supporting his chin is between it and Denholt. He's a sloppy drinker, the collar of his shirt gets a little wet. . . .

The yellow-green of the doctor's oil-lamp recedes waveringly from the doorway of the bedroom O'Shaughnessy is to occupy. Pitch-blackness wells up all around, cut by an occasional calcium-flare of lightning outside the high, small window. The flashes are less frequent now and the rain has let up.

O'Shaughnessy is lying flat on his back, on the rickety cot. He has left on his trousers and shirt. Denholt said, perhaps with ghastly double meaning, "I'm sure you'll be dead to the world in no time at all!" as he went out just now. The first thing the flyer does, as the waning lamp-glow finally snuffs out altogether and a door closes somewhere in the distance, is to take out the bulging waterlogged oil-silk envelope from his shirt and let its contents trickle silently onto the floor.

The rustle of the slackening rain outside begins to lull his senses before he knows it. The ache of his wrenched shoulder lessens, is erased by oncoming sleep. The lids of his eyes droop closed. He catches them the first time, holds them open by sheer will-power. Not a sound, not a whisper comes to help him keep awake. The lonely mountain-house is deathly still; only the rain and the far-off thunder sound outside. The girl's story begins to take on a dream-like quality, unreal, remote, fantastic —

The muffled creak of a pinewood floor-board, somewhere just beyond the open door of his room, jerks his senses awake. At first he thinks he's still at the stick of his plane, makes vague motions to keep from going into a tailspin. . . . Then he remembers where he is.

Twenty minutes, half an hour, an hour maybe, since Denholt's murky lamp-glow flickered away from the door. Maybe even more than that. O'Shaughnessy swears at himself mentally for fading out like this. But it's all right; if this is it now —

It must be deep in the night. There's no rain now any more, just the plink of loose drops as they detach themselves one by one from the eaves. A pale silver radiance, little more than a phantom glint, is coming through the window up over him. Dawn? No, a late moon, veiled by the last of the storm clouds.

The creak is repeated, closer at hand, a little more distinct this time. He can hear breathing with it. Outstretched there on the cot, he begins drawing up his knees closer to his body, tensing himself for the spring. What'll *he* have — a knife, a gun, some viciously-keen surgical instrument? O'Shaughnessy widens his arms, into a sort of simulation of a welcoming embrace. The dark hides the great fists, the menacing grin at his mouth.

Something comes over the threshold. O'Shaughnessy can *sense* the stirring of air at its furtive passage, rather than see or hear anything. There's a whispered footfall within the room itself. A blur of motion glides momentarily through the wan silvery light, which isn't strong enough to focus it clearly, into the concealing dark on his side of it.

There's a clang from the bucked cot-frame, the upward fling of a body, a choked sound of fright as a pair of arms lash out in a bear-hug. In the soft purring tones of a tea-kettle O'Shaughnessy's voice pours out unprintable maledictions.

Her softness warns him just in time, before he's done more than pinion her arms fast and drive all the breath out of her body. "Don't," she pants, "it's me." His arms drop away, he blows out breath like a steam-valve, the reaction staggers him back a step to the wall, off balance. "You! Why didn't you whisper a warning? I was —"

"I was afraid he'd hear me. He's in the laboratory. He left the door open behind him and I've been watching him from outside in the dark —"

"What's he think he's going to do, give you one of them shots again?"

"No, it's you — he's going to do something to you, I don't know what! He took your coat in there, and took all the papers in it and burned them. Then he — he lit flames under all those big glass things, and put a needle in a pan to soak, like he does with me. But this time he has a silk cord in there with him, and he made a big loop in it and measured it round his own neck first, then took it off again and practiced throwing it and pulling it tight. He's got a big black thing in there too, you hold it this way and point it —"

"A gun," says O'Shaughnessy softly, mockingly. "He's not missing any bets, is he? Knockout drops, a noose, a positive. How's he fixed for hand-grenades?"

She puts the flats of her hands against his chest. "Don't stay, please! I don't want — things like that to happen to you! Go before he gets through! He's awfully quick and strong, you ought to see how he ran after me that time when I tried to get to the fence! Maybe you can sneak by outside the door without his seeing you, or get out one of the windows — Don't stand there without moving like that! Please don't wait. That's why I came in here to you. There's steam coming from the pan the needle's in already. I saw it!" And then, in a low heartbroken wail, "Aren't you going to go?"

Instead he sits down on the edge of the cot, leisurely puts on the soiled canvas shoes Denholt has lent him. Reaches toward her, draws her over, and stands her before him.

"Nova, d'you like me?" he says.

"I like you very much."

He rubs his hair awry with one hand, as though at his wits' end. "Don't be givin' me any blarney now. D'you want to marry me?"

"What's marry?"

"I ought to be shot," he says softly to himself. "Well — d'you want to be with me always, go wherever I go, tell me how good I am when I'm good, buck me up when I'm down in the dumps — and one of these days, pretty soon, wear black for me?"

"Yes," she says softly, "I want to be near you. If that's to marry, then that's what I want."

He puts out his hand at her. "Shake, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy! Now let's get out of here." He goes over to the door, looks out at the distant bar of light escaping across their path from the open laboratory-door. "Got anything you want to bring with you? You're standing in the middle of your wardrobe right now, I guess. Got any idea where he keeps that key?"

"The one to the padlock on the gate outside? In the pockets of his coat, I guess; he always seems to reach in there for it. He hasn't got it on, though; he's got on that white thing he wears in the laboratory. It must be in the room where he sleeps."

"Okay, we'll try lifting it. I wouldn't mind roughing that bird up, only I don't want anything to happen to you. He's probably got an aim, with that gun of his, like a cockeyed nervewreck with palsy. Stick close behind me."

V

They glide through the velvety dark, O'Shaughnessy in the lead, the girl behind him, keeping contact with her fingers resting lightly against the back of his shoulder. The vague outline of the room-doorway seems to move toward them, not they toward it, to come abreast, to slip past. Ahead there is just that bar sinister of bleaching whiteness, falling across the floor of the main room and leaping up one wall.

"Gotta watch these boards," he breathes across his shoulder, "you woke me up getting in here, and you don't weigh what I do." The touch of her fingers against his back tells him she's shaking all over. "It's all right. You're with me now."

A board whimpers a little, and he gets off it with catlike litheness before it goes into a full-bodied creak. The gash of laboratory whiteness comes slowly nearer, outlining the angles of things even beyond its own radius. This house, he thinks, is as black physically as it is in spirit. Little tinkering, puttering sounds become audible from the still-distant laboratory, magnified in the stillness. Mania at its preparations.

She signals with her fingertips, abreast of an open door. "In here?" he whispers. They turn aside and glide through. "Stand here right beside the door where I can find you again. I'll see if I can locate his coat."

He does after a lot of cautious circling and navigation; it is hanging from a peg in the wall. He finds the key very quickly, though to her it must seem forever that he's standing there fumbling with the coat. He slips back to her, jaunty with his own peculiar jauntiness even in this eerie situation. "Got it. Now here we go."

Outside again. Step by step through the silence and the blackness, the triangular wedge of white ahead the only visible thing. A board barks treacherously under him, this time before he can withdraw his foot. They stand rigid, while the echoes move into the night. The tinkering has stopped abruptly. Questioning silence from the laboratory now. O'Shaughnessy nudges her with his elbow, and they draw in against the wall.

Not a sound from the laboratory. The bar of escaping light, narrow as a candlestick until now, slowly, insinuatingly, broadens out fan-shaped as the door behind it silently widens. A silhouette bisects it, Denholt's outline thrown before him over the floor and up the wall, rigid, standing just within the opening, listening.

The grin has come back to O'Shaughnessy's face; he reaches behind him and squeezes her throbbing wrist reassuringly. It seems so long ago that he was last afraid of anything. Seventeen, was he then? Eighteen? Sometimes he thinks he's missing a lot by being like this — fear gives life a fillip. He wonders how it is he lost it all, and what there is — if anything — ever to bring it back.

One thing's sure, she's being afraid for the both of them, and plenty left over; her pulse is a whipcord under the thumb that is holding her wrist.

The silhouette moves at last, begins to recede within the lighted room. The noise that conjured it up, like a genie out of a bottle, hasn't been repeated. The tinkerings and drippings resume where they left off. Only the path of light remains wider than before, a ticklish gap to bridge undiscovered. When they are almost abreast of it and can hear Denholt's breathing inside, O'Shaughnessy stops, gropes behind him, draws Nova around in front of him. He transfers the padlock key to her palm, closes her fingers over it. "I want to be sure you make that gate, no matter what. Take a deep breath and get across that lighted place. Don't be afraid, I'm right here backing you up."

She edges forward, cranes her neck toward the open door. Apparently Denholt's back is toward it. She takes a quick soundless sidestep, with instinctive feminine deftness, and is on the other side of the luminous barrier. He can see her there anxiously waiting for him to join her.

A moment later he is beside her again, bringing with him a quick bird's-eye glimpse of a white-coated form bent over, laboriously pouring something from a retort into a hypodermic-barrel. In the background a pair of operating tables, not just one. One an improvised one — planks bridging two chairs, with a rubber sheet draped over them. "Double-header coming up," thinks O'Shaughnessy. "Rain — no game."

She is tugging insistently at his arm, but he is suddenly resistant, immobile. She turns her face up toward his. "O'Shaughnessy, come on! Any minute he's —"

"My rabbit's foot. He's got it in there with him, in my coat. I couldn't go without it —"

"O'Shaughnessy, he'll kill you."

"Him and what sextet? Get over there to the door, kid, and start working on it. I want you in the clear in case that gun of his starts going boom. I've got to go in after my lucky paw, no two ways about it." He has to jog her, push her slightly, to get her to tear herself away from him. Finally she slips off in the dark with a little whimper of protest. He waits there until a faint clicking comes from the main door. Then a bolt grates miserably as she clears it, and there is sudden, startled silence from within the gleaming laboratory.

O'Shaughnessy, muscles taut as wires, rounds the angle of the doorframe, unhurried, casual. Digs a thumb at the man in the white jacket who has just whirled to face the door. "My coat, Doc. I'm leaving."

Denholt has just finished putting down the loaded needle he was preparing. The gun the girl mentioned is on the table, but under his hand already.

"So you think you're leaving? You're very foolish, my friend. It would have been easier to sleep, the way I meant you to. No fright, no last-minute agony. You would not have seen your own death."

"No fright, no agony this way either." O'Shaughnessy calmly reaches for his coat, extracts the charm, stuffs it into his trouser-pocket. "Don't be so handy burning my identification papers next time," he says, "or I'll slap your head all the way around your neck —"

The gun is up now, level with his chest.

Behind them in the darkness the heavy outer door swings open with a grinding whirr. Denholt takes a quick step forward. O'Shaughnessy doesn't move from before him, blocking his way. He's flexing his wrists slightly, in and out.

A patter of quick, light footsteps recedes outside in the open, flying over the clayey rain-wet ground.

"Who's that?"

"Who should it be? That's the girl. I'm taking her with me."

Denholt's face is a sudden mask of dismay. "You can't!" he cries shrilly. "You don't know what it means, you fool! You can't take her out into the world with you! She's got to stay here, she needs *me!*" He raises his voice to a frenzied shout. "Nova! Come back here!"

"That's your story and you're stuck with it." O'Shaughnessy raises his own voice, in a bull-rumble. He shifts dead-center in front of the leveled gun, to keep Denholt from snaking past around him.

"Get out of my way, or I'll shoot you dead. I didn't want to puncture your skin, damage any vital organ, but if I have to, you're the loser! Nothing can bring you back then, do you hear me, nothing can bring you back! You'll *stay* dead!"

O'Shaughnessy just stands, crouched a little, measuring him with his eyes. O'Shaughnessy is a gambler; he senses a reluctance on Denholt's part to shoot him, and he plays on it for what it's worth. Instead of giving ground before the weapon, he takes a sidling step in, and another.

The alarm-bell begins ringing somewhere off in the dripping trees. . . . She's got the last barrier open, she's made it.

A sudden taut cord down the side of Denholt's neck reveals to O'Shaughnessy the muscular signal sent down to his unseen trigger-finger. He swerves like a drunk. A foreshortened bar of orange, like a tube-light, seems to solder the two of them together for a second. Noise and smoke come later. O'Shaughnessy isn't aware of pain, only knows that he's been hit somewhere and mustn't be hit any more. He has the gun-hand in his own now, ten fingers obeying two different brains, clutching a single weapon. It goes off again, and again, and again — four, five, six times.

O'Shaughnessy is hitting Denholt on the side of his head with his free arm, great, walloping, pile-driver blows. The two of them stagger together, like partners in a crazy dance. Glass is breaking all around them. Gray smoke from the six shots, pink-and-white dust from the chipped brick-and-plaster walls, swirl around them in a rainbow haze. Something vividly green flares up from one of the overturned retorts, goes right out again. O'Shaughnessy tears the emptied gun away, flings it off somewhere. More breaking glass, and this time a tart pungent smell that makes the nostrils sting. The crunch of pulverized tube-glass underfoot makes it sound as if they were scuffling in sand or hard-packed snow.

O'Shaughnessy can't hit with his left arm, he notices; the shoulder blocks off the brain-message each time. He just uses that arm to hold Denholt where his right-hand blows can find him. He has lost track of the other's left hand for a moment, it comes back again around his body from somewhere, with a warning flash to it. Scalpel or something.

O'Shaughnessy dives, breaks, puts space between them. A downward hiss misses his chest-barrel, he pounces, traps the arm before it can come up again, vises it between his own arm and upthrust thigh, starts forcing it out of joint. The thing drops with a musical ting! He scuffs it aside, takes a quick step back to get driving-force, sends a shattering haymaker in. Denholt topples, skids through broken tube-glass, lies there stunned, tilted on one elbow.

O'Shaughnessy, his shoulder throbbing with pain like a bass drum, pants grimly: "Now — got it through your head I'm taking her?" He turns and shuffles unsteadily toward the door.

Denholt is trying to struggle up, gabbling: "You're taking her to her death!"

The alarm-bell keeps pealing, waiting. O'Shaughnessy stumbles out of the laboratory, on through the darkness toward the front door. Cool, dank, before-dawn air swirls about him. He turns and sees Denholt outlined there behind him in the lighted doorway, where he has dragged himself, hanging weakly onto the frame, holding up one arm in imprecation — or in warning.

"Remember what I'm saying. You're dooming her. This is the thirtieth of June — remember this date, remember it well! You'll know, you'll know soon enough! You'll come crawling back to me — with her — begging me to help you! You'll get down on your bended knees to me, you'll grovel at my feet — that'll be my hour!"

"Have another shot — on me," O'Shaughnessy growls back from the darkness under the trees.

"You're not taking her out to life, you're taking her out to her death — the most awful death a human being ever experienced!"

The shrieking, maddened voice dwindles away behind him in the house, and he can make out Nova waiting tremblingly for him at the opened barbed-wire barrier. He stumbles to her through the mud of the storm-wrack, holding his bullet-seared shoulder. He grins and drawls in that quiet way of his above the slackening noise of the exhausted alarm-bell: "H'lo, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. Shall we go now?",

He takes her arm.

VI

O'Shaughnessy, dickering with a man named Tereshko at the bar of the Palmer House, Chicago, excuses himself, steps into a booth to call his North Side flat.

"Why not have your wife join us for dinner?" Tereshko says. "Say, at the Chez Paree. We can talk business to music just as well as here."

"Great," says O'Shaughnessy. Business after all is a form of warfare;

you bring all your available weapons to bear. If you don't you're a fool. You could call Nova O'Shaughnessy's illuminating beauty that of a star-shell. If he uses it to help dazzle this wary gentleman he is trying to dent, it doesn't mean he values it any the less himself.

So he says into the phone: "Nova, I want you to meet me at Chez Paree. I've got a man with me. He's looking for a pilot, and he's talking big money, so be as beautiful as you can. Take a cab, honey." Nova is still new to the city streets. "Just one thing. Any offer under seventy-five hundred and you give me a look, much as to say, 'Isn't he funny?' Get it? And not a word about — that place on the mountain, of course."

At the Paree they order a table for three. They've been drinking a good deal, and Tereshko is beginning to show it. He isn't drunk but he loses some of his caginess. Loosens up, so to speak.

"You had much experience locating mining claims from the air?" he resumes.

"No, just flying. But as I understand it, all you want is to be piloted up there, so you can look them over yourself. I can guarantee to do that for you. All I need's the general direction and plenty of gas."

It's obvious that money isn't the hitch. This Tereshko has that written all over him, in a flashy uncouth sort of way. His hesitancy — and O'Shaughnessy is a good judge of men's motives — seems to stem from caution, as though he wants to make sure whom he's dealing with first before he puts all his cards on the table. He can't doubt by now that O'Shaughnessy's an experienced enough flier to get him anywhere he wants to go, after the clippings and documents he's been showing him all afternoon long.

"Of course," Tereshko feels his way, offering the applicant a cigarette out of a platinum case with an emerald catch, "what I'm mainly interested in is to see that the whole undertaking is kept strictly between ourselves. I don't want known to anyone what its object or destination is. No one at all, is that clear? Not even after it's been wound up."

"I can give you a guarantee on that too. I'm no loudspeaker."

"No, you seem like the sort that minds his own business — that's why I approached you in the first place." He — very unwisely — signals for another drink.

Tereshko relaxes still further. "I don't mind telling you," he admits, "that that whole mine-location business was just camouflage. What I'm looking for is already mined and minted, only it was put back in the ground. And it's all the way around the compass from where I said. Not British Columbia at all, but in one of the Florida keys, we think. Maybe one of the Bahamas. I suppose that gives you the clue. Well, it looks like you're our man, so there's no harm in your knowing."

"Pirate stuff, eh?"

"Yes and no," says Tereshko. "Certainly was a pirate all right, but he dates from prohibition days and not Captain Kidd's time. Guess you know who I mean now."

O'Shaughnessy doesn't, but it doesn't cost anything to let the other think so.

"He won't get out until, let's see —" A pecan-sized diamond flames as he figures on his fingers. "1948, or is it '50? Hell, he was a great guy and all that," he goes on by way of self-excuse, "but you can't blame the rest of us. After all, we're getting older every day. He got his, why shouldn't we get ours? He's served two years of his sentence — why should we wait?"

"Then you have no right to it?"

"Any more than he had!" snaps the other. "It's nobody's money. It don't even belong to the saps he got it from, because he gave 'em needle-beer for it at four bits a throw."

"One way of looking at it," says O'Shaughnessy non-committally.

"What other way of looking at it is there? Is it doing anybody any good lying where it is in the ground? We wouldn't have to go to all this trouble only — you see banks were no good, nor safe-deposit boxes nor anything else, because his trouble was — Government trouble. He musta seen it coming up. We didn't, but he musta, because we all remember how just before it happened he went off on a cruise down Florida waters in his motor yacht. Just him and a small crew to run the thing for him and, oh yes, some girl he was playing around with at the time. None of *us*, not one of us. We all thought that was funny, too, because he was a guy loved company. Until then he'da caught cold without the bunch of us being around him all the time. Well funnier still, just before turning back they touch at Havana. Him and this dame go ashore and nobody else's allowed to leave the boat. Then, on very sudden orders from him, the yacht leaves Havana — without him and the girl coming back to it. It's supposed to pick them up later at Bimini or something. It was never seen in one piece again. A piece of charred wood was picked up later with its name on it. Must have been destroyed at sea by an explosion, and not a soul aboard escaped alive. Funny, huh, to send it on ahead like that, when it could have waited right in the harbor for them? They were the only two it had to cater to."

"Funny is right, but not for laughing," O'Shaughnessy agrees.

"Just when we were getting out our black neckties and armbands, a cable comes from him. 'Hope you're not worried, I'm okay, taking the next plane north, and wasn't that a terrible accident?' Thirty days later to the hour, Uncle Sam jumps on his neck and —" He pinches his fingers together, kisses them, flies them apart. "How much turned up, when the smoke had

cleared away? Five grand. Why, he used to carry as much as that around in his pocket for change! Does it look like I'm right, or does it look like I'm right? Every other lead we've had since then has petered out. It took us long enough to tumble, but now I think we've got it added up right. Now, d'you think you can help us swing it?"

O'Shaughnessy shrugs. "What's hard about it? I can taxi you around for a month, two months, as long as it takes you to locate it. An amphibian is the answer, of course. Now there's this: you'll have to stake me to the plane. I banged my own up week before last — that's when I got this busted shoulder. Don't get the idea I can't fly — lightning butted in, that was all."

"We'll provide you with the plane," Tereshko assures him. "You shop around and pick up what you think you'll need, and you can keep it, as an extra bonus, when we get back."

"Just how long will I last after that to enjoy the use of it?" wonders O'Shaughnessy knowingly. But that isn't really a deterrent — people have thought they'd get rid of him, once he's served his purpose, before now — and haven't made a go of it. These fellows'll find that out too.

"The wren would come in handy for a guide — did you ever think of contacting her?" he says thoughtfully.

"Did we think?" scoffs the other. "His cell door wasn't closed behind him yet before we started to put on the pressure. Well we put it on too heavy. We had her figured all wrong. It just happens she was one of those innocent babes, hadn't known what it was all about until the lid blew off — musta thought he made his dough in stocks and bonds or something."

O'Shaughnessy makes that derisive sound with his lips commonly known as the raspberry.

"No, that's what we thought too," Tereshko assures him, "but it was on the level. He used to tell us everything was on the up-and-up between them — you know what I mean, and she wasn't really his moll. . . . He called her his madonna —"

"Machine-gun madonna," chuckles O'Shaughnessy.

"He was going to marry her. She was only a kid, seventeen or something like that. Well, between the shock of finding out who she'd been mixed up with, and us putting the pressure on her, the poor dame never had a chance. She claimed she didn't know anything that went on during that cruise. So then we lock her up in a dark garage overnight, to frighten her into talking. We frightened her all right, but not into talking. Just our luck — he'd never let her cut her hair, said she looked like an angel with it long. So she has a hairpin to unlock the engines of all the cars in there — and there was about six of them — and starts them all turning over and breathes the monoxide until she's gone. With a kitten he gave her still in her arms."

"Fine note." O'Shaughnessy scowls sympathetically. Not with them, but with the harried, friendless girl in the garage.

Tereshko grins.

"Yeah, ain't it? Of all the dirty tricks! We hadda leave her lie in there all next day. Then we sneaked her out after dark, carried her miles away, and planted her somewhere else. I never even read about them finding her. If they did, they never tumbled to who she was, not a word about it came out in the pa —"

"Here's my wife," O'Shaughnessy interrupts, standing up. He's sighted her across Tereshko's shoulder as she comes in from the street just then, stands there a second, looks around. She's something to look at, as she locates them, starts over toward them, with a smile for him on her face.

Tereshko, whose chair is facing the other way, follows him to his feet, turning around to greet her as he does so.

O'Shaughnessy is saying, "Nova, meet Mr. Vincent Tereshko."

There's a tinkle as Tereshko's cocktail glass hits the floor. There's a peculiar hiss at the same time, like an overheated radiator, or an inner tube deflating. Tereshko sort of reels back, the low top of the chair he has just risen from catches him across the spine, he goes over it, dumping the back of his head onto the soft padded seat, and then he and chair alike roll over sideward to the floor. Instantly he scrambles up again, gives a hoarse cry that sounds like, "No! Get away from me! You're not real."

He makes flailing motions with both arms, buffeting the air before him, then turns and runs through the foyer and out into the street.

They come out of their trance after awhile, not right away. "Well, I'll be a — Did you see that? What bit him? A minute ago he's sitting here chatting with me, then all at once he goes haywire."

"It was — me," she says wonderingly, still staring after Tereshko.

He flips his head impatiently at such an idea. "Nah, how could it have been you? Talk sense. You're not used to crowds yet, every time anyone looks at you you think something's the matter." He can't, after all, really tell who or what Tereshko saw.

"It was, O'Shaughnessy," she insists troubledly. "He was looking right at me, right into my face. Something must be the matter with me! Is there anything wrong with the way I look? Because that's the second time tonight that's happened —"

He turns to her, startled. "Second! What d'you mean?"

"Just now, outside the door. There was a man sitting waiting in a limousine for someone, and as I got out of my cab, he turned around and looked at me, and then he — he gave a yell like this one did, and started off, tearing down the street a mile a minute as if he'd seen a ghost —"

O'Shaughnessy looks puzzled.

"Turn around a minute. Lemme see," he says. Then as she slowly revolves before him: "You're okay from every angle, I don't see anything about you to scare grown men out of their wits. He musta seen somebody or something in back of you that did that to him. The heck with it. Let's go home. It looks like the deal's off, and I'm just as satisfied. It had a bad smell to it from the beginning."

Seventy-two hours go by, the lull before the storm. Then, the third night after that, he happens to come back to the flat earlier than usual. He's down to his last few dollars, and he's been tramping around all day trying to make connections. But free-lance pilots, flying soldiers of fortune, don't seem to be in great demand at the moment. He has her to look after now. . . .

He spots her standing at the curb in front of their house, as he rounds the corner. She's looking for a taxi. She signals one, and just as she's on the point of getting in, he shouts: "Hey Nova! What's the idea?" and comes running up just in time.

She seems astonished to see him. Not confused, just astonished.

"I'm sorry it took me so long. I didn't mean to keep you waiting like that. Is that why you changed your mind and came back here instead? You're not sore, are you, O'Shaughnessy?"

He says: "What're you talking about? Sore about what?"

"Why, because I'm half an hour late in meeting you."

"Who told you to meet me?"

She's more astonished than ever. "Why, you did! You telephoned me over an hour ago and said to take a taxi and come out and meet you at —"

He takes a look around him up and down the street. "Come on upstairs," he says crisply. "Never mind, driver, we don't want you." And upstairs: "What else did I say?"

"You told me to come as quickly as I could, that's all."

"Don't you know my voice on the wire?"

"I've never heard anybody else's but yours, so I thought it was you again. You sounded a little far-off, that's all."

"Well it wasn't me. And I'm wondering who it was. Listen, Nova, honey, don't go out any more by yourself after this. I'll give you a password over the phone from now on. Barbed wire, how'll that be? If you don't hear me say barbed wire, you'll know it isn't me."

"Yes, O'Shaughnessy."

The following evening, when he comes back, he has trouble getting in. His latchkey works, but she has something shoved up against the door on the inside, a chair inserted under the knob, maybe. It doesn't hold him very long, and she's standing there in the middle of the room shaking like a leaf.

"What'd you do that for?" he asks. "And how'd that hole get in the door, over the lock?"

She runs over and hangs on tight. "They called again. They said it was you, but I knew it wasn't because they didn't say barbed wire."

"They try to get you to come out again?"

"No, they didn't. They said, 'We've got a message for you from Benny.' Who's Benny?"

O'Shaughnessy just looks at her, eyes narrowing

"Then they said, 'Oh, so your torch went out?' Then they laughed and they said, 'Where'd you get hold of the mick?' What's a mick?"

"Me," he says slowly, wondering. "Anything else?"

She shakes her head dazedly. "I couldn't make head or tail out of it. They said, 'You sure put one over on us, didn't you? It was a good gag while it lasted, but it's run out now. We'll be seeing you.' "

"Then what?"

"Oh, O'Shaughnessy, I was so scared. I didn't know where to get hold of you, except you were downtown in the Loop somewhere. I locked the door and I hid in the closet, just left it open on a crack. In about half an hour, all of a sudden I could see the doorknob slowly turning, as if someone was out there trying it. Then when that wouldn't work the bell started to ring, and a voice said thickly, 'It's me, babe. Let me in, I forgot my key.' But I knew it wasn't you. I got way in the far corner of the closet and pulled all the clothes over me —"

Meanwhile he's taken his gun out of the valise where he keeps it and is checking it over, his wrists trembling a little with rage. That's a man's vital spot, the helpless thing he loves.

She goes on:

"Then something went *pokk* right into the door and came through on this side. I couldn't stand it any more, I was afraid they'd come in and get me. I ran out of the closet and climbed out that window there onto the fire escape and got into the flat next door and begged the lady to hide me. I told her someone was trying to break into our flat, and she started to call the police, but by that time they'd gone. I could hear feet scuttling down the stairs, a whole lot of them, and a big car driving off outside —"

Walking back and forth, trying to dope it out, tapping the muzzle of his gun against his palm, he says, "Listen kid, I don't know what we're up against, it may be just a false alarm, but — Shooting a bullet-hole through your door in broad daylight makes it look like the McCoy. If I could only figure what it was all about! It's no one in *my* life. I've made enough enemies, heaven knows, but not in this country. Nova, tell me the truth — were you ever in Chicago before?" He stands still and looks at her.

"Never, O'Shaughnessy, never, until we came here two weeks ago. I don't know anyone here but you. I've never spoken to anyone but you the whole time we've been here. You've got to believe me!"

He does, how could he help it?

But then, what is it? What would you call it, anyway? If he had anything, he'd say it had the earmarks of an attempted snatch, for ransom. Mistaken identity? Yes, but who do they take her to be? The whole thing's a maze. He wonders if he ought to give it to the police to handle for him. But then, what can he tell them? Somebody impersonated me on the phone to my wife, somebody tried to break into my flat while I was out. It doesn't stack up to much when you put it that way. And he's an individualist, anyway, used to being on his own. When it comes to anything threatening Nova, he'd rather take care of her himself.

Tereshko rings up unexpectedly that night. "This is Tereshko, O'Shaughnessy," he says. "I'm down on lower State Street. I'd like to conclude that transaction we were talking over. Can you run down and meet me for ten minutes or so?"

"What happened to you the other night? Something seemed to frighten you."

A phony laugh. "Me? Not at all. I got kinda sick all of a sudden, and beat it for the street."

O'Shaughnessy motions Nova over, puts the receiver to her ear and whispers: "This the same voice you heard the other times?"

She listens, shakes her head.

So he says into the phone: "Frankly, the deal's off, count me out."

Tereshko doesn't seem very perturbed, perhaps he doesn't realize how much he revealed that night. "Sorry you feel that way, but you know best. Come down anyway for a drink, to show there's no hard feeling. Come alone."

O'Shaughnessy decides then and there that he will, to see what this is all about. That first night Tereshko was all for having Nova join them. Tonight he wanted O'Shaughnessy to come down alone. Does Tereshko want Nova left alone in the flat? Is *he* the one behind all this? Nothing like finding out. He says, "Get your hat." And on the street, a couple of blocks away: "You've never been to a movie, have you? Well, you're going to one now."

He buys two seats, takes her in, finds a place for her. "Now don't move from there till I come back and get you!" As if she were a child.

"Yes, O'Shaughnessy."

There is no sign of Tereshko at the taproom where they were supposed to meet. O'Shaughnessy waits ten minutes, leaves, goes back and gets Nova. He fingers the gun in his pocket as they near their flat. "So now,"

he says to himslf grimly, "I think I know *who* I'm up against — if not why."

The flat-door falls back unfastened before them. They give one another a look. "I thought — I saw you lock it after us when we left," she whispers.

"You thought right," he says grimly. He goes in first, gun bared.

No one there. "Must have blown open," he says. "Maybe sneak-thieves."

This alarms her. "My clothes! All the pretty things you gave me!" He grins a little at the woman of it, while she runs to the closet to find out. She comes out again as puzzled as ever.

"Anything missing?"

"No, but — I don't remember *this* being on here before." She's holding one up to show him. A large lily is pinned to the front of it!

"Maybe it came that way and you've forgotten it."

She strokes it with her fingers. "But it's alive. They don't put *live* ones on them."

Even he knows that. He also knows what lilies stand for as a rule. He softly starts to whistle a bar or two. "Chicago, Chicago, I'll show you around —"

VII

Some church-belfry on the other side of the river bongs twelve times. "Got everything in?" he says quietly. "I'll carry the bags down. You put out the lights."

She tiptoes submissively down the stairs after him. "I don't know how far we can get on five bucks," he remarks, "but it's a cinch I can't leave you up there by yourself any more in the daytime, and I can't drag you all over town with me either. Maybe we can get a room on the other side of the city —"

Just inside the doorway he puts down the bags, motions her to stand by them a minute. He saunters out ahead, carefully casual. Peers up one way, down the other. Nothing. The street's dead to the world.

Then suddenly, from nowhere, *ping!* Something flicks off the wall just behind him, flops at his feet like a dead bug. He doesn't bend down to look closer, he can tell what kind of a bug it is all right. He's seen that kind of bug before, plenty of times. No flash, no report, to show which direction it came from. Silencer, of course.

He hasn't moved. *Fsssh!* and a bee or wasp in a hurry strokes by his cheek, tingles, draws a drop of slow blood. Another *pokk!* from the wall, another bug rolling over. The insect-world seems very streamlined, very self-destructive, tonight.

He takes a wary step back, slips inside the doorway again, still facing front. If he could only spot the flash, see where it was coming from, he could

send them a *few* back. Meanwhile he's half-in, half-out of the iron-grilled, thick, glass street-door.

There's an anvil-like sound, and the warped spokes of a wheel show up in the glass, centering in a neat, round hole. Powdery stuff like dandruff dusts his shoulder. Another bug has dropped inside the hallway.

Hands are gripping at his coat, pulling at him from behind. "O'Shaughnessy, don't — you'll kill yourself standing there like that! Think of *me!*"

"Douse that bulb back there, swat it with your handbag — I want to see if I can catch the flashes."

But she won't do it, and that traps him into going back and doing it himself. Then her arms wind around him when she gets him back there at the far end of the hallway, and she clings for dear life.

"No! No! I won't let you — What good'll you be to me dead? What'll become of me?" He gives in at last — it's either that or drag her bodily after him back to the entrance clinging like a barnacle.

"All right, all right. There must be a back way out of here."

But, at the outlet to the electric-lighted basement passageway, as he emerges in advance of her — there are again winged insects on the loose, spitting off the wall. "Wait a minute!" he says, cutting short her plaintive remonstrances. "I think I caught the flash that time! Along the edge of the roof on that next house. Wait'll it comes again." And cuts his hand at her backhand. "The bulb. The bulb." This time she obeys, blackness inks the passage behind him.

He draws and slowly raises his gun, standing perfectly still, face tilted to the sky. Gambler's odds: his life against the chances of hitting a powder-flash six stories up. His left thumbnail scrapes past the rabbit foot imbedded in his vest-pocket, half absent-mindedly.

A winking gleam just over the cornice up there, a flare from his own gun as fire draws fire. A chipping of the stonework just over and behind his head, and then something black and gangling falling clumsily down six stories, a blur against the gray-gloom of the walls. A sickening thud against cement, just out of sight behind the eight-foot dividing-fence.

More flashes up there, six in a row, and a sound like hail or gravel down where they are. But O'Shaughnessy's already back inside the sheltering passageway. "It won't work. There's still a second one up there, and we could never get over that eight-foot fence alive. They seem to be doing this up in style. Come on back up to the flat."

She goes up the inner stairs with her hands shielding her face. "That fall. I hope he was dead before — he landed."

"That evens the score a little," he says unsentimentally. "They that live by the sword —"

Night in a Chicago flat. He says: "The door's locked, and I'm here with Buster. You try to get a little sleep, honey, your old man'll look after you."

"But promise me you'll stay up here with me, you won't go down there again."

"I promise."

So, fully dressed, she lies there on the bed, and after awhile she sleeps, while he stands guard at the shade-drawn window, gun in hand, the spark of his cigarette held carefully behind his back.

A milkman comes and never dreams the muzzle of a gun is four inches away from his head on the other side of the door as he stoops to set down a bottle of milk. Nova sleeps on, like a child. Night in a Chicago flat.

Three hours after daylight they're ready to leave. There are enough people on the streets now to give them a chance. If they don't get out now, they never will. This net that's been meshed loosely around them all night will be pulled tight by the time darkness comes a second time. They want him out of the way, but they want her alive. That much he's sure of.

Just before they go, he murmurs, "There's a cab been standing there ever since dawn, probably all night, just past the next corner. There's no public hack-stand at that spot, either."

"Do you think that's — them?"

"I don't give a hoot whether it is or not, I can't breathe in here any more, I've got to get out in the open! Stick close behind me, and if I tumble, you keep going. I've been shot at before. I'm the bad penny that always turns up again."

But then, as he puts his hand out to the doorknob, a sudden rigidity, as though some indefinable sound has reached him from outside it. "There's someone out there," he breathes.

She winces. "We're too late."

He motions her behind him, shielding her; reaches out and does something to the lock, levels his gun. "It's open," he calls out. "Come in at your own risk."

Nothing for a minute. Then very slowly it starts to fall back toward them.

"Quicker than that or I'll shoot!" He kicks it the rest of the way with the edge of his foot.

The tremblingly upraised arms are the first things they see. And the empty background behind the solitary figure. O'Shaughnessy takes a step backward, propelling her with him, not in retreat but to give himself elbow-room.

The face is Oriental, Chinese. Spectacles and close-cropped hair. Hat fallen off just now at the unexpected welcome.

O'Shaughnessy: "This is the place you wanted?"

"Yes, if you will permit me to mop my forehead —"

"You warm?"

"No, but my reception was."

"All right, close the door behind you. We've been a little draughty here all night."

The visitor bows nervously. "Allow me to introduce myself —"

"You're on the air."

"I am Lawrence Lee, American name. I have come to offer you interesting proposition —"

"I just had one, thanks, a couple days ago."

"I had great trouble finding you —"

"You're going to have even greater losing me, if this is a come-on."

"I represent the illustrious Benevolent-Wisdom Yang. His recruiting-agent in United States. He has ordered a shipment of lovely planes, and needs someone who will know how to make them work. Your reputation has reached our ears. Can I offer you post on generalissimo's staff?"

O'Shaughnessy, gun still bared, sticks his left hand in his pocket, pulls it out again, lets the lining trail after it. "You make it sound interesting — up to a point."

"Five hundred dollars American, a week."

"I'm no greenhorn, I've been in China before. I'm O'Shaughnessy of Winnipeg, he can't get another like me. The coolies used to bow down and worship in their rice-paddies whenever I passed overhead." That he can stand and bargain like this, when both their lives are hanging by a thread, is — well, just part of his being O'Shaughnessy.

"Two thousand, p'aps?"

"More like it." He turns to her, still huddled behind him. "Shall we do it, just for the fun of it?" Then, with a grin to the emissary, "Yang would not, I take it, be interested in a dead pilot?"

The agent, with Oriental lack of humor: "Dead pilot could not handle planes satisfactory."

"Well, I may have a little trouble getting through alive from here to the Northwest Station. I can't promise you I will." She shudders at this point, clings closer. "However, that's my look-out. You leave two through tickets for Frisco on tap for us at the ticket-office, and if I don't show up to claim them, you can always get a refund from the railroad — and another pilot."

"Today-train agreeable? Shall do. Boat-tickets will be waiting in Frisco at N. Y. K. Line office. And for binder, one thousand advance suitable?"

O'Shaughnessy says in Chinese, "I could not wound your generosity by refusing." Then in English, "Carry your hat in your hand leaving here, so your face can be seen clearly."

The envoy bows himself out. "Happy comings-down."

When they're alone once more, he says to her: "Shanghai-ho. The Coast Limited leaves at eleven, so we've got just one hour to make it."

"But how are we going to get out of here?"

"I don't know yet, but we are." He goes back to the window, peers narrowly down through the gap of the drawn shade. "There goes Confucius without anyone stopping him; I guess they didn't tie him up with me." Then, "Who's that fat woman walking up and down out there with a poodle?"

"Oh, that's the lady in the rear flat I climbed into yesterday. She always airs her dogs like that regularly every morning."

"Dogs? She's only got one there."

"She's got two in the flat. She has to take them down in relays because they fight."

"I've got it now!" he says. "Wait'll she comes upstairs again."

"What are you going to do?"

"You're going to take the next one down. I'm going to see that you get to the station and safely aboard that train first of all. I'll stall them off here; you call me back as soon as you get there. Then I'll make a break for it myself —"

"Leave you —?" she wails.

"I'm giving the orders in this ground-crew. Here she comes now." He goes to the door, stops her, brings her in with him. She's globular and baby-faced, with carefully gilded hair under a large cartwheel hat that flops around her face.

"Do you want to do something for us? I've got to get my wife out of the building and I can't do it openly — we're being watched. Will you lend her your hat and coat and dog? Your other dog."

"I'll gladly lend my hat and coat, but Fifi — my little Fifi — who'll bring her back?"

"She'll turn her over to the station-master for you, you can call for her later. I tell you her life's in danger. Do this, won't you?"

"Yes," she says, looking at Nova, "I think I understand. I was sure I'd seen your face somewhere before — in the paper, you know. Tell me, what was he like? Was he as bad as they said? I heard he used to make people stand with their feet in buckets of cement —"

"Skip it," says O'Shaughnessy, "you've got your wires crossed."

It only takes a couple minutes for the change. The wide-brimmed concealing hat hides everything but Nova's chin. He ties a couple of pillows around her with cord, one in front and one in back, under the coat, apologizing, "No offense," to the woman as he does so.

"That's all right," she sighs. "I know I've filled out."

The fat lady stays up in their flat; she thinks it will be a good idea to give them a glimpse of her passing back and forth behind the windows. Make them think Nova's there. For this purpose they raise the shades once more. He goes down to the lower hall with Nova and the dog. Their parting is a mixture of comedy and tension. "I'll be standing here behind the door covering you with my gun. Don't be frightened. Imitate her waddle. Walk slow and keep your eye on the dog, like she does. Give yourself a good two blocks before you jump for it. And don't drop those pillows to the sidewalk, whatever you do!"

"Oh, O'Shaughnessy, if you don't show up, I'm going to die."

"I'll be there with bells on."

The bulky, padded figure eases out through the door, minces after the dog, straining at its leash. He edges up slantwise against the door, screened by an abutment of the hall-wall, peering out after her, gun ready, until she passes from his radius of vision. Then quickly chases upstairs where the window will give him a wider perspective.

The dog stops. The figure under the concealing hat-brim stands patiently by. They go on again a few yards. They stop again. "Darn dog!" he chafes, sweating with impatience in the hollows of his hands. Finally, almost imperceptibly, by fits and starts, she's progressed around the corner and out of sight.

He glues his eyes on the motionless taxi now. That street she just went up is a continuation of the one it's on. If it makes a move, starts out after her suddenly, he'll know —

Slow tense minutes. She must be a block away now. The cab's still standing. She ought to be off the streets by this time, safely installed in a cab, whirling toward the station. They've put it over!

He takes a deep breath of released tension, steps back into the room away from the window. The worst's over, she's made it. All that's left now is to sit tight until she calls him to let him know she's reached the station. Fifteen minutes ought to do the trick, making every allowance for traffic-hitches and lights.

He sits there smoking calmly, waiting. The fat lady is still there in the flat. This, to her, is romance with a capital R. She's enjoying it more than a box of marshmallows. She's eating it up.

And then in a flash, before he quite knows how it's happened, seventeen minutes have passed, and the call is two minutes overdue, and the calmness is going out with every noseful of smoke he's expelling.

Twenty minutes. He throws down his cigarette, and takes three or four quick turns around the room. "She should have called by now," he says.

"Yes, she should have," agrees the fat lady. "It doesn't take that long to get from here to the Northwest Station."

Twenty-five minutes, half an hour. "Maybe the phone's out of order —" But he's afraid to get on and test it, afraid to block her call. He shakes his fist at it helplessly.

He's prowling back and forth like a lion with distemper now. There's a shiny streak down one side of his face. "I shouldn't have let her go ahead — I ought to be hung! Something's gone wrong. I can't stand this any more!" he says with a choked sound. "I'm starting now —"

"But how are you —"

"Spring for it and fire as I go if they try to stop me." And then as he barges out, the fat lady waddling solicitously after him, "Stay there; take it if she calls — tell her I'm on the way —"

He plunges straight at the street-door from all the way back in the hall, like a fullback headed for a touchdown. That's the best way. Gun bedded in his pocket, but hand gripping it ready to let fly through lining and all. He slaps the door out of his way without slowing and skitters out along the building, head and shoulders defensively lowered.

It *was* the taxi, you bet. No sound from it, at least not at this distance, just a thin bluish haze slowly spreading out around it that might be gas-fumes if its engine were turning; and at his end a long row of dun-colored spurts — of dust and stone-splinters — following him along the wall of the flat he's tearing away from. Each succeeding one a half yard too far behind him, smacking into where he was a second ago. And they never catch up.

He rounds the corner unscathed, spins like a dervish on one leg, brakes with the other, snaps a shot back at the cab, mist-haloed now, which is just getting into gear; and slipping out away from the curb. Glass tinkles faintly back there — he got the windshield maybe — and he sees the cab lurch crazily for a minute, as though more than glass got the bullet.

Then he sprints up the street without waiting to see any more. His own shots make plenty of noise, and the vicinity is coming to shocked life around him. Nothing in sight though that's any good to him — a slow-moving truck, a laundry-wagon. But music somewhere ahead — a cab radio — and he steers toward the sound, locates it just around the next corner, is in and on the way almost between two notes of a single bar. At the wheel himself.

The driver rears up in consternation in the back, holding a handful of pinochle-cards, shrieks, "Hey! what's the —"

"All right, climb around here and take it — I'm in a hurry, got no time to lower the gangplank!"

"What about these other guys?" The back of the cab is alive with shanghaied card-playing cab-drivers.

"They'll have to come along for the ride." Two blocks behind the other cab has showed up, is putting on a burst of speed. O'Shaughnessy warns, as the driver crawls over his lap: "I want you to keep that cab back there where it belongs — zigzag, I don't care what you do — but lose it. It means your back-tires if you don't!"

The rear-view mirror suddenly spatters into crystal confetti.

"See, what'd I tell you? Left, left, get offa here, don't stay in a straight line with 'em!"

The driver says, "What *you* done? I don't like this!" He takes a turn that nearly lands them axle-shafts in air.

A series of two-wheel turns, and a combination of lights in their favor — the rabbit's foot must be working again — closing down after them like portcullises each time. They shake them off.

It's twelve-and-a-half minutes before train-time when he jumps down at the Northwest Station, slaps one of Lawrence Lee's sawbucks in through the cab-window and dives inside.

At the barrier: "Tickets, please!"

"Wasn't one left here for me with you?"

"Nope."

"My wife must have taken them through to the train with her, then. Didn't you see her — pretty blonde, big floppy hat —?"

"All blondes are pretty to me, haven't seen a bad-looking one so far today —"

"Buddy, I'm not interested in your love-life, I wanna get through here to see if I can find her —"

"Hey, come back here!"

The agony of that wild, headlong plunge into car after car, calling: "Nova! Nova!" from the vestibule of each one. No sign of her. Upstairs again at a mile a minute, nearly knocking over the gateman a second time — eight minutes to train-time now.

At the ticket-window, "Two for the Coast — O'Shaughnessy — were they picked up?"

"Nope, here they are waiting for you."

Uncalled for! She never got here, then! Seven minutes to find her, in a city of four million people! Outside again, and looking around him dazed. Dazed — and dangerous — and yet helpless. Ready to give this town something to be tough about, but not knowing where to start in — Instinctively touching the rabbit's foot, that habit of his. And then — like a genie at the summons of Aladdin's lamp — a redcap, haphazardly accosting him in line of duty. One out of the dozens swarming all over the place, but the right one, the right one out of all of them!

"Cab, boss?"

"No. Wait, George — blonde lady, big droopy hat, did you see anyone like that drive up here at all the past half-hour or so?"

"Li'l dog with a haircut 'cepting on its ankles?"

"Yes! Yes!" He grabs the guy by both shoulders. "Hurry up and tell me, for Pete's sake!"

The redcap shows his teeth.

"That sho' was a dirty trick that lady have played on her. She done come away without bringin' no change fo' her cab-fare, and the driver he wouldn't listen to her no-how, he turn around and take her to the police station."

"Which?"

"Neares' one, I reckon."

And there she is when he tears in a couple minutes later, sitting on a bench under the desk-sergeant's eye, dog and all. Driver, too.

"We've been trying to reach you, young fellow." The sergeant clears his throat meaningly, winks at O'Shaughnessy to show he won't give him away. Wife starting on a vacation, somebody else answering the phone; *he* understands. "Couldn't seem to get you."

"How much is it? We've got a train to make."

"Two dollas and twenny cents," says the driver.

"Here it is. And here's a little something extra —" Wham! and the driver nearly brings down the rear wall of the room as he lands into it.

Then he's outside with her again, minus dog and pillows now, in another machine, tearing back to the station. Three minutes to spare. He doesn't notice as he jumps down that the cab ahead of theirs, the one that's just pulled into the driveway before them, has a shattered windshield.

They don't have to be mind-readers, these others, to figure out where he and she will head for. If they're on their way out of town, that means one of the stations. They've cased the La Salle Street Station first, now this one.

He starts her through the big vaulted place at a quick trot. Then suddenly a shout somewhere behind them, "There they are!" and five men are streaming in after them, one with a bloody bandage over his head.

O'Shaughnessy daren't shoot; the station's alive with people crisscrossing the line of fire. His pursuers can't either; not that the risk of hitting somebody else would deter them, but they're sprinting after him too fast to stop for aim. A redcap goes keeling over, and one of the rodmen topples over a piece of hand-luggage the porter dropped, goes sliding across the smooth floor on his stomach. And above it all the amplifier blaring out remorselessly, "Coast Limited — Kansas City — Denver — Salt Lake City — San Francisco! 'Board!"

He wedges her through the closing barrier, throws the tickets at the gate-

man. A shot, and looking back he can see the uniformed figure at the gate toppling, even while the gateman still tries to wedge it closed. A young riot is taking place back there, shouts, scuffling, station-guards' clubs swinging. But one figure squeezes through, detaches itself, comes darting after him, gun out. Tereshko.

O'Shaughnessy shoves her into a car vestibule. "Get on, kid. Be right with you." The train is already giving its first few preliminary hitches — forward.

Tereshko's gun flames out as he comes on; the shot hits the L of El Dorado, the Pullman's gold-lettered name, slowly slipping past behind O'Shaughnessy's back. Tereshko never has a chance for another shot. O'Shaughnessy closes in bare-handed; his fist swings out, meets Tereshko half way as he crashes into it, lands him spread-eagled on the platform. The gun goes flying up in a foreshortened arc, comes down again with a clank, and fires innocuously.

O'Shaughnessy flicks him a derisive salute from over one ear. "I gotta make a train, or I'd stay and do it right!" He turns and catches the hand-rail of the next-to-the-last vestibule as it glides by, swings himself aboard. Tereshko stands staring blurredly down his own nose at the dwindling observation-platform of the Coast Limited.

O'Shaughnessy sinks wearily down in the seat beside Nova, and as she shrinks into the protective angle of his outstretched arm, he tells her grimly: "You're O'Shaughnessy's girl for keeps. Let 'em try to take you away from me now!"

VIII

O'Shaughnessy, minutes after his Bellanca has kissed the hard-packed earth of the Shanghai municipal airport, is already on one of the airport phones asking for the Broadway Mansions. Seven weeks out of Shanghai, seven weeks back in the red mountains of Szechuan, China's "wild west," piloting the great General Yang around, dropping a few well-placed bombs for him, and trans-shipping machine-gun parts inland from below Ichang, which is as far as the river boats can go. No commission in Yang's fighting-forces, nothing like that — just his own crate, his own neck, payment in American gold dollars, and a leave of absence whenever he feels like it, which happens to be right now. Seven weeks is a plenty long time.

He's still in the crumpled slacks and greasy khaki shirt he left the interior in, but under them a triple-tiered money-belt, twice around the chest and once across the waist, packed with good solid chunky gold eagles, outlawed at home now but as good as ever over here. Fifteen-thousand dollars' worth; two thousand a week salary, and a thousand bonus for obliterating

a caterpillar-tank that General Yang didn't like the looks of. Not bad, two thousand a week. But seven weeks is still a long time, any way you look at it.

Her voice comes over the wire throbbing with expectancy; every time it's rung she's hoped it was he — and now at last it is.

"O'Shaughnessy." A love song in one word. She's never called him by anything but that.

"Just grounded. I've brought back fifteen-thousand-worth of red paint with me. Turn the shower on, lay out my dude-clothes, and get ready for a celebration!"

He just lingers long enough to see his plane put to bed properly, then grabs a cab at the airport-gate. "The Settlement," and forgetting that he's not inland any more, that Shanghai's snappier than Chicago, "Chop-chop."

"Sure, Mike," grins the slant-eyed driver. "Hop in."

A change has come over the city since he went away, he can feel that the minute they hit the outskirts, clear the congested native sections, and cross the bridge into the Settlement. Shanghai is already tuning-up for its oncoming doom, without knowing it. A city dancing on the brink of the grave. There's an electric tension in the air, the place never seemed so gay, so hectic, as tonight; the roads opening off the Bund a welter of blinking, flashing neon lights, in ideographs and Latin letters alike, as far as the eye can see. Traffic hopelessly snarled at every crossing, cops piping on their whistles, packed sidewalks, the blare of saxophones coming from taxi-dance mills, and overhead the feverish Oriental stars competing with intercrossed searchlight-beams from some warships or other on the Whang-poo. Just about the right town and the right night to have fifteen thousand bucks in, all at one time.

He says: "Hold it, Sam," in front of a jewelry-store on Bubbling Well Road, lopes in, comes out again with a diamond solitaire in his pocket.

The skyscraper Mansions shows up, he vaults out, counts windows up to the tenth floor, three over from the corner. Brightly lighted, waiting for him. Shies a five-dollar bill at the driver.

The elevator seems to crawl up; he feels like getting out and pushing. A pair of Englishmen stare down their noses at his waste-rag outfit. The rush of her footsteps on one side of the door matches his long stride on the other.

"I'd recognize your step with cotton in my ears!"

"Watch it, you'll get fusel-oil all over you!"

They go in together in a welter of disjointed expressions, such as any pair might utter. "I thought you were never coming back this time!"

"Boy, you certainly made time getting dressed. All set to go, aren't you?"

As a matter of fact she isn't, it's her gloves that mislead him. She has on a shimmery silver dress, but no shoes. Her hair is still down too.

He laughs. "What do you do, put on your gloves before your shoes?"

A shadow of something passes across her face. Instantly she's smiling again. "Just knowing you were back got me so rattled —"

He takes a quick shower, jumps into his best suit. Comes in on her just as she is struggling into a pair of silver dancing-shoes — just in time to catch the expression of livid agony on her pretty face. She quickly banishes it.

"Matter — too tight? Wear another pair —"

"No, no, it isn't that. They're right for me — my feet got a little swollen wearing those Chinese things all day."

He lets it go. "Come on, where'll it be? Astor House, American Club, Jockey Club?" He laughs again as she drenches herself with expensive perfume, literally empties the bottle over herself. "Incidentally, I think we'll move out of here. Something seems to be the matter with the drains in this apartment, you can notice a peculiar musty odor inside there — decay —"

The haunted look of a doomed thing flickers in her eyes. She takes his arm with desperate urgency. "Let's — let's go. Let's get out into the open, O'Shaughnessy. It's such a lovely night, and you're back, and — life is so short!"

That air of electric tension, of a great city on the edge of an abyss, is more noticeable than ever at the White Russian cabaret called, not inappropriately, "New York." You wouldn't know you were in China. An almond-eyed platinum-blonde has just finished wailing, with a Mott Street accent, "You're gonna lose your gal."

O'Shaughnessy leads Nova back to the table apologizing. "I knew I wasn't cut out for dancing, but I didn't know how bad I was until I got a look at your face just now. All screwed up like you were on the rack. Kid, why didn't you speak up —"

"It wasn't you, O'Shaughnessy," she gasps faintly. "My — my feet are killing me —"

"Well, I've got something here that'll cure that. We don't get together often, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, but when we do — the sky's the limit." He takes the three-thousand-dollar ring out of his pocket, blows on it, shows it to her. "Take off your glove, honey, and lemme see how this headlight looks on your finger —"

Her face is a white, anguished mask. He reaches toward her right hand. "Go ahead, take the glove off."

The tense, frightened way she snatches it back out of his reach gives her away. He tumbles. The smile slowly leaves his face. "What's the matter — don't you want my ring? You trying to cover up something with those gloves? You fixed your hair with them on, you powdered your nose with them on — What's under them? Take 'em off, let me see."

"No, O'Shaughnessy. No!"

His voice changes. "I'm your husband, Nova. Take off those gloves and let me see your hands!"

She looks around her agonized. "Not here, O'Shaughnessy! Oh, not here!"

She sobs deep in her throat, even as she struggles with one glove. Her eyes are wet, pleading. "One more night, give me one more night," she whispers brokenly. "You're leaving Shanghai again in such a little while. Don't ask to see my hands. O'Shaughnessy, if you love me . . ."

The glove comes off, flops loosely over, and there's suddenly horror beating into his brain, smashing, pounding, battering. He reels a little in his chair, has to hold onto the edge of the table with both hands, at the impact of it.

A clawlike thing — two of the finger extremities already bare of flesh as far as the second joint; two more with only shriveled, bloodless, rotting remnants of it adhering, only the thumb intact, and that already unhealthy-looking, flabby. A dead hand — the hand of a skeleton — on a still-living body. A body he was dancing with only a few minutes ago.

A rank odor, a smell of decay, of the grave and of the tomb, hovers about the two of them now.

A woman points from the next table, screams. She's seen it, too. She hides her face, cowers against her companion's shoulder, shudders. Then he sees it too. His collar's suddenly too tight for him.

Others see it, one by one. A wave of impalpable horror spreads centrifugally from that thing lying there in the blazing electric light on O'Shaughnessy's table. The skeleton at the feast!

She says forlornly, in the stunned stillness: "You wanted me to wear your ring, O'Shaughnessy —" and slips it over that denuded bone protruding like a knobby spine from her hand. Loosely, like a hoop, it falls down to the base of the thing, hangs there, flashing prismatically, an inconceivable horror. Diamonds for the dead.

The spell breaks; the glitter of the diamond perhaps does it, shattering his hypnosis, freeing him. So lifelike there, so out of place. Not a word has passed between them, but for that one lament of hers. He seizes her to him suddenly, their two chairs go over, their champagne glasses crash to the floor. He pulls out a wing of his coat, wraps it concealingly around the

thing that was once her hand, clutches it to him, hurries her out of the place, his arm protectively about her. The flash of a silver dress, a whiff of gardenia, a hint of moldy, overturned earth, as they go by, and the dead has been removed from among the living. The ring drops off the insufficient bone-sliver that carries it, rolls unheeded across the floor.

"Not so fast, O'Shaughnessy," she pleads brokenly. "My feet too — they're that way. My knees. My side, where the ribs are. It's coming out all over me."

And then, in the cab hurtling them through the mocking constellations that were the Bund an hour ago, she says: "Life was swell, though, while it lasted. Just knowing you has made — well, everything."

He says again what he said before: "No one is going to take you away from me!"

The English doctor says, "Looks rather bad, y'know, old man."

O'Shaughnessy, white-lipped, growls out something. . . .

The German doctor says, "Neffer before haff I such a thing seen. This case will become zenzational —"

"The case will, but what about her, that's what I want to know?"

"My *gut* man —"

"I get it. Send the bill around —!"

The American doctor says, "There's just a slim chance — what you might call a thousand-to-one shot, that chaulmoogra oil might benefit her."

"I thought you said it wasn't leprosy?"

"It isn't. It may be some Chinese disease none of us has ever heard of before. She seems to be *dying alive.* Her bodily functions are unimpaired, the X-rays show; whatever it is seems to be striking on the surface. If it continues unchecked — and there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to stop it — the whole skeletal structure will be revealed — you'll have an animated corpse on your hands! And then of course . . . death."

The French doctor — the French, they are a very logical race and make good doctors — says: "M'sieu, they have all been on the wrong track —"

O'Shaughnessy's wan face lights up. "What can you tell me?"

"I can tell you only this: there is no hope. Your wife is lost to you. If you are a merciful man — I do not give you this advice as doctor, I give it to you as one husband to another — you will go to one of the opium houses of Chapei, buy a quantity sufficient for *two* at least —"

O'Shaughnessy says in a muffled voice, "I'm no quitter. I'll beat this rap."

There's pity in the Frenchman's face. "Go to Chapei, *mon ami.* Go tonight. I say this for the sake of your own sanity. Your mind will crumble at the sight of what it will have to behold in a few more weeks."

O'Shaughnessy says the name of his Maker twice, puts his arm up swiftly over his face. The doctor's hand comes to rest on his shoulder. "I can see what led them astray, the others. They sought for disease. There is no disease there. No malady. No infection. It is not that; it is the state of death, itself, that has her. How shall I say? This flesh that rots, drops away, is, paradoxically, healthy tissue. My microscopes do not lie. Just as, let us say, a person who has been shot dead by a bullet is otherwise a healthy person. But he lies in his grave and nature dissolves his flesh. That is what we have here. The effect without the cause —"

O'Shaughnessy raises his head after a while, gets up, moves slowly toward the door. "You, at least," he says, "are a square shooter. All right, medical science tells me she's as good as dead. I'm not licked yet. There's a way."

The doctor shrugs gloomily. "How? What way is there? Lourdes, you are thinking of?"

"An awful way," O'Shaughnessy says, "but a way."

He stumbles out into the bright sunlight of the Concession, roams around hopelessly. Along the Avenue of the Two Republics, bordering the French Concession, he finds himself beginning to tremble all over, suddenly.

Fear! Fear again, for the first time since his 'teens. Fear, that he thought he would never know any more. Fear that no weapon, no jeopardy, no natural cataclysm, has ever been able to inspire until now. And now here it is running icily through him in the hot Chinese noon. Fear for the thing he loves, the only fear that can ever wholly cow the reckless and the brave.

Fear of the Way, the Way that he mentioned to the doctor. Fear of the implication involved in it. A mad voice howling in the darkness sounds in his ears again: "You'll come crawling back to me, begging me to help! *That'll be my hour!*" Oh, not that his own life will assuredly be forfeit as part of the bargain, that isn't what makes him tremble. Nor any amount of pain and horror that vindictive mania can devise. He can stand it with a smile, to give her an hour, a day, or a week of added life. It's what will come after, what she must face alone without him, once he's out of the way. The barbed-wire fence — cooped up with a madman; kept trapped like an animal in a cage, after having known the world. Better if he'd left her as he'd found her. . . .

But that's the Way, and there is no other. And once his mind's made up, the trembling and aimless walking stops, and he can look doom in the face without flinching.

He has their boat-tickets in his pocket when he goes back to the Mansions. All down the corridor, from the elevator-shaft to their door, there's that cloying odor of perfumery — to conceal another, different one.

She's propped up in bed, a native *amah* sitting by her fanning her. He

stops short in surprise. The screwy clock of this bedevilment seems to have spun backward again to that awful night, when he first came out of the interior — and didn't know yet. For she's beautiful there, composed, placid again, expressionless as a wax doll, the stigma of the knowledge of approaching doom erased from her face.

"The mask came," she says through it, in a slightly resonant voice. Her own features, reproduced by a clever Chinese craftsman, at her terrified request — before anything happens to them. Not for herself, this, for the man who stands there looking at her — the man whom life and love have laughed at, the man to whom life and love and laughter, too, have been denied.

He gestures the Chinese woman out of the room.

When they're alone Nova asks, as tonelessly as though she were asking what the weather was like, "Any hope?"

"Not here." It's not the first time it's been asked and answered that way, so there's no shock to it any more.

He sees a small canvas bag upon the table beside her bed. "What's that?"

"Another agent of Yang was here while you were out. He left this bag of gold, and a thinly veiled threat that your tea will be bitter if you don't report back soon. They think you've run out on them. Better go back, O'Shaughnessy."

"Not a chance, darling. I've sold my plane. We're taking the early morning boat back to the States. I'm taking you back to Denholt."

She is silent for a long minute. He can see her shivering through the thick, brocaded, Chinese jacket, pretty much the way he was, out in the sun-baked streets.

He sits down close beside her. "You've knocked around with me now for almost a year. You've talked to lots of other girls your age. You must have found out by now that none of them learned to walk and talk as late as you did. Something happened to you, and there's only one man alive knows what it was and what's to be done about it. Those injections — can't you see that he was keeping you alive in some way? It's our only chance, we've got to go back there, we've got to get more of his stuff." And bitterly, as he hauls out a valise and tosses up the lid, "O'Shaughnessy wasn't so smart. O'Shaughnessy knows when he's licked. . . ."

Down the Whangpoo to the Yangtse, and out into the China Sea. A race against time now. A race against death. And the odds are so tall against them. The widest body of water in the world to cross. Then a whole continent afterward from west to east. Three weeks at the very least. Can she hold out that long by sheer will-power? Or have they waited too long, like fools? Then too, how can he be sure there is help waiting at the end of

the long journey, even the help that they both dread so? Suppose Denholt is gone. How to locate him again in time? He may be in a strait jacket at this very moment, unable to tell a serum from a split of White Rock. The odds are pretty steep. But — at least there *are* odds.

She sits in a deck-chair covered up to her chin in a steamer-rug; her beautiful masked face above it never smiles, never frowns, never changes — just the eyes alive and the voice. He haunts the chart that marks their daily progress. Comes back to it a hundred times a day, says prayers before it while it lengthens a pitiful notch at a time, in red ink across the graph.

Kobe. Bad news. A Japanese English-language paper has picked up the story from something that must have come out in Shanghai after they left. Fright sounds through the mask. "It's — it's leaked out already. Here. Beautiful girl stricken with living death. First case of its kind on record. Being rushed home by husband —' "

She makes a small, plaintive sound. "Don't you see? The papers in America will pick it up, follow it through, play it up. And your name's here. *They*, whoever they were, they'll know it means us, they'll find out we're coming back. They'll be waiting for us to land, they'll — we'll never make it. Oh, let's turn back, O'Shaughnessy! Let me die in China — what's the difference where it is? I've brought you enough grief, don't let me be the cause of —"

He takes her in his arms and holds her tight. "You don't seem to think much of my ability to take care of us."

She makes a thoughtless gesture to reach out and clasp his hand understandingly; but she remembers and draws the gloved claw back again.

Days pass. The story has circulated now, and turned the ship into a buzzing beehive of curiosity. People find excuses to go by her on the deck, just so they can turn and stare. O'Shaughnessy overhears two men bet that she won't reach Frisco alive. She tries to smoke a cigarette through the lips of the mask one afternoon, to buoy up his spirits a little. Smoke comes out at her hair-line, under her chin, before her ears. A steward drops a loaded bouillon-tray at the sight of her. Nova stays in her cabin after that.

IX

Three thousand years later they're at Honolulu. Leis and steel-guitars above deck; and below, something that scarcely stirs, that lies still now, saturated with cologne, smothered with fresh-cut flowers as though she were already on her bier. It's too painful to force the fleshless footbones to support her tottering body any more, even swathed in bandages, except for a few moments at a time. Reporters try to get in to see her; O'Shaughnessy has to swing his fists to get them to keep their distance.

Out to sea again, on the last leg of the trip. Sometimes he bends down, whispers low, like a prizefighter's second in his corner when the bout's going against him: "You can make it. Just a little longer, honey. Do it for O'Shaughnessy." Sometimes, in the depths of night, he goes up on the boatdeck, shakes his fist — at what? The ship, the limitless ocean, the elusive horizon that never comes any nearer, the stars overhead that don't give a rap?

The rabbit's paw has hardly been out of his palm the whole way over. All the pelt's worn off it with his stroking. His thumb has developed an ineradicable habit of turning inward on itself, circling his palm. "You and me," he says to it grimly. "We'll do the trick."

Frisco at last. And as the anchor plunges into the waters of the bay — they've made it —! The three of them, he and she and the rabbit's foot. There's still a voice behind that mask — faltering, weak, but alive. Still living eyes behind those immobile eyeholes with their double tier of lashes — real and artificial.

He's wirelessed ahead from the Islands for a cabin plane, and it's tuned up and waiting at the airport over in Oakland. He gets Nova through the gang of reporters clogging the deck, has her carried down the gangplank on a stretcher while flashlights go off around her like a constellation. Into a car outside the Customs House, while the newsmen like a pack of hounds in full cry swarm around them, yapping. But there's one man who doesn't pepper him with questions, doesn't say a word — just takes a good look at the beautiful graven face being transferred from stretcher to car, and then dives into the nearest phone-booth. O'Shaughnessy isn't near enough to overhear him ask for long-distance. . . .

And then the plane, with a relief pilot to spell O'Shaughnessy. Up and due east. "And we don't come down again for snow or rain or fog or engine-trouble until you hit Louisville," says O'Shaughnessy.

All through the day they hurl through space. "You got that Kentucky map I asked you to get hold of?"

He locates the mountain on it finally, draws a big ring around it. "Here's where we come down, inside that circle."

"But on what? How do we know what's there? It'll be dark long before we make it," the relief pilot protests.

"Here's where we come down," is O'Shaughnessy's remorseless answer, "if we splinter into match-wood. Here, right on the perimeter, where this feeder branches off from the trunk-highway on the west and climbs up. That's as close as we can get."

"Radio ahead, contact one of the towns near there to have something waiting for you at that point, otherwise you may be held up for hours."

"Yeah, that's it," nods O'Shaughnessy. He starts calling the county seat.

Nova shakes her head, He bends down close to hear what she wants to say. "That may bring *them* down on us, if you mention the place — tip them off where we're going to land."

"How can they beat our time in, unless they're already somewhere around there?"

"But that's it, they may be. You wirelessed him from Honolulu and mentioned a chart of this one county. They may have intercepted that message. They're likely to be within reach of your set, and this'll bring them right to the exact spot."

"Then that'll bring them grief!" is all he says. He fiddles with the dials. "Hello, Wellsville? This is a private chartered plane coming your way, with a desperately ill passenger on board. We need ground transport badly. . . ."

"Hello, this is Wellsville. This is Wellsville. There are no facilities here."

"I'm not asking for hospitalization. All I want is ground transport. I want a car where Route 19 bisects the highway."

"Well — I dunno —"

"Have you been reading the papers lately?" O'Shaughnessy barks. "This is Penny O'Shaughnessy — Yes, yes, the 'Dying-Alive Girl,' if you insist! Now do I get a car at that particular spot?"

"I'll start out now."

"We don't want any publicity. Come alone. We should be there by ten. Tilt your headlights upward to guide us, keep snapping them off and on at two-minute intervals, we're going to have to land in pitch-darkness. If we live through it, be ready to start off at a moment's notice. Don't let us down, there's a human life at stake. This is her last chance."

Louisville, an hour after dark, is a carpet of gilt thumb-tacks below them, with straight, twinkling lines like strings of beads leading out from it. Southeastward now, toward the Tennessee state-line.

At nine a continuous line of little pinpoints, stretched straight as an arrow, shows up below. They follow it, flying so low now the twinkling lights of an occasional car crawling along it seems to be right under them. Then, in thirty, forty minutes, a firefly down there in the dark fields, going off, on, off, on.

O'Shaughnessy clutches his pilot jubilantly by the shoulder. "See it? Here, gimme the controls — I *couldn't* go wrong, not this late in the game!"

Around and around in a narrowing spiral. Then way out, and around, and in again in a straight swoop that barely seems to skim the roof of the

waiting car. "Hold on!" he warns, and slaps the pocket holding the rabbit's foot. The earth comes up flat like a blackboard. A jolt, a rise, a dip, another bump, a short stretch of wobbly taxiing, a shudder, and he cuts off his engine.

The car, waiting off across the field, has lowered its headlights to guide them. Carrying her between them they waver toward it up a thinly-talcumed path of light-motes. A rail fence shows up. "All right, driver! You in the car!" shouts O'Shaughnessy. "Come out here and give us a hand over this!"

A figure jumps out, hurries to meet them on the outside of the fence.

They ease her over the top rail, the newcomer holding her in both arms until O'Shaughnessy can scramble over and relieve him.

They pass her into the back of the car. Then suddenly, a dark motionless outline shows up a little way up the side-road, under shadowing trees that all but blot it out — materializes into a second car, unlighted, stalled, apparently deserted.

The plane pilot, who has been standing off to one side, looking on, cries out: "Hey, there's a guy lying here at the side of the road, out —"

"Take it easy, pal," an unseen voice purrs. An orange hyphen flicks toward the pilot from somewhere just behind the car. A report shatters the crossroads' stillness, and the pilot leans over toward the road, as though he saw a coin lying there and was languidly about to pick it up.

O'Shaughnessy doesn't wait for him to complete the fall. He whirls back toward Nova, flings out his arms to keep her from going into this car that is a trap. The blurred oval of a second face, not that of the man who helped to carry her to it, looms at him in the dark, above her body.

"No you don't," a voice says blandly, "she's coming with us — we're taking up where we left off that night — and she ain't fooling us this time!"

A second red-orange spearhead leaps straight at O'Shaughnessy. The whole world seems to stand still. Then the gun behind it crashes, and there's a cataclysm of pain all over him, and a shock goes through him as if he ran head-on into a stone wall.

A voice from the car says blurredly, while the ground rushes up to meet him, "Finish him up, you guys! I'm getting so I don't trust their looks no more, no matter how stiff they act!"

Three comets seem to dart down at him as he lies there on the ground. Asphalt-grits fly up beside his skull. A hot wire creases his side while something that feels like a mallet pounds his shoulder. He can feel his mouth opening; he must be trying to say something.

Far away, from some low-flying soundless plane in the skies, a pair of voices reach him. "Did you hear where they were headed for?"

"Yeah, and it sounds like a swell idea —"

High up over him the chattering motor swells into a roar, the air he is trying to breathe is sucked away from him along the ground, grit and road-dust swirl over him. God, they're flying low! What're they trying to do —? Looking down his own body he can see a red light poised momentarily on the toe of his shoe. Then it dips below it, and it's gone. And he's alone there, with the unconscious pilot lying a little way off for company, and some other guy he's never even seen, only spoken to over the radio.

He wants to sleep so badly — dying they call it — and he can't. Something's bothering him to keep him awake. Something that won't let him alone. Not about Nova, not about the still pilot either. Something about this other, strange guy.

And then he remembers. The guy has a car, that's what it is. The guy brought a car here. The guy is dead now, but the car is still standing there, back a little ways under some trees. He saw it himself.

He's got to get into that car. He may be half-dead, but cars don't die; it'll get him wherever he wants to go, good as ever. And where he wants to go is just where Nova is, no matter where.

He rolls over on his face first. And a lot of hot wet stuff comes out on his shoulder and his chest and hip. That makes everything come alive again and hurt like blazes. He starts pulling himself around the other way, with his good arm and shoulder for a propeller, like something maimed that ought to be put out of its misery with a big stick.

Then when he gets all the way around in a half circle, there's the car, with the pilot and the other guy for milestones leading to it. He starts dragging himself toward it. He can tell it's no use trying to get up on his feet.

He comes up to the pilot first, rests full length beside him a minute, reaches out, shakes him a little.

Frazier moans a little — almost a bleat — stirs a little.

O'Shaughnessy inches on toward the car. Like a caterpillar goes, contracting in the middle, expanding again, contracting, expanding. Like a caterpillar someone's stepped on, though. He leaves a moist trail behind him along the asphalt roadbed.

It's easy to rear up as high as the running-board, but above that there's a long unbroken stretch of glossy tonneau up to the door-handle. He makes it, on the heels of his hands and the points of his elbows, using them for grips, like vacuum-cups. The window's down, luckily, and a hand on the sill of the frame keeps him up. He falls, sprawling, into the seat.

Light funnels out of the dead headlights again, across the two men on the ground. He jockeys slowly around, then straightens out.

The rush of air through the open windows clears some of the cobwebs from his bullet-stunned mind. He knows where they went, and where to follow. "Did you hear where they were heading for?" the first voice had said. And the second answered, "Sounds like a swell idea."

The dirt-packed mountain-detour branches off at last, and the new-made treads of the car ahead are plainly visible along it. It's a hard trail to tackle, with just one good arm to steady the wheel by, and a grade like a loose plank tilted before your face, and obscuring branches and foliage whistling in at you through the windows.

The barbed-wire fence starts up beside him after awhile. He wonders if Denholt still lives behind it. The scooped-out hollows of their ruts are still before him, plain as day, and broken branches hanging down at right-angles. The fence suddenly crumples into the ground, and a big gap torn in it where the gate used to be, where he remembers it, shows him how they got in.

He turns in after them, brakes only when their own car, broad side to him, blocks further progress. Beyond, the house shows palely against his partly-deflected headlights. He gets out, bangs the car door after him out of habit, lurches over to their car, steadies himself against it for a moment. Caution is for the healthy. He laughs sort of crazily and stamps onto the wooden porch. He hangs onto the door-frame for a minute, then goes on through the unguarded opening.

They haven't even closed the door after them, they're so sure they've left all opposition dead behind them where the highway crosses Route 19. That white light from the laboratory is streaming out to guide him. They're in there, all of them; he can hear their voices as he comes draggingly nearer. One voice, raised above the others, strident, threatening.

"Don't tell us you don't know what we mean! Why the barbed-wire fence and all the trimmings, if it ain't around here somewhere? Why was the Brown girl, here, heading this way so fast with that guy she calls her husband? And a nifty place, if there ever was one! Here we was thinking it was somewhere down in the Florida keys all the time! That's just like the Boss, goes off on a cruise in one direction to cover up, sends the do-re-mi in another. He was always smart that way, always doing things like that. Now *you* be smart."

"There's no money here. I don't know who you are, what brings you here, but there's no money here. Only the — the results of a lifetime of — For God's sake, be careful!"

That's Denholt's voice. Already O'Shaughnessy has reached the threshold by now and stands there looking in at them like an apparition, unnoticed. Their backs are all to him, even Nova's, gripped cruelly between two of

them, held upright. Only Denholt is facing his way, at bay against the far wall.

Even from behind, O'Shaughnessy can spot one of those backs, Tereshko.

X

He is standing near a retort filled with colorless fluid; as Denholt's frantic warning singles it out, his elbow has just grazed it, caused it to teeter. The plea has exactly the opposite effect it was intended to; it is something precious to that old crank standing there before him, so his impulse is to destroy it forthwith. He deliberately completes the shove, sweeps it off the trestle it rests on. "Nuts with all this junk y'got here! This is a phony front. Who y'think y'kidding?"

The retort shivers into pieces on the floor. Its contents flood out, spread, dissipate beyond recovery.

Denholt lets out a hoarse, anguished cry. And leaps at the wanton destroyer of his whole life's work. Tereshko's gun raps out almost perfunctorily; smoke blooms between them; Denholt staggers, turns around the other way, then goes down to his knees slowly like a penitent in prayer.

They hear him say, in the brief silence: "Yes, it's better this way — now." Then he falls forward on his face.

O'Shaughnessy's leap for Tereshko crashes through the rear-guard, sends the four behind Tereshko lurching off-balance. Nova released, totters aside, keeps herself from falling against the edge of the operating table. They whirl, see who faces them and forget, in their utter disbelief, to use their guns. Tereshko goes down backward, his neck caught in the grip of O'Shaughnessy's arm, while the Irishman's other fist is pounding, flailing, slashing, into the side of Tereshko's head and ribs.

The struggle doesn't last long; it's too unequal. Their momentary surprise overcome, they close in on him. The well-directed slice of a gun-butt slackens the good arm; it's easy to pry the disabled one from around the racketeer's collar.

Tereshko is trembling with his anger. "Now *him* again!" he protests, as though at an injustice. "All they do is die and then get up and walk around again! What'sa matter, you guys using spitballs for slugs? No, don't kick at him, that'll never do it — I think the guy has nine lives!"

"Wait!" The mask has spoken, and they turn in awe at the impassive face looking at them. Face that lies now if it never did before — so calm, so untroubled, so serene, at the scene before it. "What is it you want of us — of me? Why do you hound us like this? What have we ever done to you?"

Tereshko sneers, "You're Benedetto's girl, ain't you? You're Jane Brown, ain't you? You oughta know what we want of you. We did his dirty work

for seven long years, you just come in on the pay-off at the end. Where's the profits of those seven years, when two bits out of every fifty-cent glass of beer drunk east of the Mississippi went into his pockets? Where's the million and a quarter dollars in gold and Federal Reserve notes that dropped from sight when he was arrested?"

"I never saw or knew Benedetto," says the mask slowly.

"You lying tomato! I'm looking right at the face he used to kiss in front of all of us. I'm looking right at the face that stood in a diamond frame on his bureau, every time I went in there to make a report. I'm hearing the voice that used to call him Benny-boy, I'm seeing the eyes that cried when he got sent away — Oh no! You're Jane Brown, all right."

Gloved hands rise from the enfolding cloak, undo tiny straps behind the ears, below the golden hair on top of the head. "Look closer still — and tell me if I'm Benedetto's girl — if I'm Jane Brown!" The face drops off — a shell — and yet repeats itself, identical, still unravaged, only paler, beneath.

They gasp in surprise. And then in the midst of a deep silence, Tereshko says: "All right, that's a mask — so what?" but his voice trembles a little.

Her hands flutter up and down the cloak-fastenings, seize it to throw it open. "Look closer," she says, "and tell me if you know me!"

"No, Nova — don't!" O'Shaughnessy cries from the floor.

She says softly: "Close your eyes, O'Shaughnessy, and keep them closed, if you love me. For no love could survive this — no love in all the world."

Dumbly obedient, he holds his hands there in front of his eyes. A rustle of Nova's cloak, a swirl of air as it flies back. A choking sound from someone near him. A gun thudding to the floor. Then a wild, terrible scream — a sudden rush of feet, five pairs of them, around and past him and toward the door. A stampede of mortal terror.

"Get away from me! What — are you?"

Above it all, her voice, serene, sepulchral. "Now — am I Benedetto's girl — am I anyone's girl any more?"

Across the wooden floor of the front of the house rushes the retreat of scuffling shoe-leather. A door bangs. The motor of their car comes to life — gears clash and scream. The car sound dies away — then suddenly comes a far-off crash carried thinly on the still night. One dim, final cry of pain and death — and dead silence drops at last like a curtain on a play. Within the room, for long minutes, there is no movement.

"They must have gone off the road," O'Shaughnessy says tautly. His hands fall from before his eyes, and Nova's cloak is closed again. How close to death she must be, he thinks, to drive the living to their own deaths in wild flight just from the look of her.

A gun, dropped there on the laboratory floor, is all that's left of them.

O'Shaughnessy toes it aside and it skitters across the room. Painfully, inch by inch, he hauls himself over beside Denholt, lifts the scientist's head and shoulders in his arms. Denholt's eyes, still alive, turn toward him.

O'Shaughnessy's voice rasps like a file. "You've got to save her. Got to! Kill me if I've wronged you — but I've brought her back to you — you're the only one who can do anything. . . . Denholt, can you hear me?"

The dying man nods, points helplessly to the shattered retort, the evaporating stain on the floor.

"Was that it —?" O'Shaughnessy shakes him wildly in his fright. "There must be more. That can't be all! Can't you tell me how to make more?"

A sigh filters through the parted lips. "No time."

"Haven't you got it written down?"

A feeble shake of the head. "Afraid to — Jealous someone else would steal it from me —"

O'Shaughnessy's bony hands claw at Denholt's shoulders. "But you can't mean — that she's got to die. That there isn't anything you with your knowledge or I with my love can do for her — anything at all —?" Something, like a cold hand, closes his throat. Something else, like little needles, pricks his eyes until the lashes are moistened. Nova, standing there motionless, slowly droops her head.

A thin tensile hand grips O'Shaughnessy's arm to arrest his attention. A hand that must have been very strong once. "Wait. Lean down closer, so you can hear me — I was filling a hypo — for one of the rabbits — when they broke in. I don't remember what became — Look around, see if you can find it — Enough for one injection, if it's intact — hurry, it's getting dark, I'm going fast."

But before he does look for it, before he makes a move, he remembers to touch that mascot in his pocket, the rabbit's foot. "Help me," he says to her then, "you know what it looks like, you used to see enough of them —"

She raises her head, steps aside — and there it is behind her, lying on the operating table. A precious liquid glinting within its transparent barrel.

Then he's down again beside the dying man, holding it before his dimming eyes.

"Yes, that's it. All there is left now. It'll be lost forever in a few more minutes when I go. I'm taking it with me — after what I've seen tonight of human nature, too much power for evil in it — it's better, for our own sakes, the way Nature ordered it —"

"Shall I lift you up, do you think you can stand long enough to —"

"No time." He motions to Nova, weakly. She draws near. "Recline on the floor here, where I can reach you —" Then to O'Shaughnessy, "Sweep the hair from the base of her head. Hold my arm at the elbow, steady it —"

The needle falls, emptied.

O'Shaughnessy murmurs, staring dully at the floor: "A month more — this'll give her. Maybe I'm a fool to have done it. What torture that month is going to be — knowing now our only chance is gone. Well, maybe that French doctor was right. . . ."

Again that hand on his arm. "Listen — She will be ill, very ill, for twenty-four hours. The reaction. Keep ice packed around her until the temperature goes down. Then — after that — the injection will arrest it for a while. It can't mend what's already happened — but it will give you that one month. Maybe a little — longer. I am sorry that I can't give you more — or any real hope at all."

Then whatever was human and compassionate in Denholt dies out, and the scientist replaces the man. "I want you to know why I failed. I must tell someone. I brought everything in her to life — but the blood. That was dead, stayed dead. As it circulated in her veins it carried death through her body. The injections I gave her held that flowing decay at bay — no more.

"I didn't realize that — I do now. The chemical composition of the blood changed in death — nothing I have done restored it. It would always defeat the serum — eventually. She was not really alive in her own right; she was being kept alive by a sort of artificial combustion introduced into her system at periodic intervals."

O'Shaughnessy's eyes glare dully. "You had no right," he says. "You had no right to do it. It wasn't fair to her or to me — or" — and he smiles ruefully — "even to those fear-crazy gunmen who are smeared all over your mountainside right now. You tried to bring life, Denholt — and you've got nothing but death on your hands."

The pale, almost lifeless lips flicker in a ghastly smile. "My death, too," he whispers. He struggles to rise in O'Shaughnessy's arms. And there is a pitiful attempt at self-justification. "If you hadn't come along, O'Shaughnessy — who can say? None of this — would have been. And yet, you represented the human element — the thing I didn't reckon on. Yes. It was the blood that defeated me — the passionate warm blood of men and women, hungry and greedy and alive — the blood I couldn't put into Jane Brown's body. . . ."

O'Shaughnessy's shoulder still throbs with pain and there is blood trickling down the arm inside the sleeve, coming out below the cuff, oozing over his wrist and his hands. O'Shaughnessy stares at it dully and remembers Denholt's last words; and then suddenly strength comes to him to do the thing he must do. There is a car outside and down below a plane waiting. And there is Nova, her pale face flushed and hectic with the

fever, her eyes flickering closed, her breathing labored. And here — here, you crazy gods of Fate, is O'Shaughnessy, the man who hasn't been afraid, not for himself anyway, since he was eighteen. Yes, all the pieces of the mosaic are here to hand, and the pattern has just fallen into place in O'Shaughnessy's mind.

He is a little light-headed, and giddy, but there is a hard core of will in his brain. He can stand now, where before he could only crawl like a snake with its spine crushed. He scoops Nova up in his arms, totters for one step with her, before his walk is firm and steady.

Nova's head stirs against his shoulder. Her eyes are open. "What are we to do now?" she murmurs, with the fever-heat thickening her tones.

"What does it matter?" O'Shaughnessy says. He doesn't want to tell her, doesn't want her to know. "I'm with you, Jane."

He says that to show her that he can call her by her right name without feeling, that he doesn't hold Jane Brown against her. But she won't let him. That name isn't hers.

"My name," she says, childlike, "is Nova. Nova — O'Shaughnessy."

She doesn't speak again all the time he is putting her into the car, where she slumps against the cushions like a rag doll, no more than half conscious, or while they are driving down the mountainside, or even while he carries her to the plane that is still standing there.

He goes, a little more unsteadily now, to kneel beside the wounded pilot.

"How you feeling?" O'Shaughnessy's words are jerky.

The pilot nods. "I'm okay, I guess. Feels like just a nick."

"That's all right, then," O'Shaughnessy says. He pushes a wad of bills into Frazier's hand, helps the man to sit up. "I'm going to take your plane. I'm glad you're feeling okay, because I'd have to take the plane anyway — only it's nice that I don't have to leave you here dying. You can use the car there."

Wrinkles of worry blossom at the corners of the relief pilot's eyes. "You sound kinda crazy to me — what happened up there? What's this money for?"

"That's to square you for the plane — in case . . . Well, just in case."

Then he is gone, weaving across the uneven ground. Frazier gets up and wobbles after him. "Hi, wait a minute. The propeller —"

In a few minutes, his hands are on the blades and from inside the plane-cabin O'Shaughnessy's voice is calling, "Contact," and Frazier yanks, the propeller spins. Frazier falls back and the plane taxis jerkily with a sputtering roar of the engine.

O'Shaughnessy somehow negotiates a take-off from an impossibly tip-tilted angle, and Frazier stands there watching, jaw dropped, until the

black of the sky and the distance have inked out the tiny plane-lights.

"Screwball," he mutters and paws the sweat from his face.

O'Shaughnessy's hard-knuckled hands grasp the stick hard. Thunder rumbles above the roar of the motor; lightning stabs the darkness. Rain begins to slash down around the plane.

O'Shaughnessy remembers another storm, another plane, another night; and he glances at the girl beside him. She seems to sense his gaze upon her, her eyes open; her lips would speak but the fever that is burning through her won't let the words come. They are in her eyes, though, as plain as any words could be, and her whole heart is with them. No question there at all, just courage and confidence.

"I brought you into this," he says — to those eyes. "Now I'm taking you out of it. There's no place in it for us any longer."

Her fingers inside the glove tighten on his hand convulsively as if to say: "Alone, O'Shaughnessy? Must I go alone?"

At least that's the way he figures it, for he says quickly: "With me, honey. Together."

The pressure of the fingers relaxes, then tightens, but more steadily this time, reassured and reassuring. That's her way of saying:

"All right, O'Shaughnessy. It's all right with me."

Her face blurs in O'Shaughnessy's eyes; he begins to whistle a silly tune that even he can't hear, and somehow it is comforting. Lightning again and a louder crash of thunder. A gust of wind rocks the plane. The black bulk of a granite ridge that looks like a giant comber whipped up by a typhoon and frozen by the hands of God shows up ahead and a little below.

O'Shaughnessy's hand blunders out to take Nova's gloved one in his own. She whimpers a little, and stirs. O'Shaughnessy slides the stick forward, the plane tilts sharply down; the mountainside, rocky and desolate, seems to be reaching up for them, but in these seconds they are alone, the two of them, with the sky and the storm.

It takes will power and nerve to hold the stick that way, to keep his eyes open and watch the rocky face of the cliff, pine-bearded, rush up at them. O'Shaughnessy's mouth flattens, his face goes white. And then in that final fraction of a moment, he laughs, a little crazily — a laugh of defiance, of mocking farewell, and, somehow, of conquest.

"Here we go, baby!" he shouts, teeth bared. "Now I'm going to find out what it really feels like to fly into the side of a mountain! . . ."

There is only the storm to hear the smash of the plane as it splinters itself against the rock — and the storm drowns the sound out with thunder, just as the lightning turns pale the flame that rises, like a hungry tongue, from the wreckage.

Richard Matheson's first published story, Born of Man and Woman, *is probably, to judge from your letters, the most popular single story we've printed to date — an astonishing record for a short-short by a beginner. Since that classic (about to be reprinted in the Bleiler-Dikty* BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES 1951), *Matheson has published many stories here and elsewhere, admirable tales but never quite equaling the sheer originality and shock-impact of his first. Now at last, in* Dress of White Silk, *we think that Dick Matheson has done it again. That's introduction enough.*

Dress of White Silk

by RICHARD MATHESON

QUIET IS HERE and all in me.

Granma locked me in my room and wont let me out. Because its happened she says. I guess I was bad. Only it was the dress. Mommas dress I mean. She is gone away forever. Granma says your momma is in heaven. I dont know how. Can she go in heaven if shes dead?

Now I hear granma. She is in mommas room. She is putting mommas dress down the box. Why does she always? And locks it too. I wish she didnt. Its a pretty dress and smells sweet so. And warm. I love to touch it against my cheek. But I cant never again. I guess that is why granma is mad at me.

But I amnt sure. All day it was only like everyday. Mary Jane came over to my house. She lives across the street. Everyday she comes to my house and play. Today she was.

I have seven dolls and a fire truck. Today granma said play with your dolls and it. Dont you go inside your mommas room now she said. She always says it. She just means not mess up I think. Because she says it all the time. Dont go in your mommas room. Like that.

But its nice in mommas room. When it rains I go there. Or when granma is doing her nap I do. I dont make noise. I just sit on the bed and touch the white cover. Like when I was only small. The room smells like sweet.

I make believe momma is dressing and I am allowed in. I smell her white silk dress. Her going out for night dress. She called it that I dont remember when.

I hear it moving if I listen hard. I make believe to see her sitting at the dressing table. Like touching on perfume or something I mean. And see her dark eyes. I can remember.

Its so nice if it rains and I see eyes on the window. The rain sounds like a big giant outside. He says shushshush so every one will be quiet. I like to make believe that in mommas room.

What I like almost best is sit at mommas dressing table. It is like pink and big and smells sweet too. The seat in front has a pillow sewed in it. There are bottles and bottles with bumps and have colored perfume in them. And you can see almost your whole self in the mirror.

When I sit there I make believe to be momma. I say be quiet mother I am going out and you can not stop me. It is something I say I dont know why like hear it in me. And oh stop your sobbing mother they will not catch me I have my magic dress.

When I pretend I brush my hair long. But I only use my own brush from my room. I didnt never use mommas brush. I dont think granma is mad at me for that because I never use mommas brush. I wouldnt never.

Sometimes I did open the box up. Because I know where granma puts the key. I saw her once when she wouldnt know I saw her. She puts the key on the hook in mommas closet. Behind the door I mean.

I could open the box lots of times. Thats because I like to look at mommas dress. I like best to look at it. It is so pretty and feels soft and like silky. I could touch it for a million years.

I kneel on the rug with roses on it. I hold the dress in my arms and like breathe from it. I touch it against my cheek. I wish I could take it to sleep with me and hold it. I like to. Now I cant. Because granma says. And she says I should burn it up but I loved her so. And she cries about the dress.

I wasnt never bad with it. I put it back neat like it was never touched. Granma never knew. I laughed that she never knew before. But she knows now I did it I guess. And shell punish me. What did it hurt her? Wasnt it my mommas dress?

What I like the real best in mommas room is look at the picture of momma. It has a gold thing around it. Frame is what granma says. It is on the wall on top the bureau.

Momma is pretty. Your momma was pretty granma says. Why does she? I see momma there smiling on me and she *is* pretty. For always.

Her hair is black. Like mine. Her eyes are even pretty like black. Her mouth is red so red. I like the dress and its the white one. It is all down on her shoulders. Her skin is white almost white like the dress. And so too are her hands. She is so pretty. I love her even if she is gone away forever I love her so much.

I guess I think thats what made me bad. I mean to Mary Jane.

Mary Jane came from lunch like she does. Granma went to do her nap. She said dont forget now no going in your mommas room. I told her no granma. And I was saying the truth but then Mary Jane and I was playing fire truck. Mary Jane said I bet you havent no mother I bet you made up it all she said.

I got mad at her. I have a momma I know. She made me mad at her to say I made up it all. She said Im a liar. I mean about the bed and the dressing table and the picture and the dress even and every thing.

I said well Ill show you smarty.

I looked into granmas room. She was doing her nap still. I went down and said Mary Jane to come on because granma wont know.

She wasnt so smart after then. She giggled like she does. Even she made a scaredy noise when she hit into the table in the hall upstairs. I said youre a scaredy cat to her. She said back well *my* house isnt so dark like this. Like that was so much.

We went in mommas room. It was more dark than you could see. So I took back the curtains. Just a little so Mary Jane could see. I said this is my mommas room I suppose I made up it all.

She was by the door and she wasnt smart then either. She didnt say any word. She looked around the room. She jumped when I got her arm. Well come on I said.

I sat on the bed and said this is my mommas bed see how soft it is. She didnt say nothing. Scaredy cat I said. Am not she said like she does.

I said to sit down how can you tell if its soft if you dont sit down. She sat down by me. I said feel how soft it is. Smell how like sweet it is.

I closed my eyes but funny it wasnt like always. Because Mary Jane was there. I told her to stop feeling the cover. You said to she said. Well stop it I said.

See I said and I pulled her up. Thats the dressing table. I took her and brought her there. She said let go. It was so quiet and like always. I started to feel bad. Because Mary Jane was there. Because it was in my mommas room and momma wouldnt like Mary Jane there.

But I had to show her the things because. I showed her the mirror. We looked at each other in it. She looked white. Mary Jane is a scaredy cat I said. Am not am not she said anyway nobodys house is so quiet and dark inside. Anyway she said it smells.

I got mad at her. No it doesnt smell I said. Does so she said you said it did. I got madder too. It smells like sugar she said. It smells like sick people in your mommas room.

Dont say my mommas room is like sick people I said to her.

Well you didnt show me no dress and youre lying she said there isnt no dress. I felt all warm inside so I pulled her hair. Ill show you I said and dont never say Im a liar again.

She said Im going home and tell my mother on you. You are not I said youre going to see my mommas dress and youll better not call me a liar.

I made her stand still and I got the key off the hook. I kneeled down. I opened the box with the key.

Mary Jane said pew that smells like garbage.

I put my nails in her and she pulled away and got mad. Dont you pinch me she said and she was all red. Im telling my mother on you she said. And anyway its not a white dress its dirty and ugly she said.

Its not dirty I said. I said it so loud I wonder why granma didnt hear. I pulled out the dress from the box. I held it up to show her how its white. It fell open like the rain whispering and the bottom touched on the rug.

It is too white I said all white and clean and silky.

No she said she was so mad and red it has a hole in it. I got more madder. If my momma was here shed show you I said. You got no momma she said all ugly. I hate her.

I have. I said it way loud. I pointed my finger to mommas picture. Well who can see in this stupid dark room she said. I pushed her hard and she hit against the bureau. See then I said mean look at the picture. Thats my momma and shes the most beautiful lady in the whole world.

Shes ugly she has funny hands Mary Jane said. She hasnt I said shes the most beautiful lady in the world!

Not not she said *she has buck teeth.*

I dont remember then. I think like the dress moved in my arms. Mary Jane screamed. I dont remember what. It got dark and the curtains were closed I think. I couldnt see anyway. I couldnt hear nothing except buck teeth funny hands buck teeth funny hands even when no one was saying it.

There was something else because I think I heard some one call *dont let her say that!* I couldnt hold to the dress. And I had it on me I cant remember. Because I was like grown up strong. But I was a little girl still I think. I mean outside.

I think I was terrible bad then.

Granma took me away from there I guess. I dont know. She was screaming god help us its happened its happened. Over and over. I dont know why. She pulled me all the way here to my room and locked me in. She wont let me out. Well Im not so scared. Who cares if she locks me in a million billion years? She doesnt have to even give me supper. Im not hungry anyway.

Im full.

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