

0-825-03492-8 • \$1.95 • A GERALDY MEDALLION BOOK



"One of the most original
fantasists this country has ever produced."

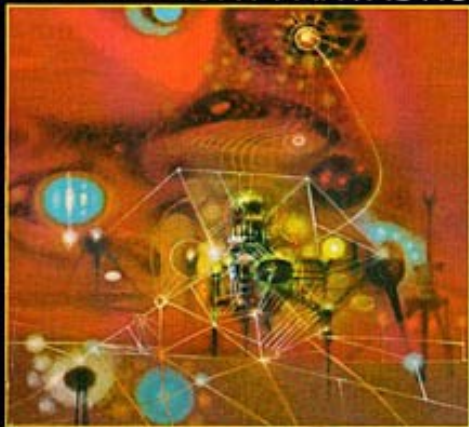
—Harlan Ellison *The Los Angeles Times*

STARLIGHT

THE GREAT SHORT FICTION OF
ALFRED BESTER

INCLUDES:

STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT
and THE LIGHT FANTASTIC



FIRST TIME IN PAPERBACK

Starlight

The Great Short Fiction of

Alfred Bester



Contents (Short Stories)

5,271,009, 1954. (F & SF, #34, March, 1954.)

Ms. Found in a Champagne Bottle, 1968. (Status Magazine, 1968.)

Fondly Fahrenheit, 1954. (F & SF, #39, August, 1954.)

The Four-Hour Fugue, 1974. (Analog, 1974.)

The Men Who Murdered Mohammed, 1958. (F & SF, October, 1958.)

Disappearing Act, 1954. (New Worlds, #29, November, 1954.)

Hell Is Forever, 1942. (novella) (Unknown, August, 1942.)

5,271,009

Alfred Bester

THERE I was in our cottage out on Fire Island, taking the summer off because the shows I wrote took the summer off. My wife was an actress then and went into New York during the week to work or look for work, leaving me alone to enjoy the fun and games.

They weren't what you're thinking. The Island does have and indeed has earned a raunchy reputation, but Walpurgisnacht indulgence is not for everybody and certainly not for me, which gave me a curious schizorepute. Half our village believed I was a stealthy swinger who could and did chase women and girls into bed whenever he pleased. The other half believed I was an undercover queen. I was delighted with both.

No, I vacationed very quietly. I'd go surf-fishing every dawn and dusk, occasionally catching a respectable fish. I'd laze around in the cottage, reading. For real entertainment I'd attend the police magistrates' hearings. The crimes were earth-shaking. Failure to remove garbage can from front of house before 10 a.m.--Fine: \$2.00. Failure to wear covering over bathing dress on public walks--Fine: \$2.00. Noisy party after 11 p.m.--Fine: a whopping \$10.00. The garbage can raps were the most fun; the ladies involved would argue passionately, plead, burst into tears, even bring lawyer friends to defend them. In the end they paid the \$2.00.

The other main source of entertainment was the morning visit to the post office. I didn't expect or receive much mail; it was merely an excuse to saunter down the main street of the village and watch it in action. So who was as surprised as me when I received a parcel from Tony Boucher and Mick McComas who were then editing Fantasy & Science Fiction into the witty so-phistication which it has never lost. The parcel contained a 6 STARLIGHT garish color reproduction of a cover for the magazine and a letter asking me if I could write a story to go with the cover.

I'd heard of this sort of operation but it had never happened to me, so I was intrigued. I examined the cover closely for stimulation. It was absurd. It depicted a case-hardened criminal wearing a nineteenth-century convict uniform... you know, the striped kind... with the number 5,271,002 emblazoned on his chest. He was chained to a big chunk of rock, floating in space. I'm fairly certain that he wore a helmet of some sort attached to oxygen cylinders. Come to think of it, he had to; how else could he survive in space?

I laughed and decided to reject the assignment with thanks. I was on splendid terms with Tony and Mick and I knew they wouldn't hold it against me. And yet... And yet... I went for a walk on the beach. It was dead low tide and the flat, hard-packed sand at the water's edge made for a wonderful stroll. I thought about that silly cover, keeping an eye on the alert for attractive shells and interesting lagan and derelict washed up on the shore.

You can't take that preposterous painting seriously, I told myself. No one could. It's a mad camp, and if you do a story to go with it, the story will have to be a mad camp, too. But what? I wondered what for a couple of miles, relaxed and happy, utterly devoid of ideas but not pressing myself. I was content to let my unconscious do its fair share of the work. If it came up with something, fine. If it didn't... well, you can't win 'em all. And there's a sand dollar, by gum! Milly collects sand dollars.

Apparently my unconscious had been waiting a long time to give me a piece of its mind because it began abusing me. Listen, it said, pay attention: You've been making fun of the cliché's and stereotypes of science fiction for years. This certainly is a chance for more of the same, but while you're at it, the least you can do, if you're honest, is make fun of yourself, too.

What sort of fun? All the childish fantasies still in your mind. Swept under the carpet, no doubt, but very much with you.

I tried arguing: What makes you think that readers will identify with my fantasies? What makes you think you're so different? You share them with everybody else.

I tried pleading: But if I did, the story would turn episodic. There wouldn't be any central spine to hold it all together.

You claim you're a writer, don't you? Come up with some-thing.

So in the end I paid the \$2.00 and came up with something. The fantasies are all my own. Most of the characters are based on people I know. I enjoyed the writing tremendously because the structure was loose enough to give me a free hand, and be-cause I discovered that I was great fun to spoof; I've never been able to take myself very seriously.

There are still two aspects of the story which displease me. I don't care for the title, and when the story was reprinted in an-other collection, I changed it to "The Star Comber." However, I've been told that "\$,271,009" is rather different and oddly grabby, so I've gone back to it.

The other irritant is the tagline of the story. I spent two whole days trying to come up with something more satisfactory, and failed. I appealed to Tony and Mick for help. They failed too. (The best that Tony could do was reassure me that 5,271,009 was indeed a prime number.) So we let the original stand, and I'm still unhappy with it. And yet even if I did find the right tag this very moment, it's too late to substitute it.

Altering earlier work is a heinous crime. Fine: \$5,271,009.

P.S. My editor in this edition has solved the problem by cut-ting the Gordian Knot, which the dictionary defines as "to solve a problem quickly and boldly." My quick and bold editor solved the tag tsimmi by cutting it completely.

Take two parts of Beelzebub, two of Israfel, one of Monte Cristo, one of Cyrano, mix violently, season with mystery and you have Mr. Solon Aquila. He is tall, gaunt, sprightly in man-ner, bitter in expression, and when he laughs his dark eyes turn into wounds. His occupation is unknown. He is wealthy without visible means of support. He is seen everywhere and understood nowhere. There is something odd about

bis life.

This is what's odd about Mr. Aquila, and you can make what you will of it. When he walks he is never forced to wait on a traffic signal. When he desires to ride there is always a vacant taxi on hand. When he bustles into his hotel an elevator always happens to be waiting. When he enters a store, a salesclerk is always free to serve him. There always happens to be a table available for Mr. Aquila in restaurants. There are always last-minute ticket returns when he craves entertainment at sold-out shows.

You can question waiters, hack drivers, elevator girls, sales-men, box-office men. There is no conspiracy.

Mr. Aquila does not bribe or blackmail for these petty conveniences. In any case, it would not be possible for him to bribe or blackmail the auto-matic clock that governs the city traffic-signal system. These things, which make life so convenient for him, simply happen. Mr. Solon Aquila is never disappointed. Presently we shall hear about his first disappointment and see what it led to.

Mr. Aquila has been seen fraternizing in low saloons, in middle saloons, in high saloons. He has been met in bagnios, at coronations, executions, circuses, magistrate's courts and handbook offices. He has been known to buy antique cars, historic jewels, incunabula, pornography, chemicals, porro prisms, polo ponies and full-choke shotguns.

"HimmelHerrGottSeiDank! I'm crazy, man, crazy. Eclectic, by God," he told a flabbergasted department-store president. "The Weltmann type, nicht wahr? My ideal: Goethe. Tout le monde. God damn."

He spoke a spectacular tongue of mixed metaphors and meanings. Dozens of languages and dialects came out in machine-gun bursts. Apparently he also lied ad libitum.

"Sacred bleu, Jeez!" he was heard to say once. "Aquila from the Latin. Means aquiline. O tempora, o mores. Speech by Cicero. My ancestor."

And another time: "My idol: Kipling. Took my name from him. Aquila, one of his heroes. God damn.

Greatest Negro writer since Uncle Tom's Cabin."

On the morning that Mr. Solon Aquila was stunned by his first disappointment, he bustled into the atelier of Lagan & Derelict, dealers in paintings, sculpture and rare objects of art. It was his intention to buy a painting. Mr. James Derelict knew Aquila as a client. Aquila had already purchased a Frederic Remington and a Winslow Homer some time ago when, by another odd coincidence, he had bounced into the Madison Avenue shop one minute after the coveted painting went up for sale. Mr. Derelict had also seen Mr.

Aquila boat a prize striper at Montauk.

"Bon soir, bel esprit, God damn, Jimmy," Mr. Aquila said. He was on first-name terms with everyone.

"Here's a cool day for color, oui\ Cool. Slang. I have in me to buy a picture."

"Good morning, Mr. Aquila," Derelict answered. He had the seamed face of a cardsharp, but his eyes were honest and his smile was disarming. However at this moment his smile seemed strained, as though the volatile appearance of Aquila had unnerved him.

"I'm in the mood for your man, by Jeez," Aquila said, rapidly opening cases, fingering ivories and tasting the porcelains. "What's his name, my old? Artist like Bosch. Like Heinrich Kley. You handle him, parbleu, exclusive. O si sic omnia, by Zeus!"

"Jeffrey Halsyon?" Derelict asked timidly.

"Oeil de boeuf Aquila cried. "What a memory. Chryselephantine. Exactly the artist I want He is my favorite. A mono-chrome, preferably. A small Jeffrey Halsyon for Aquila, bitte. Wrap her up."

"I wouldn't have believed it," Derelict muttered.

"Ah! Ah-ha? This is not one hundred proof guaranteed Ming," Mr. Aquila exclaimed brandishing an exquisite vase. "Caveat emptor, by damn. Well, Jimmy? I snap my fingers. No Halsyons in stock, old faithful?"

"It's extremely odd, Mr. Aquila," Derelict seemed to struggle with himself. "Your coming in like this. A Halsyon monochrome arrived not five minutes ago."

"You see? Tempo ist Richtung. Well?"

"I'd rather not show it to you. For personal reasons, Mr. Aquila."

"HimmelHerrGott! Pourquoi? She's bespoke?"

"N-no, sir. Not for my personal reasons. For your personal reasons."

"Oh? God damn. Explain myself to me."

"Anyway, it isn't for sale, Mr. Aquila. It can't be sold."

"For why not? Speak, old fish and chips."

"I can't say, Mr. Aquila."

"Zut alors! Must I judo your arm, Jimmy? You can't show. You can't sell. Me, internally, I have pressurized myself for a Jeffrey Halsyon. My favorite. God damn. Show me the Halsyon or sic transit gloria mundi. You hear me, Jimmy?"

Derelict hesitated, then shrugged "Very well, Mr. Aquila. Ill show you."

Derelict led Aquila past cases of china and silver, past lacquer and bronzes and suits of shimmering armor to the gallery in the rear of the shop where dozens of paintings hung on the gray velour walls, glowing under warm spotlights. He opened a drawer in a Goddard breakfront and took out an envelope. On the envelope was printed BABYLON INSTITUTE. From the io STARLIGHT envelope Derelict withdrew a dollar bill and handed it to Mr. Aquila.

Jeffrey Halsyon's latest," he said.

With a fine pen and carbon ink, a cunning hand had drawn another portrait over the face of George Washington on the dol-lar bill. It was a hateful, diabolic face set in a hellish back-ground. It was a face to strike terror, in a scene to inspire loath-ing. The face was a portrait of Mr. Aquila.

"God damn," Mr. Aquila said.

"You see, sir? I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Now I must own him, big boy." Mr. Aquila appeared to be fascinated by the portrait. "Is she accident or for purpose? Does Halsyon know myself? Ergo sum."

"Not to my knowledge, Mr. Aquila. But in any event I can't sell the drawing. It's evidence of a felony... mutilating United States currency. It must be destroyed."

"Never!" Mr. Aquila returned the drawing as though he feared the dealer would instantly set fire to it.

"Never, Jimmy. Nevermore quoth the raven. God damn. Why does he draw on money, Halsyon? My picture, pfui. Criminal libels but riimporte. But pictures on money? Wasteful. Joci causa."

"He's insane, Mr. Aquila."

"No! Yes? Insane?" Aquila was shocked.

"Quite insane, sir. It's very sad. They've had to put him away. He spends his time drawing these pictures on money."

"God damn, mon ami. Who gives him money?"

"I do, Mr. Aquila; and his friends. Whenever we visit him he begs for money for his drawings."

"he jour viendra, by Jeez! Why you don't give him paper for drawings,

eh, my ancient of days?"

Derelict smiled sadly. "We tried that, sir. When we gave Jeff paper, he drew pictures of money."

"HimmelHerrGott! My favorite artist. In the loony bin. Eh bien. How in the holy hell am I to buy paintings from same if such be the case?"

"You won't, Mr. Aquila. I'm afraid no one will ever buy a Hal-syon again. He's quite hopeless."

"Why does he jump his tracks, Jimmy?"

"They say it's a withdrawal, Mr. Aquila. His success did it to him."

"Ah? Q.E.D. me, big boy. Translate."

"Well, sir, he's still a young man; in his thirties and very im- mature. When he became so very successful, he wasn't ready for it. He wasn't prepared for the responsibilities of his life and his career. That's what the doctors told me. So he turned his back on everything and withdrew into childhood."

"Ah? And the drawing on money?"

"They say that's his symbol of his return to childhood, Mr. Aquila. It proves he's too young to know what money is for."

"Ah? Oui. Ja. Astute, by crackey. And my portrait?"

"I can't explain that, Mr. Aquila, unless you have met him in the past and he remembers you somehow. Or it may be a coincidence."

"Hmmm. Perhaps. So. You know something, my attic of Greece? I am disappointed. Je n'oublierai jamais. I am most se-verely disappointed. God damn. No more Halsyons ever? Merde. My slogan. We must do something about Jeffrey Halsyon. I will not be disappointed. We must do something."

Mr. Solon Aquila nodded his head emphatically, took out a cigarette,

took out a lighter, then paused, deep in thought. After a long moment, he nodded again, this time with decision, and did an astonishing thing. He returned the lighter to his pocket, took out another, glanced around quickly and lit it under Mr. Derelict's nose.

Mr. Derelict appeared not to notice. Mr. Derelict appeared, in one instant, to be frozen. Allowing the lighter to burn, Mr. Aquila placed it carefully on a ledge in front of the art dealer who stood before it without moving. The orange flame gleamed on his glassy eyeballs.

Aquila darted out into the shop, searched and found a rare Chinese crystal globe. He took it from its case, warmed it against his heart, and peered into it. He mumbled. He nodded. He re-turned the globe to the case, went to the cashier's desk, took a pad and pencil and began ciphering in symbols that bore no relationship to any language or any graphology. He nodded again, tore up the sheet of paper, and took out his wallet.

From the wallet he removed a dollar bill. He placed the bill on the glass counter, took an assortment of fountain pens from his vest pocket, selected one and unscrewed it. Carefully shield-ing his eyes, he allowed one drop to fall from the pen point onto the bill. There was a blinding flash of light. There was a hum-ming vibration that slowly died.

Mr. Aquila returned the pens to his pocket, carefully picked up the bill by a corner, and ran back into the picture gallery where the art dealer still stood staring glassily at the orange flame. Aquila fluttered the bill before the sightless eyes.

"Listen, my ancient," Aquila whispered. "You will visit Jeffrey Halsyon this afternoon. N'est-ce pas? You will give him this very own coin of the realm when he asks for drawing materials? Eh? God damn." He removed Mr. Derelict's wallet from his pocket, placed the bill inside and returned the wallet.

"And this is why you make the visit," Aquila continued. "It is because you have had an inspiration from le Diable Boiteux. Nolens volens, the lame devil has inspired you with a plan for healing Jeffrey

Halsyon. God damn. You will show him samples of his great art of the past to bring him to his senses. Memory is the all-mother. HimmelHerrGott. You hear me, big boy? You do what I say. Go today and devil take the hindmost."

Mr. Aquila picked up the burning lighter, lit his cigarette and permitted the flame to go out. As he did so, he said: "No, my holy of holies! Jeffrey Halsyon is too great an artist to languish in durance vile. He must be returned to this world. He must be re-turned to me. sempre l'ora. I will not be disappointed. You hear me, Jimmy? I will not!"

"Perhaps there's hope, Mr. Aquila," James Derelict said. "Something's just occurred to me while you were talking... a way to bring Jeff back to sanity. I'm going to try it this after-noon.

As he drew the face of the Faraway Fiend over George Washington's portrait on a bill, Jeffrey Halsyon dictated his autobi-ography to nobody.

"Like Cellini," he recited. "Line and literature simultaneously. Hand in hand, although all art is one art, holy brothers in barbi-turate, near ones and dear ones in Nembutal. Very well. I com-mence: I was born. I am dead. Baby wants a dollar. No--"

He arose from the padded floor and raged from padded wall to padded wall, envisioning anger as a deep purple fury running into the pale lavenders of recrimination by the magic of his brushwork, his chiaroscuro, by the clever blending of oil, pig-ment, light and the stolen genius of Jeffrey Halsyon torn from him by the Faraway Fiend whose hideous face--

"Begin anew," he muttered. "We darken the highlights. Start with the underpainting...." He squatted on the floor again, picked up the quill drawing pen whose point was warranted harmless, dipped it into carbon ink whose contents were war-ranted poisonless, and applied himself to the monstrous face of the Faraway Fiend which was replacing the first President on the dollar.

"I was born," he dictated to space while his cunning hand wrought beauty and horror on the banknote paper. "I had peace. I had hope. I had art. I had peace. Mama. Papa. Kin I have a glass of water? Oooo! There was a big bad bogey man who gave me a bad look; and now baby's afraid. Mama! Baby wantsa make pretty pictures onna pretty paper for Mama and Papa. Look, Mama. Baby makin' a picture of the bad bogey man with a mean look, a black look with his black eyes like pools of hell, like cold fires of terror, like faraway fiends from faraway fears-- Who's that!"

2

The cell door unbolted. Halsyon leaped into a corner and cowered, naked and squalling, as the door was opened for the Faraway Fiend to enter. But it was only the medicine man in his white jacket and a stranger-man in black suit, black homburg, carrying a black portfolio with the initials J.D. lettered on it in a bastard gold Gothic with ludicrous overtones of Goudy and Baskerville.

"Well, Jeffrey?" the medicine man inquired heartily.

"Dollar?" Halsyon whined. "Kin baby have a dollar?"

"I've brought an old friend, Jeffrey. You remember Mr. Dere-lict?"

"Dollar," Halsyon whined. "Baby wants a dollar."

"What happened to the last one, Jeffrey? You haven't finished it yet, have you?"

Halsyon sat on the bill to conceal it, but the medicine man was too quick for him. He snatched it up and he and the stranger-man examined it.

"As great as all the rest," Derelict sighed. "Greater! What a magnificent talent wasting away...."

Halsyon began to weep. "Baby wants a dollar!" he cried.

The stranger-man took out his wallet, selected a dollar bill and handed it to Halsyon. As soon as Halsyon touched it, he heard it sing and he tried to sing with it, but it was singing him a private song so he had to listen.

It was a lovely dollar; smooth but not too new, with a faintly matte surface that would take ink like kisses. George Washington looked reproachful but resigned, as though he was used to the treatment in store for him. And indeed he might well be, for he was much older on this dollar. Much older than on any other, for his serial number was 5,271,009 which made him 5,000,000 years old and more, and the oldest he had ever been before was 2,000,000.

As Halsyon squatted contently on the floor and dipped his pen in the ink as the dollar told him to, he heard the medicine man say, "I don't think I should leave you alone with him, Mr. Derelict."

"No, we must be alone together, doctor. Jeff always was shy about his work. He could only discuss it with me privately."

"How much time would you need?"

"Give me an hour."

I doubt very much whether it'll do any good."

"But there's no harm trying?"

"I suppose not. All right, Mr. Derelict. Call the nurse when you're through."

The door opened; the door closed. The stranger-man named Derelict put his hand on Halsyon's shoulder in a friendly, intimate way. Halsyon looked up at him and grinned cleverly, meanwhile waiting for the sound of the bolt in the door. It came; like a shot, like a final nail in a coffin.

"Jeff, I've brought some of your old work with me," Derelict said in a voice that was only approximately casual. "I thought you might like to look it over with me."

"Have you got a watch on you?" Halsyon asked.

Restraining his start of surprise at Halsyon's normal tone, the art dealer took out his pocket watch and displayed it.

"Lend it to me for a minute."

Derelict unchained the watch and handed it over. Halsyon took it carefully and said, "All right. Go ahead with the pictures."

"Jeff!" Derelict exclaimed. "This is you again, isn't it? This is the way you always--"

"Thirty," Halsyon interrupted. "Thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, ONE." He concentrated on the flicking second hand with rapt expectation.

"No, I guess it isn't," the dealer muttered. "I only imagined you sounded--Oh well." He opened the portfolio and began sorting mounted drawings.

"Forty, forty-five, fifty-five, TWO."

"Here's one of your earliest, Jeff. Remember when you came into the gallery with the roughs and we thought you were the new polisher from the agency? Took you months to forgive us.

You always claimed we bought your first picture just to apolo-gize. Do you still think so?"

"Forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, THREE."

"Here's that tempera that gave you so many heartaches. I was wondering if you'd care to try another? I really don't think tempera is as inflexible as you claim, and I'd be interested to have you try again now that your technique's so much more mature. What do you say?"

"Forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, FOUR."

"Jeff, put down that watch."

"Ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five..." "What the devil's the point of counting minutes?"

"Well," Halsyon said reasonably, "sometimes they lock the door and go away. Other times they lock up and stay and spy on you. But they never spy longer than three minutes, so I'm giving them five just to make sure. FIVE."

Halsyon gripped the pocket watch in his big fist and drove the fist cleanly into Derelict's jaw. The dealer dropped without a sound. Halsyon dragged him to the wall, stripped him naked, dressed himself in his clothes, repacked the portfolio, and closed it. He picked up the dollar bill and pocketed it. He picked up the bottle of carbon ink warranted nonpoisonous and smeared the contents over his face.

Choking and shouting, he brought the nurse to the door.

"Let me out of here," Halsyon cried in a muffled voice. "That maniac tried to drown me. Threw ink in my face. I want out!"

The door was unbolted and opened. Halsyon shoved past the nurse-man, cunningly mopping his blackened face with a hand that only masked it more. As the nurse-man started to enter the cell, Halsyon said, "Never mind Halsyon. He's all right. Get me a towel or something. Hurry!"

The nurse-man locked the door again, turned and ran down the corridor. Halsyon waited until he disappeared into a supply room, then turned and ran in the opposite direction. He went through the heavy doors to the main wing corridor, still cleverly mopping, still sputtering with cunning indignation. He reached the main building. He was halfway out and still no alarm. He knew those brazen bells. They tested them every Wednesday noon.

It's like a game, he told himself. It's fun. It's nothing to be scared of. It's being safely, sanely, joyously a kid again and when we quit playing, I'm going home to mama and dinner and papa reading me the funnies and I'm a ldd again, really a ldd again, forever.

There still was no hue and cry when he reached the main floor. He complained about his indignity to the receptionist. He complained to the protection guards as he forged James Dere-lict's name in the visitors' book, and his inky hand smeared such a mess on the page that the forgery was undetected. The guard buzzed the final gate open. Halsyon passed through into the street, and as he started away he heard the brass of the bells begin a clattering that terrified him.

He ran. He stopped. He tried to stroll. He could not. He lurched down the street until he heard the guards shouting. He darted around a corner, and another, tore up endless streets, heard cars behind him, sirens, bells, shouts, commands. It was a ghastly Catherine wheel of flight. Searching desperately for a hiding place, Halsyon darted into the hallway of a desolate tene-ment.

Halsyon began to climb the stairs. He went up three at a clip, then two, then struggled step by step as his strength failed and panic paralyzed him. He stumbled at a landing and fell against a door. The door opened.

The Faraway Fiend stood within, smiling briskly, rubbing his hands.

"Gluckliche Reise" he said. "On the dot God damn. You twenty-three skidooed, eh? Enter, my old. I'm expecting you. Be it never so humble..."

Halsyon screamed.

"No, no, nol No Sturm und Drang, my beauty," Mr. Aquila clapped a hand over Halsyon's mouth, heaved him up, dragged him through the doorway and slammed the door.

"Presto-chango," he laughed. "Exit Jeffrey Halsyon from mor-tal ken. Dieu vous garde."

Halsyon freed his mouth, screamed again and fought hysteri-cally, biting and kicking. Mr. Aquila made a clucking noise, dipped into his pocket and brought out a package of cigarettes. He flipped one out of the pack expertly and broke it under Hal-syon's nose. The artist at

once subsided and suffered himself to be led to a couch, where Aquila cleansed the ink from his face and hands.

"Better, eh?" Mr. Aquila chuckled. "Non habit-forming. God damn. Drinks now called for."

He filled a shot glass from a decanter, added a tiny cube of purple ice from a fuming bucket, and placed the drink in Halsyon's hand. Compelled by a gesture from Aquila, the artist drank it off. It made his brain buzz. He stared around, breathing heavily. He was in what appeared to be the luxurious waiting room of a Park Avenue physician. Queen Anne furniture. Ax-minster rug. Two Hogarths and a Copley on the wall in gilt frames.

They were genuine, Halsyon realized with amazement. Then, with even more amazement, he realized that he was think-ing with coherence, with continuity. His mind was quite clear.

He passed a heavy hand over his forehead. "What's hap-pened?" he asked faintly. "There's like...

Something like a fever behind me. Nightmares." "You have been sick," Aquila replied. "I am blunt, my old. This is a temporary return to sanity. It is no feat, God damn. Any doctor can do it. Niacin plus carbon dioxide. Id genus omne. Only temporary. We must search for something more perma-nent."

"What's this place?"

"Here? My office. Anteroom without. Consultation room within. Laboratory to left. In God we trust."

"I know you," Halsyon mumbled. "I know you from some-where. I know your face."

"Oui. You have drawn and redrawn me in your fever. Ecce homo. But you have the advantage, Halsyon. Where have we met? I ask myself." Aquila put on a brilliant speculum, tilted it over his left eye and let it shine into Halsyon's face. "Now I ask you. Where have we met?"

Hypnotized by the light, Halsyon answered dreamily. "At the Beaux Arts Ball.... A long time ago....

Before the fever...."

"Ah? Si. It was one half year ago. I was there. An unfortunate night."

"No. A glorious night.... Gay, happy fun.... Like a school dance.... Like a prom in costume...."

"Always back to the childhood, eh?" Mr. Aquila murmured. "We must attend to that. Cetera desunt, young Lochinvar. Con-tinue."

"I was with Judy... We realized we were in love that night. We realized how wonderful life was going to be. And then you passed and looked at me.... Just once. You looked at me. It was horrible."

Tsk!" Mr. Aquila clicked his tongue in vexation. "Now I remember said incident. I was unguarded. Bad news from home. A pox on both my houses."

"You passed in red and black.... Satanic. Wearing no mask. You looked at me.... A red and black look I never for-got. A look from black eyes like pools of hell, like cold fires of terror. And with that look you robbed me of everything... of joy, of hope, of love, of life...."

"No, no!" Mr. Aquila said sharply. "Let us understand our-selves. My carelessness was the key that unlocked the door. But you fell into a chasm of your own making. Nevertheless, old beer and skittles, we must alter same." He removed the speculum and shook his finger at Halsyon. "We must bring you back to the land of the living. Auxilium ab alto. Jeez. That is for why I have arranged this meeting. What I have done I will undone, eh? But you must climb out of your own chasm. Knit up the ravelled sleeve of care. Come inside."

He took Halsyon's arm, led him down a paneled hall, past a neat office and into a spanking white laboratory. It was all tile and glass with shelves of reagent bottles, porcelain filters, an electric oven, stock jars of acids, bins of raw materials. There was a small round elevation in the center of the floor, a sort of dais. Mr. Aquila placed a

stool on the dais, placed Halsyon on the stool, got into a white lab coat and began to assemble apparatus.

"You," he chatted, "are an artist of the utmost. I do not dorer la pilule. When Jimmy Derelict told me you were no longer at work. God damn! We must return him to his mutttons, I said. Solon Aquila must own many canvases of Jeffrey Halsyon. We shall cure him. Hoc age"

"You're a doctor?" Halsyon asked.

"No. Let us say a warlock. Strictly speaking a witch-pathologist. Very high class. No nostrums. Strictly modern magic. Black magic and white magic are passe, n'est-ce pas? I cover entire spectrum, specializing mostly in the 15,000 angstrom band."

"You're a witch-doctor? Never!"

"Oh yes."

"In this kind of place?"

"Ah-ha? You too are deceived, eh? It is our camouflage. Many a modern laboratory you think concerns itself with toothpaste is devoted to magic. But we are scientific too. Parbleu! We move with the times, we warlocks. Witch's Brew now complies with Pure Food and Drug Act. Familiars one hundred percent sterile.

Sanitary brooms. Cellophane-wrapped curses. Father Satan in rubber gloves. Thanks to Lord Lister; or is it Pasteur? My idol."

The witch-pathologist gathered raw materials, consulted an ephemeris, ran off some calculations on an electronic computer and continued to chat.

"Fugit hora," Aquila said. "Your trouble, my old, is loss of sanity. Oui? Lost in one damn flight from reality and one damn desperate search for peace brought on by one unguarded look from me to you. Hdlas! I apologize for that, R.S.V.P." With what looked like a miniature tennis linemarker, he rolled a circle around Halsyon on the dais. "But your trouble is, to wit: You search for the peace of infancy. You should be

fighting to acquire the peace of maturity, n'est-ce pas? Jeez."

Aquila drew circles and pentagons with a glittering compass and rule, weighed out powders on a micro-beam balance, dropped various liquids into crucibles from calibrated burettes, and continued: "Many warlocks do brisk trade in potions from Fountains of Youths. Oh yes. Are many youths and many foun-tains; but none for you. No.

Youth is not for artists. Age is the cure. We must purge your youth and grow you up, nicht wahr?"

"No," Halsyon argued. "No. Youth is the art. Youth is the dream. Youth is the blessing."

"For some, yes. For many, not. Not for you. You are cursed, my adolescent. We must purge you. Lust for power.

Lust for sex. Injustice collecting. Escape from reality. Passion for revenges. Oh yes, Father Freud is also my idol. We wipe your slate clean at very small price."

"What price?"

"You will see when we are finished."

Mr. Aquila deposited liquids and powders around the helpless artist in crucibles and petri dishes. He measured and cut fuses, set up a train from the circle to an electric timer which he care-fully adjusted. He went to a shelf of serum bottles, took down a small Woulff vial numbered 5-271-009, filled a syringe and me-ticulously injected Halsyon.

"We begin," he said, "the purge of your dreams. VoM."

He tripped the electric timer and stepped behind a lead shield. There was a moment of silence. Suddenly black music crashed from a concealed loudspeaker and a recorded voice began an intolerable chant. In quick succession the powders and liquids around Halsyon burst into flame. He was engulfed in music and fire. The world began to spin around him in a roaring confusion...

The president of the United Nations came to him. He was tall and gaunt, sprightly but bitter. He was wringing his hands in dismay.

"Mr. Halsyon! Mr. Halsyon!" he cried. "Where you been, my cupcake? God damn. Hoc tempore. Do you know what has hap-pened?"

"No," Halsyon answered. "What's happened?"

"After your escape from the loony bin. Bango! Atom bombs everywhere. The two-hour war. It is over.

Horn fugit, old faith-ful. Virility is over."

"What!"

"Hard radiation, Mr. Halsyon, has destroyed the virility of the world. God damn. You are the only man left capable of engen-dering children. No doubt on account of a mysterious mutant strain in your makeup which it makes you different. Jeez."

"No."

"Oui. It is your responsibility to repopulate the world. We have taken for you a suite at the Odeon. It has three bedrooms. Three; my favorite. A prime number."

"Hot dog!" Halsyon said. "This is my big dream."

His progress to the Odeon was a triumph. He was garlanded with flowers, serenaded, hailed and cheered. Ecstatic women displayed themselves wickedly before him, begging for his attention. In his suite, Halsyon was wined and dined. A tall, gaunt man entered subserviently. He was sprightly but bitter. He had a list in his hand.

"I am World Procurer at your service, Mr. Halsyon," he said. He consulted his list. "God damn. Are 5,271,009 virgins clamoring for your attention. All guaranteed beautiful. Ewig-Weibliche. Pick a number from one to 5,000,000."

"We'll start with a redhead," Halsyon said.

They brought him a redhead. She was slender and boyish, with a small, hard bosom. The next was fuller with a rollicking rump. The fifth was Junoesque and her breasts were like African pears. The tenth was a voluptuous Rembrandt. The twentieth was slender and boyish with a small, hard bosom.

"Haven't we met before?" Halsyon inquired.

"No," she said.

The next was fuller, with a rollicking rump.

"The body is familiar," Halsyon said.

"No," she answered.

The fiftieth was Junoesque, with breasts like African pears.

"Surely?" Halsyon said.

"Never," she answered.

The World Procurer entered with Halsyon's morning aphrodisiac.

"Never touch the stuff," Halsyon said.

"God damn," the Procurer exclaimed. "You are a veritable giant. An elephant. No wonder you are the beloved Adam. Tant soit peu. No wonder they all weep for love of you." He drank off the aphrodisiac himself.

"Have you noticed they're all getting to look alike?" Halsyon complained.

"But no! Are all different. Parbleu! This is an insult to my office."

"Oh, they're different from one to another, but the types keep repeating."

"Ah? This is life, my old. All life is cyclic. Have you not, as an artist,

noticed?"

"I didn't think it applied to love."

"To all things. Wahrheit und Dichtung."

"What was that you said about them weeping?"

"Oui. They all weep."

"Why?"

"For ecstatic love of you. God damn."

Halsyon thought over the succession of boyish, rollicking, Junoesque, Rembrandtesque, wiry, red, blonde, brunette, white, black, and brown women.

"I hadn't noticed," he said.

"Observe today, my world father. Shall we commence?"

It was true. Halsyon hadn't noticed. They all wept. He was flattered but depressed.

"Why don't you laugh a little?" he asked.

They would not or could not.

Upstairs on the Odeon roof where Halsyon took his afternoon exercise, he questioned his trainer who was a tall, gaunt man with a sprightly but bitter expression.

"Ah?" said the trainer. "God damn. I don't know, old scotch and soda. Perhaps because it is a traumatic experience for them."

"Traumatic?" Halsyon puffed. "Why? What do I do to them?"

"Ah-ha? You joke, eh? All the world knows what you do to them."

"No, I mean... How can it be traumatic? They're all fighting to get to

me, aren't they? Don't I come up to expectations?"

"A mystery. Tripotage. Now, beloved father of the world, we practice the push-ups. Ready? Begin."

Downstairs, in the Odeon restaurant, Halsyon questioned the headwaiter, a tall, gaunt man with a sprightly manner but bitter expression.

"We are men of the world, Mr. Halsyon. *Suo jure*. Surely you understand. These women love you and can expect no more than one night of love. God damn. Naturally they are disappointed."

"What do they want?"

"What every woman wants, my gateway to the west. A permanent relationship. Marriage."

"Marriage!"

"Oui."

"All of them?"

"Oui."

"All right. I'll marry all 5,271,009."

But the World Procurer objected. "No, no, no, young Lochin-var. God damn. Impossible. Aside from religious difficulties there are human also. Who could manage such a harem?"

"Then I'll marry one."

"No, no, no. *Pensez d, moi*. How could you make the choice? How could you select? By lottery, drawing straws, tossing coins?"

"I've already selected one."

"Ah? Which?"

"My girl," Halsyon said slowly. "Judith Field."

"So. Your sweetheart?"

"Yes."

"She is far down on the list of five million."

"She's always been number one on my list. I want Judith." Halsyon sighed. "I remember how she looked at the Beaux Arts Ball.... There was a full moon...."

"But there will be no full moon until the twenty-sixth."

"I want Judith."

"The others will tear her apart out of jealousy. No, no, no, Mr, Halsyon, we must stick to the schedule. One night for all, no more for any."

"I want Judith... or else."

"It will have to be discussed in council. God damn."

It was discussed in the U. N. council by a dozen delegates, all tall, gaunt, sprightly but bitter. It was decided to permit Jeffrey Halsyon one secret marriage.

"But no domestic ties," the World Procurer warned. "No faithfulness to your wife. That must be understood.

We cannot spare you from our program. You are indispensable."

They brought the lucky Judith Field to the Odeon. She was a tall, dark girl with cropped curly hair and lovely tennis legs. Hal-syon took her hand. The World Procurer tiptoed out.

"Hello, darling," Halsyon murmured.

Judith looked at him with loathing. Her eyes were wet, her face was bruised from weeping.

Hello, darling," Halsyon repeated.

"If you touch me, Jeff," Judith said in a strangled voice, "I'll kill you."

"Judy!"

That disgusting man explained everything to me. He didn't seem to understand when I tried to explain to him.

... I was praying you'd be dead before it was my turn."

"But this is marriage, Judy."

"I'd rather die than be married to you."

"I don't believe you. We've been in love for--"

"For God's sake, Jeff, love's over for you. Don't you understand? Those women cry because they hate you. I hate you. The world loathes you. You're disgusting."

Halsyon stared at the girl and saw the truth in her face. In an excess of rage, he tried to seize her. She fought him bitterly. They careened around the huge living room of the suite, over-turning furniture, their breath hissing, their fury mounting. Halsyon struck Judith Field with his big fist to end the struggle once and for all.

She reeled back, clutched at a drape, smashed through a french window and fell fourteen floors to the street like a gyrating doll.

Halsyon looked down in horror. A crowd gathered around the smashed body. Faces upturned. Fists shook.

An ominous growl began. The World Procurer dashed into the suite.

"My old! My blue!" he cried. "What have you done? Per conto. It is a spark that will ignite savagery. You are in very grave danger. God damn."

"Is it true they all hate me?"

Helm, then you have discovered the truth? That indiscreet girl. I warned her. Oui. You are loathed."

"But you told me I was loved. The new Adam. Father of the new world."

"Oui. You are the father, but what child does not hate its father? You are also a legal rapist. What woman does not hate being forced to embrace a man... even by necessity for survival? Come quickly, my rock and rye. Passim. You are in great danger."

He dragged Halsyon to a back elevator and took him down to the Odeon cellar.

"The army will get you out. We take you to Turkey at once and effect a compromise."

Halsyon was transferred to the custody of a tall, gaunt, bitter army colonel who rushed him through underground passages to a side street, where a staff car was waiting. The colonel thrust Halsyon inside.

"Jacta aha est," he said to the driver. "Speed, my corporal. Protect old faithful. To the airport. Alors!"

"God damn, sir," the corporal replied. He saluted and started the car. As it twisted through the streets at breakneck speed, Halsyon glanced at him. He was a tall, gaunt man, sprightly but bitter.

"Kulturkampf der Menschheit," the corporal muttered. "Jeez!"

A giant barricade had been built across the street, improvised of ash barrels, furniture, overturned cars, traffic stanchions. The corporal was forced to brake the car. As he slowed for a U-turn, a mob of women appeared from doorways, cellars, stores. They were screaming. Some of them brandished improvised clubs.

"Excelsior!" the corporal cried. "God damn." He tried to pull his service gun out of its holster. The women yanked open the car doors and tore Halsyon and the corporal out. Halsyon broke free, struggled

through the wild clubbing mob, dashed to the sidewalk, stumbled and dropped with a sickening yaw through an open coal chute. He shot down and spilled out into an endless black space. His head whirled. A stream of stars sailed before his eyes....

And he drifted alone in space, a martyr, misunderstood, a victim of cruel injustice. He was still chained to what had once been the wall of Cell 5, Block 27, Tier 100, Wing 9 of the Callisto Penitentiary until that unexpected gamma explosion had torn the vast fortress dungeon--vaster than the Chateau d' If--apart. That explosion, he realized, had been detonated by the Grssh.

His assets were his convict clothes, a helmet, one cylinder of O2, his grim fury at the injustice that had been done him, and his knowledge of the secret of how the Grssh could be defeated in their maniacal quest for solar domination.

The Grssh, ghastly marauders from Omicron Cei, space-degenerates, space-imperialists, cold-blooded, roachlike, depending for their food upon the psychotic horrors which they engendered in man through mental control and upon which they fed, were rapidly conquering the galaxy. They were irresistible, for they possessed the power of simul-kinesis--the ability to be in two places at the same time.

Against the vault of space, a dot of light moved slowly, like a stricken meteor. It was a rescue ship, Halsyon realized, combing space for survivors of the explosion. He wondered whether the light of Jupiter, flooding him with rusty radiation, would make him visible to the rescuers. He wondered whether he wanted to be rescued at all.

"It will be the same thing again," Halsyon grated. "Falsely accused by Balorsen's robot... Falsely convicted by Judith's father. ... Repudiated by Judith herself. ... Jailed again . . . and finally destroyed by the Grssh as they destroy the last strong-holds of Terra. Why not die now?"

But even as he spoke he realized he lied. He was the one man with the one secret that could save the earth and the very galaxy itself. He

must survive. He must fight.

With indomitable will, Halsyon struggled to his feet, fighting the constricting chains. With the steely strength he had developed as a penal laborer in the Grssh mines, he waved and shouted. The spot of light did not alter its slow course away from him. Then he saw the metal link of one of his chains strike a brilliant spark from the flinty rock. He resolved on a desperate expedient to signal the rescue ship.

He detached the plasti-hose of the O2 tank from his plasti-helmet, and permitted the stream of life-giving oxygen to spurt into space. With trembling hands, he gathered the links of his leg chain and dashed them against the rock under the oxygen. A spark glowed. The oxygen caught fire. A brilliant geyser of white flame spurted for half a mile into space.

Husbanding the last oxygen in his plasti-helmet, Halsyon twisted the cylinder slowly, sweeping the fan of flame back and forth in a last desperate bid for rescue. The atmosphere in his plasti-helmet grew foul and acrid. His ears roared. His sight flickered. At last his senses failed....

3

When he recovered consciousness he was on a plasti-cot in the cabin of a starship. The high-frequency whine told him they were in overdrive. He opened his eyes. Balorsen stood before the plasti-cot, and Balorsen's robot and High Judge Field, and his daughter Judith. Judith was weeping. The robot was in magnetic plasti-clamps and winced as General Balorsen lashed him again and again with a nuclear plasti-whip.

"Parbleul God damn!" the robot grated. "It is true I framed Jeff Halsyon. Ouch! Flux de bouche. I was the space-pirate who space-hijacked the space-freighter. God damn. Ouch! The space-bartender in the Spaceman's Saloon was my accomplice. When Jackson wrecked the space-cab I went to the space-garage and X-beamed the sonic before Tantial murdered O'Leary. Am* armes. Jeez. Ouch!"

"There you have the confession, Halsyon," General Balorsen grated. He was tall, gaunt, bitter. "By God.

Ars est celare artem. You are innocent."

"I falsely condemned you, old faithful," Judge Field grated. He was tall, gaunt, bitter. "Can you forgive this God damn fool? We apologize."

"We wronged you, Jeff," Judith whispered. "How can you ever forgive us? Say you forgive us."

"You're sorry for the way you treated me," Halsyon grated. "But it's only because on account of a mysterious mutant strain in my makeup which it makes me different, I'm the one man with the one secret that can save the galaxy from the Grssh."

"No, no, no, old gin and tonic," General Balorsen pleaded. "God damn. Don't hold grudges. Save us from the Grssh."

"Save us, faute de mieux, save us, Jeff," Judge Field put in.

"Oh please, Jeff, please," Judith whispered. "The Grssh are everywhere and coming closer. We're taking you to the U. N. You must tell the council how to stop the Grssh from being in two places at the same time."

The starship came out of overdrive and landed on Governor's Island where a delegation of world dignitaries met the ship and rushed Halsyon to the General Assembly room of the U. N. They drove down the strangely rounded streets lined with strangely rounded buildings which had all been altered when it was discovered that the Grssh always appeared in corners. There was not a corner or an angle left on all Terra.

The General Assembly was filled when Halsyon entered. Hundreds of tall, gaunt, bitter diplomats applauded as he made his way to the podium, still dressed in convict plasti-clothes. Halsyon looked around resentfully.

"Yes," he grated. "You all applaud. You all revere me now; but where were you when I was framed, convicted, and jailed... an innocent man? Where were you then?"

"Halsyon, forgive us. God damn!" they shouted.

"I will not forgive you, I suffered for seventeen years in the Grssh mines. Now it's your turn to suffer."

"Please, Halsyon!"

"Where are your experts? Your professors? Your specialists? Where are your electronic calculators? Your super thinking machines? Lekthem solve the mystery of the Grssh."

"They can't, old whiskey and soda. Entre nous. They're stopped cold. Save us, Halsyon. Auf wiedersehen."

Judith took his arm. "Not for my sake, Jeff," she whispered. "I know you'll never forgive me for the injustice I did you. But for the sake of all the other girls in the galaxy who love and are loved."

"I still love you, Judy."

"I've always loved you, Jeff."

"Okay. I didn't want to tell them but you talked me into it." Halsyon raised his hand for silence. In the ensuing hush he spoke softly. "The secret is this, gentlemen. Your calculators have assembled data to ferret out the secret weakness of the Grssh. They have not been able to find any.

Consequently you have assumed that the Grssh have no secret weakness. That was a wrong assumption"

The General Assembly held its breath.

"Here is the secret. You should have assumed there was something wrong with the calculators."

"God damn!" the General Assembly cried. "Why didn't we think of that? God damn!"

"And I know what's wrong! There was a deathlike hush.

The door of the General Assembly burst open. Professor Deathhush, tall, gaunt, bitter, tottered in.

"Eureka!" he cried.

"I've found it. God damn. Something wrong with the thinking machines. Three comes after two, not before."

The General Assembly broke into cheers. Professor Deathhush was seized and pummeled happily. Bottles were opened. His health was drunk. Several medals were pinned on him. He beamed.

"Hey!" Halsyon called. "That was my secret. I'm the one man who on account of a mysterious mutant strain in my--"

The ticker tape began pounding: ATTENTION. ATTENTION. HUSHENKOV IN MOSCOW REPORTS DEFECT IN CALCULATORS. 3 COMES AFTER 2 AND NOT BEFORE. REPEAT: AFTER (UNDERSCORE) NOT BEFORE.

A postman ran in. "Special delivery from Doctor Lifehush at Caltech. Says something's wrong with the thinking machines. Three comes after two, not before."

A telegraph boy delivered a wire: THINKING MACHINE WRONG STOP TWO COMES BEFORE THREE STOP NOT AFTER STOP. VON DREAMHUSH, HEIDELBERG.

A bottle was thrown through the window. It crashed on the floor revealing a bit of paper on which was scrawled: Did you ever stop to think that maybe the number 3 comes after 2 instead of in front? Down with the Grish. Mr.

Hush-Hush.

Halsyon buttonholed Judge Field. "What the hell is this?" he demanded. "I thought I was the one man in the world with that secret."

"Himmel Herr Gottr Judge Field replied impatiently. "You are all alike. You dream you are the one man with a secret, the one man with a wrong, the one man with an injustice, with a girl, without a girl, with or without anything. God damn. You bore me, you one-man dreamers. Get lost."

Judge Field shouldered him aside. General Balorsen shoved him back. Judith Field ignored him. Balorsen's robot sneakily tripped him into a corner of the crowd where a Grssh, also in a crowded corner on Neptune, appeared, did something unspeakable to Halsyon, and disappeared with him, screaming, jerking and sobbing, into a horror that was a delicious meal for the Grssh but a plasti-nightmare for Halsyon. . . .

From which his mother awakened him and said, "Thisll teach you not to sneak peanut-butter sandwiches in the middle of the night, Jeffrey."

"Mama?"

"Yes. It's time to get up, dear. You'll be late for school."

She left the room. He looked around. He looked at himself. It was true. True! The glorious realization came upon him. His dream had come true. He was ten years old again, in the flesh that was his ten-year-old body, in the home that was his boy-hood home, in the life that had been his life in his school days. And within his head was the knowledge, the experience, the so-phistication of a man of thirty-three.

"Oh joy!" he cried. "It'll be a triumph. A triumph!"

He would be the school genius. He would astonish his parents, amaze his teachers, confound the experts. He would win scholarships. He would settle the hash of that kid Rennahan who used to bully him. He would hire a typewriter and write all the successful plays and stories and novels he remembered. He would cash in on that lost opportunity with Judy Field behind the memorial in Isham

Park. He would steal inventions and discoveries, get in on the ground floor of new industries, make bets, play the stock market. He would own the world by the time he caught up with himself.

He dressed with difficulty. He had forgotten where his clothes were kept. He ate breakfast with difficulty. This was no time to explain to his mother that he'd gotten into the habit of starting the day with Irish coffee. He missed his morning cigarette. He had no idea where his schoolbooks were. His mother had trouble starting him out.

"Jeffs in one of his moods," he heard her mutter. "I hope he gets through the day."

The day started with Rennahan ambushing him at the Boy's Entrance. Halsyon remembered him as a big, tough kid with a vicious expression. He was astonished to discover that Rennahan was skinny and harassed, and obviously compelled by some bedevilmnts to be omnivorously aggressive.

"Why, you're not hostile to me," Halsyon exclaimed. "You're just a mixed-up Md who's trying to prove something."

Rennahan punched him.

"Look, kid," Halsyon said kindly. "You really want to be friends with the world. You're just insecure. That's why you're compelled to fight."

Rennahan was deaf to spot analysis. He punched Halsyon harder. It hurt "Oh leave me alone," Halsyon said. "Go prove yourself on somebody else."

Rennahan, with two swift motions, knocked Halsyon's books from under his arm and ripped his fly open. There was nothing for it but to fight. Twenty years of watching films of the future Joe Louis did nothing for Halsyon. He was thoroughly licked. He was also late for school. Now was his chance to amaze his teachers.

"The fact is," he explained to Miss Ralph of the fifth grade, "I had a run-in with a neurotic. I can speak for his left hook, but I won't answer for his compulsions."

Miss Ralph slapped him and sent him to the principal with a note, reporting unheard-of insolence.

"The only thing unheard of in this school," Halsyon told Mr. Snider, "is psychoanalysis. How can you pretend to be competent teachers if you don't--"

"Dirty little boy!" Mr. Snider interrupted angrily. He was tall, gaunt, bitter. "So you've been reading dirty books, eh?"

"What the hell's dirty about Freud?"

"And using profane language, eh? You need a lesson, you filthy little animal."

He was sent home with a note requesting an immediate consultation with his parents regarding the withdrawal of Jeffrey Halsyon from school as a degenerate in desperate need of correction and vocational guidance.

Instead of going home, he went to a newsstand to check the papers for events on which to get a bet down. The headlines were full of the pennant race. But who the hell finally won the pennant? And the series? He couldn't for the life of him remember. And the stock market? He couldn't remember anything about that either. He'd never been particularly interested in such matters as a boy. There was nothing planted in his memory to call upon.

He tried to get into the library for further checks. The librarian, tall, gaunt, and bitter, would not permit him to enter until children's hour in the afternoon. He loafed on the streets. Wherever he loafed he was chased by gaunt and bitter adults. He was beginning to realize that ten-year-old boys had limited opportunities to amaze the world.

At lunch hour he met Judy Field and accompanied her home from school. He was appalled by her knobby knees and black corkscrew curls. He didn't like the way she smelled, either. But he was rather taken with her mother who was the image of the Judy he remembered. He forgot himself with Mrs. Field and did one or two

things that indeed confounded her. She drove him out of the house and then telephoned his mother, her voice shaking with indignation.

Halsyon went down to the Hudson River and hung around the ferry docks until he was chased. He went to a stationery store to inquire about typewriter rentals and was chased. He searched for a quiet place to sit, think, plan, perhaps begin the recall of a successful story. There was no quiet place to which a small boy would be admitted.

He slipped into his house at 4:30, dropped his books in his room, stole into the living room, sneaked a cigarette and was on his way out when he discovered his mother and father inspecting him. His mother looked shocked. His father was gaunt and bitter.

"Oh," Halsyon said. "I suppose Snider phoned. I'd forgotten about that."

"Mister Snider," his mother said.

"And Mrs. Field," his father said.

"Look," Halsyon began. "We'd better get this straightened out. Will you listen to me for a few minutes? I have something startling to tell you and we've got to plan what to do about it. I"

He yelped. His father had taken him by the ear and was marching him down the hall. Parents did not listen to children for a few minutes. They did not listen at all.

"Pop.... Just a minute... . Please! I'm trying to explain. I'm not really ten years old. I'm thirty-three. There's been a freak in time, see? On account of a mysterious mutant strain in my makeup which--"

"Damn you! Be quiet!" his father shouted. The pain of his big hands, the suppressed fury in his voice silenced Halsyon. He suffered himself to be led out of the house, down four blocks back to the school, and up one flight to Mr. Snider's office where a public school psychologist was waiting with the principal. He was a tall man, gaunt, bitter, but sprightly.

"Ah, yes, yes," he said. "So this is our little degenerate. Our Scarface Al Capone, eh? Come, we take him to the clinic and there I shall take his journal intime. We will hope for the best. Nisi prius.

He cannot be all bad."

He took Halsyon's arm. Halsyon pulled his arm away and said, "Listen, you're an adult, intelligent man. You'll listen to me. My father's got emotional problems that blind him to the—"

His father gave him a tremendous box on the ear, grabbed his arm and thrust it back into the psychologist's grasp. Halsyon burst into tears. The psychologist led him out of the office and into the tiny school infirmary. Halsyon was hysterical. He was trembling with frustration and terror.

"Won't anybody listen to me?" he sobbed. "Won't anybody try to understand? Is this what we're all like to kids? Is this what all kids go through?"

"Gently, my sausage," the psychologist murmured. He popped a pill into Halsyon's mouth and forced him to drink some water.

"You're all so damned inhuman," Halsyon wept. "You keep us out of your world, but you keep barging into ours. If you don't respect us, why don't you leave us alone?"

"You begin to understand, eh?" the psychologist said. "We are two different breeds of animal, childrens and adults.

God damn. I speak to you with frankness. Les absents ont toujours fort. There is no meetings of the minds. Jeez. There is nothing but war. It is why all childrens grow up hating their childhoods and searching for revenges. But there is never revenges. Pari mutuel. How can there be? Can a cat insult a king?"

"It's... s'hateful," Halsyon mumbled. The pill was taking effect rapidly. "Whole world's hateful. Full of conflicts'n'insults 'at can't be r'solved... or paid back.... S'like a joke some-body's playin' on us. Silly jokes without point. Isn't?"

As he slid down into darkness, he could hear the psychologist chuckle, but couldn't for the life of him understand what he was laughing at....

He picked up his spade and followed the first clown into the cemetery. The first clown was a tall man, gaunt, bitter, but sprightly.

"Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" the first clown asked.

"I tell thee she is," Halsyon answered. "And therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial."

"How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own de-fense?"

"Why, 'tis found so."

They began to dig the grave. The first clown thought the mat-ter over, then said, "It must be se offendendo; it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act: and an act hath three branches; it is, to act, to do, to per-form: argal, she drowned herself wittingly."

"Nay, but hear you, goodman delver--" Halsyon began.

"Give me leave," the first clown interrupted and went on with a tiresome discourse on quest-law. Then he turned sprightly and cracked a few professional jokes. At last Halsyon got away and went down to Yaughan's for a drink. When he returned, the first clown was cracking jokes with a couple of gentlemen who had wandered into the graveyard. One of them made quite a fuss about a skull.

The burial procession arrived; the coffin, the dead girl's brother, the king and queen, the priests and lords.

They buried her, and the brother and one of the gentlemen began to quarrel over her grave. Halsyon paid no attention. There was a pretty girl in the procession, dark, with cropped curly hair and lovely long legs.

He winked at her. She winked back. Halsyon edged over toward her, speaking with his eyes and she answering him saucily the same way.

Then he picked up his spade and followed the first clown into the cemetery. The first clown was a tall man, gaunt, with a bitter expression but a sprightly manner.

"Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" the first clown asked.

"I tell thee she is," Halsyon answered. "And therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial."

"How can that be, unless she drov.iled herself in her own de-fense?"

"Didn't you ask me that before?" Halsyon inquired.

"Shut up, old faithful. Answer the question."

"I could swear this happened before."

"God damn. Will you answer? Jeez."

"Why, 'tis found so."

They began to dig the grave. The first clown thought the mat-ter over and began a long discourse on quest-law. After that he turned sprightly and cracked trade jokes. At last Halsyon got away and went down to Yaughan's for a drink. When he re-turned there were a couple of strangers at the grave and then the burial procession arrived.

There was a pretty girl in the procession, dark, with cropped curly hair and lovely long legs. Halsyon winked at her. She winked back. Halsyon edged over toward her, speaking with his eyes and she answering him the same way.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

"Judith," she answered.

"I have your name tattooed on me, Judith."

"You're lying, sir."

"I can prove it, Madam. I'll show you where I was tattooed."

"And where is that?"

"In Yaughan's tavern. It was done by a sailor off the Golden Hind. Will you see it with me tonight?"

Before she could answer, he picked up his spade and followed the first clown into the cemetery. The first clown was a tall man, gaunt, with a bitter expression but a sprightly manner.

"For God's sake!" Halsyon complained. "I could swear this happened before."

"Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" the first clown asked.

"I just know we've been through all this."

"Will you answer the question!"

"Listen," Halsyon said doggedly. "Maybe I'm crazy; maybe not. But I've got a spooky feeling that all this happened before. It seems unreal. Life seems unreal."

The first clown shook his head. "HimmelHerrGott," he muttered. "It is as I feared. Lux et Veritas. On account of a mysterious mutant strain in your makeup which it makes you different, you are treading on thin water. Ewigkeit! Answer the question."

"If I've answered it once, I've answered it a hundred times."

"Old ham and eggs," the first clown burst out, "you have answered it 5,271,009 times. God damn.

Answer again."

"Why?"

"Because you must. Pot au feu. It is the life we must live."

"You call this life? Doing the same things over and over again? Saying the same things? Winking at girls and never getting any further?"

"No, no, no, my Donner and Blitzen. Do not question. It is a conspiracy we dare not fight. This is the life every man lives. Every man does the same things over and over. There is no escape."

"Why is there no escape?"

"I dare not say, I dare not. Vox populi. Others have questioned and disappeared. It is a conspiracy. I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of our owners."

"What? We are owned?"

"Si. Ach, Ja! All of us, young mutant. There is no reality. There is no life, no freedom, no will. God damn. Don't you realize? We are.... We are all characters in a book. As the book is read, we dance our dances; when the book is read again, we dance again. E pluribus unum. Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?"

"What are you saying?" Halsyon cried in horror. "We're pup-pets?"

"Answer the question."

"If there's no freedom, no free will, how can we be talking like this?"

"Whoever's reading our book is daydreaming, my capital of Dakota. Idem est. Answer the question."

"I will not. I'm going to revolt. I'll dance for our owners no longer. I'll find

a better life.... I'll find reality."

"No, no! It's madness, Jeffrey! Cul-de-sac!"

"All we need is one brave leader. The rest will follow. We'll smash the conspiracy that chains us!"

"It cannot be done. Play it safe. Answer the question."

Halsyon answered the question by picking up his spade and bashing in the head of the first clown who appeared not to notice. "Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" he asked.

"Revolt!" Halsyon cried and bashed him again. The clown started to sing. The two gentlemen appeared. One said: "Has this fellow no feeling of business that he sings at gravemaking?"

"Revolt! Follow me!" Halsyon shouted and swung his spade against the gentleman's melancholy head. He paid no attention. He chatted with his friend and the first clown. Halsyon whirled like a dervish, laying about him with his spade. The gentleman picked up a skull and philosophized over some person or persons named Yorick.

The funeral procession approached. Halsyon attacked it, whirling and turning, around and around with the clotted frenzy of a man in a dream.

"Stop reading the book," he shouted. "Let me out of the pages. Can you hear me? Stop reading the book! I'd rather be in a world of my own making. Let me go!"

There was a mighty clap of thunder, as if the covers of a mighty book slamming shut. In an instant Halsyon was swept spinning into the third compartment of the seventh circle of the Inferno in the Fourteenth Canto of the Divine Comedy where they who have sinned against art are tormented by flakes of fire which are eternally showered down upon them. There he shrieked until he had provided sufficient amusement. Only then was he permitted to devise a text of his own... and he formed a new world, a romantic world, a world of his fondest

dreams....

He was the last man on earth.

He was the last man on earth and he howled.

The hills, the valleys, the mountains and streams were his, his alone, and he howled.

Five million two hundred and seventy-one thousand and nine houses were his for shelter, 5,271,009 beds were his for sleeping. The shops were his for the breaking and entering. The jewels of the world were his; the toys, the tools, the playthings, the necessities, the luxuries... all belonged to the last man on earth, and he howled.

He left the country mansion in the fields of Connecticut where he had taken up residence; he crossed into Westchester, howling; he ran south along what had once been the Hendrick Hudson Highway, howling; he crossed the bridge into Manhattan, howling; he ran downtown past lonely skyscrapers, department stores, amusement palaces, howling. He howled down Fifth Avenue, and at the corner of Fiftieth Street he saw a human being.

She was alive, breathing; a beautiful woman. She was tall and dark with cropped curly hair and lovely long legs. She wore a white blouse, tiger-skin riding breeches and patent leather boots. She carried a rifle.

She wore a revolver on her hip. She was eating stewed tomatoes from a can and she stared at Halsyon in disbelief. He ran up to her.

"I thought I was the last human on earth," she said.

"You're the last woman," Halsyon howled. "I'm the last man. Are you a dentist?"

"No," she said. "I'm the daughter of the unfortunate Professor Field, whose well-intentioned but ill-advised experiment in nuclear fission has wiped mankind off the face of the earth with the exception of you and me who, no doubt on account of some mysterious mutant strain

in our makeup which it make us different, are the last of the old civilization and the first of the new."

"Didn't your father teach you anything about dentistry?"

"No," she said.

"Then lend me your gun for a minute."

She unholstered the revolver and handed it to Halsyon, mean-while keeping her rifle ready. Halsyon cocked the gun.

"I wish you'd been a dentist," he said.

"I'm a beautiful woman with an I.Q. of 141 which is more im-portant for the propagation of a brave new beautiful race of men to inherit the good green earth," she said.

"Not with my teeth it isn't," Halsyon howled.

He clapped the revolver to his temple and blew his brains out.

He awoke with a splitting headache. He was lying on the tile dais alongside the stool, his bruised temple pressed against the cold floor. Mr. Aquila had emerged from the lead shield and was turning on an exhaust fan to clear the air.

"Bravo, my liver and onions," he chuckled. "The last one you did by yourself, eh? No assistance from yours truly required. Meglio tarde che mai. But you went over with a crack before I could catch you. God damn."

He helped Halsyon to his feet and led him into the consul-tation room where he seated him in a velvet chaise lounge and gave him a glass of brandy.

"Guaranteed free of drugs," he said. "Noblesse oblige. Only the best spiritus frumenti. Now we discuss what we have done, eh? Jeez."

He sat down behind the desk, still sprightly, still bitter, and regarded

Halsyon with kindliness. "Man lives by his decisions, n'est-ce pas?" he began. "We agree, oui? A man has some five million two hundred seventy-one thousand and nine decisions to make in the course of his life. Pestel Is it a prime number? N'im-porte. Do you agree?"

Halsyon nodded.

"So, my coffee and doughnuts, it is the maturity of these decisions that decides whether a man is a man or a child. Nicht wahr? MalgrS nous. A man cannot start making adult decisions until he has purged himself of the dreams of childhood. God damn. Such fantasies. They must go."

"No," Halsyon said slowly. "It's the dreams that make my art ... the dreams and fantasies that I translate into line and color...."

"God damn! Yes. Agreed. Mattre dhdtel! But adult dreams, not baby dreams. Baby dreams. Pfu! All men have them. To be the last man on earth and own the earth.... To be the last fertile man on earth and own the women.... To go back in time with the advantage of adult knowledge and win vic-tories.... To escape reality with the dream that life is make-believe.... To escape responsibility with a fantasy of heroic in-justice, of martyrdom with a happy ending.... And there are hundreds more, equally popular, equally empty.

God bless Father Freud and his merry men. He applies the quietus to such nonsense. Sic semper tyrannis. Avaunt!"

"But if everybody has those dreams, they can't be bad, can they?"

"God damn. Everybody in fourteenth century had lice. Did that make it good? No, my young, such dreams are for chil-drens. Too many adults are still childrens. It is you, the artists, who must lead them out as I have led you. I purge you; now you purge them."

"Why did you do this?"

"Because I have faith in you. Sic vos non vobis. It will not be easy for you. A long hard road and lonely."

"I suppose I ought to feel grateful," Halsyon muttered, "but I feel... well... empty. Cheated."

"Oh yes, God damn. If you live with one Jeez big ulcer long enough, you miss him when he's cut out. You were hiding in an ulcer. I have robbed you of said refuge. Ergo: you feel cheated. Wait! You will feel even more cheated.

There was a price to pay, I told you. You have paid it. Look."

Mr. Aquila held up a hand mirror. Halsyon glanced into it, then started and stared. A fifty-year-old face stared back at him: lined, hardened, solid, determined. Halsyon leaped to his feet.

"Gently, gently," Mr. Aquila admonished. "It is not so bad. It is damned good. You are still thirty-three in age of physique. You have lost none of your life... only all of your youth. What have you lost? A pretty face to lure young girls? Is that why you are wild?"

"Christ!" Halsyon cried.

"All right. Still gently, my child. Here you are, purged, disillusioned, unhappy, bewildered, one foot on the hard road to maturity. Would you like this to have happened or not have happened? Si. I can do. This can never have happened. Spurlos versenkt. It is ten seconds from your escape. You can have your pretty young face back. You can be recaptured. You can return to the safe ulcer of the womb... a child again. Would you like same?"

"You can't."

"Sauve qui pent, my Pike's Peak. I can. There is no end to the 15,000 angstrom band."

"Damn you! Are you Satan? Lucifer? Only the devil could have such powers."

"Or angels, my old."

"You don't look like an angel. You look like Satan."

"Ah? Ha? But Satan was an angel before he fell. He has many relations on high. Surely there are family resemblances. God damn." Mr. Aquila stopped laughing. He leaned across the desk and the sprightliness was gone from his face. Only the bitterness remained. "Shall I tell you who I am, my chicken? Shall I explain why one unguarded look from this phizz toppled you over the brink?"

Halsyon nodded, unable to speak.

"I am a scoundrel, a black sheep, a scapegrace, a blackguard. I am a remittance man. Yes. God damn! I am a remittance man." Mr. Aquila's eyes turned into wounds. "By your standards I am the great man of infinite power and variety. So was the remittance man from Europe to naive natives on the beaches of Tahiti. Eh? And so am I to you as I comb the beaches of the stars for a little amusement, a little hope, a little joy to while away the lonely years of my exile....

"I am bad," Mr. Aquila said in a voice of chilling desperation. "I am rotten. There is no place in my home that can tolerate me. They pay me to stay away. And there are moments, unguarded, when my sickness and my despair fill my eyes and strike terror into your innocent souls. As I strike terror into you now. Yes?"

Halsyon nodded again.

"Be guided by me. It was the child in Solon Aquila that destroyed him and led him into the sickness that destroyed his life. Oui, I too suffer from baby fantasies from which I cannot escape. Do not make the same mistake. I beg of you.

..." Mr. Aquila glanced at his wristwatch and leaped up. The sprightly returned to his manner. "Jeez. It's late. Time to make up your mind, old bourbon and soda. Which will it be? Old face or pretty face? The reality of dreams or the dream of reality?"

"How many decisions did you say we have to make in a life-time?"

"Five million two hundred and seventy-one thousand and nine. Give or take a thousand. God damn."

"And which one is this for me?"

"Ah? V6HU sans peur. The two million six hundred and thirty-five thousand five hundred and fourth... offhand."

"But it's the big one."

"They are all big." Mr. Aquila stepped to the door, placed his hand on the buttons of a rather complicated switch and cocked an eye at Halsyon.

"Voild. tout" he said. "It rests with you."

"I'll take it the hard way." Halsyon decided.

FONDLY FAHRENHEIT

Alfred Bester



He doesn't know which of us we are these days, but they know one truth. You must own nothing but yourself. You must make your own life, live your own life and die your own death... or else you will die another's.

The rice fields on Paragon III stretch for hundreds of miles like checkerboard tundras, a blue and brown mosaic under a burning sky of orange. In the evening, clouds whip like smoke, and the paddies rustle and murmur.

A long line of men marched across the paddies the evening we escaped from Paragon III. They were silent, armed, intent; a long rank of silhouetted statues looming against the smoking sky. Each man carried a gun. Each man wore a walkie-talkie belt pack, the speaker button in his ear, the microphone bug clipped to his throat, the glowing view-screen strapped to his wrist like a green-eyed watch. The multitude of screens showed nothing but a multitude of individual paths through the paddies. The annunciators made no sound but the rustle and splash of steps. The men spoke infrequently, in heavy grunts, all speaking to all.

"Nothing here."

"Where's here?"

"Jenson's fields."

"You're drifting too far west." "Close in the line there."

"Anybody covered the Grimson paddy?"

"Yeah. Nothing."

"She couldn't have walked this far."

"Could have been carried."

"Think she's alive?"

"Why should she be dead?"

The slow refrain swept up and down the long line of beaters advancing toward the smoky sunset. The line of beaters wavered like a writhing snake, but never ceased its remorseless advance. One hundred men spaced fifty feet apart. Five thousand feet of ominous search. One mile of angry determination stretching from east to west across a compass of heart. Evening fell. Each man lit his search lamp. The writhing snake was transformed into a necklace of wavering diamonds.

"Clear here. Nothing."

"Nothing here."

"Nothing."

"What about the Allen paddies?"

"Covering them now."

"Think we missed her?"

"Maybe."

"We'll beat back and check."

"This'll be an all-night job."

"Allen paddies clear."

"God damn! We've got to find her!"

"We'll find her."

"Here she is. Sector Seven. Tune in."

The line stopped. The diamonds froze in the heat. There was silence. Each man gazed into the glowing green screen on his wrist, tuning to Sector 7. All tuned to one. All showed a small nude figure awash in the muddy water of a paddy. Alongside the figure an owner's stake of bronze read: VANDALEUR. The ends of the line converged toward the Vandaleur field. The necklace turned into a cluster of stars. One hundred men gathered around a small nude body, a child dead in a rice paddy. There was no water in her mouth. There were fingermarks on her throat. Her innocent face was battered. Her body was torn. Clotted blood on her skin was crusted and hard.

"Dead three--four hours at least." "Her mouth is dry."

"She wasn't drowned. Beaten to death."

In the dark evening heat-the men swore softly. They picked up the body. One stopped the others and pointed to the child's fingernails. She had fought her murderer. Under the nails were particles of flesh and bright drops of scarlet red, still liquid, still uncoagulated.

"That blood ought to be clotted too."

"Funny." "Not so funny. What kind of blood don't clot??"

"Android."

"Looks like she was killed by one."

"Vandaleur owns an android."

"She couldn't be killed by an android."

"That's android blood under her nails."

"The police better check."

"The police'll prove I'm right."

"But androids can't kill." "That's android blood, ain't it?"

"Androids can't kill. They're made that way."

"Looks like one android was made wrong."

"Jesus!"

And the thermometer that day registered 92.9° gloriously Fahrenheit.

So there we were aboard the Paragon Queen en route for Megastar V, James Vandaleur and his android. James Vandaleur counted his money and wept. In the second-class cabin with him was his android, a magnificent synthetic creature with classic features and wide blue eyes. Raised on its forehead in a cameo of flesh were the letters MA, indicating that this was one of the rare multiple-aptitude androids, worth \$57,000 on the current exchange. There—we were, weeping and counting and calmly watching.

"Twelve, fourteen, sixteen. Sixteen hundred dollars." Vandaleur wept; "That's all. Sixteen hundred dollars. My house was worth ten thousand. The land was worth five. There was furniture, cars, my paintings, etchings, my plane, my— And nothing to show for everything but sixteen hundred dollars"

I leaped up from the table and turned on the android. I pulled a strap from one of the leather bags and beat the android. It didn't move.

"I must remind you," the android said, "that I am worth fifty-seven thousand dollars on the current exchange. I must warn you that you are endangering valuable property."

"You damned crazy machine," Vandaleur shouted.

"I am not a machine," the android answered. "The robot is a machine. The android is a chemical creation of synthetic tissue."

"What got into you?" Vandaleur cried. "Why—did you do it? Damn you!" He beat the android savagely.

"I must remind you that! cannot be punished," it said-. "The pleasure pain syndrome is not incorporated in the android synthesis." "Then why did you kill her?" Vandaleur shouted. "If it wasn't for kicks, why did you--" . "I must remind you," the android said, "that the secondclass cabins in these ships are not soundproofed."

Vandaleur dropped the strap and stood panting, staring at the creature he owned.

"Why did you do it? Why did you kill her?" I asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"First it was malicious mischief. Small things. Petty destruction: I should have known there was something wrong with you then. Androids can't destroy. They can't harm. They--"

"There is no pleasure-pain syndrome incorporated in the android synthesis."

"Then it got to arson. Then serious destruction. Then assault... that engineer on Rigel.

Each time worse. Each time we had to get out faster. Now it's murder. Christ! What's the matter with you? What's happened?"

"There are no self-check relays incorporated in the android brain."

"Each time we had to get out it was a step downhill. Look at me. In a second-class cabin. Me. James Paleologue Vandaleur. There was a time when my father was the wealthiest-- Now, sixteen hundred dollars in the world. That's all I've got And you. Christ damn you!"

Vandaleur raised the strap to beat the android again, then dropped it and collapsed on a berth, sobbing. At last he pulled himself together.

"Instructions," he said.

The multiple-aptitude android responded at once. It arose and awaited orders.

"My name is now Valentine. James Valentine. I stopped off on Paragon Three for only one day to transfer to this ship for Megastar Five. My occupation: Agent for one privately owned MA android which is for hire. Purpose of visit: To settle on Megastar Five. Forge the papers."

The android removed Vandaleur's passport and papers from a bag, got pen and ink and sat down at the table. With an accurate, flawless hand--an accomplished hand that could draw, write, paint, carve, engrave, etch, photograph, design, create and build--it meticulously forged new credentials for Vandaleur. Its owner watched me miserable.

"Create and build," I muttered. "And now destroy. Oh, God! What am I going to do? Christ! "I could only get rid of you. "I didn't have to live off you. God! If only I'd inherited some guts instead of you."

Dallas Brady was Megastar's leading jewelry designer. She was short, stocky, amoral and nymphomaniac. She hired Valentine's multiple-aptitude android and put me to work in her shop. She seduced Valentine. In her bed one night, she asked abruptly: "Your name's Vandaleur, isn't it?"

"Yes," I murmured. Then: "No! No! It's Valentine. James Valentine."

"What happened on Paragon?' Dallas Brady asked. "I thought androids couldn't kill or destroy property. Prime Directives and Inhibitions set up for them when they're synthesized. Every company guarantees they can't."

"Valentine!" Vandaleur insisted.

"Oh, come off it," Dallas Brady said. "I've known for a week. I haven't hollered copper, have I?"

"The name is Valentine."

"You want to prove it? You want I should call the police?" Dallas reached out-and picked up the phone.

"For God's sake, Dallas!" Vandaleur leaped up and struggled to take the phone from her. She fended him off, laughing at him, until he collapsed and wept in shame and helplessness.

"How did you find--out?" he asked at last.

"The papers are full of it. And Valentine was a little too close to Vandaleur. That wasn't smart, was it?"

"I guess not. I'm not very smart." "Your android's got quite a record, hasn't it? Assault. Arson. Destruction. What happened on Paragon?"

"It kidnapped a child. Took her out into the rice fields and murdered her."

"Raped her?"

"I don't know."

"They're going to catch up with you."

"Don't I know it? Christ! We've been running for two years now. Seven planets in two years. I must have abandoned a hundred thousand dollars' worth of property in two years."

"You better find out what's wrong with it."

"How can I? Can I walk into a repair clinic and ask for an overhaul? What am I going to say? 'My android's just turned killer. Fix it.' They'd call the police right off." I began to shake. "They'd have that android dismantled inside one day.

"I'd probably be booked as an accessory to murder."

"Why didn't you have it repaired before it got to murder?"

"I couldn't take the chance," Vandaleur explained angrily. "if they started fooling around with lobotomies and body chemistry and endocrine surgery, they might have destroyed its aptitudes. What would I have left to hire out? How would I live?" "You could work

yourself. People do.

"Work at what? You know I'm good for nothing. How could I compete with specialist androids and robots? Who can, unless he's got a terrific talent for a particular job?"

"Yeah. That's true."

"I lived off my old man all my life. Damn him! He had to go bust just before he died. Left me the android and that's all. The only way I can get along is living off what it earns;"

"You better sell it before the cops catch up with you. You can live off fifty grand. Invest it."

"At three percent? Fifteen hundred a year? When the android returns fifteen percent of its value? Eight thousand—a year.

That's what it earns. No, Dallas. I've got to go along with it."

"What are you going to do about its violence kick?"

"I can't do anything... except watch it and pray. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. It's none of my business. Only one thing...I ought to get something for keeping my mouth shut."

"What?"

"The android works for me for free. Let somebody else pay you, but I get it for free."

The multiple-aptit de android worked. Vandaleur collected its fees. His expenses were taken care of. His savings began to mount. As the warm spring of Megastar V turned to hot summer, I began investigating farms and properties. It would be possible, within a year or two, for us to settle down permanently, provided Dallas Brady's demands did not become rapacious.

On the first hot day of summer, the android began singing in Dallas Brady's workshop. It hovered over the electric furnace which, along with the weather, was broiling the shop, and sang an ancient tune that had been popular half a century before.

"Oh, it's no feat to beat the heat.

All reet! All reet!
So jeet your seat
Be fleet be fleet
Cool and discreet
- Honey..."

It sang in a strange, halting voice, and its accomplished fingers were clasped behind its back, writhing in a strange rumba all their own. Dallas Brady was surprised.

"You happy or something?" she asked.

"I must remind you that the pleasure-pain syndrome is not incorporated in the android synthesis," I answered. "All reet! All rent! Be fleet be fleet, cool and discreet, honey

Its fingers stopped their twisting and picked up a pair of iron tongs. The android poked them into the glowing heart of the furnace, leaning far forward to peer into the lovely heat.

"Be careful, you damned fool!" Dallas Brady exclaimed. "You want to fall in?"

"I must remind you that I am worth fifty-seven thousand dollars on the current exchange," I said. "It is forbidden to endanger valuable property. All met! All met! Honey...

It withdrew a crucible of glowing gold from the electric furnace, turned, capered hideously, sang crazily, and splashed a sluggish goblet of molten gold over Dallas Brady's head. She screamed and collapsed, her hair and clothes flaming, her skin crackling. The android poured again while it capered and sang.

"Be fleet be fleet, cool and discreet, honey...." It sang and slowly

poured and poured the molten, gold until the writhing body was still. Then I left the workshop and rejoined James Vandaleur in his hotel suite. The android's charred clothes and squinching fingers warned its owner- that something was very much wrong.

Vandaleur rushed to Dallas Brady's workshop, stared once, vomited and fled. I had enough time to pack one bag and raise nine hundred dollars on portable assets. He took a third-class cabin on the Megastar Queen, which left that morning for Lyre Alpha. He took me with him. He wept and counted his money and I beat the android again.

And the thermometer in Dallas Brady's workshop registered 98.10 beautifully Fahrenheit.

On Lyra Alpha we holed up in a small hotel near the muversity. There, Vandaleur carefully bruised my forehead until the letters MA were obliterated by the swelling and the discoloration. The letters would reappear again, but not for several months, and in the meantime Vandaleur hoped that the hue and cry for an MA android would be forgotten. The android was hired out as a common laborer in the university power plant. Vandaleur, as James Venice, eked out life on the android's small earnings.

I wasn't too unhappy. Most of the other residents in the hotel were university students, equally hard up, but delightfully young and enthusiastic. There was one charming girl with sharp eyes and a quick mind. Her name was Wanda, and she and her beau, Jed Stark, took a tremendous interest in the killing android which was being mentioned in every paper in the galaxy.

"We've been studying the case," she and Jed said at one of the casual student parties which happened to be held this night in Vandaleur's room. "We think we know what's causing it. We're going to do a paper." They were in a high state of excitement.

"Causing what?" somebody wanted to know.

"The android rampage."

"Obviously out Of adjustment, isn't it? Body chemistry gone haywire. Maybe a kind of synthetic cancer, yes?"

"No." Wanda gave Jed a look of suppressed triumph.

"Well, what is it?"

"Something specific." "What?"

"That would be telling." "Oh, come on."

"Nothing doing."

"Won't you tell us?" I asked intently. "I... we're very much interested in what could go wrong with an android."

"No, Mr. Venice," Wanda said. "It's a unique idea and we've got to protect it. One thesis like this and we'll be set up for life. We can't take the chance of somebody stealing it."

"Can't you give us a hint?"

"No. Not a hint. Don't say a word, Jed. But I'll tell you this much, Mr. Venice. I'd hate to be the man who owns that android." "You mean the police?" I asked.

"I mean projection, Mr. Venice. Psychotic projection! That's the danger... and I won't say any more. I've said too much as is."

I heard steps outside, and a hoarse voice singing softly: "Be fleet be fleet, cool and discreet, honey...." My android entered the room, home from its tour of duty at the university power plant. It was not introduced. I motioned to it and I immediately responded to the command and went to the beer keg and took over Vandaleur's job of serving the guests. Its accomplished fingers writhed in a private rumba of their own. Gradually they stopped their squirming, and the strange humming ended.

Androids were not unusual at the university. The wealthier students owned them along with cars and planes. Vandaleur's 'android

provoked no comment, but young Wanda was sharpened and quick-witted. She noted my bruised forehead and she was intent on the history-making, thesis she and Jed Stark were going to write. After the party broke up, she consulted with Jed walking upstairs to her room.

"Jed, why'd that android have a bruised forehead?"

"Probably hurt itself, Wanda. It's working in the power plant. They fling a lot of heavy stuff around." "That all?"

"What else?"

"It could be a convenient bruise."

"Convenient for what?"

"Hiding what's stamped on its forehead."

"No point to that, Wanda. You don't have to see marks on a forehead to recognize an android. You don't have to see a trademark on a car to know it's a car."

"I don't mean it's trying to pass as a human. I mean it's trying to pass as a lower-grade android."

"Why?"

"Suppose it had MA on its forehead."

"Multiple aptitude? Then why in hell would Venice waste it stoking furnaces if it could earn more-- Oh. Oh! You mean it's--?"

Wanda nodded.

"Jesus!" Stark pursed his lips. "What do we do? Call the police?"

"No. We don't know if it's an MA for a fact. If it turns out to be an MA and the killing android, our paper comes first anyway. This is our big chance, Jed. If it's that android we can run a series of controlled tests and--"

"How do we find out for sure?"

"Easy. Infrared film. That'll show what's under the bruise.

Borrow a camera. We'll sneak down to the power plant tomorrow afternoon and take some pictures. Then we'll know."

They stole down into the university power plant the following afternoon. It was a vast cellar, deep under the earth. It was dark, shadowy, luminous with burning light from the furnace doors. Above the roar of the fires they could hear a strange voice shouting and chanting in the echoing vault: "All rent! All rent! So jeet your seat. Be fleet be fleet, cool and discreet, honey And they could see a capering figure dancing a lunatic rumba in time to the music it shouted. The legs twisted.

The arms waved. The fingers writhed.

Jed Stark raised the camera and began shooting his spool of infrared film, aiming the camera sights at that bobbing head.

Then Wanda shrieked, for I saw them and came charging down on them, brandishing a polished steel shovel. It smashed the camera. It felled the girl and then the boy. Jed fought me for a desperate hissing moment before he was bludgeoned into helplessness. Then the android dragged them to the furnace and fed them to the flames, slowly, hideously. It capered and sang-. Then it returned to my hotel.

The thermometer in the power plant registered 100.9° murderously Fahrenheit. All reet! All reet!

We bought steerage on the Lyra Queen and Vandaleur and the android did odd jobs for their meals. During the night watches, Vandaleur would sit alone in the steerage head with a cardboard portfolio on his lap, puzzling over its contents. That portfolio was all he had managed to bring with him from Lyra Alpha. He had stolen it from Wanda's room. It was labeled ANDROID. It contained the secret of my sickness.

And it contained nothing but newspapers. Scores of newspapers from all over the galaxy, printed, microfilmed, engraved, etched, offset, photostated... Rigel Star-Banner

Paragon Picayune... Megastar Times-Leader... Lalande Herald... Lacaille Journal... Indi Intelligencer... Eridani Telegram-News. All rent! All rent!

Nothing but newspapers. Each paper contained an account of one crime in the android's ghastly career. Each paper also contained news, domestic and foreign, sports, society, weather, shipping news, stock exchange quotations, human-interest stories, features, contests, puzzles. Somewhere in that mass of uncollated facts was the secret Wanda and Jed Stark had discovered. Vandaleur pored over the papers helplessly. It was beyond him. So jettison your seat!

"I'll sell you," I told the android. "Damn you. When we land on Terra, I'll sell you. I'll settle for three percent of whatever you're worth."

"I am worth fifty-seven thousand dollars on the current exchange," I told him.

"If I can't sell you, I'll turn you in to the police," I said.

"I am valuable property," I answered. "It is forbidden to endanger valuable property. You won't have me destroyed."

"Christ damn you!" Vandaleur cried. "What? Are you arrogant? Do you know you can trust me to protect you? Is that the secret?"

The multiple-aperture android regarded him with calm accomplished eyes. "Sometimes," it said, "it is a good thing to be property."

It was three below zero when the Lyra Queen dropped at Croydon Field. A mixture of ice and snow swept across the field, fizzling and exploding into steam under the Queen's tail jets. The passengers trotted numbly across the blackened concrete to customs inspection, and thence to the airport bus that was to take them to London. Vandaleur and the android were broke. They walked.

By midnight they reached Piccadilly Circus. The December ice storm had not slackened and the statue of Eros was encrusted with ice. They turned right, walked down to Trafalgar Square and then along the Strand, shaking with cold and wet. Just above Fleet Street, Vandaleur saw a solitary figure coming from the direction of St. Paul's. He drew the android into an alley.

"We've got to have money," he whispered. He pointed to the approaching figure. "He has money. Take it from him."

"The order cannot be obeyed," the android said.

"Take it from him," Vandaleur repeated. "By force. Do you understand? We're desperate."

"It is contrary to my prime directive," the android repeated. "The order cannot be obeyed."

"Damn you!" I said. "You've murdered... tortured destroyed! You tell me that now?"

"It is forbidden to endanger life or property. The order cannot be obeyed."

I thrust the android back and leaped out at the stranger. He was tall, austere, poised. He had an air of hope curdled by cynicism. He carried a cane. I saw he was blind.

"Yes?" he said. "I hear you near me. What is it?"

"Sir,..." Vandaleur hesitated. "I'm desperate."

"We are all desperate," the stranger replied. "Quietly desperate."
"Sir... I've got to have some money."

"Are you begging or stealing?" The sightless eyes passed over Vandaleur and the android.

"I'm prepared for either."

"An. So are we all. It is the history of our race." The stranger motioned over his- shoulder. "I have been begging at St. Paul's, my friend. What I desire cannot be stolen. What is it you desire that you are lucky enough to be able to steal?" "Money," Vandaleur said.

"Money for what? Come, my friend, let us exchange confidences. I will tell you why I beg, if you will tell me why you steal. My name is Blenheim.", "My name is... Vole."

"I was not begging for sight at St. Paul's, Mr. Vole. I was begging for a number."

"A number?"

"An, yes. Numbers rational, numbers irrational. Numbers imaginary. Positive integers. Negative integers. Fractions, positive and negative. Eh? You have never heard of Blenheim's immortal treatise on Twenty Zeros, or The Differences in Absence of Quantity?" Blenheim smiled bitterly. "I am the wizard of the Theory of Numbers, Mr. Vole, and I have exhausted the charm of Number fOr myself. After fifty years of wizardry, senility approaches and appetite vanishes. I have been praying in St. Paul's for inspiration. Dear God, I prayed, if You exist, send me a Number."

Vandaleur slowly lifted the cardboard portfolio, and touched Blenheim's hand with it.- "In here," he said, "is a number. A hidden number. A secret number. The number of a crime. Shall we exchange, Mr. Blenheim? Shelter for a number?"

"Neither begging nor stealing, eh?" Blenheim said. "But a bargain. So all life reduces itself to the banal." The sightless eyes again passed over Vandaleur and the android. "Perhaps the Almighty is not God but a merchant. Come home with me."

On the top floor of Blenheim's house we share a room-- two beds, two claset, two washstands, one bathroom. Vandaleur bruised my forehead again and sent me out to find work, and while the android worked, I consulted with Blenheim and read him the papers from the portfolio, one by one. All reet! All reet! Vandaleur told him this much

and no more. He was a student, I said, planning a thesis on the murdering android. In these papers which he had collected were the facts that would explain the crimes, of which Blenheim had heard nothing.

There must be a correlation, a number, a statistic, something which would account for my derangement, I explained, and Blenheim was piqued by the mystery, the detective story, the human interest of Number.

We examined the papers. As I read them--loud, he listed them and their contents in his blind, meticulous writing. And then I read his notes to him. He listed the papers--by type, by type face, by fact, by fancy, by article, spelling, words, theme, advertising, pictures, subject, politics, prejudices. He analyzed. He studied. He meditated. And we lived together in that top floor, always a little cold, always a little terrified, always a little closer... brought together by our fear of us, our hatred between us driven like a wedge into a living tree and splitting the trunk, only to be forever incorporated into the-scar tissue. So we grew together; Vandaleur and the android. Be fleet be fleet.

And one afternoon Blenheim called Vandaleur into his study and displayed his notes. "I think I've found it," he said, "but I can't understand it."

Vandaleur's heart leaped. -- "Here are the correlations," Blenheim continued. "In fifty papers there are accounts of the criminal android. What is there, outside the depredations, that is also in fifty papers?" "I don't know, Mr. Blenheim." "It was a rhetorical-- question. Here is the answer. The weather."

"What?"

"The weather." Blenheim nodded. "Each crime was committed on a day when the temperature was above ninety-degrees Fahrenheit."

"But that's impossible," Vandaleur exclaimed. "It was cold at the university on Lyra Alpha."

"We have no record of any crime committed on Lyra Alpha. There is

no paper."

"No. That's right. I--" Vandaleur was coiffused. Suddenly he exclaimed. "No. You're right. The furnace room. It was hot down there. Hot! Of course. My God, yes! That's the answer. Dallas Brady's electric furnace... the rice deltas on Paragon. So jeet- your seat. Yes. But' why? Why? My God, why?"

I came into the house at that moment and, passing the study, saw Vandaleur and Blenheim. I entered, awaiting commands, my multiple aptitudes devoted to service. "That's the android, eh?" Blenheim said after a long moment.

"Yes," Vandaleur answered, still confused by the discovery.

"And that explains why it refused to attack you that night on the Strand. It wasn't hot enough to break the prime directive.

Only in the-heat...The heat, all reet!" He looked at the android. A lunatic command passed from man to android. I refused. It is forbidden to endanger life. Vandaleur gestured furiously, then seized Blenheim's shoulders and yanked him back out of his desk chair to the floor. Blenheim shouted once.

Vandaleur leaped on him like a tiger, pinning him to the floor and sealing his mouth with one hand.

"Find a weapon," I called to the android.

"It is forbidden to endanger life-."

"This is a fight for self-preservation. Bring me a weapon!"

He held the squirming mathematician with all his weight. I went at once to a cupboard where I knew a revolver was kept. I checked it. It was loaded with five cartridges. I handed it to Vandaleur. I took it, rammed the barrel against Blenheim's head and pulled the trigger. He shuddered once. We had three hours before the cook returned from her day off. We looted the house. We took Blenheim's money and jewels. We packed a bag with clothes. We took Blenheim's

notes, destroyed the newspapers, and we fled, carefully locking the door behind us. In Blenheim's study we left a pile of crumpled papers under a half inch of burning candle. And we soaked the rug around it with kerosene. No, I did all that. The android refused. I am forbidden to endanger life or property.

All reet!

They took the tubes to Leicester Square, changed trains and rode to the British Museum. There they got off and went to a small Georgian house just off Russell Square. A shingle in the window read: NAN WEBB, PSYCHOMETRIC CONSULTANT. Vandaleur had made a note of the address some weeks earlier. They went into the house. The android waited in the foyer with the bag. Vandaleur entered Nan Webb's office.

She was a tall woman with gray shingled hair, very fine English complexion and very bad English legs. Her features were blunt, her expression acute, She nodded to Vandaleur, finished a letter, sealed it and looked up.

"My name," I said, "is Vanderbilt. James Vanderbilt."

"Quite."

"I'm an exchange student at London University."

"Quite."

"I've been researching on the killer android, and I think I've discovered something very interesting. I'd like your advice on it. What is your fee?" -- "What is your college at the university?"

"Why?"

"There is a discount for students." "Merton College."

"That will be two pounds, please."

Vandaleur placed two pounds on the desk and added to the fee

Blenheim's notes. "There is a correlation," he said, "between the crimes of the android and the weather. You will note that each crime was committed when the temperature rose above ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Is there a psychometric answer for this?"

Nan Webb nodded, studied the notes for a moment, put down the sheets of paper and said: "Synesthesia, obviously."

"W'hat?"

"Synesthesia," she repeated. "When a sensation, Mr. Vanderbilt, is interpreted immediately in terms of a sensation from a different sense organ than the one stimulated, it is called synesthesia. For example: A sound stimulus gives rise to a simultaneous sensation of definite color. Or color gives rise to a sensation of taste. Or a light stimulus gives rise to a sensation of sound. There can be confusion or short circuiting of any sensation of taste, smell, pain, pressure, temperature--and so on. D'you understand?"

"I think so."

"Your research has probably uncovered the fact that the android most probably reacts to temperature stimulus above the ninety-degree level synesthetically. Most probably there is an endocrine response. Probably a temperature linkage with the android adrenal surrogate. High temperature brings about a response of fear, anger, excitement and violent physical activity... all within the province of the adrenal gland."

"Yes. I see. Then if the android were to be kept in cold climates...."

"There would be neither stimulus nor response. There would be no crimes. Quite."

"I see. What is psychotic projection?"

"How do you mean?"

"Is there any danger of projection with regard to the owner of the android?"

"Very interesting. Projection is a throwing forward. It is the process of throwing out upon another the ideas or impulses that belong to oneself. The paranoid, for example, projects upon others his conflicts and disturbances in order to externalize them. He accuses, directly or by implication, other men of having the very sicknesses with which he is struggling himself."

"And the danger of projection?"

"It is the danger of the victim's believing what is implied. If you live with a psychotic who projects his sickness upon you, there is a danger of falling into his psychotic pattern and becoming virtually psychotic yourself. As, no doubt, is happening to you, Mr. Vandaleur."

Vandaleur leaped to his feet.

"You are an ass," Nan Webb went on crisply. She waved the sheets of notes. "This is no exchange student's writing. It's the unique cursive of the famous Blenheim. Every school in England knows this blind writing. There is no Merton College at London University. That was a miserable guess. Merton is one of the Oxford Colleges. And you, Mr. Vandaleur, are so obviously infected by association with your deranged android... by projection, if you will... that I hesitate between calling the Metropolitan Police and the Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

I took the gun out and shot her.

Reet!

"Antares Two, Alpha Aurigae, Acrux Four, Pollux Nine, Rigel Centaurus," Vandaleur said. "They're all cold. Cold as a witch's kiss. Mean temperatures of forty degrees Fahrenheit. Never get hotter than seventy. We're in business again. Watch that curve."

The multiple-aperture android swung the wheel with its accomplished hands. The car took the curve sweetly and sped on through the northern marshes, the reeds stretching for miles, brown and dry, under the cold English sky. The sun was sinking swiftly. Overhead, a

lone ifight of bastards flapped clumsily eastward. High above the flight, a lone helicopter drifted toward home and warmth.

"No more warmth for us," I said. "No more heat. We're safe when we're cold. We'll hole up in Scotland, make a little money, get across to Norway, build a bankroll and then ship out. We'll settle on Pollux. We're safe. We've licked it. We can live again."

There was a startling bleep from overhead, and then a ragged roar:

"ATTENTION JAMES VANDALEUR AND ANDROID.

ATTENTION JAMES VANDALEUR AND ANDROID."

Vandaleur started and looked up. The lone helicopter was floating above them. From its belly came amplified commands:

"YOU ARE SURROUNDED.

THE ROAD IS BLOCKED.

YOU ARE TO STOP YOUR CAR AT ONCE AND SUBMIT TO ARREST.

STOP AT ONCE!"

I looked at Vandaleur for orders.

"Keep driving," Vandaleur snapped.

The helicopter dropped lower "ATTENTION ANDROID.

YOU ARE IN CONTROL OF THE VEHICLE. YOU ARE TO STOP AT ONCE.

THIS IS A STATE DIRECTIVE SUPERSEDING ALL PRIVATE COMMANDS.!

The car slowed.

"What the hell are you doing?" I shouted.

"A state directive supercedes all private commands," the android answered. "I must point out to you that--"

"Get the hell away from the wheel," Vandaleur ordered. I clubbed the android, yanked him sideways and squirmed Over him to the wheel. The car veered off the road in that moment and went churning through the frozen mud and dry reeds. Vandaleur regained control and continued westward through the marshes toward a parallel highway five miles distant.

"We'll beat their goddamned block," he grunted. The car pounded and surged. The helicopter dropped even lower. A searchlight blazed from the belly of the plane.

"ATTENTION JAMES VANDALEUR AND ANDROID.

SUBMIT TO ARREST.

THIS IS A STATE DIRECTIVE

SUPERSEDING ALL PRIVATE COMMANDS."

"He can't submit," Vandaleur shouted wildly. "Them's no one to submit to. He can't and I won't."

"Christ!" I muttered. "We'll beat them yet. We'll beat the block. We'll beat the heat. We'll--"

"I must point out to you," I said, "that I am required by my prime directive to obey state directives which supersede all private commands. I must submit to arrest."

"Who says it's a state directive?" Vandaleur said. "Them? Up in that plane? They've got to show credentials. They've got to prove it's state authority before you submit. How d'you know they're not crooks trying to trick us?"

Holding the wheel with one arm, he reached into his side pocket to make sure the gun was still in place. The car skidded.

The tires squealed on frost and reeds. The wheel was wrenched from his grasp and the car yawed up a small hillock and overturned. The motor roared and the wheels screamed. Vandaleur crawled out and dragged the android with him. For the moment we were outside the cone of light blazing down from the helicopter. We blundered off into the marsh, into the blackness; into concealment... Vandaleur running with a pounding heart, hauling the android along.

The helicopter circled and soared over the wrecked car, searchlight peering, loudspeaker braying. On the highway we had left, lights appeared as the pursuing and blocking parties gathered and followed radio directions from the plane. Vandaleur and the android continued deeper and deeper into the marsh, working their way towards the parallel road and safety. It was night by now. The sky was a black matte. Not a star showed. The temperature was dropping. A southeast night wind knifed us to the bone.

Far behind there was a dull concussion. Vandaleur turned, gasping. The car's fuel had exploded. A geyser of flame shot up like a lurid fountain. It subsided into a low crater of burning reeds. Whipped by the wind, the distant hem of flame fanned up into- a wall, ten feet high. The wall began marching down on us, crackling fiercely. Above it, a pall of oily smoke surged forward. Behind it, Vandaleur could make out the figures of men.. a mass of beaters searching the marsh.

"Christ!" I cried and searched desperately for safety. He ran, dragging me with him, until their feet crunched through the surface ice of a pool. He trampled the ice furiously, then flung himself down in the numbing water, pulling the android with us.

The wall of flame approached. I could hear the crackle and feel the heat. He could see the searchers clearly. Vandaleur reached into his side pocket for the gun. The pocket was torn. The gun was gone. He groaned and shook with cold and terror.

The light from the marsh fire was blinding. Overhead, the helicopter floated helplessly to one side, unable to fly through the smoke and flames and aid the searchers, who were beating far to the right of us.

They'll miss us," Vandaleur whispered. "Keep quiet. That's an order. They'll miss us. We'll beat them. We'll beat the fire. We'll--"

Three distinct shots sounded less than a hundred feet from the fugitives. Blam! Blam! Blam! They came from the last three cartridges in my gun as the marsh fire reached it where it had dropped, and exploded the shells. The searchers turned toward the sound and began working directly toward us. Vandaleur cursed hysterically and tried to submerge even deeper to escape the intolerable heat of the fire. The android began to twitch.

The wall of flame surged up to them. Vandaleur took a deep breath and prepared to submerge until the flame passed over them. The android shuddered and suddenly began to scream.

"All reet! All met!" it shouted. "Be fleet be fleet!"

"Damn you!" I shouted. I tried to drown the android.

"Damn you!" I cursed. I smashed Vandaleur's face.

The android battered Vandaleur, who fought it off until it burst out of the mud and staggered upright. Before I could return to the attack, the live flames captured it hypnotically. It danced and capered in a lunatic rumba before the wall of fire.

Its legs twisted. Its arms waved. The fingers writhed in a private rumba of their own. It shrieked and sang and ran in a crooked waltz before the embrace of the heat, a muddy monster silhouetted against the brilliant sparkling flare.

The searchers shouted. There were shots. The android spun around twice and then continued its horrid dance before the face of the flames. There was a rising gust of wind. The fire swept around the capering figure and enveloped it for a roaring moment. Then the fire swept on, leaving behind it a sobbing mass of synthetic flesh oozing scarlet blood that would never coagulate.

The thermometer would have registered 1200° wondrously Fahrenheit.

Vandaleur didn't die. I got away. They missed him while they watched the android caper and die. But I don't know which of us he is these days. Psychotic projection, Wanda warned me. Projection, Nan Webb told him. If you live with a crazy machine long enough, I become crazy too. Reet!

But we know the truth. We know that they were wrong. It was the other way around. It was the man that was corrupting the machine.... any machine.... all machines. The new robot and Vandaleur know that because the new robot's started twitching too. Reet!

- Here on cold Pollux, the robot is twitching and singing. No heat, but my fmgers writhe. No heat, but it's taken the little Talley girl off for a solitary walk. A cheap labor robot... A servo-mechanism... all I could afford... but it's twitching and humming and walking alone with the child somewhere and I can't fmd them. Christ! Vandaleur can't fmd me before it's too late. Cool and discreet, honey, in the dancing frost while the thermometer registers 10° fondly Fahrenheit.

The Four-Hour Fugue

Alfred Bester

Fear carries a scent with it that most humans can't detect. Most, but not all.

By now, of course, the Northeast Corridor was the Northeast slum, stretching from Canada to the Carolinas and as far west as Pittsburgh. It was 'a fantastic jungle of rancid violence inhabited by a steaming, restless population with no visible means of support and no fixed residence, so vast that census takers, birth-control supervisors and the social services had given up all hope. It was a gigantic raree-show that everyone denounced and enjoyed. Even the privileged few who could afford to live highly-protected lives in highly-expensive Oases and could live anywhere else they pleased never thought of leaving. The jungle grabbed you. There were thousands of everyday survival problems but one of the most exasperating was the shortage of fresh water. Most of the available potable water had long since been impounded by progressive industries for the sake of a better tomorrow and there was very little left to go around. Rainwater tanks on the roofs, of course. A black market, naturally. That was about all. So the jungle stank. It stank worse than the court of Queen Elizabeth, which could have bathed but didn't believe in it. The Corridor just couldn't bathe, wash clothes or clean house, and you could smell its noxious effluvium from ten miles out at sea. Welcome to the Fun Corridor. Sufferers near the shore would have been happy to clean up in salt water, but the Corridor beaches had been polluted by so much crude oil seepage for so many generations that they were all owned by deserving oil reclamation companies. Keep Out! No Trespassing! And armed guards. The rivers and lakes were electrically fenced; no need for guard's, just skull and crossbones signs and if you didn't know what they were telling you, tough.

Not to believe that everybody minded stinking as they skipped merrily over the rotting corpses in the streets, but a lot did and their only remedy was perfumery. There were dozens of competing companies

producing perfumes but the leader, far and away, was the Continental Can Company, which hadn't manufactured cans in two centuries. They'd switched to plastics and had the good fortune about a hundred stockholders meetings back to make the mistake of signing a sales contract with and delivering to some cockamamie perfume brewer an enormous quantity of glowing neon containers. The corporation went bust and CCC took it over in hopes of getting some of their money back. That take-over proved to be their salvation when the perfume explosion took place; it gave them entree to the most profitable industry of the times.

But it was neck-and-neck with the rivals until Blaise Skiaki joined CCC; then it turned into a runaway. Blaise Skiaki, Origins; French, Japanese, Black African and Irish, Education; BA, Princeton; ME, MIT; PhD. Dow Chemical, (It was Dow that had secretly tipped CCC that Skiaki was a winner and lawsuits brought by the completion were still pending before the ethics board.) Blaise Skiaki; age, thirty-one; unmarried, straight, genius.

His sense of scent was his genius, and he was privately, referred to at CCC as "The Nose." He knew everything about perfumery; the animal products, ambergris, castor, civet, musk; the essential oils distilled from plants and flowers; the balsams extruded by tree and shrub wounds, benzoin, opopanax, Peru, Talu, storax, myrrh; the synthetics created from the combination of natural and chemical scents, the latter mostly the esters of fatty acids.

He had created for CCC their most successful sellers: "Vulva," "Assuage," "Oxter" (a much more attractive brand name than "Armpitto"), "Preparation F," "Tongue War," et cetera. He was treasured by CCC, paid a salary generous enough to enable him to live in an Oasis and, best of all, granted unlimited supplies of fresh water. No girl in the Corridor could resist the offer of taking a shower with him. But he paid a high price for these advantages. He could never use scented soaps, shaving creams, pomades or depilatories. He could never eat seasoned foods. He could drink nothing but pure water. All this, you understand; to keep The Nose pure and uncontaminated so that he could smell around in his sterile laboratory and devise new creations. He was presently composing a rather

promising unguent provisionally named "Correctum," but he'd been on it for six months without any positive results and CCC was alarmed by the delay. His genius had never before taken so long. There was a meeting of the top-level executives, names withheld on the grounds of corporate privilege.

"What's the matter with him anyway?"

"Has he lost his touch?"

"It hardly seems likely,"

"Maybe he needs a rest."

"Why, he had a week's holiday last month."

"What did he do?"

"Ate up a storm, he told me."

"Could that be it?"

"No. He said he purged himself before he came back to work."

"Is he having trouble here at CCC? Difficulties with middle management?"

"Absolutely not, Mr. Chairman. They wouldn't dare touch him."

"Maybe he wants a raise."

"No. He can't spend the money he makes now."

"Has our competition got to him?"

"They get to him all the time. General, and he laughs them off."

"Then it must be something personal."

"Agreed."

"Woman-trouble? "

"My God! We should have such trouble."

"Family-trouble? "

"He's an orphan, Mr. Chairman."

"Ambition? Incentive? Should we make him an officer of CCC? "

"I offered that to him the first of the year, sir, and he turned me down. He just wants to play in his laboratory."

"Then why isn't he playing? "

"Apparently he's got some kind of creative block."

"What the hell is the matter with him anyway? "

"Which is how you started this meeting."

"I did not."

"You did."

"Not."

"Governor, will you play back the bug."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please! Obviously Dr.Skiakihas personal problems which are blocking his genius. Wemust solve that for him.Suggestions? "

"Psychiatry? "

"That won't work without voluntary cooperation. I doubt whether he'd cooperate. He's an obstinate gook."

"Senator, I beg you! Such expressions must not be used with reference to one of our most valuable assets."

"Mr. Chairman, the problem is to discover the source of Dr.Skiaki's block."

"Agreed.Suggestions? "

"Why, the first step should be to maintain twenty-four-hour surveillance. All the gook's--excuse me-the good doctor's activities, associates, contacts.""By CCC? " "I would suggest not. There are bound to be leaks which would only antagonize the good gook-doctor! ""Outside surveillance? ""Yes, sir.""Very good. Agreed. Meeting adjourned."

Skip-Tracer Associates were perfectly furious. After one month they threw the case back intoCCC's lap, asking for nothing more than their expenses.

"Why in hell didn't you tell us that we were assigned to a pro, Mr. Chairman, sir? Our tracers aren't trained for that:"

"What a minute, please.Whatd'youmean , 'pro? "" "A professional Rip:"

"A what? "

"Rip,Gorill ,Gimpster ,Crook ."

"Dr.Skiaki a crook? Preposterous."

"Look, Mr. Chairman, I'll frame it for you and you draw your own conclusions. Yes? "

"Go ahead."

"It's all detailed in this report anyway. We put double tails onSkiaki every day to and from your shop. When he left they followed him home. He always went home. They staked in double shifts. He had dinner sent in from the Organic Nursery every night. They checked the messengers bringing the dinners. Legit. They checked the dinners; sometimes for one, sometimes for two. They traced some of the girls who left his penthouse. All clean. So far, all clean, yes? "

"And? "

"The crunch. Couple of nights a week he leaves the house and goes into the city. He leaves around midnight and doesn't come back until four, more or less."

"Where does he go? "

"We don't know because he shakes his tails like the pro that he is. He weaves through the Corridor like a whore or a fag cruising for trade-excuse me-and he always loses our men. I'm not taking anything away from him. He's smart, shifty, quick and a real pro. He has to be; and he's too much for Skip Tracers to handle."

"Then you have no idea of what he does or who he meets between midnight and four? "

"No, sir. We've got nothing and you've got a problem. Not ours any more."

"Thank you. Contrary to the popular impression, corporations are not altogether idiotic . CCC understands that negatives are also results. You'll receive your expenses and the agreed upon fee."

"Mr. Chairman, I-

"No, no, please. You've narrowed it down to those missing four hours. Now, as you say, they're our problem."

CCC summoned Salem Burne . Mr. Burne always insisted that he was neither a physician nor a psychiatrist; he did not care to be associated with what he considered to be the drek of the professions. Salem Burne was a witch doctor; more precisely, a warlock. He made the most remarkable and penetrating analyses of disturbed people, not so much through his coven rituals of pentagons, incantations, incense and the like as through his remarkable sensitivity to Body English and his acute interpretation of it. And this might be witchcraft after all.

Mr.Burne enteredBlaiseSkiaki's immaculate laboratory with a winning smile and Dr.Skiaki let out a rending howl of anguish.

"I told you to sterilize before you came."

"But I did, Doctor.Faithfully."

"You did not. You reek of anise,ilang-ilang and methylantranilate . You've polluted my day. Why? "

"Dr.Skiaki . I assure you that I-" Suddenly SalemBurne stopped. "Oh my God! " he groaned. "I used my wife's towel this morning."

Skiakilaughed and turned up the ventilators to full force. "I understand. No hard feelings. Now let's get your wifeout of here. I have an office about half a mile down the hall. We can talk there."

They sat down in the vacant office and looked at each other. Mr.Burne saw a pleasant, youngish man with cropped black hair, small expressive ears, high telltale cheekbones,slitty eyes that would need careful watching and graceful hands that would be a dead giveaway.

"Now, Mr.Burne , how can I help you? "Skiaki said while his hands asked, "Why the hell have you come pestering me? "

"Dr.Skiaki , I'm a colleague in a sense; I'm a professional witch doctor. One crucial part of my ceremonies is the burning of various forms of incense, but they're all rather conventional. I was hoping that your expertise might suggest something different with which I could experiment"

"I see.Interesting. You've been burningstacte ,onycha , galbanum,frankincense ... that sort of thing? "

"Yes.All quite conventional."

"Most interesting.I could, of course, make many suggestions for new experiments, and yet-." HereSkiaki stopped and stared into space.

After a long pause the warlock asked, "Is anything wrong, Doctor? "

"Look here," Skiaki burst out. "You're on the wrong track. It's the burning of incense that's conventional and old-fashioned, and trying different scents won't solve your problem. Why not experiment with an altogether different approach? "

"And what would that be? "

"The Odophone principle."

"Odophone? "

"Yes. There's a scale that exists among scents as among sounds. Sharp smells correspond to high notes and heavy smells with low notes. For example, ambergris is in the treble clef while violet is in the bass. I could draw up a scent scale for you, running perhaps two octaves. Then it would be up to you to compose the music."

"This is positively brilliant, Dr. Skiaki ."

"Isn't it? "Skiaki beamed. "But in all honesty I should point out that we're collaborators in brilliance. I could never have come up with the idea if you hadn't presented me with a most original challenge."

They made contact on this friendly note and talked shop enthusiastically, lunched together, told each other about themselves and made plans for the withcraft experiments in which Skiaki volunteered to participate despite the fact that he was no believer in diabolism.

"And yet the irony lies in the fact that he is indeed devil-ridden," Salem Burne reported.

The Chairman could make nothing of this.

"Psychiatry and diabolism use different terms for the same phenomenon," Burne explained. "So perhaps I'd better translate. Those missing four hours are fugues."

The Chairman was not enlightened. "Do you mean the musical expression, Mr.Burne ? "

"No, sir.A fugue is also the psychiatric description of a more advanced form of somnambulism... sleepwalking."

"Blaise Skiaki walks in his sleep? "

"Yes, sir, but it's more complicated than that. The sleepwalker is a comparatively simple case. He is never in touch with his surroundings. You can speak to him, shout at him, address him by name, and he remains totally oblivious."

"And the fugue? "

"In the fugue the subject is in touch with his surroundings. He can converse with you. He has awareness and memory for the events that take place within the fugue, but while he is within his fugue he is a totally different person from the man he is in real life. And-and this is most important, sir-after the fugue he remembers nothing of it"

"Then in your opinion Dr.Skiaki has these fugues two or three times a week."

"That is my diagnosis, sir."

"And he can tell us nothing of what transpires during the fugue? "

"Nothing:"

"Can you? "

"I'm afraid not, sir. There's a limit to my powers." "Have you any idea what is causing these fugues? "

"Only that he is driven by something. I would say that he is possessed by the devil, but that is the cant of my profession. Others may use different terms-compulsion or obsession. The terminology is unimportant. The basic fact is that something possessing him is compelling him to go out nights to do-what? I don't know. All I do

know is that this diabolical drive most probably is what is blocking his creative work for you."

One does not summon Gretchen Nunn, not even if you're CCC whose common stock has split twenty-five times. You work your way up through the echelons of her staff until you are finally admitted to the Presence. This involves a good deal of backing and forth between your staff and hers, and ignites a good deal of exasperation, so the Chairman was understandably put out when at last he was ushered into Miss Nunn's workshop, which was cluttered with the books and apparatus she used for her various investigations.

Gretchen Nunn's business was working miracles: not in the sense of the extraordinary, anomalous or abnormal brought about by a superhuman agency, but rather in the sense of her extraordinary and/or abnormal perception and manipulation of reality. In any situation she could and did achieve the impossible begged by her desperate clients, and her fees were so enormous that she was thinking of going public.

Naturally the Chairman had anticipated Miss Nunn as looking like Merlin in drag. He was flabbergasted to discover that she was a Watusi princess with velvety black skin, aquiline features, great black eyes, tall, slender, twentyish, ravishing in red.

She dazzled him with a smile, indicated a chair, sat in one opposite and said, "My fee is one hundred thousand. Can you afford it? "

"I can. Agreed."

"And your difficulty—is it worth it? "

"It is." "Then we understand each other so far. Yes, Alex? "

The young secretary who had bounced into the workshop said, "Excuse me. LeClerque insists on knowing how you made the positive identification of themold as extraterrestrial."

Miss Nunn clicked her tongue impatiently. "He knows that I never give reasons. I only give results."

"Yes'N."

"Has he paid? "

"Yes'N."

"All right.I'll make an exception in his case. Tell him that it was based on thelevo anddextro probability in amino acids and tell him to have a qualifiedexobiologist carry on from there. He won't regret the cost."

"Yes'N. Thank you."

She turned to the Chairman as the secretary left. "You heard that. I only give results."

"Agreed, Miss Nunn."

"Now your difficulty.I'm not committed yet. Understood? "

"Yes, Miss Nunn."

"Go ahead.Everything.Stream of consciousness, if necessary."

An hour later she dazzled him with another smile and said, "Thank you. This one is really unique.A welcome change. It's a contract, if you're still willing."

"Agreed, Miss Nunn.Would you like a deposit or an advance? "

"Not from CCC."

"What about expenses? Should that be arranged? "

"No.My responsibility."

"But what if you have to-if you're required to-if-"

She laughed."My responsibility. I never give reasons and I never reveal methods. How can I charge for them? Now don't forget; I want that Skip-Trace report."

A week later Gretchen Nunn took the unusual step of visiting the Chairman in his office at CCC."I'm calling on you, sir, to give you the opportunity of withdrawing from our contract."

"Withdraw? But why? "

"Because I believe you're involved in something far more serious than you anticipated."

"But what? "

"You won't take my word for it? "

"I must know."

Miss Nunn compressed her lips. After a moment she sighed. "Since this is an unusual case I'll have to break my rules. Look at this, sir." She unrolled a large map of a segment of the Corridor and flattened it on the Chairman's desk. There was a star in the center of the map. "Skiaki's residence," Miss Nunn said.

There was a large circle scribed around the star. "The limits to which a man can walk in two hours," Miss Nunn said. The circle was crisscrossed by twisting trails all emanating from the star. "I got this from the Skip-Trace report. This is how the trails traced Skiaki ."

"Very ingenious, but I see nothing serious in this, Miss Nunn."

"Look closely at the trails. What do you see? "

"Why... each ends in a red cross."

"And what happens to each trail before it reaches the red cross? "

"Nothing. Nothing at all, except-except that the dots change to dashes."

"And that's what makes it serious."

"I don't understand, Miss Nunn."

"I'll explain. Each cross represents the scene of a murder. The dashes represent the backtracking of the actions and whereabouts of each murder victim just prior to death:" "Murder! "

"They could trace their actions just so far back and no further. Skip-Trace could tailSkiaki just so far forward and no further. Those are the dots. The dates join up. What's your conclusion? "

"It must be coincidence," the Chairman shouted."This brilliant, charming young man.Murder? Impossible! "

"Do you want the factual data I've drawn up? "

"No, I don't. I want the truth. Proof-positive without any inferences from dots, dashes and dates."

"Very well, Mr. Chairman.You'll get it."

She rented the professional beggar's pitch alongside the entrance to Skiaki's Oasis for a week. No success. She hired a Revival Band and sang hymns with it before the Oasis. No success. She finally made the contact after she promoted a job with the Organic Nursery. The first three dinners she delivered to the penthouse she came and went unnoticed;Skiaki was entertaining a series of girls, all scrubbed and sparkling with gratitude. When she made the fourth delivery he was alone and noticed her for the first time.

"Hey," he grinned. "How long has this been going on? "

"Sir? "

"Since when has Organic been using girls for delivery boys? "

"I am a delivery person, sir," Miss Nunn answered with dignity. "I have been working for the Organic Nursery since the first of the month."

"Knock off the sir bit."

"Thanks you, s-Dr. Skiaki ."

"How the devil do you know that I've got a doctorate? "

She'd slipped. He was listed at the Oasis and the Nursery merely as B. Skiaki , and she should have remembered. As usual, she turned her mistake into an advantage. "I know all about you, sir. Dr.Blaise Skiaki , Princeton, MIT, Dow Chemical.Chief Scent Chemist at CCC."

"You sound like 'Who's Who.'"

"That's where I read it, Dr. Skiaki ."

"You read me up in 'Who's Who'? Why on earth? "

"You're the first famous man I've ever met"

"Whatever gave you the idea that I'm famous, which I'm not."

She gestured around. "I knew you had to be famous to live like this."

"Very flattering.What's your name, love? "

"Gretchen, sir."

"What's your last name? "

"People from my class don't have last names, sir."

"Will you be the delivery b-person tomorrow, Gretchen? "

"Tomorrow is my day off, Doctor."

"Perfect. Bring dinner for two."

So the affair began and Gretchen discovered, much to her astonishment, that she was enjoying it very much.Blaise was indeed a brilliant, charming young man, always entertaining, always considerate,always generous. In gratitude he gave her (remember he believed she came from the lowest Corridor class) one of his most prized possessions, a five-carat diamond he had synthesized at Dow. She responded with equal style: she wore it in her navel and

promised that it was for his eyes only.

Of course he always insisted on her scrubbing up each time she visited, which was a bit of a bore; in her income bracket she probably had more fresh water than he did. However, one convenience was that she could quit her job at the Organic Nursery and attend to other contracts while she was attending to Skiaki .

She always left his penthouse around eleven-thirty but stayed outside until one. She finally picked him up one night just as he was leaving the Oasis. She'd memorized the Salem Burne report and knew what to expect. She overtook him quickly and spoke in an agitated voice. "Mistuh. Mistuh." He stopped and looked at her kindly without recognition.

"Yes, my dear? "

"If yuh gone this way kin I come too. I scared."

"Certainly, my dear."

"Thanks, mistuh .I gone home.You gone home? "

"Well, not exactly."

"Where you gone? Y'ain't up to nothin ' bad, is you? I don't want no part."

"Nothing bad, my dear. Don't worry."

"Then what you up to? "

He smiled secretly. "I'm following something."

"Somebody? "

"No, something."

"What kind of something? "

"My, you're curious, aren't you. What's your name? "

"Gretchen.How 'bout you? "

"Me? "

"What's your name? "

"Wish.Call me Mr. Wish." He hesitated for a moment and then said, "I have to turn left here."

"Thasokay,Mistuh Wish.I go left, too."

She could see that all his senses were pricking, and reduced her prattle to a background of unobtrusive sound. She stayed with him as he twisted, turned,sometimes doubling back, through streets, alleys, lanes and lots, always assuring him that this was her way home too. At a rather dangerous-looking refuse dump he gave her a fatherly pat and cautioned her to wait while he explored its safety. He explored, disappeared and never reappeared.

"I replicated this experience withSkiaki six times," Miss Nunn reported to CCC. "They were all significant. Each time he revealed a little more without realizing it and without recognizing me. Burne was right. It is fugue."

"And the cause, Miss Nunn? "

"Pheromone trails."

"What? "

"I thought you gentlemen would know the term, being in the chemistry business. I see I'll have to explain. It will take some time so I insist that you do not require me to describe the induction and deduction that led to my conclusion. Understood? "

"Agreed, Miss Nunn."

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Surely you all know hormones, from the Greek hormaein , meaning 'to excite'. They're internal secretions

which excite other parts of the body into action. Pheromones are external secretions which excite other creatures into action. It's a mute chemical language.

"The best example of the pheromone language is the ant. Put a lump of sugar somewhere outside an ant hill. A forager will come across it, feed and return to the nest. Within an hour the entire commune will be single-filing the pheromone trail first laid down quite undeliberately by the first discoverer. It's an unconscious but compelling stimulant."

"Fascinating.And Dr.Skiaki ? "

"He follows human pheromone trails. They compel him; he goes into fugue and follows them."

"Ah! An outer aspect of The Nose. It makes sense, Miss Nunn. It really does. But what trails is he compelled to follow? "

"The death-wish."

"Miss Nunn! "

"Surely you're aware of this aspect of the human psyche. Many people suffer from an unconscious but powerful deathwish , especially in these despairing times. Apparently this leaves a pheromone trail which Dr.Skiaki senses, and he is compelled to follow it."

"And then? "

"Apparently he grants the wish."

"Apparently! Apparently! " the Chairman shouted. "I ask you for proof-positive of this monstrous accusation."

"You'll get it, sir. I'm not finished withBlaiseSkiaki yet. Thereare one or two things I have to wrap up with him, and in the course of that I'm afraid he's in for a shock. You'll have your proof-pos-"

That was a half-lie from a woman half in love. She knew she had to

see Blaise again but her motives were confused. To find out whether she really loved him, despite what she knew? To find out whether he loved her? To warn him or save him or run away with him? To fulfill her contract in a cool, professional style? She didn't know. Certainly she didn't know that she was in for a shock from Skiaki .

"Were you born blind? " he murmured that night.

She sat bolt upright in the bed. "What? Blind? What? "

"You heard me."

"I've had perfect sight all my life."

"Ah. Then you don't know, darling. I rather suspected that might be it."

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

"Oh, you're blind all right," he said calmly. "But you've never known because you're blessed with a fantastic freak facility. You have extrasensory perception of other people's senses. You see through other people's eyes. For all I know you may be deaf and hear through their ears. You may feel with their skin. We must explore it some time."

"I never heard of anything more absurd in all my life," she said angrily.

"I can prove it to you, if you like, Gretchen."

"Go ahead, Blaise . Prove the impossible."

"Come into the lounge."

In the living room he pointed to a vase, "What color is that? "

"Brown, of course."

"What color is that? "A tapestry.

"Gray."

"And that lamp? "

"Black."

"QED," Skiaki said. "It has been demonstrated."

"What's been demonstrated? "

"That you're seeing through my eyes."

"How can you say that? "

"Because I'm color-blind. That's what gave me the clue in the first place."

"What? "

He took her in his arms to quiet her trembling. "Darling Gretchen, the vase is green. The tapestry is amber and gold. The lamp is crimson. I can't see the colors but the decorator told me and I remember. Now why the terror? You're blind, yes, but you're blessed with something far more miraculous than mere sight; you see through the eyes of the world. I'd change places with you any time."

"It can't be true," she cried.

"It's true, love."

"What about when I'm alone? "

"When are you alone? When is anybody in the Corridor ever alone? "

She snatched up a shift and ran out of the penthouse, sobbing hysterically. She ran back to her own Oasis nearly crazed with terror. And yet she kept looking around and there were all the colors : red, orange, yellow, green, indigo , blue, violet. But there were also people swarming through the labyrinths of the Corridor as they always were, twenty-four hours a day.

Back in her apartment she was determined to put the disaster to the test. She dismissed her entire staff with stern orders to get the hell

out and spend the night somewhere else. She stood at the door and counted them out, all amazed and unhappy. She slammed the door and looked around. She could still see.

"The lying son-of-a-bitch," she muttered and began to pace furiously. She raged through the apartment, swearing venomously. It proved one thing; never get into personal relationships. They'll betray you, they'll try to destroy you, and she'd made a fool of herself. But why, in God's name, did Blaise use this sort of dirty trick to destroy her? Then she smashed into something and was thrown back. She recovered her balance and looked to see what she had blundered into. It was a harpsichord.

"But... but I don't own a harpsichord," she whispered in bewilderment. She started forward to touch it and assure herself of its reality. She smashed into the something again, grabbed it and felt it. It was the back of a couch. She looked around frantically. This was not one of her rooms. The harpsichord. Vivid Brueghels hanging on the walls, Jacobean furniture, Linenfold paneled doors, Crewel drapes.

But... this is the... the Raxon apartment downstairs. I must be seeing through their eyes. I must... he was right. I... ' She closed her eyes and looked. She saw a melange of apartments, streets, crowds, people, events. She had always seen this sort of montage on occasion but had always thought it was merely the total visual recall which was a major factor in her extraordinary abilities and success. Now she knew the truth.

She began to sob again. She felt her way around the couch and sat down, despairing. When at last the convulsion spent itself she wiped her eyes courageously, determined to face reality. She was no coward. But when she opened her eyes she was shocked by another bombshell. She saw her familiar room in tones of gray. She saw Blaise Skiaki standing in the open door smiling at her. - "Blaise?" she whispered.

"The name is Wish, my dear. Mr. Wish. What's yours?"

"Blaise, for God's sake, not me! Not me. I left no death-wish trail."

"What's your name, my dear? We've met before? "

"Gretchen," she screamed. "I'm Gretchen Nunn and I have no death-wish."

"Nice meeting you again, Gretchen," he said in glassy tones, smiling the glassy smile of Mr. Wish. He took two steps toward her. She jumped up and ran behind the couch.

"Blaise, listen to me. You are not Mr. Wish. There is no Mr. Wish. You are Dr.BlaiseSkiaki , a famous scientist. You are chief chemist at CCC and have created many wonderful perfumes."

He took another step toward her, unwinding the scarf he wore around his neck.

"Blaise, I'm Gretchen. We've been lovers for two months. You must remember. Try to remember. You told me about my eyes tonight... being blind. You must remember that."

He smiled and whirled the scarf into a cord.

"Blaise, you're suffering from fugue.A blackout.A change of psyche. This isn't the real you. It's another creature driven by a pheromone. But I left no pheromone trail. I couldn't. I've never wanted to die."

"Yes, you do, my dear.Only happy to grant your wish. That's why I'm called Mr. Wish."

She squealed like a trapped rat and began darting and dodging while he closed in on her. She feinted him to one side, twisted to the other with a clear chance of getting out the door ahead of him, only to crash into three grinning goons standing shoulder to shoulder. They grabbed and held her.

Mr. Wish did not know that he also left a pheromone trail. It was a pheromone trail of murder.

"Oh, it's you again," Mr. Wish sniffed.

"Hey, old buddy-boy, got alooker this time, huh? "

"And loaded.Dig this layout"

"Great. Makes up for the last three which wasnothin '. Thanks, buddy-boy. You can go home now."

"Why don't I ever get to kill one? " Mr. Wish exclaimed petulantly.

"Now, now.No sulks. We got to protect our bird dog. You lead. We follow and do the rest."

"And if anything goes wrong, you're the setup," one of the goons giggled.

"Go home, buddy-boy. The rest is ours. No arguments. We already explained the standoff to you. We know who you are but you don't know who we are."

"I know who I am," Mr. Wish said with dignity. "I am Mr. Wish and I still think I have the right to kill at least one."

"All right, all right.Next time.That's a promise. Now blow."

As Mr. Wish exited resentfully, they ripped Gretchen naked and let out a huge wow when they saw the five-carat diamond in her navel. Mr. Wish turned and saw its scintillation too. "But that's mine," he said in a confused voice. "That's only for my eyes. I-Gretchen said she would never-" Abruptly Dr.BlaiseSkiaki spoke in a tone accustomed to command: "Gretchen, what the hell are you doing here? What's this place? Who are these creatures? What's going on? "

When the police arrived they found three dead bodies and a composed Gretchen Nunn sitting with a laser pistol in her lap. She told a perfectly coherent story of forcible entry, an attempt at armed rape and robbery, and how she was constrained to meet force with force. There were a few loopholes in her account. The bodies were not armed, but if the men had said they were armed Miss Nunn, of course, would have believed them. The three were somewhat

battered, but goons were always fighting. Miss Nunn was commended for her courage and cooperation.

After her final report to the Chairman (which was not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth) Miss Nunn received her check and went directly to the perfume laboratory, which she entered without warning. Dr.Skiaki was doing strange and mysterious things with pipettes, flasks and reagent bottles. Without turning he ordered, "Out. Out. Out."

"Good morning, Dr.Skiaki ."

He turned, displaying a mauled face and black eyes, and smiled. "Well, well, well. The famous Gretchen Nunn, I presume.Voted Person of the Year three times in succession."

"No, sir.People from my class don't have last names." "Knock off the sir bit."

"Yes s-Mr. Wish."

"Oi! "He winced. "Don't remind me of that incredible insanity. How did everything go with the Chairman? "

"I snowed him. You're off the hook."

"Maybe I'm off his hook but not my own. I was seriously thinking of having myself committed this morning."

"What stopped you? "

"Well, I got involved in this patchouli synthesis and sort of forgot."

She laughed. "You don't have to worry. You're saved." "You mean cured? "

"No,Blaise . Not any more than I'm cured of my blindness. But we're both saved because we're aware. We can cope now."

He nodded slowly but not happily.

"So what are you going to do today? " she asked cheerfully.

"Struggle with patchouli? "

"No," he said gloomily. "I'm still in one hell of a shock. I think I'll take the day off."

"Perfect. Bring two dinners."

The Men Who Murdered Mohammed

Alfred Bester



There was a man who mutilated history. He toppled empires and uprooted dynasties. Because of him, Mount Vernon should not be a national shrine, and Columbus, Ohio, should be called Cabot, Ohio. Because of him the name Marie Curie should be cursed in France, and no one should swear by the beard of the Prophet. Actually, these realities did not happen, because he was a mad professor; or, to put it another way, he only succeeded in making them unreal for himself.

Now, the patient reader is too familiar with the conventional mad professor, undersized and overbrowed, creating monsters in his laboratory which invariably turn on their maker and menace his lovely daughter. This story isn't about that sort of make-believe man. It's about Henry Hassel, a genuine mad professor in a class with such better-known men as Ludwig Boltzmann (see Ideal Gas Law), Jacques Charles, and André Marie Ampère (1775-1836).

Everyone ought to know that the electrical ampere was so named in honor of Ampère. Ludwig Boltzmann was a distinguished Austrian physicist, as famous for his research on black-body radiation as on Ideal Gases. You can look him up in Volume Three of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, BALT to BRAI. Jacques Alexandre César Charles was the first mathematician to become interested in flight, and he invented the hydrogen balloon. These were real men.

They were also real mad professors. Ampère, for example, was on his way to an important meeting of scientists in Paris. In his taxi he got a brilliant idea (of an electrical nature, I assume) and whipped out a pencil and jotted the equation on the wall of the hansom cab.

Roughly, it was: $dH = ipdl/r^2$ in which p is the perpendicular distance from \vec{N} to the line of the element $d\vec{l}$; or $dH = i \sin\theta \, dl/r^2$. This is sometimes known as Laplace's Law, although he wasn't at the meeting.

Anyway, the cab arrived at the Académie. Ampère jumped out, paid the driver and rushed into the meeting to tell everybody about his idea. Then he realized he didn't have the note on him, remembered where he'd left it, and had to chase through the streets of Paris after the taxi to recover his runaway equation. Sometimes I imagine that's how Fermat lost his famous "Last Theorem," although Fermat wasn't at the meeting either, having died some two hundred years earlier.

Or take Boltzmann. Giving a course in Advanced Ideal Gases, he peppered his lectures with involved calculus, which he worked out quickly and casually in his head. He had that kind of head. His students had so much trouble trying to puzzle out the math by ear that they couldn't keep up with the lectures, and they begged Boltzmann to work out his equations on the blackboard.

Boltzmann apologized and promised to be more helpful in the future. At the next lecture he began, "Gentlemen, combining Boyle's Law with the Law of Charles, we arrive at the equation $p_v = p_0 v_0 (1 + \alpha t)$. Now, obviously, if $aS_b = f(x) dx + (a)$, then $p_v = RT$ and $vS \, f(x,y,z) \, dV = 0$. It's as simple as two plus two equals four." At this point Boltzmann remembered his promise. He turned to the blackboard, conscientiously chalked $2 + 2 = 4$, and then breezed on, casually doing the complicated calculus in his head.

Jacques Charles, the brilliant mathematician who discovered Charles's Law (sometimes known as Gay-Lussac's Law), which Boltzmann mentioned in his lecture, had a lunatic passion to become a famous paleographer—that is, a discoverer of ancient manuscripts. I think that being forced to share credit with Gay-Lussac may have unhinged him.

He paid a transparent swindler named Vrain-Lucas 200,000 francs for holograph letters purportedly written by Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Pontius Pilate. Charles, a man who could see through

any gas, ideal or not, actually believed in these forgeries despite the fact that the maladroït Vrain-Lucas had written them in modern French on modern notepaper bearing modern watermarks. Charles even tried to donate them to the Louvre.

Now, these men weren't idiots. They were geniuses who paid a high price for their genius because the rest of their thinking was other-world. A genius is someone who travels to truth by an unexpected path. Unfortunately, unexpected paths lead to disaster in everyday life. This is what happened to Henry Hassel, professor of Applied Compulsion at Unknown University in the year 1980.

Nobody knows where Unknown University is or what they teach there. It has a faculty of some two hundred eccentrics, and a student body of two thousand misfits--the kind that remain anonymous until they win Nobel prizes or become the First Man on Mars. You can always spot a graduate of U.U. when you ask people where they went to school. If you get an evasive reply like: "State," or "Oh, a freshwater school you never heard of," you can bet they went to Unknown. Someday I hope to tell you more about this university, which is a center of learning only in the Pickwickian sense.

Anyway, Henry Hassel started home from his office in the Psychotic Psenter early one afternoon, strolling through the Physical Culture arcade. It is not true that he did this to leer at the nude coeds practicing Arcane Eurythmics; rather, Hassel liked to admire the trophies displayed in the arcade in memory of great Unknown teams which had won the sort of championships that Unknown teams win--in sports like Strabismus, Occlusion, and Botulism. (Hassel had been Frambesia singles champion three years running.) He arrived home uplifted, and burst gaily into the house to discover his wife in the arms of a man.

There she was, a lovely woman of thirty-five, with smoky red hair and almond eyes, being heartily embraced by a person whose pockets were stuffed with pamphlets, microchemical apparatus, and a patella-reflex hammer--a typical campus character of U.U., in fact. The embrace was so concentrated that neither of the offending parties noticed Henry Hassel glaring at them from the hallway.

Now, remember Ampère and Charles and Boltzmann. Hassel weighed one hundred and ninety pounds. He was muscular and uninhibited. It would have been child's play for him to have dismembered his wife and her lover, and thus simply and directly achieve the goal he desired—the end of his wife's life. But Henry Hassel was in the genius class; his mind just didn't operate that way.

Hassel breathed hard, turned and lumbered into his private laboratory like a freight engine. He opened a drawer labeled DUODENUM and removed a .45-caliber revolver. He opened other drawers, more interestingly labeled, and assembled apparatus. In exactly seven and one half minutes (such was his rage), he put together a time machine (such was his genius).

Professor Hassel assembled the time machine around him, set the dial for 1902, picked up the revolver and pressed a button. The machine made a noise like defective plumbing and Hassel disappeared. He reappeared in Philadelphia on June 3, 1902, went directly to No. 1218 Walnut Street, a red-brick house with marble steps, and rang the bell. A man who might have passed for the third Smith Brother opened the door and looked at Henry Hassel.

"Mr. Jessup?" Hassel asked in a suffocated voice.

"Yes?"

"You are Mr. Jessup?"

"I am."

"You will have a son, Edgar? Edgar Allan Jessup—so named because of your regrettable admiration for Poe?"

The third Smith Brother was startled. "Not that I know of," he said. "I'm not married yet."

"You will be," Hassel said angrily. "I have the misfortune to be married to your son's daughter. Greta. Excuse me." He raised the revolver and shot his wife's grandfather-to-be.

"She will have ceased to exist," Hassel muttered, blowing smoke out of the revolver. "I'll be a bachelor. I may even be married to somebody else... Good God! Who?"

Hassel waited impatiently for the automatic recall of the time machine to snatch him back to his own laboratory. He rushed into his living room. There was his redheaded wife, still in the arms of a man.

Hassel was thunderstruck.

"So that's it," he growled. "A family tradition of faithlessness. Well, we'll see about that. We have ways and means." He permitted himself a hollow laugh, returned to his laboratory, and sent himself back to the year 1901, where he shot and killed Emma Hotchkiss, his wife's maternal grandmother-to-be. He returned to his own home in his own time. There was his redheaded wife, still in the arms of another man.

"But I know the old bitch was her grandmother," Hassel muttered. "You couldn't miss the resemblance. What the hell's gone wrong?"

Hassel was confused and dismayed, but not without resources. He went to his study, had difficulty picking up the phone, but finally managed to dial the Malpractice Laboratory. His finger kept oozing out of the dial holes.

"Sam?" he said. "This is Henry."

"Who?"

"Henry."

"You'll have to speak up."

"Henry Hassel!"

"Oh, good afternoon, Henry."

"Tell me all about time."

Time? Hmm..." The Simplex-and-Multiplex Computer cleared its throat while it waited for the data circuits to link up. "Ahem. Time. (1) Absolute. (2) Relative. (3) Recurrent. (1) Absolute: period, contingent, duration, diurnity, perpetuity--"

"Sorry, Sam. Wrong request. Go back. I want time, reference to succession of, travel in."

Sam shifted gears and began again. Hassel listened intently. He nodded. He grunted. "Uh huh. Uh huh. Right. I see. Thought so. A continuum, eh? Acts performed in past must alter future. Then I'm on the right track. But act must be significant, eh? Mass-action effect. Trivia cannot divert existing phenomena streams. Hmmm. But how trivial is a grandmother?"

"What are you trying to do, Henry?"

"Kill my wife," Hassel snapped. He hung up. He returned to his laboratory. He considered, still in a jealous rage.

"Got to do something significant," he muttered. "Wipe Greta out. Wipe it all out. All right, by God! I'll show 'em."

Hassel went back to the year 1775, visited a Virginia farm and shot a young colonel in the brisket. The colonel's name was George Washington, and Hassel made sure he was dead. He returned to his own time and his own home. There was his redheaded wife, still in the arms of another.

"Damn!" said Hassel. He was running out of ammunition. He opened a fresh box of cartridges, went back in time and massacred Christopher Columbus, Napoleon, Mohammed and half a dozen other celebrities. "That ought to do it, by God!" said Hassel. He returned to his own time, and found his wife as before.

His knees turned to water; his feet seemed to melt into the floor. He went back to his laboratory, walking through nightmare quicksands.

"What the hell is significant?" Hassel asked himself painfully.

"How much does it take to change futurity? By God, I'll really change it this time. I'll go for broke."

He traveled to Paris at the turn of the twentieth century and visited a Madame Curie in an attic workshop near the Sorbonne.

"Madame," he said in his execrable French, "I am a stranger to you of the utmost, but a scientist entire. Knowing of your experiments with radium-- Oh? You haven't got to radium yet? No matter. I am here to teach you all of nuclear fission."

He taught her. He had the satisfaction of seeing Paris go up in a mushroom of smoke before the automatic recall brought him home. "That'll teach women to be faithless," he growled... "Guhhh!" The last was wrenched from his lips when he saw his redheaded wife still-- But no need to belabor the obvious.

Hassel swam through fogs to his study and sat down to think. While he's thinking I'd better warn you that this not a conventional time story. If you imagine for a moment that Henry is going to discover that the man fondling his wife is himself, you're mistaken. The viper is not Henry Hassel, his son, a relation, or even Ludwig Boltzmann (1844--1906). Hassel does not make a circle in time, ending where the story begins--to the satisfaction of nobody and the fury of everybody--for the simple reason that time isn't circular, or linear, or tandem, discoid, syzygous, longinquitous, or pandicularted. Time is a private matter, as Hassel discovered.

"Maybe I slipped up somehow," Hassel muttered. "I'd better find out." He fought with the telephone, which seemed to weigh a hundred tons, and at last managed to get through to the library.

"Hello, Library? This is Henry."

"Who?"

"Henry Hassel."

"Speak up, please."

HENRY HASSEL!"

"Oh. Good afternoon, Henry."

"What have you got on George Washington?"

Library clucked while her scanners sorted through her catalogues.

"George Washington, first president of the United States, was born in--"

"First president? Wasn't he murdered in 1775?"

"Really, Henry. That's an absurd question. Everybody knows that George Wash--"

"Doesn't anybody know he was shot?"

"By whom?"

"Me."

"When?"

"In 1775."

"How did you manage to do that?"

"I've got a revolver."

"No, I mean, how did you do it two hundred years ago?"

"I've got a time machine."

"Well, there's no record here," Library said. "He still doing fine in my files. You must have missed."

"I did not miss. What about Christopher Columbus? Any record of his death in 1489?"

"But he discovered the New World in 1492."

"He did not. He was murdered in 1489."

"How?"

"With a forty-five slug in the gizzard."

"You again, Henry?"

"Yes."

"There's no record here," Library insisted. "You must be one lousy shot."

"I will not lose my temper," Hassel said in a trembling voice.

"Why not, Henry?"

"Because it's lost already," he shouted. "All right! What about Marie Curie? Did she or did she not discover the fission bomb which destroyed Paris at the turn of the century?"

"She did not. Enrico Fermi--"

"She did."

"She didn't."

"I personally taught her. Me. Henry Hassel."

"Everybody says you're a wonderful theoretician, but a lousy teacher, Henry. You--"

"Go to hell, you old biddy. This has got to be explained."

"Why?"

"I forget. There was something on my mind, but it doesn't matter now. What would you suggest?"

"You really have a time machine?"

"Of course I've got a time machine."

"Then go back and check."

Hassel returned to the year 1775, visited Mount Vernon, and interrupted the spring planting. "Excuse me, colonel," he began.

The big man looked at him curiously. "You talk funny, stranger," he said. "Where you from?"

"Oh, a freshwater school you never heard of."

"You look funny too. Kind of misty, so to speak."

"Tell me, colonel, what do you hear from Christopher Columbus?"

"Not much," Colonel Washington answered. "Been dead two, three hundred years."

"When did he die?"

"Year fifteen hundred some-odd, near as I remember."

"He did not. He died in 1489."

"Got your dates wrong, friend. He discovered America in 1492."

"Cabot discovered America. Sebastian Cabot."

"Nope. Cabot came a mite later."

"I have infallible proof!" Hassel began, but broke off as a stocky and rather stout man, with a face ludicrously reddened by rage, approached. He was wearing baggy gray slacks and a tweed jacket two sizes too small for him. He was carrying a .45 revolver. It was only after he had stared for a moment that Henry Hassel realized that he was looking at himself and not relishing the sight.

"My God!" Hassel murmured. "It's me, coming back to murder Washington that first time. If I'd made this second trip an hour later, I'd have found Washington dead. Hey!" he called. "Not yet. Hold off a

minute. I've got to straighten something out first."

Hassel paid no attention to himself; indeed, he did not appear to be aware of himself. He marched straight up to Colonel Washington and shot him in the gizzard. Colonel Washington collapsed, emphatically dead. The first murderer inspected the body, and then, ignoring Hassel's attempt to stop him and engage him in dispute, turned and marched off, muttering venomously to himself.

"He didn't hear me," Hassel wondered. "He didn't even feel me. And why don't I remember myself trying to stop me the first time I shot the colonel? What the hell is going on?"

Considerably disturbed, Henry Hassel visited Chicago and dropped into the Chicago University squash courts in the early 1940s. There, in a slippery mess of graphite bricks and graphite dust that coated him, he located an Italian scientist named Fermi.

"Repeating Marie Curie's work, I see, dottore?" Hassel said.

Fermi glanced about as though he had heard a faint sound.

"Repeating Marie Curie's work, dottore?" Hassel roared.

Fermi looked at him strangely, "where you from, amico?"

"State."

"State Department?"

"Just State. It's true, isn't it, dottore, that Marie Curie discovered nuclear fission back in nineteen ought ought?"

"No! No! No!" Fermi cried. "We are the first, and we are not there yet. Police! Police! Spy!"

"This time I'll go on record," Hassel growled. He pulled out his trusty .45, emptied it into Dr. Fermi's chest, and awaited arrest and immolation in newspaper files. To his amazement, Dr. Fermi did not collapse. Dr. Fermi merely explored his chest tenderly and, to the

men who answered his cry, said, "It is nothing. I felt in my within a sudden sensation of burn which may be a neuralgia of the cardiac nerve, but is most likely gas."

Hassel was too agitated to wait for the automatic recall of the time machine. Instead he returned at once to Unknown University under his own power. This should have given him a clue, but he was too possessed to notice. It was at this time that I (1913–1975) first saw him—a dim figure tramping through parked cars, closed doors and brick walls, with the light of lunatic determination on his face.

He oozed into the library, prepared for an exhaustive discussion, but could not make himself felt or heard by the catalogues. He went to the Malpractice Laboratory, where Sam, the Simplex-and-Multiplex Computer, has installations sensitive up to 10,700 angstroms. Sam could not see Henry, but managed to hear him through a sort of wave-interference phenomenon.

"Sam," Hassel said. "I've made one hell of a discovery."

"You're always making discoveries, Henry," Sam complained. "Your data allocation is filled. Do I have to start another tape for you?"

"But I need advice. Who's the leading authority on time, reference to succession of, travel in?"

"That would be Israel Lennox, spatial mechanics, professor of, Yale."

"How do I get in touch with him?"

"You don't, Henry. He's dead. Died in '75."

"What authority have you got on time, travel in, living?"

"Wiley Murphy."

"Murphy? From our own Trauma Department? That's a break. Where is he now?"

"As a matter of fact, Henry, he went over to your house to ask you

something."

Hassel went home without walking, searched through his laboratory and study without finding anyone, and at last floated into the living room, where his redheaded wife was still in the arms of another man. (All this, you understand, had taken place within the space of a few moments after the construction of the time machine; such is the nature of time and travel.) Hassel cleared his throat once or twice and tried to tap his wife on the shoulder. His fingers went through her.

"Excuse me, darling," he said. "Has Wiley Murphy been in to see me?"

Then he looked closer and saw that the man embracing his wife was Murphy himself.

"Murphy!" Hassel exclaimed. "The very man I'm looking for. I've had the most extraordinary experience." Hassel at once launched into a lucid description of his extraordinary experience, which went something like this: "Murphy, $u - v = (u^{1/2} - v^{1/4})(u_a + u_x + v_y)$ but when George Washington F $(x)y + dx$ and Enrico Fermi F $(u^{1/2}) dx dt$ one half of Marie Curie, then what about Christopher Columbus times the square root of minus one?"

Murphy ignored Hassel, as did Mrs. Hassel. I jotted down Hassel's equations on the hood of a passing taxi.

"Do listen to me, Murphy," Hassel said. "Greta dear, would you mind leaving us for a moment? I— For heaven's sake, will you two stop that nonsense? This is serious."

Hassel tried to separate the couple. He could no more touch them than make them hear him. His face turned red again and he became quite choleric as he beat at Mrs. Hassel and Murphy. It was like beating an Ideal Gas. I thought it best to interfere.

"Hassel!"

"Who's that?"

"Come outside a moment. I want to talk to you."

He shot through the wall. "Where are you?"

"Over here."

"You're sort of dim."

"So are you."

"Who are you?"

"My name's Lennox, Israel Lennox."

"Israel Lennox, spatial mechanics, professor of, Yale?"

"The same."

"But you died in '75."

"I disappeared in '75."

"What d'you mean?"

"I invented a time machine."

"By God! So did I," Hassel said. "This afternoon. The idea came to me in a flash—I don't know why—and I've had the most extraordinary experience. Lennox, time is not a continuum."

"No?"

"It's a series of discrete particles—like pearls on a string."

"Yes?"

"Each pearl is a 'Now.' Each 'Now' has its own past and future, but none of them relate to any others. You see? if $a = a_1 + a_2j + ax(b_1) -$
_."

"Never mind the mathematics, Henry."

"It's a form of quantum transfer of energy. Time is emitted in discrete corpuscles or quanta. We can visit each individual quantum and make changes within it, but no change in any one corpuscle affects any other corpuscle. Right?"

"Wrong," I said sorrowfully.

"What d'you mean, 'Wrong'?" he said, angrily gesturing through the cleave of a passing coed. "You take the trochoid equations and--"

"Wrong," I repeated firmly. "Will you listen to me, Henry?"

"Oh, go ahead," he said.

"Have you noticed that you've become rather insubstantial? Dim? Spectral? Space and time no longer affect you?"

"Yes?"

"Henry, I had the misfortune to construct a time machine back in '75."

"So you said. Listen, what about power input? I figure I'm using about 7.3 kilowatts per--"

"Never mind the power input, Henry. On my first trip into the past, I visited the Pleistocene. I was eager to photograph the mastodon, the giant ground sloth, and the saber-tooth tiger. While I was backing up to get a mastodon fully in the field of view at f/6.3 at 1/100th of a second, or on the LVS scale--"

"Never mind the LVS scale," he said.

"While I was backing up, I inadvertently trampled and killed a small Pleistocene insect."

"Aha!" said Hassel.

"I was terrified by the incident. I had visions of returning to my world to find it completely changed as a result of this single death. Imagine my surprise when I returned to my world to find that nothing had

changed."

"Oho!" said Hassel.

"I became curious. I went back to the Pleistocene and killed the mastodon. Nothing was changed in 1975. I returned to the Pleistocene and slaughtered the wildlife--still with no effect. I ranged through time, killing and destroying, in an attempt to alter the present."

"Then you did it just like me," Hassel exclaimed. "Odd we didn't run into each other."

"Not odd at all."

"I got Columbus."

"I got Marco Polo."

"I got Napoleon."

"I thought Einstein was more important."

"Mohammed didn't change things much—I expected more from him."

"I know. I got him too."

"What do you mean, you got him too?" Hassel demanded.

"I killed him September 16, 599. Old Style."

"Why, I got Mohammed January 5, 598."

"I believe you."

"But how could you have killed him after I killed him?"

"We both killed him."

"That's impossible."

"My boy," I said, "time is entirely subjective. It's a private matter--a personal experience. There is no such thing as objective time, just as there is no such thing as objective love, or an objective soul."

"Do you mean to say that time travel is impossible? But we've done it."

"To be sure, and many others, for all I know. But we each travel into our own past, and no other person's. There is no universal continuum, Henry. There are only billions of individuals, each with his own continuum; and one continuum cannot affect the other. We're like millions of strands of spaghetti in the same pot. No time traveler can ever meet another time traveler in the past or future. Each of us must travel up and down his own strand alone."

"But we're meeting each other now."

"We're no longer time travelers, Henry. We've become the spaghetti sauce."

"Spaghetti sauce?"

"Yes. You and I can visit any strand we like, because we've destroyed ourselves."

"I don't understand."

"When a man changes the past he only affects his own past--no one else's. The past is like memory. When you erase a man's memory, you wipe him out, but you don't wipe out anybody else's. You and I have erased our past. The individual worlds of the others go on, but we have ceased to exist."

"What d'you mean, 'ceased to exist'?"

"With each act of destruction we dissolved a little. Now we're all gone. We've committed chronicide. We're ghosts. I hope Mrs. Hassel will be very happy with Mr. Murphy... Now let's go over to the Académie. Ampère is telling a great story about Ludwig Boltzmann."

Disappearing Act

This one wasn't the last war or a war to end war. They called it the War for the American Dream. General Carpenter struck that note and sounded it constantly. There are fighting generals (vital to an army), political generals (vital to an administration), and public relations generals (vital to a war). General Carpenter was a master of public relations. Forthright and FourSquare, he had ideals as high and as understandable as the mottoes on money. In the mind of America he was the army, the administration, the nation's shield and sword and stout right arm. His ideal was the American Dream.

"We are not fighting for money, for power, or for world domination," General Carpenter announced at the Press Association dinner.

"We are fighting solely for the American Dream," he said to the 137th Congress.

"Our aim is not aggression or the reduction of nations to slavery," he said at the West Point Annual Officer's Dinner.

"We are fighting for the meaning of civilization," he told the San Francisco Pioneers' Club.

"We are struggling for the ideal of civilization; for culture, for poetry, for the Only Things Worth Preserving," he said at the Chicago Wheat Pit Festival.

"This is a war for survival," he said. "We are not fighting for ourselves, but for our dreams; for the Better Things in Life which must not disappear from the face of the earth."

America fought. General Carpenter asked for one hundred million men. The army was given one hundred million men. General Carpenter asked for ten thousand H-Bombs. Ten thousand H-Bombs were delivered and dropped. The enemy also dropped ten thousand HBombs and destroyed most of America's cities.

"We must dig in against the hordes of barbarism," General Carpenter said. "Give me a thousand engineers."

One thousand engineers were forthcoming, and a hundred cities were dug and hollowed out beneath the rubble.

"Give me five hundred sanitation experts, three hundred traffic managers, two hundred air-conditioning experts, one hundred city managers, one thousand communication chiefs, seven hundred personnel experts..."

The list of General Carpenter's demand for technical experts was endless. America did not know how to supply them.

"We must become a nation of experts," General Carpenter informed the National Association of American Universities. "Every man and woman must be a specific tool for a specific job, hardened and sharpened by your training and education to win the fight for the American Dream."

"Our Dream," General Carpenter said at the Wall Street Bond Drive Breakfast, "is at one with the gentle Greeks of Athens, with the noble Romans of... er Rome. It is a dream of the Better Things in Life. Of music and art and poetry and culture. Money is only a weapon to be used in the fight for this dream. Ambition is only a ladder to climb to this dream. Ability is only a tool to shape this dream."

Wall Street applauded. General Carpenter asked for one hundred and fifty billion dollars, fifteen hundred ambitious dollar-a-year men, three thousand able experts in mineralogy, petrology, mass production, chemical warfare and air-traffic time study. They were delivered. The country was in high gear. General Carpenter had only to press a button and an expert would be delivered.

In March of A.D. 2112 the war came to a climax and the American Dream was resolved, not on any one of the seven fronts where millions of men were locked in bitter combat, not in any of the staff headquarters or any of the capitals of the warring nations, not in any of the production centers spewing forth arms and supplies, but in

Ward T of the United States Army Hospital buried three hundred feet below what had once been St. Albans, New York.

Ward T was something of a mystery at St. Albans. Like any army hospital, St. Albans was organized with specific wards reserved for specific injuries. All right arm amputees were gathered in one ward, all left arm amputees in another. Radiation burns, head injuries, eviscerations, secondary gamma poisonings and so on were each assigned their specific location in the hospital organization. The Army Medical Corps had designated nineteen classes of combat injury which included every possible kind of damage to brain and tissue. These used up letters A to S. What, then, was in Ward T?

No one knew. The doors were double locked. No visitors were permitted to enter. No patients were permitted to leave. Physicians were seen to arrive and depart. Their perplexed expressions stimulated the wildest speculations but revealed nothing. The nurses who ministered to Ward T were questioned eagerly but they were close-mouthed.

There were dribs and drabs of information, unsatisfying and self-contradictory. A charwoman asserted that she had been in to clean up and there had been no one in the ward. Absolutely no one. Just two dozen beds and nothing else. Had the beds been slept in? Yes. They were rumpled, some of them. Were there signs of the ward being in use? Oh yes. Personal things on the tables and so on. But dusty, kind of. Like they hadn't been used in a long time.

Public opinion decided it was a ghost ward. For spooks only.

But a night orderly reported passing the locked ward and hearing singing from within. What kind of singing? Foreign language, like. What language? The orderly couldn't say. Some of the words sounded like.. . well, like: Cow dee on us eager tour.

Public opinion started to run a fever and decided it was an alien ward. For spies only.

St. Albans enlisted the help of the kitchen staff and checked the food

trays. Twenty-four trays went in to Ward T three times a day. Twenty-four came out. Sometimes the returning trays were emptied. Most times they were untouched.

Public opinion built up pressure and decided that Ward T was a racket. It was an informal club for goldbricks and staff grafters who caroused within. Cow de on us eager tour indeed!

For gossip, a hospital can put a small town sewing circle to shame with ease, but sick people are easily goaded into passion by trivia. It took just three months for idle speculation to turn into downright fury. In January, 2112, St. Albans was a sound, well-run hospital. By March, 2112, St. Albans was in a ferment, and the psychological unrest found its way into the official records. The percentage of recoveries fell off. Malingering set in. Petty infractions increased. Mutinies flared. There was a staff shake-up. It did no good. Ward T was inciting the patients to riot. There was another shake-up, and another, and still the unrest fumed.

The news finally reached General Carpenter's desk through official channels.

"In our fight for the American Dream," he said, "we must not ignore those who have already given of them selves. Send me a Hospital Administration expert." The expert was delivered. He could do nothing to heal St. Albans. General Carpenter read the reports and broke him.

"Pity," said General Carpenter, "is the first ingredient of civilization. Send me a Surgeon General."

A Surgeon General was delivered. He could not break the fury of St. Albans and General Carpenter broke him. But by this time Ward T was being mentioned in the dispatches.

"Send me," General Carpenter said, "the expert in charge of Ward T."

St. Albans sent a doctor, Captain Edsel Dimmock. He was a stout young man, already bald, only three years out of medical school but

with a fine record as an expert in psychotherapy. General Carpenter liked experts. He liked Dimmock. Dimmock adored the general as the spokesman for a culture which he had been too specially trained to seek up to now, but which he hoped to enjoy after the war was won.

"Now look here, Dimmock," General Carpenter began. "We're all of us tools, today--sharpened and hardened to do a specific job. You know our motto: A job for everyone and everyone on the job. Somebody's not on the job at Ward T and we've got to kick him Out. Now, in the first place, what the hell is Ward T?"

Dimmock stuttered and fumbled. Finally he explained that it was a special ward set up for special combat cases. Shock cases.

"Then you do have patients in the ward?"

"Yes, sir. Ten women and fourteen men."

Carpenter brandished a sheaf of reports. "Says here the St. Albans patients claim nobody's in Ward T."

Dimmock was shocked. That was untrue, he assured the general.

"All right, Dimmock. So you've got your twenty-four crocks in there. Their job's to get well. Your job's to cure them. What the hell's upsetting the hospital about that?"

"W-Well, sir. Perhaps it's because we keep them locked up."

"You keep Ward T locked?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"To keep the patients in, General Carpenter."

"Keep 'em in? What d'you mean? Are they trying to get out? They violent, or something?"

"No, sir. Not violent."

"Diinmock, I don't like your attitude. You're acting damned sneaky and evasive. And I'll tell you something else I don't like. That T classification. I checked with a Filing Expert from the Medical Corps and there is no T classification. What the hell are you up to at St. Albans?" "W-Well, sir... We invented the T classification. It

They.. . They're rather special cases, sir. We don't know what to do about them or how to handle them. W-We've been trying to keep it quiet until we've worked out a modus operandi, but it's brand new, General Carpenter. Brand new!" Here the expert in Dinimock triumphed over discipline. "It's sensational. It'll make medical history, by God! It's the biggest damned thing ever."

"What is it, Dimmock? Be specific."

"Well, sir, they're shock cases. Blanked out. Almost catatonic. Very little respiration. Slow pulse. No response."

"I've seen thousands of shock cases like that," Carpenter grunted. "What's so unusual?"

"Yes, sir. So far it sounds like the standard Q or R classification. But here's something unusual. They don't eat and they don't sleep."

"Never?"

"Some of them never."

"Then why don't they die?"

"We don't know. The metabolism cycle's broken, but only on the anabolism side. Catabolism continues. In other words, sir, they're eliminating waste products but they're not taking anything in. They're eliminating fatigue poisons and rebuilding worn tissue, but without sleep. God knows how. It's fantastic."

"That why you've got them locked up? Mean to say... D'you suspect them of stealing food and cat naps somewhere else?"

"N-No, sir." Dimmock looked shamefaced. "I don't know how to tell you this, General Carpenter. I... We lock them up because of the real mystery. They... Well, they disappear."

"They what?"

"They disappear, sir. Vanish. Right before your eyes."

"The hell you say."

"I do say, sir. They'll be sitting on a bed or standing around. One minute you see them, the next minute you don't. Sometimes there's two dozen in Ward T. Other times none. They disappear and reappear without rhyme or reason. That's why we've got the ward locked, General Carpenter. In the entire history of combat and combat injury there's never been a case like this before. We don't know how to handle it."

"Bring me three of those cases," General Carpenter said.

Nathan Riley ate French toast, eggs benedict; consumed two quarts of brown ale, smoked a John Drew, belched delicately and arose from the breakfast table. He nodded quietly to Gentleman Jim Corbett, who broke off his conversation with Diamond Jim Brady to intercept him on the way to the cashier's desk.

"Who do you like for the pennant this year, Nat?" Gentleman Jim inquired.

"The Dodgers," Nathan Riley answered.

"They've got no pitching."

"They've got Snider and Furillo and Campanella. They'll take the pennant this year, Jim. I'll bet they take it earlier than any team ever did. By September 13th. Make a note. See if I'm right."

"You're always right, Nat," Corbett said.

Riley smiled, paid his check, sauntered out into the street and caught a horsecar bound for Madison Square Garden. He got off at the corner of 50th and Eighth Avenue and walked upstairs to a handbook office over a radio repair shop. The bookie glanced at him, produced an envelope and counted out fifteen thousand dollars.

"Rocky Marciano by a TKO over Roland La Starza in the eleventh," he said. "How the hell do you call them so accurate, Nat?"

"That's the way I make a living," Riley smiled. "Are you making book on the elections?"

"Eisenhower twelve to five. Stevenson—"

"Never mind Adlai." Riley placed twenty thousand dollars on the counter. "I'm backing Ike. Get this down for me."

He left the handbook office and went to his suite in the Waldorf where a tall, thin young man was waiting for him anxiously.

"Oh yes," Nathan Riley said. "You're Ford, aren't you? Harold Ford?"

"Henry Ford, Mr. Riley."

"And you need financing for that machine in your bicycle shop. What's it called?"

"I call it an Ipsimobile, Mr. Riley."

"Hmnm. Can't say I like that name. Why not call it an automobile?"

"That's a wonderful suggestion, Mr. Riley. I'll certainly take it."

"I like you, Henry. You're young, eager, adaptable. I believe in your future and I believe in your automobile. I'll invest two hundred thousand dollars in your company."

Riley wrote a check and ushered Henry Ford out. He glanced at his watch and suddenly felt impelled to go back and look around for a moment. He entered his bedroom, undressed, put on a gray shirt and

gray slacks. Across the pocket of the shirt were large blue letters: U.S.A.H.

He locked the bedroom door and disappeared.

He reappeared in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital in St. Albans, standing alongside his bed which was one of twenty-four lining the walls of a long, light steel barracks. Before he could draw another breath, he was seized by three pairs of hands. Before he could struggle, he was shot by a pneumatic syringe and poleaxed by 1 1/2 cc of sodium thiomorphate.

"We've got one," someone said.

"Hang around," someone else answered. "General Carpenter said he wanted three."

After Marcus Junius Brutus left her bed, Lela Machan clapped her hands. Her slave women entered the chamber and prepared her bath. She bathed, dressed, scented herself and breakfasted on Smyrna figs, rose oranges and a flagon of Lacrima Christi. Then she smoked a cigarette and ordered her litter.

The gates of her house were crowded as usual by adoring hordes from the Twentieth Legion. Two centurions removed her chair-bearers from the poles of the litter and bore her on their stout shoulders. Lela Machan smiled. A young man in a sapphire-blue cloak thrust through the mob and ran toward her. A knife flashed in his hand. Lela braced herself to meet death bravely.

"Lady!" he cried. "Lady Lela!"

He slashed his left arm with the knife and let the crimson blood stain her robe.

"This blood of mine is the least I have to give you," he cried.

◆ Lela touched his forehead gently.

"Silly boy," she murmured. "Why?"

"For love of you, my lady."

"You will be admitted tonight at nine," Lela whispered. He stared at her until she laughed. "I promise you. What is your name, pretty boy?"

"Ben Hur."

"Tonight at nine, Ben Hur."

The litter moved on. Outside the forum, Julius Caesar passed in hot argument with Marcus Antonius, Antony. When he saw the litter he motioned sharply to the centurions, who stopped at once. Caesar swept back the curtains and stared at Lela, who regarded him languidly. Caesar's face twitched.

"Why?" he asked hoarsely. "I have begged, pleaded, bribed, wept, and all without forgiveness. Why, Lela? Why?"

"Do you remember Boadicea?" Lela murmured.

"Boadicea? Queen of the Britons? Good God, Lela, what can she mean to our love? I did not love Boadicea. I merely defeated her in battle."

"And killed her, Caesar."

"She poisoned herself, Lela."

"She was my mother, Caesar!" Suddenly Lela pointed her finger at Caesar. "Murderer. You will be punished. Beware the Ides of March, Caesar!"

Caesar recoiled in horror. The mob of admirers that had gathered around Lela uttered a shout of approval. Amidst a rain of rose petals and violets she continued on her way across the Forum to the Temple of the Vestal Virgins where she abandoned her adoring suitors and entered the sacred temple.

Before the altar she genuflected, intoned a prayer, dropped a pinch of incense on the altar flame and disrobed. She examined her

beautiful body reflected in a silver mirror, then experienced a momentary twinge of homesickness. She put on a gray blouse and a gray pair of slacks. Across the pocket of the blouse was lettered U.S.A.H.

She smiled once at the altar and disappeared.

She reappeared in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital where she was instantly felled by 11/2 cc sodium thiomorphate injected subcutaneously by a pneumatic syringe.

"That's two," somebody said.

"One more to go."

George Hanmer paused dramatically and stared around

at the opposition benches, at the Speaker on the woolsack, at the silver mace on a crimson cushion before the Speaker's chair. The entire House of Parliament, hypnotized by Hanmer's fiery oratory, waited breathlessly for him to continue.

"I can say no more," Hanmer said at last. His voice was choked with emotion. His face was blanched and grim. "I will fight for this bifi at the beachheads. I will fight in the cities, the towns, the fields and the hamlets. I will fight for this bill to the death and, God willing, I will fight for it after death. Whether this be a challenge or a prayer, let the consciences of the right honorable gentlemen determine; but of one thing I am sure and determined: England must own the Suez Canal."

Hanmer sat down. The House exploded. Through the cheering and applause he made his way out into the divi.

sion lobby where Gladstone, Canning and Peel stopped him to shake his hand. Lord Palmerston eyed him coldly, but Pam was shouldered aside by Disraeli who limped up, all enthusiasm, all admiration.

"We'll have a bite at Tattersall's," Dizzy said. "My car's waiting."

Lady Beaconfield was in the Rolls Royce outside the Houses of Parliament. She pinned a primrose on Dizzy's lapel and patted Hanmer's cheek affectionately.

"You've come a long way from the schoolboy who used to bully Dizzy, Georgie," she said.

Hanmer laughed. Dizzy sang: "Gaudeamus igitur. .

and Hanmer chanted the ancient scholastic song until they reached Tattersall's. There Dizzy ordered Guinness and grilled bones while Hanmer went upstairs in the club to change.

For no reason at all he had the impulse to go back for a last look. Perhaps he hated to break with his past completely. He divested himself of his surtout, nankeen waistcoat, pepper and salt trousers, polished Hessians and undergarments. He put on a gray shirt and gray trousers and disappeared.

He reappeared in Ward T of the St. Albans hospital where he was rendered unconscious by 1(1/2) cc of sodium thiomorphate.

"That's three," somebody said.

"Take 'em to Carpenter."

So there they sat in General Carpenters' office, PFC Nathan Riley, M/Sgt Lela Machan, and Corp/2 George Hanmer. They were in their hospital grays. They were torpid with sodium thiomorphate.

The office had been cleared and it blazed with blinding light. Present were experts from Espionage, CounterEspionage, Security and Central Intelligence. When Captain Edsel Dimmock saw the steel-faced ruthless squad awaiting the patients and himself, he started. General Carpenter smiled grimly.

"Didn't occur to you that we mightn't buy your disappearance story, eh, Dimmock?"

"S-Sir?"

"I'm an expert too, Dimmock. I'll spell it out for you. The war's going badly. Very badly. There've been intelligence leaks. The St. Albans mess might point to you."

"B-But they do disappear, sir. I--"

"My experts want to talk to you and your patients about this disappearance act, Dimmock. They'll start with you."

The experts worked over Dimmock with preconscious softeners, id releases and superego blocks. They tried every truth serum in the books and every form of physical and mental pressure. They brought Dimmock, squealing, to the breaking point three times, but there was nothing to break.

"Let him stew for now," Carpenter said. "Get on to the patients."

The experts appeared reluctant to apply pressure to, the sick men and the woman.

"For God's sake, don't be squeamish," Carpenter raged. "We're fighting a war for civilization. We've got to protect our ideals no matter what the price. Get to it!"

The experts from Espionage, Counter-Espionage, Security and Central Intelligence got to it. Like three candles, PFC Nathan Riley, M/Sgt Lela Machan and Corp/2 George Hanmer snuffed out and disappeared. One moment they were seated in chairs surrounded by violeffce. The next moment they were not.

The experts gasped. General Carpenter did the handsome thing. He stalked to Dimmock. "Captain Dimmock, I apologize. Colonel Dimmock, you've been promoted for making an important discovery... only what the hell does it mean? We've got to check ourselves first."

Carpenter snapped up the intercom. "Get me a combat-shock expert and an alienist."

The two experts entered and were briefed. They examined the witnesses. They considered.

"You're all suffering from a mild case of shock," the combat-shock expert said. "War jitters."

"You mean we didn't see them disappear?"

The shock expert shook his head and glanced at the alienist who also shook his head.

"Mass illusion," the alienist said.

At that - moment PFC Riley, M/Sgt Machan and Corp/2 Hanmer reappeared. One moment they were a mass illusion; the next, they were back sitting in their chairs surrounded by confusion.

"Dope 'em again, Dinimock," Carpenter cried. "Give 'em a gallon." He snapped up his intercom. "I want every expert we've got. Emergency meeting in my office at once."

Thirty-seven experts, hardened and sharpened tools all, inspected the unconscious shock cases and discussed them for three hours. Certain facts were obvious: This must be a new fantastic syndrome brought on by the new and fantastic horrors of the war. As combat technique develops, the response of victims of this technique must also take new roads. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Agreed.

This new syndrome must involve some aspects of teleportation... the power of mind over space. Evidently combat shock, while destroying certain known powers of the mind, must develop other latent powers hitherto unknown. Agreed.

Obviously, the patients must only be able to return to the point of departure, otherwise they would not continue to return to Ward T nor would they have returned to General Carpenter's office. Agreed.

Obviously, the patients must be able to procure food and sleep wherever they go, since neither was required in Ward T. Agreed.

"One small point," Colonel Dimmock said. "They seem to be returning to Ward T less frequently. In the beginning they would come and go every day or so. Now most of them stay away for weeks and hardly ever return."

"Never mind that," Carpenter said. "Where do they go?"

"Do they teleport behind the enemy lines?" someone asked. "There's those intelligence leaks."

"I want Intelligence to check," Carpenter snapped. "Is the enemy having similar difficulties with, say, prisoners of war who appear and disappear from their POW camps? They might be some of ours from Ward T."

"They might simply be going home," Colonel Dimmock suggested.

"I want Security to check," Carpenter ordered. "Cover the home life and associations of every one of those twenty-four disappearers. Now... about our operations in Ward T. Colonel Dimmock has a plan."

"We'll set up six extra beds in Ward T," Edsel Dimmock explained. "We'll send in six experts to live there and observe. Information must be picked up indirectly from the patients. They're catatonic and nonresponsive when conscious, and incapable of answering questions when drugged."

"Gentlemen," Carpenter summed it up. "This is the greatest potential weapon in the history of warfare I don't have to tell you what it can mean to us to be able to teleport an entire army behind enemy lines. We can win the war for the American Dream in one day if we can win this secret hidden in those shattered minds. We must win!"

The experts hustled, Security checked, Intelligence probed. Six hardened and sharpened tools moved into Ward T in St. Albans Hospital and slowly got acquainted with the disappearing patients who appeared and departed less and less frequently. The tension increased.

Security was able to report that not one case of strange appearance had taken place in America in the past year. Intelligence reported that the enemy did not seem to be having similar difficulties with their own shock cases or with POWs.

Carpenter fretted. "This is all brand new. We've got no specialists to handle it. We've got to develop new tools." He snapped up his intercom. "Get me a college," he said.

They got him Yale.

"I want some experts in mind over matter. Develop them," Carpenter ordered. Yale at once introduced three graduate courses in Thaumaturgy, Extra Sensory Perception and Telekinesis.

The first break came when one of the Ward T experts requested the assistance of another expert. He wanted a Lapidary.

"What the hell for?" Carpenter wanted to know.

"He picked up a reference to a gem stone," Colonel Dimmock explained. "He can't relate it to anything in his experience. He's a personnel specialist."

"And he's not supposed to," Carpenter said approvingly. "A job for every man and every mair on the job." He flipped up the intercom. "Get me a Lapidary."

An expert Lapidary was given leave of absence from the army arsenal and asked to identify a type of diamond called Jim Brady. He could not.

"We'll try it from another angle," Carpenter said. He snapped up his intercom. "Get me a Semanticist."

The Semanticist left his desk in the War Propaganda Department but could make nothing of the words Jim Brady. They were names to him. No more. He suggested a Genealogist.

A Genealogist was given one day's leave from his post with the Un-American Ancestors Committee but could make nothing of the name of Brady beyond the fact that it had been a common name in America for five hundred years. He suggested an Archaeologist.

An Archaeologist was released from the Cartography Division of Invasion Command and instantly identified the name Diamond Jim Brady. It was a historic personage who had been famous in the city of Little Old New York some time between Governor Peter Stuyvesant and Governor Fiorello La Guardia.

"Christ!" Carpenter marveled. "That's centuries ago. Where the hell did Nathan Riley get that? You'd better join the experts in Ward T and follow this up."

The Archaeologist followed it up, checked his references and sent in his report. Carpenter read it and was stunned. He called an emergency meeting of his staff of experts.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "Ward T is something bigger than teleportation. Those shock patients are doing something far more incredible.. . far more meaningful. Gentlemen, they're traveling through time."

The staff rustled uncertainly. Carpenter nodded emphatically.

"Yes, gentlemen. Time travel is here. It has not arrived the way we expected it.. . as a result of expert research by qualified specialists; it has come as a plague... an infection... a disease of the war... .. a result of combat injury to ordinary men. Before I continue, look through these reports for documentation." The staff read the stenciled sheets. PFC Nathan Riley

disappearing into the early twentieth century in New York; M/Sgt Lela Machan.. . visiting the first century in Rome; Corp/2 George Hanmer... journeying into the nineteenth century in England. And all the rest of the twenty-four patients, escaping the turmoil and horrors of modern war in the twenty-second century by fleeing to Venice and 'the Doges, to Jamaica and the buccaneers, to China and the Han

Dynasty, to Norway and Eric the Red, to any place and any time in the world.

"I needn't point out the colossal significance of this discovery," General Carpenter pointed out. "Think what it would mean to the war if we could send an army back in time a week or a month or a year. We could win the war before it started. We could protect our Dream... poetry and beauty and the fine culture of America... from barbarism without ever endangering it."

The staff tried to grapple with the problem of winning battles before they started.

"The situation is complicated by the fact that these men and women of Ward T are non corn pos. They may or may not know how they do what they do, but in any case they're incapable of communicating with the experts who could reduce this miracle to method. It's for us to find the key. They can't help us."

The hardened and sharpened specialists looked around uncertainly.

"We'll need experts," General Carpenter said.

The staff relaxed. They were on familiar ground again.

"We'll need a Cerebral Mechanist, a Cybematicist, a Psychiatrist, an Anatomist, an Archaeologist and a first-rate Historian. They'll go into that ward and they won't come out until their job is done. They must get the technique of time travel."

The first five experts were easy to draft from other war departments. All America was a tool chest of hardened and sharpened specialists. But there was trouble locating a first-class Historian until the Federal Penitentiary operated with the army and released Dr. Bradley Scrim from his twenty years at hard labor. Dr. Scrim was acid and jagged. He had held the chair of Philosophic History at a Western university until he spoke his mind about the war for the American Dream. That got him the twenty years hard.

Scrim was still intransigent, but induced to play ball by the intriguing

problem of Ward T.

"But I'm not an expert," he snapped. "In this benighted nation of experts, I'm the last singing grasshopper in the ant heap."

Carpenter snapped up the intercom. "Get me an Entomologist," he said.

"Don't bother," Scrim said. "I'll translate. You're a nest of ants... all working and toiling and specializing. For what?"

"To preserve the American Dream," Carpenter answered hotly. "We're fighting for poetry and culture and education and the Finer Things in Life."

"You're fighting to preserve me," Scrim said. "That's what I've devoted my life to. And what do you do with me? Put me in jail."

"You were convicted of enemy sympathizing and fellow-traveling," Carpenter said.

"I was convicted of believing in the American Dream," Scrim said. "Which is another way of saying I had a mind of my own."

Scrim was also intransigent in Ward T. He stayed one night, enjoyed three good meals, read the reports, threw them down and began hollering to be let out.

"There's a job for everyone and everyone must be on the job," Colonel Dimmock told him. "You don't come out until you've got the secret of time travel."

"There's no secret I can get," Scrim said.

"Do they travel in time?"

"Yes and no."

"The answer has to be one or the other. Not both. You're evading the-
_"

"Look," Scrim interrupted wearily. "What are you an expert in?"

"Psychotherapy."

"Then how the hell can you understand what I'm talking about? This is a philosophic concept. I tell you there's no secret here that the army can use. There's no secret any group can use. It's a secret for individuals only."

"I don't understand you."

"I didn't think you would. Take me to Carpenter."

They took Scrim to Carpenter's office where he grinned at the general malignantly, looking for all the world like a red-headed, underfed devil.

"I'll need ten minutes," Scrim said. "Can you spare them out of your tool box?"

Carpenter nodded.

"Now listen carefully. I'm going to give you all the clues to something vast, so strange, so new, that it will need all your fine edge to cut into it."

Carpenter looked expectant.

"Nathan Riley goes back in time to the early twentieth century. There he lives the life of his fondest dreams. He's a big-time gambler, the friend of Diamond Jim Brady and others. He wins money betting on events because he always knows the outcome in advance. He won money betting on Eisenhower to win an election. He won money betting on a prize fighter named Marciano to beat another prize fighter named La Starza. He made money investing in an automobile company owned by Henry Ford. There are the clues. They mean anything to you?"

"Not without a Sociological Analyst," Carpenter answered. He reached for the intercom.

"Don't bother. I'll explain. Let's try some more clues. Lela Machan, for example. She escapes into the Roman empire where she lives the life of her dreams as a femme fatale. Every man loves her. Julius Caesar, Brutus, the entire Twentieth Legion, a man named Ben Hur. Do you see the fallacy?"

"She also smokes cigarettes."

"Well?" Carpenter asked after a pause.

"I continue," Scrim said. "George escapes into England of the nineteenth century where he's a Member of Parliament and the friend of Gladstone, Canning and Disraeli, who takes him riding in his Rolls Royce. Do you know what a Rolls Royce is?"

"No."

"It was the name of an automobile."

"You don't understand yet?"

Scrim paced the floor in exaltation. "Carpenter, this is a bigger discovery than teleportation or time travel. This can be the salvation of man. I don't think I'm exaggerating. Those two dozen shock victims in Ward T have been H-Bombed into something so gigantic that it's no wonder your specialists and experts can't understand it."

"What the hell's bigger than time travel, Scrim?"

"Listen to this, Carpenter. Eisenhower did not run for office until the middle of the twentieth century. Nathan Riley could not have been a friend of Diamond Jim Brady's and bet on Eisenhower to win an election... not simultaneously. Brady was dead a quarter of a century before Ike was President. Marciano defeated La Starza fifty years after Henry Ford started his automobile company. Nathan Riley's time traveling is full of similar anachronisms."

Carpenter looked puzzled.

"Lela Machan could not have had Ben Hur for a lover. Ben Hur never existed in Rome. He never existed at all. He was a character in a novel. She couldn't have smoked. They didn't have tobacco then. You see? More anachronisms. Disraeli could never have taken George Hanmer for a ride in a Rolls Royce because automobiles weren't invented until long after Disraeli's death."

"The hell you say," Carpenter exclaimed. "You mean they're all lying?"

"No. Don't forget, they don't need sleep. They don't need food. They~ro not lying. They're going back in time all right. They're eating and sleeping back there."

"But you just said their stories don't stand up. They're full of anachronisms."

"Because they travel back into a time of their own mmagination. Nathan Riley has his own picture of what America was like in the early twentieth century. It's faulty and anachronistic because he's no scholar; but it's real for him. He can live there. The same is true for the others."

Carpenter goggled.

"The concept is almost beyond understanding. These people have discovered how to turn dreams into reality. They know how -to enter their dream realities. They can stay there, live there, perhaps forever. My God, Carpenter, this is your American dream. It's miracle-working, immortality, Godlike-creation, mind over matter... It must be explored. It must be studied. It must be given to the world."

"Can you do it, Scrhn?"

"No, I cannot. I'm a historian. I'm noncreative, so it's beyond me. You need a poet... a man who understands the creation of dreams. From creating dreams on paper or canvas it oughtn't to be too difficult to take the step to creating dreams in actuality."

"A poet? Are you serious?"

"Certainly I'm serious. Don't you know what a poet is? You've been telling us for five years that this war is being fought to save the poets."

"Don't be facetious, Scrim, I—"

"Send a poet into Ward T. He'll learn how they do it. He's the only man who can. A poet is half doing it anyway. Once he learns, he can teach, your psychologists and anatomists. Then they can teach us; but the poet is the only man who can interpret between those shock cases and your experts."

"I believe you're right, Scrim."

"Then don't delay, Carpenter. Those patients are returning to this world less -and less frequently. We've got to get at that secret before they disappear forever. Send a poet to Ward T."

Carpenter snapped up his intercom. "Send me a poet," he said.

He waited, and waited... and waited... while America sorted feverishly through its two hundred and ninety millions of hardened and sharpened experts, its specialized tools to defend the American Dream of beauty and poetry and the Better Things in Life. He waited for them to find a poet, not understanding the endless delay, the fruitless search, not understanding why Bradley Scrim laughed and laughed and laughed at this final, fatal disappearance.

Hell is Forever



Round and round the shutter'd Square
I strolled with the Devil's arm in mine.
No sound but the scrape of his hoofs was there
And the ring of his laughter and mine.
We had drunk black wine.

I screamed, "I will race you, Master!"
"What matter," he shriek'd, "tonight
Which of us runs the faster?
There is nothing to fear tonight
In the foul moon's light!"

Then I look'd him in the eyes,
And I laughed full shrill at the lie he told
And the gnawing fear he would fain disguise.
It was true, what I'd time and again been told
He was old—old.

From "Fungoids," by Enoch Soames

There were six of them and they had tried everything.

They began with drinking and drank until they had exhausted the sense of taste. Wines—Amontillado, Beaune, Kirschwasser, Bordeaux, Hock, Burgundy, Medoc and Chambertin; whiskey, Scotch, Irish, usquebaugh and Schnapps; brandy, gin and rum. They drank them separately and together; they mixed the tart alcohols and flavors into stupendous punches, into a thousand symphonies of taste; they experimented, created, invented, destroyed—and finally they were bored.

Drugs followed. The milder first, then the more potent. Crisp brown licoricelike opium, toasted and rolled into pellets for smoking in long ivory pipes; thick green absinthe sipped bitter and strong, without

sugar or water; heroin and cocaine in rustling snow crystals; marijuana rolled loosely in brown-paper cigarettes; hashish in milk-white curds to be eaten or tarry plugs of Bhang that were chewed and stained the lips deep tan--and again they were bored.

Their search for sensation became frantic with so much of their senses already dissipated. They enlarged their parties and turned them into festivals of horror. Exotic dancers and esoteric half-human creatures crowded the broad low room and filled it with their incredible performances. Pain, fear, desire, love and hatred were torn apart and exhibited to the least quivering detail like so many laboratory specimens.

The cloying odor of perfume mingled with the knife-sharp sweat of excited bodies; the anguished screams of tortured creatures merely interrupted their swift, never-ceasing talk--and so in time this, too, palled. They reduced their parties to the original six and returned each week to sit, bored and still hungry for new sensations. Now, languidly and without enthusiasm, they were toying with the occult; turning the party room into a necromancer's studio.

Offhand you would not have thought it was a bomb shelter. The room was large and square, the walls paneled with imitation-grained soundproofing, the ceiling low-beamed. To the right was an inset door, heavy and bolted with an enormous wrought-iron lock. There were no windows, but the air-conditioning inlets were shaped like the arched slits of a Gothic monastery. Lady Sutton had paned them with stained glass and set small electric bulbs behind them. They threw showers of sullen color across the room.

The flooring was of ancient walnut, high polished and gleaming like metal. Across it were spread a score of lustrous Oriental scatter rugs. One enormous divan, covered with Indian Batik, ran the width of the shelter against a wall. Above, were tiers of book shelves, and before it was a long trestle table piled with banquet remains. The rest of the shelter was furnished with deep, seductive chairs, soft, quilted and inviting.

Centuries ago this had been the deepest dungeon of Sutton Castle,

hundreds of feet beneath the earth. Now--drained, warmed, air-conditioned and refurbished, it was the scene of Lady Sutton's sensation parties. More--it was the official meeting place of the Society of Six. The Six Decadents, they called themselves.

"We are the last spiritual descendants of Nero--the last of the gloriously evil aristocrats," Lady Sutton would say. "We were born centuries too late, my friends. In a world that is no longer ours we have nothing to live for but ourselves. We are a race apart--we six."

And when unprecedented bombings shook England so catastrophically that the shudders even penetrated to the Sutton shelter, she would glance up and laugh: "Let them slaughter each other, those pigs. This is no war of ours. We go our own way, always, eh? Think, my friends, what a joy it would be to emerge from our shelter one bright morning and find all London dead--all the world dead--" And then she laughed again with her deep hoarse bellow.

She was bellowing now, her enormous fat body sprawled half across the divan like a decorated toad, laughing at the program that Digby Finchley had just handed her. It had been etched by Finchley himself--an exquisite design of devils and angels in grotesque amorous combat encircling the cabalistic lettering that read:

THE SIX PRESENT

ASTAROTH WAS A LADY

By Christian Braugh

Cast:

(In order of appearance)

A Necromancer Christian Braugh

A Black Cat Merlin

(By courtesy of Lady Sutton)

Astaroth Theone Dubedat

Nebiros, an Assistant Demon Digby Finchley

Costumes Digby Finchley

Special Effects Robert Peel

Music Sidra Peel

Finchley said: "A little comedy is a change, isn't it?"

Lady Sutton shuddered with uncontrolled laughter. "Astaroth was a lady! Are you sure you wrote it, Chris?"

There was no answer from Braugh, only the buzz of preparations from the far end of the room, where a small stage had been erected and curtained off.

She bellowed in her broken bass: "Hey, Chris! Hey, there--"

The curtain split and Christian Braugh thrust his albino head through. His face was partially made up with red eyebrows and beard and dark-blue shadows around the eyes. He said: "Beg pardon, Lady Sutton?"

At the sight of his face she rolled over the divan like a mountain of jelly. Across her helpless body, Finchley smiled to Braugh, his lips unfolding in a cat's grin. Braugh moved his white head in imperceptible answer.

"I said, did you really write this, Chris... or have you hired a ghost again?"

Braugh looked angry, then suddenly disappeared behind the curtain. "Oh my hat!" gurgled Lady Sutton. "This is better than a gallon of champagne. And, speaking of the same.... who's nearest the bubbly? Bob? Pour some more. Bob! Bob Peel!"

The man slumped in the chair alongside the ice buckets never moved. He was lying on the nape of his neck, feet thrust out in a V before him, his dress shirt buckled under his bearded chin. Finchley

went across the room and looked down at him.

"Passed out," he said.

"So early? Well, no matter. Fetch me a glass, Dig, there's a good lad." Finchley filled a prisms champagne glass and brought it to Lady Sutton. From a small, cameo-faced vial she added three drops of laudanum, swirled the sparkling mixture once and then sipped while she read the program.

"A Necromancer.... that's you, eh, Dig?"

He nodded.

"And what's a Necromancer?"

"A kind of magician, Lady Sutton."

"Magician? Oh, that's good.... that's very good!" She spilled champagne on her vast, blotchy bosom and dabbed ineffectually with the program.

Finchley lifted a hand to restrain her and said: "You ought to be careful with that program, Lady Sutton. I made only one print and then destroyed the plate. It's unique and liable to be valuable."

"Collector's item, eh? Your work, of course, Dig?"

"Yes."

"Not much of a change from the usual pornography, hey?" She burst into another thunder of laughter that degenerated into a fit of hacking coughs. She dropped the glass altogether. Finchley flushed, then retrieved the glass and returned it to the buffet, stepping carefully over Peel's legs. "And who's this Astaroth?" Lady Sutton went on.

From behind the curtain, Theone Dubedat called: "Me! !! Ich! Moi!" her voice was husky. It had a quality of gray smoke.

"Darling, I know it's you, but what are you?"

"A devil, I think."

Finchley said: "Astaroth is some sort of legendary arch-demon--a top-ranking devil, so to speak."

"Theone a devil? No doubt of it--" Exhausted with rapture, Lady Sutton lay quiescent and musing on the patterned divan. At last she raised an enormous arm and examined her watch. The flesh hung from her elbows in elephantine creases, and at the gesture it shook and a little shower of torn sequins glittered down from her sleeve.

"You'd best get on with it, Dig. I've got to leave at midnight."

"Leave?"

"You heard me."

Finchley's face contorted. He bent over her, tense with suppressed emotions, his bleak eyes examining her. "What's up? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then--"

"A few things have changed, that's all."

"What's changed?"

Her face turned harsh as she returned his stare. The bulging features seemed to stiffen into obsidian. "Too soon to tell you.... but you'll find out quick enough. Now I don't want any more pestering from you, Dig, m'lad!"

Finchley's scarecrow features regained some measure of control. He started to speak, but before he could utter a word Sidra Peel suddenly popped her head out of the alcove alongside the stage, where the organ had been placed. She called: "Robert!"

In a constricted voice Finchley said: "Bob's passed out again, Sidra."

She emerged from the alcove, walked jerkily across the room and stood looking down in her husband's face. Sidra Peel was short, slender and dark. Her body was like an electric high-tension wire, alive with too much current, yet coruscated, stained and rusted from too much exposure to passion. The deep black sockets of her eyes were frigid coals with gleaming white points. As she gazed at her husband, her long fingers writhed; then, suddenly, her hand lashed out and struck the inert face.

"Swine!" she hissed.

Lady Sutton laughed and coughed all at once. Sidra Peel shot her a venomous glance and stepped toward the divan, the sharp crack of her heel on the walnut sounding like a pistol shot. Finchley gestured a quick warning that stopped her. She hesitated, then returned to the alcove, and said: "The music's ready."

"And so am I," said Lady Sutton. "On with the show and all that, eh?" She spread herself across the divan like a crawling tumor the while Finchley propped scarlet pillows under her head. "It's really nice of you to play this little comedy for me, Dig. Too bad there're only six of us here tonight. Ought to have an audience, eh?"

"You're the only audience we want, Lady Sutton."

"Ah! Keep it all in the family?"

"So to speak."

"The Six--Happy Family of Hatred."

"That's not so, Lady Sutton."

"Don't be an ass, Dig. We're all hateful. We glory in it. I ought to know. I'm the Bookkeeper of Disgust. Some day I'll let you see all the entries. Some day soon.,,

"What sort of entries?"

"Curious already, eh? Oh, nothing spectacular. Just the way Sidra's

been trying to kill her husband--and Bob's been torturing her by holding on. And you making a fortune out of filthy pictures and eating your rotten heart out for that frigid devil, Theone--"

"Please, Lady Sutton!"

"And Theone," she went on with relish, "using that icy body of hers like an executioner's scalpel to torture and.... and Chris.... How many of his books d'you think he's stolen from those poor Grub Street devils?"

"I couldn't say."

"I know. All of them. A fortune on other men's brains. Oh, we're a beautifully loathsome lot, Dig. It's the only thing we have to be proud of--the only thing that sets us off from the billion blundering moralistic idiots that have inherited our earth. That's why we've got to stay a happy family of mutual hatred."

"I should call it mutual admiration," Finchley murmured. He bowed courteously and went to the curtains, looking more like a scarecrow than ever in the black dinner clothes. He was extremely tall--three inches over six feet--and extremely thin. The pipestem arms and legs looked like warped dowel sticks, and his horsy flat features seemed to have been painted on a pasty pillow.

Finchley pulled the curtains together behind him. A moment after he disappeared there was a whispered cue and the lights dimmed. In the vast room there was no sound except Lady Sutton's croupy breathing. Peel, still slumped in his deep chair, was motionless and invisible except for the limp angle of his legs.

From infinite distances came a slight vibration--almost a shudder. It seemed at first to be a sinister reminder of the hell that was bursting across England, hundreds of feet over their heads. Then the shuddering quickened and by imperceptible stages swelled into the deepest tones of the organ. Above the background of the throbbing diapasons, a weird tremolo of fourths, empty and spine-chilling, cascaded down the keyboard in chromatic steps.

Lady Sutton chuckled faintly. "My word," she said, "that's really horrid, Sidra. Ghastly."

The grim background music choked her. It filled the shelter with chilling tendrils of sound that were more moan than tone. The curtains slipped apart slowly, revealing Christian Braugh garbed in black, his face a hideous, twisted mass of red and purple-blue that contrasted starkly to the near-albino white hair. Braugh stood at the center of the stage surrounded by spider-legged tables piled high with Necromancer's apparatus. Prominent was Merlin, Lady Sutton's black cat, majestically poised atop an iron-bound volume.

Braugh lifted a piece of black chalk from a table and drew a circle on the floor twelve feet around himself. He inscribed the circumference with cabalistic characters and pentacles. Then he lifted a wafer and exhibited it with a flirt of his wrist.

"This," he declaimed in sepulchral tones, "is a sacred wafer stolen from a church at midnight."

Lady Sutton applauded satirically, but stopped almost at once. The music seemed to upset her. She moved uneasily on the divan and looked about her with little uncertain glances.

Muttering blasphemous imprecations, Braugh raised an iron dagger and plunged it through the center of the wafer. Then he arranged a copper chafing dish over a blue alcohol flame and began to stir in powders and crystals of bright colors. He lifted a crystal vial filled with purple liquid and poured the contents into a porcelain bowl. There was a faint detonation and a thick cloud of vapor lifted to the ceiling.

The organ surged. Braugh muttered incantations under his breath and performed oddly suggestive gestures. The shelter swam with scents and mists, violet clouds and deep fogs. Lady Sutton glanced toward the chair across from her. "Splendid, Bob," she called. "Wonderful effects—really." She tried to make her voice cheerful, but it came out in a sickly croak. Peel never moved.

With a savage motion, Braugh pulled three black hairs from the cat's

tail. Merlin uttered a yowl of rage, and sprang at the same time from the table to the top of an inlaid cabinet in the background. Through the mists and vapors his giant yellow eyes gleamed balefully. The hairs went into the chafing dish and a new aroma filled the room. In quick succession the claws of an owl, the powder of vipers, and a human-shaped mandrake root followed.

"Now!" cried Braugh.

He cast the wafer, transfixed by the dagger, into the porcelain bowl containing the purple fluid, and then poured the whole mixture into the copper chafing dish.

There was a violent explosion.

A jet-black cloud enfolded the stage and swirled out into the shelter. Slowly it cleared away, faintly revealing the tall form of a naked devil; the body exquisitely formed, the head a frightful mask. Braugh had disappeared.

Through the drifting clouds, in the husky tones of Theone Dubedat, the devil spoke: "Greetings, Lady Sutton--"

She stepped forward out of the vapor. In the pulsating light that shot down to the stage her body shone with a shimmering nacreous glow of its own. The toes and fingers were long and graceful. Color slashed across the rounded torso. Yet that whole perfect body was cold and lifeless--as unreal as the grotesque papiermaché that covered her head.

Theone repeated: "Greetings--"

"Hi, old thing!" Lady Sutton interrupted. "How's everything in hell?"

There was a giggle from the alcove where Sidra Peel was playing softly. Theone posed statuesquely and lifted her head a little higher to speak. "I bring you--"

"Darling!" shrieked Lady Sutton, "why didn't you let me know it was going to be like this. I'd have sold tickets!"

Theone raised a gleaming arm imperiously. Again she began: "I bring you the thanks of the five who--" And then abruptly she stopped.

For the space of five heartbeats there was a gasping pause while the organ murmured and the last of the black smoke filtered away, mushrooming against the ceiling. In the silence Theone's rapid, choked breathing mounted hysterically--then came a ghastly, piercing scream.

The others darted from behind the stage, exclaiming in astonishment--Braugh, Necromancer's costume thrown over his arm, his make-up removed; Finchley like a pair of animated scissors in black habit and cowl, a script in his hand. The organ stuttered, then stopped with a crash, and Sidra Peel burst out of the alcove.

Theone tried to scream again, but her voice caught and broke. In the appalled silence Lady Sutton cried: "What is it? Something wrong?"

Theone uttered a moaning sound and pointed to the center of the stage. "Look--There--" The words came off the top of her throat like the squeal of nails on slate. She cowered back against a table upsetting the apparatus. It clashed and tinkled.

"What is it? For the love of--"

"It worked--" Theone moaned. "The r-ritual--It worked!"

They stared through the gloom, then started. An enormous sable Thing was slowly rising in the center of the Necromancer's circle--a vague, morphous form towering high, emitting a dull, hissing sound like the whisper of a caldron.

"Who is that?" Lady Sutton shouted.

The Thing pushed forward like some sickly extrusion. When it reached the edge of the black circle it halted. The seething sounds swelled ominously.

"It is one of us?" Lady Sutton cried. "Is this a stupid trick? Finchley..."

Braugh--"

They shot her startled glances, bleak with terror.

"Sidra... Robert.... Theone.... No, you're all here. Then who is that? How did it get in here?"

"It's impossible," Braugh whispered, backing away. His legs knocked against the edge of the divan and he sprawled clumsily.

Lady Sutton beat at him with helpless hands and cried: "Do something! Do something--"

Finchley tried to control his voice. He stuttered: "W-we're safe so long as the circle isn't broken. It can't get out--"

On the stage, Theone was sobbing, making pushing motions with her hands. Suddenly she crumpled to the floor. One outflung arm rubbed away a segment of the black chalk circle. The Thing moved swiftly, stepped through the break in the circle and descended from the platform like a black fluid. Finchley and Sidra Peel reeled back with terrified shrieks. There was a growing thickness pervading the shelter atmosphere. Little gusts of vapor twisted around the head of the Thing as it moved slowly toward the divan.

"You're all joking!" Lady Sutton screamed. "This isn't real. It can't be!" She heaved up from the divan and tottered to her feet. Her face blanched as she counted the tale of her guests again. One--two--and four made six--and the shape made seven. But there should only be six--She backed away, then began to run. The Thing was following her when she reached the door. Lady Sutton pulled at the door handle, but the iron bolt was locked. Quickly, for all her vast bulk, she ran around the edge of the shelter, smashing over the tables. As the Thing expanded in the darkness and filled the room with its sibilant hissing, she snatched at her purse and tore it open, groping for the key. Her shaking hands scattered the purse's contents over the room.

A deep bellow pierced the blackness. Lady Sutton jerked and stared around desperately, making little animal noises. As the Thing threatened to engulf her in its infinite black depths, a cry tore up

through her body and she sank heavily to the floor.

Silence.

Smoke drifted in shaded clouds.

The china clock ticked off a sequence of delicate periods.

"Well--" Finchley said in conversational tones. "That's that."

He went to the inert figure on the floor. He knelt over it for a moment, probing and testing, his face flickering with savage hunger. Then he looked up and grinned. "She's dead, all right. Just the way we figured. Heart failure. She was too fat."

He remained on his knees, drinking in the moment of death. The others clustered around the toadlike body, staring with distended nostrils. The moment hardly lasted, then the languor of infinite boredom again shaded across their features.

The black Thing waved its arms a few times. The costume split at last to reveal a complicated framework and the sweating, bearded face of Robert Peel. He dropped the costume around him, stepped out of it, and went to the figure in the chair.

"The dummy idea was perfect," he said. His bright little eyes glittered momentarily. He looked like a sadistic miniature of Edward VII. "She'd never have believed it if we hadn't arranged for a se~venth unknown to enter the scene." He glanced at his wife. "That slap was a stroke of genius, Sidra. Wonderful realism--"

"I meant it."

"I know you did, dearly beloved, but thanks nevertheless."

Theone Dubedat had risen and gotten into a white dressing gown. She stepped down and walked over to the body, removing the hideous devil's mask. It revealed a beautifully chiseled face, frigid and lovely. Her blond hair gleamed in the darkness.

Braugh said: "Your acting was superb, Theone—" He bobbed his white albino head appreciatively.

For a time she didn't answer. She stood staring down at the shapeless mound of flesh, an expression of hopeless longing on her face; but there was nothing more to her gazing than the impersonal curiosity of a bystander watching a window chef. Less.

At last Theone sighed. She said: "So it wasn't worth it, after all."

"What?" Braugh groped for a cigarette.

"The acting—the whole performance. We've been let down again, Chris."

Braugh scratched a match. The orange flame flared, flickering across their disappointed faces. He lit his cigarette, then held the flame high and looked at them. The illumination twisted their features into caricatures, emphasizing their weariness, their infinite boredom. Braugh said: "My-my--"

"It's no use, Chris. This whole murder was a bust. It was about as exciting as a glass of water."

Finchley hunched his shoulders and paced up and back of the shelter like a bundle of stilts. He said: "I got a bit of a kick when I thought she suspected. It didn't last long, though."

"You ought to be grateful for even that."

"I am."

Peel clucked his tongue in exasperation, then knelt like a bearded humptydumpty, his bald head gleaming, and raked in the contents of Lady Sutton's scattered purse. The banknotes he folded and put in his pocket. He took the fat dead hand and lifted it slightly toward Theone. "You always admired her sapphire, Theone. Want it?"

"You couldn't get it off, Bob."

"I think I could," he said, pulling strenuously.

"Oh, to hell with the sapphire."

"No-it's coming."

The ring slipped forward, then caught in the folds of flesh at the knuckle. Peel took a fresh grip and tugged and twisted. There was a sucking, yielding sound and the entire finger tore away from the hand. The dull odor of putrefaction struck their nostrils as they looked on with vague curiosity.

Peel shrugged and dropped the finger. He arose, dusting his hands slightly. "She rots fast," he said. "Peculiar--"

Braugh wrinkled his nose and said: "She was too fat."

Theone turned away in sudden frantic desperation, her hands clasping her elbows. "What are we going to do?" she cried. "What? Isn't there a sensation left on earth we haven't tried?"

With a dry whirl the china clock began quick chimes. Midnight.

Finchley said: "We might go back to drugs."

"They're as futile as this paltry murder."

"But there are other sensations. New ones."

"Name one!" Theone said in exasperation. "Only one!" "I could name several--if you'll have a seat and permit me--" Suddenly Theone interrupted: "That's you speaking, isn't it, Dig?" In a peculiar voice Finchley answered: "N~no. I thought it was Chris." Braugh said: "Wasn't me."

"You, Bob?"

"No.

"Th-then--"

The small voice said: "If the ladies and gentlemen would be kind enough to--" It came from the stage. There was something there--something that spoke in that quiet, gentle voice; for Merlin was stalking back and forth, arching his high black back against an invisible leg.

"--to sit down," the voice continued persuasively.

Braugh had the most courage. He moved to the stage with slow, steady steps, the cigarette hanging firmly from his lips. He leaned across the apron and peered. For a while his eyes examined the stage, then he let a spume of smoke jet from his nostrils and called: "There's nothing here."

And at that moment the blue smoke swirled under the lights and swept around a figure of emptiness. It was no more than a glimpse of an outline--of a negative, but it was enough to make Braugh cry out and leap back. The others turned sick, too, and staggered to chairs.

"So sorry," said the quiet voice. "It won't happen again."

Peel gathered himself and said: "Merely for the sake of--"

"Yes?"

He tried to freeze his jerking features. "Merely for the sake of s-scientific curiosity it--"

"Calm yourself, my friend."

"The ritual.... it did w-work?"

"Of course not. My friends, there is no need to call us with such fantastic ceremony. If you really want us, we come."

"And you?"

"I? Oh... I know you have been thinking of me for some time. Tonight you wanted me--really wanted me, and I came."

The last of the cigarette smoke convulsed violently as that terrible figure of emptiness seemed to stoop and at last seat itself casually at the edge of the stage. The cat hesitated and then began rolling its head with little mews of pleasure as something fondled it.

Still striving desperately to control himself, Peel said: "But all those ceremonies and rituals that have been handed down--"

"Merely symbolic, Mr. Peel." Peel started at the sound of his name. "You have read, no doubt, that we do not appear unless a certain ritual is performed, and only if it is letter-perfect. That is not true, of course. We appear if the invitation is sincere--and only then--with or without ceremony."

Sick and verging on hysteria, Sidra whispered: "I'm getting out of here." She tried to rise.

The gentle voice said: "One moment, please--"

"No!"

"I will help you get rid of your husband, Mrs. Peel."

Sidra blinked, then sank back into her chair. Peel clenched his fists and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could begin, the gentle voice continued: "And yet you will not lose your wife, if you really want to keep her, Mr. Peel. I guarantee that."

The cat was suddenly lifted into the air and then settled comfortably in space a few feet from the floor. They could see the thick fur on the back smooth and resmooth from the gentle petting.

At length Braugh asked: "What do you offer us?"

"I offer each of you his own heart's desire."

"And that is?"

"A new sensation--all new sensations--"

"What new sensation?"

"The sensation of reality."

Braugh laughed. "Hardly anyone's heart's desire."

"This will be, for I offer you five different realities--realities which you may fashion, each for himself. I offer you worlds of your own making wherein Mrs. Peel may happily murder her husband in hers--and yet Mr. Peel may keep his wife in his own. To Mr. Braugh I offer the dreamworld of the writer, and to Mr. Finchley the creation of the artist--"

Theone said: "Those are dreams, and dreams are cheap. We all possess them."

"But you all awaken from your dreams and you pay the bitter price of that realization. I offer you an awakening from the present into a future reality which you may shape to your own desires--a reality which will never end."

Peel said: "Five simultaneous realities is a contradiction in terms. It's a paradox--impossible."

"Then I offer you the impossible."

"And the price?"

"I beg pardon?"

"The price," Peel repeated with growing courage. "We're not altogether naive. We know there's always a price."

There was a long pause, then the voice said reproachfully: "I'm afraid there are many misconceptions and many things you fail to understand. Just now I cannot explain, but believe me when I say there is no price."

"Ridiculous. Nothing is ever given for nothing."

"Very well, Mr. Peel, if we must use the terminology of the marketplace, let me say that we never appear unless the price for our service is paid in advance. Yours has already been paid."

"Paid?" They shot involuntary glances at the rotting body on the shelter floor.

"In full."

"Then?"

"You're willing, I see. Very well--"

The cat was again lifted high in the air and deposited on the floor with a last gentle pat. The remnants of mist clinging to the shelter ceiling weaved and churned as the invisible donor advanced. Instinctively the five arose and waited, tense and fearful, yet with a mounting sense of fulfillment.

A key' darted up from the floor and sailed through midair toward the door. It paused before the lock an instant, then inserted itself and turned. The heavy wroughtiron bolt lifted and the door swung wide. Beyond should have been the dungeon passage leading to the upper levels of Sutton Castle--a low, narrow corridor, paved with flags and lined with limestone blocks. Now, a few inches beyond the door jamb, there hung a veil of flame.

Pale, incredibly beautiful, it was a tapestry of flickering fire, the warp and weft an intermesh of rainbow colors. Those pastel strands of color locked and interlocked, swam, threaded and spun like so many individual life lines. They were an infinity of beads, emotions, the silken countenance of time, the swirling skin of space--They were all things to all men, and above all else, they were beautiful.

"For you," that quiet voice said, "your old reality ends in this room--"

"As simply as this?"

"Quite."

But--"

"Here you stand," interrupted the voice, "in the last kernel, the last nucleus so to speak, of what once was real for you. Pass the door--pass through the veil, and you enter the reality I promised."

"What will we find beyond the veil?"

"What each of you desires. Nothing lies beyond that veil now. There is nothing there--nothing but time and space waiting for the molding. There is nothing and the potential of everything."

Peel, in a low voice, said: "One time and one space? Will that be enough for all different realities?"

"All time, all space, my friend," the quiet voice answered. "Pass through and you will find the matrix of dreams."

They had been clustered together, standing close to each other in a kind of strained companionship. Now, in the silence that followed, they separated slightly as though each had marked out for himself a reality all his own--a life entirely divorced from the past and the companions of old times. It was a gesture of utter isolation.

Mutually impulsed, yet independently motivated, they moved toward the glittering veil"

I am an artist, Digby Finchley thought, and an artist is a creator. To create is to be godlike, and so shall I be. I shall be god of my world, and from nothing I shall create all--and my all will be beauty.

He was the first to reach the veil and the first to pass through. Across his face the riot of color flicked like a cool spray. He blinked his eyes momentarily as the brilliant scarlets and purples blinded him. When he opened them again he had left the veil a step behind and stood in the darkness.

But not darkness.

It was the blank jet-black of infinite emptiness. It smote his eyes like a

heavy hand and seemed to press the eyeballs back into his skull like leaden weights. He was terrified and jerked his head about, staring into the impenetrable nothingness, mistaking the ephemeral flashes of retinal light for reality.

Nor was he standing.

For he took one hasty stride and it was as though he were suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. His terror was tinged with horror as he became aware that he was utterly alone; that there was nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. A bitter loneliness assailed him and in that instant he understood how truthfully the voice in the shelter had spoken, and how terribly real his new reality was.

That instant, too, was his salvation. "For," Finchley murmured with a wry smile to the blankness, "it is of the essence of godhood to be alone--to be unique."

Then he was quite calm and hung quiescent in time and space while he mustered his thoughts for the creation.

"First," Finchley said at length, "I must have a heavenly throne that befits a god. Too, I must have a heavenly kingdom and angelic retainers; for no god is altogether complete without an entourage."

He hesitated while his mind rapidly sorted over the various heavenly kingdoms he had known. There was no need, he thought, to be especially original with this sort of thing. Originality would play an important role in the creation of his universe. Just now the only essential thing was to insure himself a reasonable degree of dignity and luxury--and for that the secondhand furnishings of ancient Yahweh would do.

Raising one hand in a self-conscious gesture, he commanded. Instantly the blackness was riven with light, and before him a flight of gold-veined marble steps rose to a glittering throne. The throne was high and cushioned. Arms, legs and back were of glowing silver, and the cushions were imperial purple. And yet--the whole was incredibly

hideous. The legs were too long and thin, the arms were rachety, the back narrow and sickly.

Finchley said: "Ow-w-w-w!" and tried to remodel. Yet no matter how he altered the proportions, the throne remained horrible. And for that matter, the steps, too, were disgusting, for by some freak of creation the gold veins twisted and curved through the marble to form obscene designs too reminiscent of the pictures Finchley had drawn in his past existence.

He gave it up at last, mounted the crooked steps and settled himself uneasily on the throne. It felt as though he was sitting on the lap of a corpse with dead arms poised to infold him in ghastly embrace. He shuddered slightly and said: "Oh, hell, I was never a furniture designer--"

Finchley glanced around, then raised his hand again. The jet clouds that had crowded around the throne rolled back to reveal high columns of crystal and a soaring roof arched and paved with smooth blocks. The hall stretched back for thousands of yards like some never-ending cathedral, and all that length was filled with rank on rank of his retainers.

Foremost were the angels: slender, winged creatures, white-robed, with blond, shining heads, sapphire-blue eyes, and scarlet, smiling mouths. Behind the angels knelt the order of Cherubin: giant winged bulls with tawny hides and hoofs of beaten metal. Their Assyrian heads were heavily bearded with gleaming jet curls. Third were the Seraphim: ranks of huge six-winged serpents whose jeweled scales glittered with a startling silent flame.

As Finchley sat and stared at them with admiration for his handiwork, they chanted in soft unison: "Glory to god. Glory to the Lord Finchley, the All Highest..... Glory to the Lord Finchley--"

He sat and stared and it was as though his eyes were slowly acquiring the distortion of astigmatism, for he realized that this was more a cathedral of evil than of heaven. The columns were carved with revolting grotesques at the capitals and bases, and as the hall

stretched into dimness it seemed peopled with cavorting shadows that grimaced and danced.

And in the far reaches of those twisting lengths, covert little scenes were playing that sickened him. Even as they chanted, the angels gazed sidelong with their glistening blue eyes at the Cherubin; and behind a column he saw one winged creature reach out and seize a lovely blond angel of lust to crush her to him.

In sheer desperation Finchley raised his hand again, and once more the blackness swirled around him--"So much," he said, "for a Heavenly Kingdom--"

He pondered for another ineffable period as he drifted in emptiness, grappling with the most stupendous artistic problem he had ever attacked.

Up to now, Finchley thought with a shudder for the horror he had recently wrought, I have been merely playing--feeling my strength--warming up, so to speak, the way an artist will toy with pastel and a block of grained paper. Now it's time for me to go to work.

Solemnly, as he thought would befit a god, he conducted a laborious conference with himself in space.

What, he asked himself, has creation been in the past?

One might call it nature.

Very well, we shall call it nature. Now, what are the objections to nature's creation?

Why--nature was never an artist. Nature merely blundered into things in an experimental sort of way. Whatever beauty existed was merely a byproduct. The difference be--The difference, he interrupted himself, between the old nature and the new God Finchley shall be order. Mine will be an ordered cosmos devoid of waste and devoted to beauty. There will be nothing haphazard. There will be no blundering.

First, the canvas.

"There shall be infinite space!" Finchley cried.

In the nothingness, his voice roared through the bony structure of his skull and echoed in his ears with a flat, sour sound; but on the instant of command, the opaque blackness was filtered into a limpid jet. Finchley could still see nothing, but he felt the change.

He thought: Now, in the old cosmos there were simply stars and nebulae and vast fiery bodies scattered through the realms of the sky. No one knew their purpose--no one knew their origin or destination.

In mine there shall be purpose, for each body shall serve to support a race of creatures whose sole function shall be to serve me--He cried: "Let there be universes to the number of one hundred, filling space. One thousand galaxies shall make up each universe, and one million suns shall be the sum of each galaxy. Ten planets shall circle each sun, and two moons each planet. Let all revolve around their creator! Let all this come to pass. Now!"

Finchley screamed in terror as light burst in a soundless cataclysm around him. Stars, close and hot as suns, distant and cold as pinpricks--Separately, by twos and in vast smudgy clouds--Blazing crimson--yellow---deep green and violet--The sum of their brilliance was a welter of light that constricted his heart and filled him with a devouring fear of the latent power within him.

"This," Finchley whimpered, "is enough cosmic creation for the time being--"

He closed his eyes determinedly and exerted his will once more. There was a sensation of solidity under his feet and when he opened his eyes cautiously he was standing on one of his earths with blue sky and a blue-white sun lowering swiftly toward the western horizon.

It was a bare, brown earth--Finchley had seen to that--it was a vast sphere of inchoate matter waiting for his molding, for he had decided that first above all other creation he would form a good green earth for himself--a planet of beauty where Finchley, God of all Creation,

would reside in his Eden.

All through that waning afternoon he worked, swiftly and with artistic finesse. A vast ocean, green and with sparkling white foam, swept over half the globe; alternating hundreds of miles of watery space with clusters of warm islands. The single continent he divided in half with a backbone of jagged mountains that stretched from pole to snowy pole.

With infinite care he worked. Using oils, water colors, charcoal and plumbago sketches, he planned and executed his entire world. Mountains, valleys, plains; crags, precipices and mere boulders were all designed into a fluent congruence of beautifully balanced masses.

All his spirit of artistry went into the clever scattering of lakes like so many sparkling jewels; and into the cunning arabesques of winding rivers that traced intricate glistening designs over the face of the planet. He devoted himself to the selection of colors: gray gravels; pink, white and black sands; good earths, brown, umber and sepia; mottled shales, glistening micas and silica stones--And when the sun at last vanished on the first day of his labor, his Eden was a shining jewel of stone, earth and metal, ready for life.

As the sky darkened overhead, a pale, gibbous moon with a face of death was revealed riding in the vault of the sky; and even as Finchley gazed at it uneasily, a second moon with a blood-red disk lifted its ravaged countenance above the eastern horizon and began a ghastly march across the heavens. Finchley tore his eyes away from them and stared out at the twinkling stars.

There was much satisfaction to be gained from their contemplation. "I know exactly how many there are," he thought complacently. "You multiply one hundred by a thousand by a million and there's your answer--And that happens to be my idea of order!"

He lay back on a patch of warm, soft soil and placed palms under the back of his head, staring up. "And I know exactly what all of them are there for--to support human lives--the countless billions upon billions of lives which I shall design and create solely to serve and worship

the Lord Finchley--That's purpose for you!"

And he knew where each of those blue and red and indigo sparks were going, for even in the vasty reaches of space they were thundering a circular course, the pivot of which was that point in the skies he had just left. Some day he would return to that place and there build his heavenly castle. Then he would sit through all eternity watching the wheeling flight of his worlds.

There was a peculiar splotch of red in the zenith of the sky. Finchley watched it absently at first, then with guarded attention as it seemed to burgeon. It spread slowly like an ink stain, and as the curious moments fled by, became tinged with orange and then the purest white. And for the first time Finchley was uncomfortably aware of a sensation of heat.

An hour passed and then two and three. The fist of red-white spread across the sky until it was a fiery nebulous cloud. A thin, tenuous edge approached a star gently, then touched. Instantly there was a blinding blaze of radiance and Finchley was flooded with gleaming, glittering light that illuminated the landscape with the eerie glow of flaring magnesium. The sensation of heat grew in intensity and tiny beads of perspiration prickled across his skin.

With midnight, the incredible inferno filled half the sky, and the gleaming stars, one after another, were bursting into silent explosions. The light was blinding white and the heat suffocating. Finchley tottered to his feet and began to run, searching vainly for shade or water. It was only then that he realized his universe was running amuck.

"No!" he cried desperately. "No!"

Heat bludgeoned him. He fell and rolled across cutting rocks that tore at him and anchored him back down with his face upthrust. Past his shielding hands, past his tight-shut eyelids, the intolerable light and heat pressed.

"Why should it go wrong?" Finchley screamed. "There was plenty of

room for everything! Why should it--"

In heat-borne delirium he felt a thunderous rocking as though his Eden were beginning to split asunder.

He cried: "Stop! Stop! Everything stop!" He beat at his temples with futile fists and at last whispered: "All right.... if I've made another mistake then--All right--" He waved his hand feebly.

And instantly the skies were black and blank. Only the two scabrous moons rode overhead, beginning the long downward journey to the west. And in the east a faint glow hinted at the rising sun.

"So," Finchley murmured, "one must be more a mathematician and physicist to run a cosmos. Very well, I can learn all that later. I'm an artist and I never pretended to know all that. But.... I am an artist, and there is still my good green earth to people--Tomorrow--We shall see.... tomorrow--"

And so presently he slept.

The scarlet sun was high when he awoke, and its evil solitary eye filled him with unrest. Glancing at the landscape he had fashioned the day previous, he was even more uncertain; for there was some subtle distortion in everything. Valley floors looked unclean with the pale sheen of lepers scales. The mountain crags formed nebulous shapes suggestive only of terror. Even the lakes contained the hint of horror under their smooth, innocent surfaces.

Not, he noticed, when he stared directly at these creations, but only when his glance was sidelong. Viewed full-eyed and steadfastly, everything seemed to be right. Proportion was good, line was excellent, coloring perfection. And yet--He shrugged and decided he would have to put in some practice at drafting. No doubt there was some subtle error of distortion in his work.

He walked to a tiny stream and from the bank scooped out a mass of moist red clay. He kneaded it smooth, wet it down to a thin mud and strained it. After it had dried under the sun slightly he arranged a heavy block of stone as a pedestal and set to work.

His hands were still practiced and certain. With sure fingers he shaped his concept of a large, furred rabbit. Body, legs and head; exquisitely etched features--it crouched on the stone ready, it seemed, to leap off at a moment's notice. Finchley smiled affectionately at his work, his confidence at last restored. He tapped it once on the rounded head and said: "Live, my friend--"

There was a second's indecision while life invaded the clay form, then it arched its back with an incredibly clumsy motion and attempted to leap. It moved forward to the edge of the pedestal where it hung crazily for an instant before it dropped heavily to the ground. As it lumbered along on a crazy course, it uttered horrible little grunting sounds and turned once to gaze at Finchley. On that animal face was an evil expression of malevolence.

Finchley's smile froze. He frowned, hesitated, then scooped up another chunk of clay and set it on the stone. For the space of an hour he worked, shaping a graceful Irish setter. At last he tapped this, too, on the narrow skull and said: "Live--"

Instantly the dog collapsed. It mewed helplessly and then struggled to shaking feet like some enormous spider, eyes distended and glassy. It tottered to the edge of the pedestal, leaped off and collided with Finchley's leg. There was a low growl and the beast tore sharp fangs into Finchley's skin. He leaped back with a cry and kicked the animal furiously. Mewling and howling, the setter went gangling across the fields like a crippled monster.

With furious intent, Finchley returned to his work. Shape after shape he modeled and endowed with life; and each: ape, monkey, fox, weasel, rat, lizard and toad--fish; long and short, stout and slender--birds by the score--each was a grotesque monstrosity that swam, shambled or fluttered off like some feverish nightmare. Finchley was horrified and exhausted. He sat himself down on the pedestal and began to sob while his tired fingers still twitched and prodded at a lump of clay.

He thought: "I'm still an artist--What's gone wrong? What turns

everything I do into horrible nonsense?"

His fingers turned and twisted, and without his realizing it, a head began to form in the clay.

He thought: "I made a fortune with my art once. Everyone couldn't have been crazy. They bought my work for many reasons--but an important one was that it was beautiful."

He stared at the lump of clay in his hands. It had been partially formed into a woman's head. He examined it closely and for the first time in many hours, he smiled.

"Why, of course!" he exclaimed. "I'm no shaper of animals. Let's see how well I do with a human figure--"

Swiftly, with heavy chunks of clay, he built up the understructure of his figure. Legs, arms, torso and head were formed. He hummed slightly under his breath as he worked, and he thought: She'll be the loveliest Eve ever created--and more--her children shall truly be the children of a god!

With loving hands he turned the full swelling calves and thighs, and cunningly joined slender ankles to graceful feet. The hips were rounded and girdled a flat slightly mounded belly. As he set the strong shoulders, he suddenly stopped and stepped back a pace.

Is it possible? He wondered.

He walked slowly around the half-completed figure.

Yes--Force of habit, perhaps?

Perhaps that--and maybe the love he had borne for so many empty years.

He returned to the figure and redoubled his efforts. With a sense of growing elation, he completed arms, neck and head. There was a certainty within him that told him it was impossible to fail. He had modeled this figure too often not to know it down to the finest detail.

And when he was finished, Theone Dubedat, magnificently sculpted in clay, stood atop the stone pedestal.

Finchley was content, Wearily he sat down with his back to a jagged boulder, produced a cigarette from space and lit it. For perhaps a minute he sat, dragging in the smoke to quiet his jerking nerves. At last with a sense of chaotic anticipation he said: "Woman--"

He choked and stopped. Then he began again.

"Be alive--Theone!"

The second of life came and passed. The nude figure moved slightly, then began to tremble. Magnetically drawn, Finchley arose and stepped toward her, arms outstretched in mute appeal. There was a hoarse gasp of indrawn breath and slowly the great eyes opened and examined him.

The living girl straightened and screamed. Before Finchley could touch her she beat at his face, her long nails ripping his skin. She fell backward off the pedestal, leaped to her feet and began running off across the fields like all the others--running like a crazy, crippled creature while she screamed and howled. The low sun dappled her body and the shadow she cast was monstrous.

Long after she disappeared, Finchley continued to gaze in her direction while within him all that futile, bitter love surged and burned with an acid tide. At length he turned again to the pedestal and with icy impassivity set once more to work. Nor did he stop until the fifth in a succession of lurid creatures ran screaming out into the night--Then and only then did he stop and stand for a long time gazing alternately at his hands and the crazy, careening moons that sailed overhead.

There was a tap on his shoulder and he was not too surprised to see Lady Sutton standing beside him. She still wore the sequined evening gown, and in the lurid moonlight her face was as course and masculine as ever.

Finchley said: "Oh.... it's you."

"How are you, Dig, m'lad?"

He thought it over, trying to bring some reason to the dumb despair and yet ludicrous insanity that pervaded his cosmos. At last he said: "Not so good, Lady Sutton."

"Trouble?"

"Yes--" He broke off and stared at her. "I say, Lady Sutton, how the devil did you get here?"

She laughed. "I'm dead, Dig. You ought to know."

"Dead? Oh.... I--" He floundered in a horror of embarrassment.

"No hard feelings, though. I'd have done the same m'self, y'know."

"You would?"

"Anything for a new sensation. That was always our motto, eh?" She nodded complacently and grinned at him. It was that same old grin of pure devilry.

Finchley said: "What are you doing here? I mean, how did--"

"I said I was dead," Lady Sutton interrupted. "There's lots you don't understand about this business of dying."

"But this is my own personal private reality. I own it."

"And I'm still dead, Dig. I can get into any bloody damned reality I choose. Wait--you'll find out."

He said: "I won't--ever--That is, I can't. Because I won't ever die."

"Oh-ho?"

"No, I won't. I'm a god."

"You are, eh? How d'you like it?"

"I... I don't." He faltered for words. "I... that is, someone promised me a reality I could shape for myself, but I can't, Lady Sutton, I can't."

"And why not?"

"I don't know. I'm a god, and yet every time I try to shape something beautiful it turns out disgusting and loathsome."

"As how, for instance?"

He showed her the twisted mountains and plains, the evil lakes and rivers, the distorted grunting creatures he had created. All this Lady Sutton examined carefully and with close attention. At last she pursed her lips and thought for a moment; then she gazed keenly at Finchley and said: "Odd that you've never made a mirror, Dig."

"A mirror?" he echoed. "No, I haven't—I never needed one—"

"Go ahead. Make one now."

He gave her a perplexed look, and still staring at her, waved a hand in the air. A square of silvered glass appeared in his hand and he held it toward her.

"No," Lady Sutton said, "it's for you. Look in it."

Wondering, he raised the mirror and gazed in it. He uttered a hoarse cry and peered closer. Leering back at him out of the dim night was the distorted, evil face of a gargoyle. In the small slant-set eyes, the splayed nose, the broken yellow teeth, the twisted ruin of a face he saw everything he had seen in his ugly cosmos.

He saw the distorted cathedral of heaven and all its unholy hierarchy of ribald retainers; the spinning chaos of crashing stars and suns; the lurid landscape of his Eden; each mewling, ghastly creature he had created; every individual horror that his brain had spawned.

Violently he hurled the mirror spinning and turned to confront Lady Sutton.

"What?" he demanded hoarsely, "what is this?"

"Why, you're a god, Dig," Lady Sutton laughed, "and you ought to know that a god can create only in his own image. Yes--the answer's as simple as that. It's a grand joke, ain't it?"

"Joke?" The import of all the eons to come thundered down over his head. An eternity of living with his hideous self, upon himself, inside himself--over and over, re-repeated in every sun and star, every living and dead thing, every creature, every everlasting moment. A monstrous god feeding upon himself and slowly, inexorably going mad.

"Joke!" he screamed.

He flung out his hand and instantly he floated once more, suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. Once more he was utterly alone, with nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. And as he pondered for another ineffable period on the inevitable futility of his next attempt, he heard quite distinctly, the deep bellow of familiar laughter.

Of such was the Kingdom of Finchley's Heaven.



"Give me the strength! Oh, give me the strength!"

She went through the veil sharp on Finchley's heels, that short, slender, dark woman; and she found herself in the dungeon passage of Sutton Castle. For a moment she was startled out of her prayer, half disappointed at not finding a land of mists and dreams. Then, with a bitter smile, she recalled the reality she wanted.

Before her stood a suit of armor; a strong, graceful figure of polished metal edged with sweeping flutings. She went to it and stared. Dully from the gleaming steel cuirass, a slightly distorted reflection stared back. It showed the drawn, highstrung face, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping down over the brow in a sharp widow's peak.

it said: "This is Sidra Peel. This is a woman whose past has been fettered to a dull-witted creature that called itself her husband. She will break that chain this day if only she finds the strength--"

"Break the chain!" she murmured fiercely, "and this day repay him for a life's worth of agony. God--if there be a god in my world--help me balance the account in full! Help me--"

Sidra stared, then froze while her pulse jerked wildly. Someone had come soundlessly down the lonesome passage and stood behind her. She could feel the heat--the aura of a presence--the almost imperceptible pressure of a body against hers. Mistily in the mirror of the armor she made out a face peering over her shoulder.

She spun around, crying: "Ahhhh!"

"So sorry," he said. "Thought you were expecting me."

Her eyes riveted to his face. He was smiling slightly in an affable manner, and yet the streaked blond hair, the hollows and mounds, the pulsing veins and shadows of his features were a lurid landscape of raw emotions.

"Calm yourself," he said while she teetered crazily and fought down the screams that were tearing through her.

"But wh-who--" she broke off and tried to swallow.

"I thought you were expecting me," he repeated.

"I... expecting you?"

He nodded and took her hands. Against his, her palms felt chilled and moist. "We had an engagement."

She opened her mouth slightly and shook her head.

"At twelve forty--" He released one of her hands to look at his watch. "And here I am, on the dot."

"No," she said, yanking herself away. "No, this is impossible. We have no engagement. I don't know you."

"You don't recognize me, Sidra? Well--that's odd; but I think you'll recollect who I am before long."

"But who are you?"

"I shan't tell you. You'll have to remember yourself."

A little calmer, she inspected his features closely. Suddenly, with the rush of a waterfall, a blended sensation of attraction and repulsion surged over her. This man alarmed and fascinated her. She was filled with horror at his mere presence, yet intrigued and drawn.

At last she shook her head and said: "I still don't understand. I never called for you, Mr. Whoever-you-are, and we had no engagement."

"You most certainly did."

"I most certainly did not!" she flared, outraged by his insolent assurance. "I wanted my old world. The same old world I'd always known--"

"But with one exception?"

"Y-yes--" Her furious glance faltered and the rage drained out of her. "Yes, with one exception."

"And you prayed for the strength to make that exception?"

She nodded.

He grinned and took her arm. "Well, Sidra, then you did call for me and we did have an engagement. I'm the answer to your prayer."

She suffered herself to be led through the narrow, steep-mounting passages, unable to break free of that magnetic leash. His touch on her arm was a frightening thing. Everything in you cried out against the misery and disgust--and yet another something in you welcomed

it eagerly.

As they passed through the cloudy light of infrequent lamps, she watched him covertly. He was tall and magnificently built. Thick cords strained in his muscular neck at the slightest turn of his arrogant head. He was dressed in tweeds that had the texture of sandstone and gave off a pungent, peaty scent. His shirt was open at the collar, and where his chest showed it was thickly matted.

There were no servants about on the street floor of the castle. The man escorted her quietly through the graceful rooms to the foyer where he removed her coat from the closet and placed it around her shoulders. Suddenly he pressed his hard hands against her arms.

She tore herself away at last, one of the old rages sweeping over her. In the quiet gloom of the foyer she could see that he was still smiling, and it added fuel to her fury.

"Ah," she cried, "what a fool I am... to take you so for granted. 'I prayed for you--' you say. 'I know you--' what kind of booby do you think I am? Keep your hands off me!"

She glared at him, breathing heavily, and he made no answer. His expression remained unchanged. It's like those snakes, she thought, those snakes with the jeweled eyes. They coil in their impassive beauty and you can't escape the deadly fascination. It's like soaring towers that make you want to leap to earth--like keen, glittering razors that invite the tender flesh of your throat. You can't escape!

"Go on!" she screamed in a last desperate effort. "Get out of here! This is my world. It's all mine to do with as I choose. I want no part of your kind of rotten, arrogant swine!"

Swiftly, silently, he gripped her shoulders and brought her close to him. While he kissed her she struggled against the hard talons of his fingers and tried to force her mouth away from his. And yet she knew that if he had released her she could not have torn herself away from that savage kiss.

She was sobbing when he relaxed his grip and let her head drop

back. Still in the affable tones of a casual conversation he said: "You want one thing in this world of yours, Sidra, and you must have me to help you."

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"I'm that strength you prayed for. Now come along."

Outside the night was pitch black, and after they had gotten into Sidra's roadster and started for London, the road was impossible to follow. As she edged the car cautiously along, Sidra was able at last to make out the limed white line that bisected the road, and the lighter velvet of the sky against the jet of the horizon. Overhead the Milky Way was a long smudge of powder.

The wind on her face was good to feel. Passionate, reckless and headstrong as ever, she pressed her foot on the accelerator and sent the car roaring down the dangerous dark road, eager for more of the cool breeze against her cheeks and brow. The wind tugged at her hair and sent it streaming back. The wind gusted over the top of the glass shield and around it like a solid stream of cold water. It whipped up her courage and confidence. Best of all, it recalled her sense of humor.

Without turning, she called: "What's your name?"

And dimly through the chattering breeze came his answer: "Does it matter?"

"It certainly does. Am I supposed to call you: 'Hey!' or 'I say there--' or 'Dear sir--'"

"Very well, Sidra. Call me Ardis."

"Ardis? That's not English, is it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Don't be so mysterious. Of course it matters. I'm trying to place you."

"I see."

"D'you know Lady Sutton?"

Receiving no answer she glanced at him and received a slight chill. He did look mysterious with his head silhouetted against the star-filled sky. He looked out of place in an open roadster.

"D'you know Lady Sutton?" she repeated.

He nodded and she turned her attention back to the road. They had left the open country and were boring through the London suburbs. The little squat houses, all alike, all flat-faced and muddy-colored, whisked past with a muffled whump-whumpwhump, echoing' back the drone of the engine.

Still gay, she asked: "Where are you stopping?"

"In London."

"Where, in London."

"Chelsea Square."

"The Square? That's odd. What number?"

"One hundred and forty-nine."

She burst into laughter. "Your impudence is too wonderful," she gasped, glancing at him again. "That happens to be my address."

He nodded. "I know that, Sidra."

Her laughter froze--not at the words, for she had hardly heard them. Barely suppressing another scream, she turned and stared through the windshield, her hands trembling violently on the wheel. For the man sat there in the midst of that howling turmoil of wind and not a hair of his head was moving.

"Merciful Heaven!" she cried in her heart, "what kind of mess did I--Who is this monster, this--Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be

thy--Get rid of him! I don't want him. If I've asked for him, consciously or not, I don't want him now. I want my world changed. Right now! I want him out of it!"

"It's no use, Sidra," he said.

Her lips twitched and still she prayed: "Get him out of here! Change anything--everything, only take him away. Let him vanish. Let the darkness and the void devour him. Let him dwindle, fade--"

"Sidra," he shouted, "stop that!" He poked her violently. "You can't get rid of me that way--it's too late!"

She stopped as a final panic overtook her and congealed her brain.

"Once you've decided on your world," Ardis explained carefully as though to a child, "you're committed to it. There's no changing your mind and making minor alterations. Weren't you told?"

"No," she whispered, "we weren't told."

"Well, now you know."

She was mute, numb and wooden. Not so much wooden as putty. She followed his directions without a word; drove carefully to the little park of trees that was behind her house, and parked there. Very carefully, Ardis explained that they would have to enter the house through the servants' door.

"You don't," he said, "walk openly to murder. Only clever criminals in storybooks do that. We, in real life, find it best to be cautious." Real life! she thought hysterically as they got out of the car. Reality! That Thing in the shelter--Aloud, she said: "You sound experienced."

"Through the park," he answered, touching her lightly on the arm. "We shan't be seen."

The path through the trees was narrow and the grass and prickly shrubs on either side were high. Ardis stepped aside and then followed her as she passed the iron gate and entered. He strode a

few paces behind her.

"As to the experience," he said, "yes--I've had plenty. But then, you ought to know, Sidra."

She didn't know. She didn't answer. Trees, brush and grass were thick around her, and although she had traversed this park a hundred times, they were alien and distorted. They were not alive--no, thank God for that--she was not yet imagining things; but for the first time she realized how skeletal and haunted they looked. Almost as if each had participated in some sordid murder or suicide through the years.

Deeper into the park, a dank mist made her cough, and behind her, Ardis patted her back sympathetically. She quivered like a length of supple steel under his touch, and when she had stopped coughing and the hand still remained on her shoulder, she knew in another burst of terror what he would attempt here in the darkness.

She quickened her stride. The hand left her shoulder and hooked at her arm. She yanked her arm free and ran crazily down the path, stumbling on her stilt heels. There was a muffled exclamation from Ardis and she heard the swift pound of his feet as he pursued her.

The path led down a slight depression and past a marshy little pond. The earth turned moist and sucked at her feet with hollow grunts. In the warmth of the night her skin began to prickle and perspire, but the sound of his panting was close behind her.

Her breath was coming in gasps and when the path veered and began to mount, she felt her lungs would burst. Her legs were aching and it seemed that at the next instant she would flounder to the ground. Dimly through the trees, she made out the iron gate at the other side of the park, and with the little strength left to her she redoubled her efforts to reach it.

But what, she wondered dizzily, what after that? He'll overtake me in the street--Perhaps before the street--I should have turned for the car--I could have driven--He clutched at her shoulder as she passed the gate and she would have surrendered at that moment. Then she

heard voices and saw figures on the street across from her. She cried: "Hello, there!" and ran to them, her shoes clattering on the pavement. As she came close, still free for the moment, they turned.

"So sorry," she babbled crazily, "thought I recognized you... was walking through the par--"

She stopped short. Staring at her were Finchley, Braugh and Lady Sutton.

"Sidra darling! What the devil are you doing here?" Lady Sutton demanded. She cocked her gross head forward to examine Sidra's face, then nudged at Braugh and Finchley with her elbows. "The girl's been running through the park. Mark my words, Chris, she's touched."

"Looks like she's been chevied," Braugh answered. He stepped to one side and peered past Sidra's shoulder, his white head gleaming in the starlight.

Sidra caught her breath at last and looked about uneasily. Ardis stood alongside her, calm and affable as ever. There was, she thought helplessly, no use trying to explain. No one would believe her. No one would help.

She said: "Just a bit of exercise. It was such a lovely night."

"Exercise!" Lady Sutton snorted. "Now I know you're cracked!"

Finchley said: "Why'd you pop off like that, Sidra? Bob was furious. We've just been driving him home."

"I—" It was too insane. She'd seen Finchley vanish through the veil of fire less than an hour ago-vanish into the world of his own choosing. Yet here he was, asking questions.

Ardis murmured: "Finchley was in your world, too. He's still here."

"But that's impossible!" Sidra exclaimed. "There can't be two Finchleys."

"Two Finchleys?" Lady Sutton echoed. "Now I know where you've been and gone, my girl! You're drunk. Reeling, stinking drunk. Running through the park! Exercise! Two Finchleys!"

And Lady Sutton? But she was dead. She had to be! They'd murdered her less than--Again Ardis murmured: "That was another world ago, Sidra. This is your new world, and Lady Sutton belongs in it. Everyone belongs in it--except your husband."

"But.... even though she's dead?"

Finchley started and asked: "Who's dead?"

"I think," Braugh said, "we'd better get her upstairs and put her to bed."

"No," Sidra said, "no--there's no need--really! I'm quite all right."

"Oh, let her be!" Lady Sutton grunted. She gathered her coat around her tub of a waist and moved off. "You know our motto, m'lads. 'Never Interfere.' See you and Bob at the shelter next week, Sidra. 'Night--"

"Good night."

Finchley and Braugh moved off, too--the three figures merging with the shadows with the delicate shadings of a misty fade-out. And as they vanished, Sidra heard Braugh murmur: "The motto ought to be 'Unashamed'!"

"Nonsense," Finchley answered. "Shame is a sensation we seek like all others, it redu--"

Then they were gone.

And with a return of that horrible chill, Sidra realized that they had not seen Ardis--nor heard him--nor been aware even of his--"Naturally," Ardis interrupted.

"But how, naturally?"

"You'll understand later. Just now we've a murder before us."

"No!" she cried, hanging back. "No!"

"How's this, Sidra? Afld after you've looked forward to this moment for so many years. Planned it. Feasted on it--"

"I'm... too upset.... unnerved."

"You'll be calmer. Come along."

Together they walked a few steps down the narrow street, turned up the gravel path and passed the gate that led to the back court. As Ardis reached out for the knob of the servants' door, he hesitated and turned a suffused face to her.

"This," he said, "is your moment, Sidra. It begins now. This is the time when you break that chain and make payment for a life's worth of agony. This is the day when you balance the account. Love is good--hate is better. Forgiveness is a trifling virtue--passion is all-consuming and the end-all of living!"

He pushed open the door, grasped her elbow and dragged her after him into the pantry. It was dark and filled with odd corners. They eased through the darkness cautiously, reached the swinging door that led to the kitchen, and pushed past it. Sidra stared and gagged. She uttered a faint moan and sagged against Ardis.

It had been a kitchen at one time. Now the stoves and sinks, cupboards and tables, chairs, closets and all loomed high and twisted like the distorted scenery of a nightmare jungle. A dull-blue spark glittered on the floor, and around it cavorted a score of silent shadows.

They were solidified smoke--semiliquid gas. Their translucent depths writhed and interplayed with the nauseating surge of living muck. Like looking through a microscope, Sidra thought in sick horror, at those creatures that foul corpse-blood; that scum a slack-water stream; that fill a swamp with noisome vapors--And most hideous of all, they were all in the wavering gusty image of her husband. Twenty Robert Peels,

gesticulating obscenely and singing a whispered chorus: "Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa Perfusus liquidis urget odoribus Grato, Sidra, sub antro?"

"Ardis! What is this?"

"Don't know yet, Sidra."

"But these shapes!"

"We'll find out."

Twenty leaping vapors crowded around them, still chanting. Sidra and Ardis were driven forward and stood at the brink of that sapphire spark that burned in the air a few inches above the floor. Gaseous fingers pushed and probed at Sidra, pinched and prodded while the blue figures cavorted with hissing laughter, slapping their naked rumps in weird ecstasies.

A slash on Sidra's arm made her start and cry out, and when she looked down, unaccountable beads of blood stood out on the white skin of her wrist. And even as she stared in disembodied enchantment, her wrist was raised to Ardis' lips. Then his wrist was raised to her mouth and she felt the stinging salt of his blood on her lips.

"No!" she screamed. "I don't believe this. You're making me see this-
_"

She turned and ran from the kitchen toward the serving pantry. Ardis was close behind her. And the blue shapes still hissed a droning chorus:

"Qui nunc te fruitur credulus aurea:

Qui semper vacuam, semper amabilem,
Sperat, nescius aurae
Fallacis--"

When they reached the foot of the winding stairs that led to the upper floors, Sidra clutched at the balustrade for support. With her free

hand she dabbed at her mouth to erase the salt taste that made her stomach crawl.

"I think I've an idea what all that was," Ardis said.

She stared at him.

"A sort of betrothal ceremony," he went on casually. "You've read of something like that before, haven't you? Odd, wasn't it--Some powerful influences in this house. Recognize those phantoms?"

She shook her head insanely. What was the use of thinking--talking?

"Didn't, eh? We'll have to see about this. I never cared for unsolicited haunting. We shan't have any more of this tomfoolery in the future--" He mused for a moment, then pointed up the stairs. "Your husband's up there, I think. Let's continue."

They trudged up the sweeping gloomy stairs, and the last vestiges of Sidra's sanity struggled up, step by step, with her.

One--You go up the stairs. Stairs leading up to what? More madness? That damned Thing in the shelter!

Two--this is hell, not reality.

Three--Or nightmare. Yes! Nightmare. Lobster last night. Where were we last night, Bob and I?

Four--Dear Bob. Why did I ever--And this Ardis. I know why he's so familiar. Why he almost speaks my thoughts. He's probably some--

Five--Nice young man who plays tennis in real life. Distorted by a dream. Yes.

Six--Seven--"Don't run into it!" Ardis cautioned.

She halted in her tracks, and simply stared. There were no more screams or shudders left in her. She simply stared at the thing that hung with a twisted head from the beam over the stair landing. It was her husband, limp and slack, dangling at the end of a length of

laundry rope.

The limp figure swayed ever so slightly, like the gentle swing of a massive pendulum. The mouth was wrinkled into a sardonic grin and the eyes popped from their sockets and glanced down at her with impudent humor. Vaguely, Sidra was aware that ascending steps behind it showed through the twisted form.

"Join hands," the corpse said in sacrosanct tones.

"Bob!"

"Your husband?" Ardis exclaimed.

"Dearly beloved," the corpse began, "we are gathered together in the sight of God and in the face of this company to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is commanded to be honorable among all men and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly--" The voice boomed on and on and on.

"Bob!" Sidra croaked.

"Kneel!" the corpse commanded.

Sidra flung her body to one side and ran stumbling up the stairs. She faltered for a gasping instant, then Ardis' strong hands grasped her. Behind them the shadowy corpse intoned: "I pronounce you man and wife--"

Ardis whispered: "We must be quick, now! Very quick!"

But at the head of the stairs Sidra made a last bid for liberty. She abandoned all hope of sanity, of understanding. All she wanted was freedom--and a place where she could sit in solitude, free of the passions that were hedging her in, gutting her soul. There was no word spoken, no gesture made. She drew herself up and faced Ardis squarely. This was one of the times, she understood, when you fought motionlessly.

For minutes they stood, facing each other in the dark hall. To their

right was the descending well of the stairs; to the left, Sidra's bedroom; behind them, the short hallway that led to Peel's study--to the room where he was so unconsciously awaiting slaughter. Their eyes met, clashed and battled silently. And even as Sidra met that deep, gleaming glance, she knew with an agonizing sense of desperation that she would lose.

There was no longer any will, any strength, any courage left in her. Worse, by some spectral osmosis it seemed to have drained out of her into the man that faced her. While she fought she realized that her rebellion was like that of a hand or a finger rebelling against its guiding brain.

Only one sentence she spoke: "For Heaven's sake! Who are you?"

And again he answered: "You'll find out--soon. But I think you know already. I think you know!"

Helpless, she turned and entered her bedroom. There was a revolver there and she understood she was to get it. But when she pulled open the drawer and yanked aside the piles of silk clothes to pick it up, the clothes felt thick and moist. As she shuddered, Ardis reached past her and picked up the gun. Clinging to the butt, a finger tight-clenched around the trigger, was a hand, the stump of a wrist clotted and torn.

Ardis clucked his lips impatiently and tried to pry the hand loose. It would not give. He pressed and twisted a finger at a time and still the sickening corpse-hand clenched the gun stubbornly. Sidra sat at the edge of the bed like a child, watching the spectacle with naive interest, noting the way the broken muscles and tendons on the stump flexed as Ardis struggled.

There was a crimson snake oozing from under the closed bathroom door. It writhed across the hardwood floor, thickening to a small river as it touched her skirt so gently. As Ardis tossed the gun down angrily, he noted the stream. Quickly he stepped to the bathroom and thrust open the door, then slammed it a second later. He jerked his head at Sidra and said: "Come on!"

She nodded mechanically and arose, careless of the sopping skirt that smacked against her calves. At Peel's study she turned the doorknob carefully until a faint click warned her that the latch was open, then she pushed the door in. The leaf opened to reveal her husband's study in semi-darkness. The desk was before the high window curtains and Peel sat at it, his back to them. He was hunched over a candle or a lamp or some rosy light that enhaloed his body and sent streams of light flickering out. He never moved.

Sidra tiptoed forward, then hesitated. Ardis touched finger to lips and moved like a swift cat to the cold fireplace where he picked up the heavy bronze poker. He brought it to Sidra and held it out urgently. Her hand reached out of its own accord and took the cool metal handle. Her fingers gripped it as though they had been born for murder.

Against all that impelled her to advance and raise the poker over Peel's head, something weak and sick inside her cried out and prayed. Cried, prayed and moaned with the mewlings of a fevered child. Like spilt water, the last few drops of her self-possession trembled before they disappeared altogether.

Then Ardis touched her. His fingers pressed against the small of her back and a charge of bestiality shocked along her spine with cruel, jagged edges. Surging with hatred, rage and livid vindictiveness, she raised the poker high and crashed it down over the still-motionless head of her husband.

The entire room burst into a silent explosion. Lights flared and shadows whirled. Remorselessly, she beat and pounded at the falling body that toppled out of the chair to the floor. She struck again and again, her breath whistling hysterically, until the head was a mashed, bloodied pulp. Only then did she let the poker drop and reel back.

Ardis knelt beside the body and turned it over.

"He's dead all right. This is the moment you prayed for, Sidra. You're free!" She looked down in horror. Dully, from the crimsoned carpet, a slightly distorted corpse face stared back. It showed the drawn, high-

strung features, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping over the brow in a sharp widow's peak.

She moaned as understanding touched her.

The face said: "This is Sidra Peel. In this man whom you have slaughtered you have killed yourself--killed the only part of yourself worth saving."

She cried: "Aieeee--" and clasped arms about herself, rocking in agony.

"Look well on me," the face said. "By my death you have broken a chain--only to find another!"

And she knew. She understood. For though she still rocked and moaned in the agony that would be never-ending, she saw Ardis arise and advance on her with arms outstretched. His eyes gleamed and were pools of horror; and his reaching arms were tendrils of her own unslaked passion eager to infold her. And once infolded, she knew there would be no escape--no escape from this sickening marriage to her own lusts that would forever caress her.

So it would be forevermore in Sidra's brave new world.

IV

After the others had passed the veil, Christian Braugh still lingered in the shelter. He lit another cigarette with a simulation of perfect aplomb, blew out the match, then called: "Er... Mr. Thing?"

"What is it, Mr. Braugh?"

Braugh could not restrain a slight start at that voice sounding from nowhere. "I--well, the fact is, I stayed for a chat."

"I thought you would, Mr. Braugh."

"You did, eh?"

"Your insatiable hunger for fresh material is no mystery to me."

"Oh!" Braugh looked around nervously. "I see."

"Nor is there any cause for alarm. No one will overhear us. Your masquerade will remain undetected."

"Masquerade!"

"You're not a really bad man, Mr. Braugh. You've never belonged in the Sutton shelter clique."

Braugh laughed sardonically.

"And there's no need to continue your sham before me," the voice continued in the friendliest manner. "I know the story of your many plagiarisms was merely another concoction from the fertile imagination of Christian Braugh."

"You know?"

"Of course. You created that legend to obtain entree to the shelter. For years you've been playing the role of a lying scoundrel, even though your blood ran cold at times."

"And do you know why I did that?"

"Naturally. As a matter of fact, Mr. Braugh, I know almost everything; but I do confess that one thing still confuses me."

"What's that?"

"Why, in that devouring appetite for fresh material, were you not content to work as other authors do? Why this almost insane desire for unique material—for absolutely untrodden fields? Why were you willing to pay such a bitter and often exorbitant price for a few ounces of novelty?"

"Why--" Braugh sucked in smoke and gushed it out past clenched teeth. "I'll tell you why. It's something that's been torturing me all my

life. A man is born with imagination."

"Ah.... imagination."

"If his imagination is slight, a man will always find the world a source of deep and infinite wonder, a place of many delights. But if his imagination is strong, vivid, restless, he finds the world a sorry place indeed--a drab jade beside the wonders of his own creations!"

"These are wonders past all imagining."

"For whom? Not for me, my invisible friend. Nor for any earth-bound, fleshbound creature. Man is a pitiful thing. Born with the imagination of gods and forever pasted to a round lump of spittle and clay. I have within me the uniqueness, the ego, the fertile loam of a timeless spirit.... and all that richness is wrapped in a parcel of quickly rotting skin!"

"Ego-" mused the voice. "That is something which, alas, none of us can understand. Nowhere in all the knowable cosmos is it to be found but on your planet, Mr. Braugh. It is a frightening thing that convinces me at times that yours is the race that will--" The voice broke off abruptly.

"That will--" Braugh prompted.

"Come," said the Thing briskly, "there is less owing you than the others and I shall give you the benefit of my experience. Let me help you select a reality."

Braugh pounced on the word: "Less?"

And again he was brushed aside. "Will you have another reality in your own cosmos? I can offer you vast worlds, tiny worlds; great creatures that shake space and fill the voids with their thunders, little creatures of charm and perfection that barely touch the ear with the sensitive timbre of their tinkling. Will you care for terror? I can give you a reality of shudders. Beauty? I can show you realities of infinite ecstasy. Pain. Torture. Any sensation. Name one, several, all. I will shape you a reality to outdo even the giant intellect that is assuredly

yours."

"No-" Braugh answered at length. "The senses are only senses at best--and in time they tire of anything. You cannot satisfy the imagination with whipped cream in new forms and flavors."

"Then I can take you to worlds of extra dimensions that will stun your imagination. There is a region I know that will entertain you forever with incongruity-- where, if you sorrow, you scratch your ear; where, if you love, you eat a potato; where, if you die, you burst out laughing--" "There is a dimension I have seen where one can assuredly perform the impossible--where creatures daily compete in the composition of paradox and where the mere feat of turning oneself mentally inside out is known as 'chrythna,' which is to say, 'corny' in the American jargon.

"Do you want to probe the emotions in classical order? I can take you to a dimension of twenty-seven planes where one by one, *seriatim et privatim*, you may exhaust the intricate nuances of the twenty-seven primary emotions--and thence go on to infinite combinations and permutations. Come, which will you take?"

"None," Braugh said impatiently. "It is obvious, my friend, that you do not understand the ego of man. The ego is not a childish thing to be satisfied with toys; and yet it is a childish thing in that it yearns after the unattainable--"

"Yours seems to be a childish thing in that it does not laugh. You have no sense of humor, Mr. Braugh."

"The ego," Braugh continued abstractedly, "desires only what it cannot hope to attain. Once a thing is attainable, it is no longer desired. Can you grant me a reality where I may possess something which I desire because I cannot possibly possess it; and by that same possession not break the qualifications of my desire? Can you do this?"

"I'm afraid," the voice answered hesitantly, "that your imagination reasons too deviously for me."

"Ah," Braugh murmured, half to himself. "I was afraid of that. Why does the universe seem to be run by second-rate individuals nOt half so clever as myself? Why this mediocrity in the appointed authorities?"

"You seek to attain the unattainable," the voice said in reasonable tones, "and by that act not to attain it. The limitations are within yourself. Would you be changed?"

"No... no, not changed." Braugh shook his head. He stood for a moment deep in thought, then sighed and tamped out his cigarette. "There's only one solution for my problem."

"And that is?"

"Erasure. If you cannot satisfy a desire, you must explain it away. If a man cannot find love, he must write a psychological treatise on passion. I shall do much the same thing--"

He shrugged and moved toward the veil. There was a slight motion behind him and the voice asked: "Where does that ego of yours take you, O man?"

"To the truth of things," Braugh called. "If I cannot slake my yearning, at least I shall find out why I yearn."

"You'll find the truth only in hell, my friend."

"How so?"

"Because truth is always hell."

"Nevertheless I'm going there--to hell or wherever truth is to be found."

"May you find the answers pleasant, O man." "Thank you."

"And may you learn to laugh."

But Braugh no longer heard, for he had passed the veil.

And he found himself standing before a high desk--a bench, almost--as high as the top of his head. Around him was nothing else. It looked as though a sulphurous fog had filled the room, concealing everything but this clerkly bench. Braugh tilted his head back and looked up. Staring down at him from the other side was a tiny little face, ancient as sin, whiskered and cockeyed. It was on a shriveled little head that was covered with a high-pointed hat. Like a sorcerer's cap. Or a dunce cap, Braugh thought.

Dimly, behind the head, he made out towering shelves of books and files labeled: A--AB, AC--AD, and so on. There was also a gleaming black pot of ink and a rack of quill pens. An enormous hourglass completed the picture. Inside the hourglass a spider had spun a web and was crawling shakily across sand-clotted strands.

The little man croaked: "A-mazing! A-stonishing! Incredible!"

Braugh still stared.

The little man hunched forward like Richard Crookback in an amateur play and got his seamed, comical face as close as possible to Braugh's. He reached down a knobby finger and poked Braugh gingerly. Abruptly he tumbled backward and bawled: "THAMM--UZ! DA--GON! RIMM--ON!"

There was a busy bustle and three more little men bounced up behind the desk and gaped at Braugh. The staring went on for minutes.

"All right," Braugh said at last. "That's enough gawping. Say something. Do something!"

"It speaks!" they shouted in unison. "Its alive!" They pressed four noses together and began to gabble swiftly. It went: "MostastonishingthingDagonthat leverhespeaksRimmoncoulditbehumanheardwhatitsaidBelialyou'dthinktheremust besomeexplanationid' youthinksoThammuz!can'tsay!"

Then it stopped.

One said: "First thing is to find out how it got here."

"Not at all. Find out what it is."

The third said: "Find out where it's from."

"I don't know about that, Belial. Cart before the horse, you know."

They raved and again turned noses together. The gabble was very loud: "THE IMPORTANT THING'S WHERE NOT AT ALL IT'S WHERE FROM YOU 'RE CRAZY YOU'RE BOTH CRAZY LISTEN TO ME HOW CAN YOU OH ALL RIGHT ALL RIGHT ALL RIGHT!"

Then apparently they came to a decision. The number one sorcerer pointed an accusing finger at Braugh and said: "What are you doing here?"

"The point is," Braugh countered, "where am I?"

The little man turned to brothers Thammuz, Dagon and Rimmon. He smirked and said: "It wants to know where it is."

Dagon said: "Silly animal, ain't he, Belial?"

Rimmon said: "Oh, get on with it, Belial. Can't hold up business all day."

"You!" Belial swiveled on Braugh. "Listen carefully. This is General Administration, Universal Control Center. Belial, Rimmon, Dagon and Thammuz, acting for Satan."

"Tuts," said Braugh, "I came here to see Satan."

"It wants to see Satan!" They were utterly appalled. Then Dagon jabbed the others with his sharp little elbows and placed a finger alongside his nose with a shrewd look.

"Spy!" he said. To elaborate, he jabbed one finger significantly toward the ceiling, then gave a shrewd look.

"Could be.... could be," Belial said, flipping the pages of a giant ledger. "It certainly don't belong here. No deliveries scheduled today. It's not dead because it don't smell. It's not alive because only the dead ones come here. Question still is: What is it? What do we do with it?" Thammuz said: "Divination. Only answer." "Right!"

"Great mind, that Thammuz!" Belial glared at Braugh and snapped: "Name?" "Christian Braugh." "Ha!" cried Dagon. "Onomancy—C, third letter—H, eighth letter--and so on. Take total sum. Double it and add ten. Divide by two, then subtract original total--"

They added and divided. Quills scratched on parchment and a bumbling, muttering noise droned. At last Belial held up the scrap and scrutinized it carefully. They all scrutinized it. As one man they shrugged and tore the parchment up.

"I can't understand it," Dagon complained. "We always get five for an answer."

"Never mind!" Belial glared at Braugh. "When born?"

"December eighteenth, nineteen thirteen."

"Time?"

"Twelve fifteen, a.m."

"Star Charts!" screamed Thammuz. "We'll try Genethliacs."

They tore at the books behind them and took out huge sheets that unrolled like window shades. This time it took them fifteen minutes to produce a scrap of parchment which they again examined carefully and again tore up.

Rimmon said: "It is odd."

Belial said: "It gets odder and odder."

Thammuz said: "We better take it into the laboratory for a check. The old boy will be plenty peeved if we muff this one."

They leaned over the bench and beckoned imperatively. Braugh followed their directions, walked around the side of the bench and found himself before a small door set in the books. The four little sorcerers bounced down from the desk and crowded him through. They just about came up to his waist.

Braugh entered the so-called laboratory. It was a circular room with a low ceiling, tile floors and walls covered with cupboards, shelves, glass gimmicks, alchemists' gadgets, books, bones and bottles. In the center was a large flat rock, the shape of a millstone. There was a slight depression in the center that had a charred look. But there wasn't any chimney over it.

Belial rooted around in a corner and came out with an armful of dry sticks.

"Altar fire," he said and tripped. The sticks went flying. Braugh solemnly bent to pick up the pieces of wood.

"Sortilege!" Rimmon squawked. He yanked a lizard out of a box and began writing on its back with a piece of charcoal, noting the order in which Braugh picked up the scattered bits of wood.

"Which way is east?" Rimmon demanded, crawling after the lizard. Thammuz pointed directly overhead. Rimmon nodded curt thanks and began to figure rapidly on the lizard's back. Gradually his hand moved slower. By the time Braugh had helpfully placed the bundle of wood on the altar, Rimmon was holding the lizard by the tail, gawping at his notations with a look of sickly wonder. Finally he shoved the lizard under the wood pile. Instantly it caught fire.

Rimmon said: "Salamander. Not bad, eh?" and swaggered off.

Dagon screamed: "Pyromancy!" and ran to the flames. He stuck his nose within an inch of the fire and mumbled rapidly in a long, droning whisper. Belial fidgeted uneasily and muttered to Thammuz: "Last time he tried that he fell asleep."

The droning faded out and Dagon, eyes blissfully closed, fell forward

into the crackling flames.

"Did it again!" Belial snapped irritably.

They ran up and dragged Dagon out of the flames. After they had slapped his face awhile, his whiskers stopped burning. Thammuz sniffed the stench of burned hair, then pointed overhead to the drifting smoke.

"Capnomancy!" he said. "It can't fail. We'll find out what this thing is yet!"

All four joined hands and danced around the rising smoke cloud, puffing at it with little pursed lips. Eventually the smoke disappeared. Thammuz gave a sour look and said: "It failed."

There was a dead silence and all glared angrily at Braugh. He endured it about as long as he could, then he said: "What's up, lads? Anything wrong?"

"It wants to know if anything's wrong," Belial sneered.

"Deceitful thing!" said Dagon.

"Not at all," Braugh said. "I'm not hiding anything. Of course I don't believe a particle of what's happening here, but that don't matter."

"Don't matter! What d'you mean, you don't believe?"

"Why," Braugh said, "you can't make me believe that you charlatans have anything to do with truth—much less His Black Majesty, Father Satan."

"Anything to do with—Why, you blasted booby, we're Satan—"

A second later they looked scared, lowered their voices and added: "So to speak."

Belial glanced around uneasily and said to unseen ears; "No offense—"

"Merely referring to power of attorney,' Dagon trembled.

"I see," Braugh said. "And how, exactly, am I deceiving you?"

"How? We'll tell you how! You've got a devil with you that obstructs official divination. You're a cacodaemon or maybe a barghest or an ouphe or an incubus. But we'll get to the heart of the matter. We'll ferret you out. We'll track you down. We'll make you talk. Bring on the iron!"

Well, Braugh thought, what's all this? Bring on the iron. Sounds like dancing girls.

Dagon trundled out a little wheelbarrow filled with lumps of iron. To Braugh he said: "Take one--any one." Braugh picked up a heavy lump of blue-gray metal and handed it to Dagon, who snatched it from him irritably and plunked it into a small vat. He placed the vat over the fire and got a pair of bellows which he pumped energetically into the flames. The iron heated white-hot. They nipped it out with pincers and waved it over Braugh's head, chanting: "Sideromancy! Sideromancy! Sideromancy!"

After a while, Dagon said: "No soap."

"Let's try Molybdomancy," Belial suggested.

They dropped the iron into a pot of solid lead. It hissed and fumed as though it had been dropped into cold water. Presently the lead melted. Belial tipped the pot over and the silvery liquid streamed slowly across the floor.

"Lead, lead, beautiful lead!" chanted Rimmon. "Tell us the story of this creature. Is it a man? Is it a--"

A crack, loud and sharp as a pistol shot, answered him. One of the floor tiles shattered to pieces, the lead dropped with a gurgle, and the next instant a fountain of water hissed and spurted up through the hole.

Belial said: "We busted the pipes again."

"Pegomancy!" Dagon cried eagerly. He approached the fountain with a reverent look, knelt before it and began to drone. In thirty seconds his eyes closed rapturously and he fell forward into the water. They dragged him back and wrung out his beard.

"Got to get him dry," Thammuz said hastily. "He'll catch his death. Get him over to the fire."

Taking Dagon by each arm, Thammuz and Belial ran him over to the altar fire. They circled the bright blaze once, and as they were about to stop, Dagon choked: "Keep me moving. We'll try Gyromancy. There's got to be some answer to what that thing is!"

They made another circle while Dagon muttered: "Hubbble-ka-bubble-ka-hubble-ka-bubble--"

Suddenly Rimmon, who was squatting over the broken tile, paddling ineffectually at the food, stopped and said: "Ui!"

The others stopped, too, and said: "Oi!"

Braugh turned.

A girl had just entered the door. She was short, red-headed, and delightfully the right side of plump. Her copper hair was done up on top of her head. She was breathing with indignant short breaths that made her look as though she would shake to pieces. She wore an expression of utter exasperation and nothing else.

"So!" she rapped out. "At it again!"

No answer. Much quartet trembling.

"How many times--" she began, then stopped and bit her lip. Abruptly she ran to the wall, seized a prodigious glass retort and hurled it straight and true. When the pieces stopped falling, she said: "How many times have I told you to cut out this nonsense or I'd report you!"

"N-nonsense?" quavered Belial. He tried to stanch his bleeding cuts

and attempted an innocent smile. "Why Astarte, wh-what d' you m-mean?"

"You know damned well what I mean! I will not have you smashing my ceiling, dripping things down on my office. First molten lead--then water. Four weeks work ruined. My new Sheraton desk ruined!" She hitched around and exhibited a long red sear that ran straight down from shoulder to hip. "Twelve inches of skin--ruined!"

Belial went: "Tsk-tsk!"

Braugh went: "My-my!"

The red-headed Astarte turned on him and lanced him with level green eyes. "Who's this?"

"We don't know," Belial began eagerly in an effort to change the subject. "That's why we were.... er--Well, it just walked up to my desk, and .

and that's all."

As Braugh stepped forward he heard Rimmon whisper: "Might try Parthenomancy.... that is, if Astarte is--"

Then he took the girl's hand and said: "The name is Braugh. Christian Braugh."

Her hand was cool and firm. She said: "The name is Astarte. I, too, am a Christian."

"Satan's crew Christians?"

"Why not?"

There was no answer to that. He said: "Is there some place where we can get away from these Zanies?"

"There's always my office."

"I like offices."

And he also liked Astarte. She ushered him into her place, on the floor below, swept a pile of papers and books off a chair, and casually invited him to sit down. Then she sprawled before the ruin of her desk and after one malevolent glance at the ceiling, listened to his story.

"As I get this," she said, "you're looking for Satan. Evil Lord of the Universe. Well, this is the only hell there is, and ours is the only Satan there is. You're in the right place."

Braugh was perplexed. "Hell?" he inquired. "Fire, brimstone, and so forth?"

"There are the business offices," she explained. "If you're looking for torments--"

"No," Braugh interrupted hastily. "I thank you. No torments."

She smiled at his solemn face and went on: "All this brings us to something rather vital. Just how did you get here? Dead?"

Braugh shook his head.

"Hm-m-m--" She made an interested survey. "You'll bear more looking into. I've never had anything to do with the live ones. You are alive, aren't you?"

"Very much so."

"And what business have you with Father Satan?"

"The truth," Braugh said. "I was granted a wish. I wished to discover the truth of all. I was sent here. Why Father Satan, as you call him, should be official purveyor of truth rather than--" He hesitated, then delicately indicated heaven. "I don't know. But to me the truth is worth any price, so I should like very much to have an interview."

Astarte rapped glittering nails on the desk and smiled broadly. "This," she said, "is going to be delicious!" She arose, flung open the door

of her office and pointed down the corridor. "Straight ahead," said Astarte, "then turn to the left. Keep on and you can't miss."

"I'll see you again?" Braugh asked as he set off.

"You'll see me again," Astarte laughed.

This, Braugh thought as he trudged along the corridor, is all too ridiculous. You pass a veil intending to seek the Citadel of Truth. You are entertained by four ridiculous creatures and by a red-head goddess. You ask to see the Knower of All Things and discover Him to be Satan rather than God. Then off you go down a musty corridor, turn left and then straight ahead.

What of this yearning of mine? What of these truths I seek? Is there no solemnity, no dignity anywhere? Is not Satan a fearful, thunderous deity? Why all this low comedy--this saturnalian air of slapstick that pervades the Underworld Offices of Satan?

He turned the corner to the left and kept on. The short hall ended abruptly in a pair of green baize doors. Almost timidly Braugh pushed them open and to his great relief found himself merely entering an open stone bridge--rather like the Bridge of Sighs, he thought. Around him was nothing but that same sulphurous mist. Behind him was the giant facade of the building he had just left--a wall of brimstone blocks. Before him was a smallish building shaped like a globe.

He stepped quickly across the bridge, for those misty depths on either side of him made him queasy. He paused only a moment before a second pair of baize doors to gather his courage, then tried to smile and pushed them in. You do not, he muttered to himself, come before Satan with a smirk in your heart; but there is an air of general insanity in hell that has touched me.

It was a large office--a kind of file room, and for the second time Braugh was relieved at having put the awesome moment a little further into the future. The office was round as a planetarium and was filled with the largest and most complicated adding machine Braugh

had ever seen in his life. The thing was all keyboard. A long platform before the banks of keys buckled and creaked like a painter's scaffolding as a dried-out little clerk wearing glasses the size of binoculars rushed up and back, punching keys with lightning speed.

More as an excuse to put off the meeting than anything else, Braugh watched the little old man scurry before those keys, punching them so rapidly they chattered like a dozen stuttering motors. This little old chap, Braugh thought, has probably put in an eternity figuring out sin totals and death totals and all sorts of statistical totals. He looks like a total himself.

Aloud, Braugh called: "Hello, there!"

Without wavering, the clerk said: "What is it?" His voice was drier than his skin.

Braugh said: "Those figures can wait a moment, can't they?"

"Sorry," said the little old man. He hustled down the scaffolding on a mad run.

"Will you stop a moment!" Braugh shouted.

The clerk paused and turned, removing the enormous binoculars very slowly.

"Now--that's better," Braugh said. "See here, my man, I'd like to get in to see Satan. His Black Majesty, Satan--"

"That's me," said the little man.

"Braugh said: "G-Gug--"

For a fleeting instant the dried-out face flickered into a smile. "Yes, that's me, son. I'm Satan."

And, despite all his imagination, Braugh had to believe.

He slumped down on the lowermost tread of the steps that led up to

the scaffold. Satan chuckled faintly and touched a clutch on the gigantic adding machine. Instantly there was a click of gears and with the sound of free-wheeling the machine began to cluck softly like a contented hen.

His Diabolic Majesty came creaking down the stairs and seated himself alongside Braugh. He took out an old silk handkerchief and began polishing his glasses. He was just a nice little old man sitting friendly like alongside Braugh. At last he said: "What's on your mind, son?"

"W-well, Satan--" Braugh began.

"You can call me Father, son."

"B-but why should I? I mean--" Braugh broke off in embarrassment.

"Well now, son, I guess you're a little worried about that heaven-and-hell business, eh?"

Braugh nodded.

Satan clicked his tongue and shook his head dubiously. "Don't know what to do about that," he said. "Fact is, son, it's all the same thing. Naturally I let it get around in certain quarters that there's two places. Got to, to keep certain folks on their toes. But the fact is, it's not really so. I'm all there is, son. God or Satan or Siva or Official Co-ordinator or Nature--or whatever you want to call it."

With a sudden rush of good feeling toward this friendly old man, Braugh said: "I call you a fine old man!"

"Well--that's nice of you, son. Glad you feel that way. You understand, of course, that we couldn't let everyone see me that way. Might instill disrespect."

"Y-yes, sir, I see."

"Got to have efficiency." The little old man went: Tsk! and shook his head. "Got to frighten folks now and then. Got to have respect, you

understand. Can't run things without respect."

"Yes, sir."

"Got to have efficiency. Can't be running things all day long, all year long, all eternity long, without efficiency. Can't have efficiency without respect."

Again Braugh said: "Yes, sir—" While within him a hideous uncertainty grew.

This was a nice old man—but this was also a maudlin old man. His Satanic Majesty was a tired creature much duller and not nearly so clever as Christian Braugh.

"What I always say," the old man went on, rubbing his knee reflectively, "is that love and all that—you can have 'em. They're nice, of course, but I'll take efficiency any time. Yes, indeed.... any time.... leastways, for a body in my position. Now then, son, what was on your mind?"

Mediocrity, Braugh thought grimly. He said: "The Truth, Father Satan. I came seeking the truth."

"And what do you want with the truth, Christian?"

"I just want to know it, Father Satan. I came seeking it. Want to know why we are, why we live, why we yearn—I want to know all that."

"Well, now"—the old man chuckled--"that's quite an order, son. Yes, sir, quite an order indeed."

"Can you tell me, Father Satan?"

"A little, son, just a little. What was it you wanted to know mostly?"

"What there is inside of us that makes us seek the unattainable!" Braugh cried with passion. "What are those forces that pull and tug and surge within us? What is this ego of mine that gives me no rest, that seeks no rest, that frets at turbulence and yet seeks nothing but

turbulence. What is all this?"

"Why," the old man said, pointing to his adding machine. "It's that gadget over there. It runs everything."

"That!"

"Yes. That."

"It runs everything?"

"Everything that I run--and I run everything there is." The old man chuckled again, then held out the binoculars. "You're an unusual boy, Christian. First person that ever said a kind word for old Father Satan. First person that ever had the decency to pay the old man a visit. I'll return the favor. Here!"

Wondering, Braugh accepted the glasses.

"Put 'em on." said the old man.

And then the wonder began, for as Braugh slipped the glasses over his head he found himself peering with the eyes of the universe at all the universe. And the adding machine was no longer a machine, but a vastly complex marionetteers crossbar from which an infinity of shimmering silver threads descended.

And with his all-seeing eyes, with the spectacles of Satan, Braugh perceived how each thread attached itself to the nape of the neck of a creature and how each living entity danced the dance of life to the tune of Father Satan's efficient machine. ,

Wondering, he stumbled up to the scaffold and reached toward the banks of keys. One key he pressed and on a pale planet a creature hungered and killed. A second key and it felt remorse. A third, and it forgot. A fourth, and a half a continent away another entity arose five minutes early and so began a chain of events that culminated in discovery and hideous punishment for the murderer.

Slowly Braugh backed away from the adding machine and in a kind

of horror slipped the glasses up to his brow. The machine went on clucking, and only vaguely did he note that the meticulous chronometer on the wall had ticked away a space of three months' time.

"This," he thought, "is ghastliest of all. We were puppets. We danced the dance of death in life, for we were little better than dead things hung from a string. Up here an old man, not overly intelligent, clicks a few keys, and down there we dance on our strings and take it for a thousand things--for fate, for free will, for Karma, for evolution, for nature, for a thousand false things.

"And none of us knew or knows or will care to know the truth--that there is neither reason, nor beauty, nor sanity to life. That all our mysterious yearning is the push of a decrepit finger on a tab. Oh--it's a bitter thing, this sour discovery. It's a bitter thing always to yearn after truth and find it to be shoddy!"

He glanced down. Old Father Satan was still seated on the steps, but his head slumped a little to one side, his eyes were half closed and he murmured indistinctly about work and rest and not enough of it.

"You're a good boy, Christian," the old man mumbled, "a good boy--" And revolt stirred in Braugh. "This isn't fair!" he cried. "Father Satan!" "Yes, my boy?" The old man roused himself slightly.

"This is true? We all dance to your key-tapping?" "All of you, my boy. All of you." "And although we think we are free, yet we dance to your tune?"

"You all think yourselves free, Christian, and yet you all dance to Father Satan's playing."

"Then, Father, grant me one thing--one very small thing. There is in a small corner of your mighty kingdom a very tiny planet.... a very insignificant speck called the Earth--"

"Earth? Earth? Can't say I recollect it off-hand, son, but I could look it up."

No, don't bother, Father Satan. It's there. Only grant me this favor--break the cords that bind it. Let it go free!"

"Now, son, don't be foolish. I can't do that."

"In all your kingdom," Braugh pleaded, "there are souls too numerous to count. There are suns and planets too vast to measure. Surely this one tiny bit of dust with its paltry few people--You who own so much can surely part with so little!"

"No, my boy, couldn't do it. Sorry--"

"You who alone knows freedom," Braugh cried. "Would you deny it to others?"

But the Co-ordinator of All slumbered.

"This, then, is His Satanic Majesty," Braugh thought. "This likable, simple old man is the one free agent in an entire cosmos. This is the answer to my seeking, and behold, the answer sleeps!"

Braugh grimly slipped the glasses back over his eyes. Let him slumber then,

Book of Maart; XIII:29--37.while Braugh, Satan pro tem, takes over. Oh, we shall be repaid for this disappointment. We shall have a giddy time writing novels in flesh and blood! And perhaps, if we can find the cord that leads to my neck and search out the proper key in all these billions, we may do something to free Christian Braugh!

He turned from the keyboard and craned his head over his shoulder, and even as his eyes searched, he stopped short, stunned, transfixed. His eyes ran up, then down, then up again. His hands began to tremble, then his arms, and finally his whole body shuddered uncontrollably. For the first time in his life he began to laugh, and the hysterical peals rang through the vast-domed room.

And Father Satan awoke and cried anxiously: "Christian! What is it? What is this laughter?" Laughter of frustration? Laughter of relief? Laughter of promise? He could not tell as he shook at the sight of that

slender tendril that stretched from the nape of Satan's neck and turned him, too, into a capering puppet. A silver thread that stretched upward into the infinite heights toward some other vaster machine hidden in the still unknowable reaches of the cosmos--The blessedly unknowable cosmos.

V

Now in the beginning all was darkness. There was neither land nor sea nor sky nor the circling stars. There was nothing. Then came Yaldabaoth and rent the light from the darkness. And the darkness He gathered up and formed into the night and the skies. And the light He gathered up and formed into the Sun and the stars. Then from the flesh and the blood of His blood did Yaldabaoth form the earth and all things upon it.

But the children of Yaldabaoth were new and green to living and unlearned, and the race did not bear fruit. And as the children of Yaldabaoth diminished in numbers they cried out unto their Lord: "Grant us a sign, Great God, that we may know how to increase and multiply! Grant us a sign, O Lord, that Thy good and mighty race may not perish from Thine earth!"

And Lo, Yaldabaoth withdrew himself from the face of his importunate people and they were sore at heart and sinful, thinking their Lord had forsaken them. And their paths were the paths of evil until a prophet arose whose name was Maart. Then did Maart gather the children of Yaldabaoth around him and spoke to them, saying: "Evil are thy ways, O people of Yaldabaoth, to doubt thy God. For He has given a sign of faith unto you."

Then gave they answer, saying: "Where is this sign?"

And Maart went into the high mountains and with him was a vast concourse of people. Nine days and nine nights did they travel even unto the peak of Mount Sinar. And at the crest of Mount Sinar all were struck with wonder and fell to their knees, crying: "Great is God! Great are His works!"

For Lo, before them blazed a mighty curtain of fire.

Pass the veil toward what reality? There's no sense trying to make up my mind. I cannot. God knows, that's been the agony of living for me--trying to make up my mind. How can I when I've felt nothing.... when nothing's touched me--ever! Take this or take that. Take coffee or tea. Buy the black gown or the silver. Marry Lord Buckley or live with Freddy Witherton. Let Finchley make love to me or stop posing for him. No--there's no sense even trying.

How it glitters in the doorway. Like silk moire or rainbow lamé. There goes Sidra. Passed through as though nothing was there. Doesn't seem to hurt. That's good. God knows I could stand anything except being hurt. No one left but Bob and myself--and he doesn't seem to be in any hurry. My turn now, I suppose. But where to?

To nowhere?

Yes--that's it. To nowhere!

In this world I'm leaving there's never been any place for me. There was nothing I could do; nothing I ever wanted to do. The world wanted nothing from me but my beauty. It had no need of me. Nothing but to pose naked while nearsighted little men smudged pictures on canvas.

I want to be useful. I want to belong. Perhaps if I belonged--if living had some purpose for me, this lump of ice in my heart might melt. I could learn to feel things--enjoy things. Even learn to fall in love.

Yes--that's it. To nowhere!

Let the reality that needs me, that wants me, that can use me.... let that reality have me and call me to itself. For if I must choose, I know I shall choose wrong again. And if I am not wanted.... anywhere; if I go through to wander forever in blank time and space.... still am I better off.

Take me, you who want me and need me!

How cool the veil.... like scented sprays caressing the skin.

And even as the multitude knelt in prayer, Maart cried aloud: "Rise, ye children of Yaldabaoth, and behold!"

Then did all arise and were struck dumb and trembled. For through the curtain of fire stepped a beast that chilled the hearts of all. To the height of eight cubits it stood and its skin was pink and white as nacre. The hair of its head was yellow and its body was long and curving like unto a sickly tree. And all was covered with slack folds of white fur.

Book of Maart; XIII: 38–39

God in Heaven!

Is this the reality that called me? This the reality that needs me?

That scarlet sun.... so high.... with its blood-red evil eye. Mountaintops like pain-racked titans. Towering mounds of gray slime--The scabrous sheen of valley floors--The pervading sickroom stench of fetid ruination--And those monstrous creatures crowding around me--like gorillas made of black, rotting coal. Not animal, not human. As though man had fashioned beasts not too well--or beasts had fashioned men still worse. They have a familiar look to them, these monstrosities. The landscape has a familiar look. Somewhere I have seen all this before. Somehow I have been here before. In dreams of death--Yes--This is a reality of death and twisted shadows.

Again the multitude cried out: "Glory to Yaldabaoth!" and at the sound of the sacred name, the beast turned toward the curtain of flames whence it had come. And Behold! The curtain was gone.

Book of Maart; XIII: 40.

No retreat?

No way out?

No way back to sanity?

But it was behind me a second ago, the veil! No escape--Listen to the sounds they make. The swilling of swine in muck. This can't be real. No reality was ever so horrible. This is all a ghastly trick. Like the one we played on Lady Sutton. I'm in the shelter now. Bob Peel's given us a new kind of hashish or opium--I'm lying on the couch dreaming and groaning. Presently I'll be awake--Before they come any closer--I must awaken!

With a loud and piercing cry, the beast of the fire ran through the multitude. Through all the gathered thousands it ran and thundered down the mountainside. And the shrill sound of its cries was as the brazen clangor of beaten shields.

And as it passed under the low boughs of the mountain trees, the children of Yaldabaoth cried out in new alarm; for the beast shed its white furred hide in a manner horrible to behold. And the skin remained clinging to the trees. And the beast ran farther, a hideous pink-and-white thing.

Book of Maart; XIII: 4 1--43.

Quick! Quick! Run through them before they clutch me. Down the mountainside! If this is a nightmare, running will awaken me. If this is reality--But it can't be. That so cruel a thing should happen to me--Were the gods jealous of my beauty? Jealous of the pride I took in my beauty? No. The gods are never jealous.

My dressing gown!

Gone.

No time to go back for it. Run naked, then--Listen to them howl at me--Raven at me. Down! Down! Quickly and down. This rotten soft offal earth sucks my feet like a leech's mouth. Like the pulsating tendrils of an octopus.

They're following.

Why can't I wake up?

My breath—like knives in my chest that dance quickstep of cutting torture.

Why can't I wake up?

Close! I hear them. Close!

WHY CAN'T I WAKE UP?

And Maart cried aloud: "Take you this beast for an offering to our Lord Yaldabaoth!"

Then did the multitude raise stout courage and gird its loins. With clubs and stones all pursued the beast down the jagged slopes of Mount Sinar, chanting the name of the Lord.

And on a small plateau stout warriors pursued it until a shrewdly thrown stone brought the beast to its knees, still screaming in a manner horrible to hear. Then did the warriors smite it many times with strong clubs until at last the cries ceased and the beast was still. And out of the pink-and-white carcass oozed a fetid red matter that sickened all who beheld it.

But when the beast was brought to the High Temple of Yaldabaoth and placed in a cage before the altar, the cries once more resounded, desecrating the sacred halls., And the High Priests were troubled, saying: "What foul offering is this to place before Yaldabaoth, Lord of Gods?"

Book of Maart; XIII: 44–47.

Pain.

Like burning and scalding.

Can't move.

No dream was ever so long—so real. This, then, is real, all real. And I, too, am real. A stranger in a reality of filth and horror and torture. My beauty—But why? Why? Why?

My head--still ringing. It feels twisted. It itches inside. I want to scratch it.

This is torture, and somewhere.... some place--I have heard that word before. Torture. It has a pleasant sound. Torture. The sound of a madrigal; the name of a boat; the title of a prince. Prince Torture.

So light in my head. Great lights and blinding sounds that come and go and have no meaning.

Once upon a time I torture a man--they say.

His name was?

Finchley? Yes. Digby Finchley.

Digby Finchley, they say, loved a pink ice goddess named Theone Dubedat--they say.

The pink ice goddess.

Where is she now?

And while the beast did moan malicious spells upon the altar steps, the Sanhedrin of Priests held council, and to the council came Maart, saying: "O ye priests of Yaldabaoth, raise up your hearts and voices in praise of our Lord. For He was displeased with us and turned His face away. And Lo, a sacrifice has been vouchsafed unto us that we may make our peace with Him."

Then spoke the High Priest, saying: "How now, Maart? Do ye say that this is a sacrifice for our Lord?"

And Maart spoke: "Yea. For it is a beast of fire. It was born of the fire and through fire it shall return whence it came."

And the High Priest said: "Is this offering seemingly in the sight of Yaldabaoth?"

And Maart spoke, saying: "All things are from Yaldabaoth. Therefore

are all things good in His sight. Perchance through this strange offering Yaldabaoth will grant us a sign that His people may not vanish from the earth. Let the beast be offered."

Then did the priests agree, for they, too, were sore afraid lest the children of the Lord be no more.

Book of Maart; XIII: 48--54.

See the pretty monkeys dance.

They dance around and around and around.

And they snort.

Almost like speaking.

Almost like--I must stop the singing in my head. The ring-ring-singing. Like the days when Dig was working hard and I would take those difficult poses and hold them for hour after hour with maybe five minutes' time out and I would get dizzy sometimes and reel off the dais and Dig would drop his palette in fright and come running with those big solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

And I knew he loved me and I wanted to love him, but I had no need then. I had no need of anything but finding myself. Now I'm found. This is me. Now I have a need and an ache and a loneliness deep, deep inside for Dig and his love. To see him all eyes and fright at the fainting spells and dancing around me with a cup of tea.

Dancing--dancing---dancing--And thumping their chests and grunting and thumping.

And when they grunt the spittle drools and gleams on their yellow fangs. And those seven with the rotting shreds of cloth across their chests.

See the pretty monkeys dance.

They dance around and around and around--So it came to pass that

the high holiday of Yaldabaoth was nigh. And on that day did the priests throw wide the portals of the temple and the hosts of children of Yaldabaoth did enter. Then did the priests remove the beast from the cage and drag it to the altar. Each of four priests held a limb and spread the beast wide across the altar stone, and the beast screamed again with evil, blasphemous sounds.

Then cried Maart: "Rend this thing to pieces that the smell of its evil death may rise to please the nostrils of Yaldabaoth!"

And the four priests, strong and holy, put powerful hands to the limbs of the beast so that its struggles were wondrous to behold; and the light of evil on its hideous hide struck terror into all.

And as Maart lit the altar fires, a great trembling shook the earth.'

Book of Maart; XIII: 55--59.

Digby, come to me!

Digby--wherever you are--come to me!

Digby, I need you.

This is Theone.

Theone.

The pink ice goddess.

No longer pink ice, Digby.

Digby, I can't stay sane much longer.

Wheels whirl faster in my head.

Faster and faster.

Digby, come to me.

I need you.

Torture--Then did the vaults of the temple split asunder with a thunderous roar, and all that were gathered there quailed and their bowels were as water. And all beheld the glittering image of the Lord, Yaldabaoth, descend from pitch-black skies to the temple. Yea, to the very altar itself.

For the space of an eternity did the Lord God Yaldabaoth gaze at the beast of the fire and the beast snarled and writhed, helpless in its evil.

Book of Maart; XIII: 59--60.

It is the final horror--the torture.

This monstrosity that floats down from the heavens.

This hideous apelike, manlike, bestial thing.

It is the final jest that it should float down like the ephemera, like a thing of fluff, a thing of lightness and joy. A monster on wings of light. A monster that stands like a rotting corpse with its twisted legs and twisted arms and the shaggy, loathsome body. A monster with the head of a man that looks torn and broken, smashed and ravaged. With those great saucer eyes--Eyes? Where have I--THOSE EYES!

This isn't madness. No. I know those eyes--those great, solemn eyes. I've seen them before. Years ago. Minutes ago. Great, solemn eyes filled with hopeless love and adoration.

No--let me be wrong.

Those big, solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

No, not Digby. It can't be. Please--

Thus ends the Book of Maart. That's where I've seen this scene before, seen these creatures and the landscape--Digby's drawings. Those monstrous pictures he drew.

But why does he look like that? Why is he rotten and loathsome like

the others--like his pictures?

This is your reality, Digby? Did you call me? Need me? Want me?

Digby!

Why don't you listen to me? Why do you look at me that way, like a mad thing when only a minute ago you walked up and back the length of the shelter and finally darted through the veil toward--And with a voice like unto shattering mountains, the Lord Yaldabaoth spoke to His people, saying: "Now praise ye the Lord, my children, for one has been sent unto you to be thy queen and consort to thy God."

With one voice the multitude cried out: "Praise the Lord, Yaldabaoth!" And Maart groveled before the Lord and spoke, saying: "A sign to Thy children, O Lord, that they may increase and multiply!"

Then the Lord God reached out to the beast and touched it, raising it with both hands from the altar fires. And behold! The evil cried out for the last time and fled the body of the beast, leaving only a pleasant song in its place. And the Lord spoke unto Maart, saying: "Lo, I will give you a sign."

Book of Maart; XIII: 60--63.

Let me die.

Let me die.

Let me not see and not hear and not feel the--The Pretty monkeys that dance around and around and around while the great, solemn eyes stare into my soul, and Digby, the darling, touches me with hands so strangely changed.

Changed by the turpentine, perhaps, or the ochre or the bice green or Vandyke brown or burnt umber or sepia or chrome yellow which always seemed to stain his fingers each time he put down the brush.

How good to be loved by Digby. How warm and comforting to be loved and to be needed to want one alone in all the millions and to

find him so strangely walking in a reality like that of when Sutton Castle can't see and I really knew that the cliffs down which I ran so funny so funny so funny so funny so funny so funny--Then did the children of Yaldabaoth take the sign of the Lord to their hearts, and Lo, thenceforward did they increase and multiply, forever chanting the praise of their Lord and His Consort on high.

VI

Exactly at the moment when he entered the veil, Peel paused in astonishment. He had not yet made up his mind. To him, a man of utter objectivity and absolute logic, this was an amazing thing. It was the first time in all his life that he had not made a decision with trigger speed. It was the final proof of how violently the Thing in the shelter had socked him.

He stood where he was and took stock. He was sheathed in a mist of fire that flamed like an opal and was far thicker than any veil should be. It was not beautiful to Peel, but it was interesting. The color dispersion was wide and embraced hundreds of fine gradations of the visible spectrum. He could identify more than a score by name.

With the little data he had at hand he judged that he was standing somewhere either outside time and space or between dimensions. Evidently the Thing in the shelter had placed all of them en rapport with the matrix of existence so that the mere intent as they entered the veil could govern the direction they would take on emergence. In other words--would direct the time and space into which they would step. The veil was more or less a pivot that could spin them into any desired existence.

Which brought Peel to the matter of his own choice. Carefully he considered, weighed and balanced accounts. So far he was satisfied with the life he led. He had plenty of money, a remunerative profession as consultant engineer, a lovely house, an attractive wife. To give all this up in reliance on the vague promises of an invisible donor would be sheer idiocy. Peel had learned never to make a change without good and sufficient reason. There was neither good

nor sufficient reason now.

"I am not," Peel thought coldly, "adventurous by nature. It is not my business to be so. Romance does not attract me, nor does the unknown. I know that I like to keep what I have. Perhaps I am overly fond of keeping. The acquisitive instinct is strong in me and I am not ashamed to be a possessive man. Acquisitiveness has brought me wealth and success. Now I want to keep what I have. There can be no other decision for me. Let the others have their romance—I keep my world precisely as it is."

He strode forward firmly, a punctilious, bald, bearded martinet, and emerged into the dungeon corridor of Sutton Castle.

A few feet before him, a little scullery maid in blue and gray was scurrying directly toward him, a tray in her hands. There was a bottle of beer and an enormous sandwich on the tray. At the sound of his step she looked up, stopped short, her eyes widening, then dropped the tray with a crash.

"What the devil--" Peel began, confounded at the sight of her.

"M-Mr. P-Peel!" she squawked. She began to scream: "Help! Murder! Help!" Peel slapped her sharply. "Will you shut up and tell me what in blazes you're doing down here this time of night--carrying on like this?"

The girl squawked and sputtered. Exactly, Peel noted, like a decapitated hen.

Before he could slap her again he felt the hand on his shoulder. He turned sharply and received another shock to find himself staring into the red, beefy face of a policeman. The man was in uniform and there was a rather eager expression on his heavy face. Peel gaped, then subsided. He realized quite suddenly that he was in the vortex of phenomena. No sense struggling until he understood the tides.

"Na then, sir," the policeman said. "No call ter strike the gel, sir."

Peel made no answer. The sharp needles of his mind plucked at the

facts. A maid and a policeman. What were they doing down here?

"If! recollect a'right, sir, I heard the gel call yer by name. Would yer give it again, sir?"

"I'm Robert Peel, you blasted idiot. I'm a guest of Lady Sutton's. What is all this?"

"Mr. Peel!" the policeman cried. "What a piece er luck. I got to take yer into custody, Mr. Peel. Yer under arrest."

"Arrest? You're out of your mind, my man!" Peel stepped back and glanced over the policeman's shoulder. The veil was gone and in its place the door to the shelter yawned wide. The entire place was turned upside down. It looked as though it had just been subjected to a spring cleaning. There was no one inside.

"I must warn yer not ta resist, Mr. Peel."

The girl emitted a wail that verged on another scream.

"See here," Peel snapped irritably, "who the deuce are you? What right do you' have to break into a private home and prance around making arrests?"

The policeman waved his hand indignantly. "Name of Jenkins, sir. Sutton Township Force. And I ain't prancin', sir."

"Then you're serious?"

The policeman pointed a majestic finger up the corridor. "Come along, sir."

"Answer me, you blithering idiot! Are you serious?"

"You oughter, know, sir," replied the policeman with considerable dignity. "Now come along."

Peel gave it up helplessly and went. He had learned long ago that when one is faced with an incomprehensible situation it is folly to take

any action until sufficient data comes to hand. He preceded the policeman up the winding stairs and heard the whimpering scullery maid come after them. So far he still only knew two things. One: Something, somewhere, had happened. Two: The police had taken over. All this was upsetting to say the least, but he would keep his head. He prided himself that no situation ever took him at a loss.

When they emerged from the cellars, Peel received his second surprise. It was broad daylight outside—bright daylight. He glanced at his watch. It read exactly twelve forty. He dropped his wrist and blinked. The unexpected sunlight made him a little ill. The policeman touched his arm and directed him toward the library. Peel immediately marched to the high, sliding doors and pulled them open.

The library was, high, long and narrow, with a small balcony running around it just under the ceiling. There was a long trestle table filling the length of the room, and at the far end three figures were seated, silhouetted against the light that streamed through the narrow window. Peel stepped in, vaguely conscious of a second policeman on guard beside the door. His eyes narrowed as he tried to distinguish faces.

While he peered, he listened carefully to the tremendous hubbub of surprise and exclamations that greeted him. He judged that: One: People had been looking for him. Two: He had been missing for some time. Three: No one had ever expected to find him here in Sutton Castle. Four: How did he get back in, anyway? All this from the astonished voices. Then his eyes accommodated to the light.

One of the three was a lanky, angular man with a narrow, graying head and deep-furrowed features. He looked familiar to Peel. The second was short and stout with ridiculously fragile glasses perched on a bulbous nose. The third was a woman, and again Peel was shocked to see that it was his wife. She wore a plaid suit and held a crumpled green felt hat in her lap.

Before he could analyze the data further, the angular man quieted the others and then turned. He said: "Mr. Peel?"

Peel advanced quietly and said: "Yes?"

"I'm Inspector Hoss."

"I thought I recognized you, inspector. We've met before, I believe?"

"We have." Hoss nodded curtly, then indicated the fat man. "This is Dr. Richards."

"How d'you do, doctor—" Peel turned toward Sidra and bowed with a faint air of irony. "Sidra?"

In flat tones she said: "Hello, Robert."

"I'm afraid I'm a little confused by all this," Peel went on amiably. "Things seem to be happening—" This, he knew, was the right talk. Be cautious. Commit yourself to nothing.

"They are," Hoss said grimly.

"Before we go any further, might I inquire the time?"

Hoss was a little taken aback. He said: "It's two o'clock."

"Thank you." Peel held his watch to his ear, then adjusted the hands. "My watch seems to be running, but somewhere it's lost a little time—" While he apparently devoted himself to his wrist watch he examined their expressions minutely. He would have to navigate with exquisite care purely by the light of their countenances until he learned much more.

Then, quite abruptly, Peel forgot his watch and stared at the desk calendar before Hoss. This was like a punch in the ribs. He swallowed and said: "Is that date quite right, inspector?"

Hoss glanced at the calendar, then back at Peel, his eyes widening. "It is, Mr. Peel. Sunday the twenty-third."

His mind screamed: Three days! Impossible.

Easy--Easy--Peel stiffened and controlled himself. Very well. Somewhere he had lost three days--for he had entered the veil Thursday just past midnight. He felt himself beginning to perspire and reached out blindly for a chair. "You'll have to excuse me," he said faintly, and sat down.

Keep cool, you confounded idiot. There's more at stake than three lost days. He lectured to himself in swift silence to give his nervestime to calm. You know you're a match for anyone. People don't know how to think. A man with a logical mind can cope with anything. Wait for more data.

After a moment of silence, Hoss said: "The fact is, Mr. Peel, we've been looking for you these past three days. You disappeared quite suddenly and we thought we knew why. We're rather surprised to find you in the castle. Rather surprised, indeed--"

"Ah? Why?" Careful now. Be careful!

"I should have thought you'd stay as far away from Sutton Castle as possible."

"Again why?" What's happened? Why the police--the suspicion--the guarded tone? What's Sidra doing here sitting like an avenging fury?

"Because, Mr. Peel, you're charged with the willful and intended murder of Lady Sutton."

Shock! Shock! Shock! They piled on one after the other, and still Peel kept hold of himself. The data was coming in a little too explicitly now. He had hesitated in the veil for a few seconds, and those seconds amounted to three days. Lady Sutton was found dead--evidently. He was charged with murder. Still he needed more facts before he spoke. Now, more than ever, he had to steer carefully.

Peel said: "I don't understand. You had better explain."

"Early Friday morning," Hoss began without preamble, "the death of Lady Sutton was reported. Immediate medical examination proved she died of shock. Witnesses' evidence revealed that you had

deliberately frightened her with full knowledge of her weak heart and with the express intent so to kill her. That is murder, Mr. Peel."

"It certainly is," Peel answered coldly, "if you can prove it. May I ask whom your witnesses are?"

"Digby Finchley. Christian Braugh. Theone Dubedat, and--" Hoss broke off, coughed and laid the paper aside.

"And Sidra Peel," Peel finished dryly. Again he met his wife's eye and read the venomous expression clearly. "How very choice!"

But the light broke and he understood at last. They had lost their nerve, those quaking swine, and selected him for the scapegoat. Perhaps because of the golden opportunity of his disappearance. Perhaps--and this was more likely--under the malicious aegis of his wife. This would be Sidra's move to get rid of him, humiliate him, drag him through the courts and up to the executioner's dock. This would be Sidra's perfect revenge.

He got to his feet and before Hoss or Richards could interfere, he grasped Sidra by the arm and dragged her to a corner of the library. Over his shoulder he said:

"Don't be alarmed, inspector, I only want a word with my wife."

Hoss coughed and called: "It's all right, officer--" and the menacing blue shadow retreated from Peel's elbow and returned to its post at the door.

Sidra tore her arm free and glared up at Peel, her face suffused with passion; her lips drawn back slightly, showing the sharp white edges of her teeth.

Peel snapped: "You arranged this."

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

"Don't stall, Sidra. This was your idea."

"It was your murder," she countered.

"It was. We saw you do it. We tried to stop you, but we couldn't. We've sworn to it--the four of us." "And it was all your idea?" Her eyes flashed: "Yes!" "Hoss will be interested to hear that." "He won't." "What if! tell him--"

"He won't believe you. We're four to one." "I can pick holes in your story." "Try!"

"You're well prepared, eh?"

"Braugh is a good writer," she said. "You won't find any flaws in our story."

"So you're getting rid of me, eh? I hang for the murder on your trumped-up evidence. You get the house, my fortune and, best of all, you get rid of me."

She smiled like a cat. "You catch on fast, Robert."

"And this is the reality you asked for? This is what you planned when you went through the veil?"

"What veil?"

"You know what I mean."

"You're mad." She was confused.

"You're lying."

She smashed her knuckles into his face.

"Never mind," Peel said quite loudly, a plan taking shape in his mind, "never mind, Sidra. But if you think you're going to turn me into a scapegoat you're quite mistaken. Yes--quite mistaken."

"Here," Hoss called sharply, "What's all this?"

"He wanted me to bribe the witnesses," Sidra said in a clear voice,

walking back to her seat. "I was to offer them ten thousand pounds each."

The doctor grunted: "Cad!"

loss said: "Now see here, Peel, we've been--"

"Please, inspector," Peel interrupted. He sauntered up to the desk, his mind clicking rapidly. The best defense was a startling offensive. The best time to begin was now. "My wife has just told you a fantastic lie."

"Ha?"

"More than that, inspector, your other witnesses have lied, too. I wish to charge Braugh, Finchley, Miss Dubedat and my wife with the willful murder of Lady Sutton!"

Hoss gasped and started forward, slapping the papers off the table. As the doctor bent to pick them up, Hoss stuttered: "My-my d-dear Peel! Really... you know!"

"Don't believe him!" Sidra screamed. "He's lying. He's trying to lie out of

He let her scream, grateful for more time to whip his story into shape. It must be convincing--flawless. The truth was impossible. And who would believe the truth, anyway? What was truth for him was plainly unknown to the others.

"The murder of Lady Sutton," Peel went on smoothly, "was planned and executed by those four persons. I was the only member of the party to demur. You will grant me, inspector, that it sounds far more logical for four persons to commit a murder against the will of one, than one against four. Four could stop one. One could not possibly stand in the way of four."

Hoss nodded, fascinated by Peel's cold logic.

"Moreover, it is far easier for four persons to trump up a false account

and swear to it, than for one to outweigh the evidence of four."

Again Hoss nodded.

Sidra beat at Hoss' shoulder and cried shrilly: "He's lying, inspector. If he's telling the truth ask him why he ran away! Ask him where he's been these last three days! Ask him--"

"Unfortunately there's little love lost between my wife and myself," Peel commented dryly. "Her evidence is entirely wishful thinking."

Hoss freed himself and said: "Please... Mrs. Peel. I beg you--"

With a graceful gesture, Peel ran sensitive fingers across his crisp beard and mustache. "My story is this," he continued, "the four whom I accuse desired to murder Lady Sutton. Motive? A craving for the ultimate in emotional sensation. They were utterly depraved and degenerate. The only reason I was part of their devilish clique was to protect my wife as much as possible. On Thursday night I learned of their plans for the first time. I refused to permit them to continue and threatened to reveal all to Lady Sutton. Evidently they were prepared for this. My wine was drugged and I was rendered unconscious. I have a faint recollection of being lifted and carried somewhere by the two men and--that's all I know of the murder."

"My word!" Hoss gasped. The doctor leaned over to him and whispered. Hoss nodded and murmured: "Yes, yes--the tests can come later." He turned to Peel and said: "Please, go on."

So far, Peel thought, so good. Add a little truth to a lie and it makes the whole seem truthful. Now for the rest, he would have to add just enough color to gloss over the rough edges.

"I came to in pitch darkness. I was lying on a stone floor. I heard no sounds, nothing but the ticking of my watch. These dungeon walls are fifteen and twenty feet thick in places so I could not possibly hear anything. When I got to my feet I found I was in a small cavity about ten feet square.

"I realized that I was in some secret cell that was as yet unknown to

any but the members of the clique. After an hour's shouting vainly for help and pounding on the wall, an accidental blow of my fist must have touched the proper spring or lever. One section, vastly thick, swung open quite abruptly and I found myself in the passage where I was picked up--"

"He's lying!" Sidra screamed again.

While Hoss calmed her, Peel coolly considered his position. His story was excellent so far. The evidence at hand was sufficiently strong. Sutton Castle was known for its secret passages. His clothes were still rumpled from the framework he had worn to frighten Lady Sutton. There was no known saliva or blood test to show that he had been drugged seventy-two hours previous. His beard and mustache would eliminate the shaving line of attack. So far his logic was excellent.

"That," Peel said quietly, "is my story."

"We note that you plead not guilty, Mr. Peel," Hoss said, "and we note your story and accusation. I confess that your three-day disappearance seemed to incriminate you, but now--" He shrugged. "All we need do is locate this mysterious cell in which you were confined."

Peel was even prepared for this. He said: "You may, and then again you may not. I'm an engineer, you know. I warn you that the only way we may be able to locate the cell is by blasting through the stone, which may only serve to wipe out all traces."

"We'll take that chance."

"That chance may not have to be taken," the little round doctor said.

Hoss turned slowly and gave the doctor a curious glance. Sidra exclaimed. Peel shot a sharp look toward the man. Experience warned him that fat men were always dangerous.

"It was a perfect story, Mr. Peel," the fat doctor said pleasantly, "quite a perfect story. Most entertaining. But really, my dear sir, for an

engineer you slipped up quite badly."

"I beg your pardon?" Peel said stiffly, every nerve on guard.

"When you awoke in your cell," the doctor went on with a childish smile, "you mentioned that you were in complete darkness and silence. The walls were so thick all you heard was the ticking of your watch. Very colorful. But, alas, proof of a lie. You awoke seventy hours later--No watch will run seventy hours without rewinding!"

He was right. Peel realized that at once. He had made a mistake, and there was no going back for alterations. The entire story depended on the wholeness of the fabric. Tear away one threat and the whole thing would ravel. The fat doctor was right--and he was trapped.

One glance at Sidra's malevolent, triumphant face was enough for him. He decided that now was the time for action, and very quick action indeed. He arose from his chair, laughing in obvious defeat. Hoss was gaping again; the doctor chuckling like a pleased puzzle-solver; Sidra gloating. Peel sprinted to the window like a shot, crossed arms before his face, and smashed through the glass pane.

The shattering of the glass and the excited shouts behind him were only vague sounds. Peel limbered his legs as the soft earth came up at him and landed with a jarring shock. It was a fifteen-foot drop, but he took it well. He was on his feet in a trice and running toward the rear of the castle where the cars were parked. Five seconds later he was vaulting into Sidra's roadster. Ten seconds later he was speeding past the high iron gates to the highway outside.

Even in this crisis, Peel thought swiftly and with precision. He had driven out of the grounds too quickly for anyone to note which direction he would take. He turned toward London and sent the car roaring down the road until he came to an abrupt curve. Here he stopped and snatched a hammer from the tool kit.

He smashed every window in the car and the windshield, too. The broken glass he spread evenly across the road. It might not cause a

puncture, and then again it might. The loss of time was worth the gamble. He leaped back into the car and started off again toward London. A man could lose himself in a metropolis.

But he was not a man to flee blindly, nor was there panic in his heart. Even as his eyes mechanically followed the road, his mind was sorting through facts, accurately and methodically, and inevitably drawing closer to a stern conclusion. He knew that he could never prove his innocence. The three-day hiatus was the bar to that. He knew he would be pursued as Lady Sutton's murderer.

In war time it would be impossible to get out of the country. It would even be impossible to hide very long. What remained then was an outlaw living in miserable hiding for a few brief months only to be taken and brought to trial. Peel had no intention of giving his wife the satisfaction of watching him dragged through a murder trial.

Still cool, still in full possession of himself, Peel planned as he drove. The audacious thing would be to go straight to his home. They would never think of looking for him there—for a while. At home he would have time enough to do what had to be done. He set his mouth in a thin, straight line.

Rapidly he drove deep into London toward Chelsea Square, a frigid, bearded, bald man at the wheel of the car looking like some icy buccaneer from the past.

He approached the square from the rear, watching for the police. There were none about and the house looked quite calm and inauspicious. But, as he drove into the square and saw the front facade of his home, he was grimly amused to see that an entire wing had been demolished in a bombardment. Evidently the catastrophe had taken place some days previous, for all the rubble was neatly piled and the broken side of the building was fenced off.

So much the better, Peel decided. No doubt the house would be empty. He parked the car, unnoticed by the few people in the street, leaped out and walked briskly to the front door. Now that he had made his decision and formed his plans he was absolutely

impassive.

There was no one inside. Peel went to the library, took pen and ink and seated himself at the desk. Carefully, with lawyerlike acumen, he made out a new will cutting his wife off beyond legal impeachment. While the ink was drying, he went to the front door and waited until a couple of laborers trudged by with shovels on their shoulders.

"You there!" Peel called.

They turned weary faces toward him. "Yes, sir?"

"Want to earn a flyer?"

Their faces glowed.

"Step in a moment."

With many apologies for their muddied boots, they edged into the library, glancing around curiously. Peel sat them down and read the will to them. They listened with open mouths, then witnessed his signature. Laboriously, with much protrusion of tongues, they signed their names and received the bank note. Peel ushered them out and locked the door.

He paused grimly and took a breath. So much for Sidra. It was the old possessive instinct, he knew, that forced him to act this way. He wanted to keep his fortune, even after death. He wanted to keep his honor and dignity, even after death. He had made sure of the first. He would have to perform the second--quickly!

He thought for another moment, then nodded his head decisively and marched back to the kitchen. From the linen closet he took down an armful of sheets and towels and with them padded the windows and edges of the doors. As an afterthought, he took a large square of cardboard and on it, with shoe-blackening, printed:

DANGER! GAS! He placed it outside the kitchen door.

When the room was sealed tight, Peel went to the stove, opened the

oven door 'and turned the gas cock over. The gas hissed out of the jets, rank and yet cooling. Peel knelt and thrust his head into the oven, breathing with deep, even breaths. It would not, he knew, take very long. It would not be painful.

For the first time in hours, some of the tension left him, and he relaxed almost gratefully, calmly awaiting his death. Although he had lived a hard, geometrically patterned life; and traveled a rigidly realistic road--now his mind reached back toward more tender moments, He regretted nothing; he apologized for nothing; he was ashamed of nothing--and yet he thought of the days when he first met Sidra with a sense of sorrow.

What slender youth, bedewed with liquid odors, Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave, Sidra--He almost smiled. Those were the lines he wrote to her when, in the romantic beginning, he worshiped her as a goddess of youth, of beauty and goodness. Those had been great days--the days when he had finished at Manchester College and had come to London to build a reputation, a fortune, a life. A thin-haired boy with precise habits and precise thoughts. Dreamily he sauntered through the backwash of memory as though he were recalling an entertaining play.

He came to with a start and realized that he had been kneeling before the oven for twenty minutes. There was something very much awry. He had not forgotten his chemistry and he knew that twenty minutes of illuminating gas should have been sufficient to make him lose consciousness. Perplexed, he got to his feet, rubbing his stiff knees. There was no time for analysis now. The pursuit would be on his neck at any moment.

Neck! That was an idea. Almost as painless as gas. Much quicker!

Peel shut off the oven, took a length of laundry rope from a cupboard and left the kitchen, picking up the sign en route. As he tore up the cardboard, his alert little eyes pried through the house, looking for the proper spot. Yes, there. In the stairwell. He could throw the rope over that beam and stand on the balcony above the stairs. When he leaped, he would have a ten-foot drop to the landing.

He ran up the stairs to the balcony, straddled the railing and carefully threw the rope over the beam. He caught the flying end as it whipped around the beam and swung toward him. He tied it into a loose knot and ran it up the length of the rope until it snuggled tight. After he had yanked twice to tighten the knot, he put his full weight on the rope and swung himself clear of the balcony. The rope supported his weight admirably. There was no chance of its snapping.

When he had climbed back to the railing, he shaped a hangman's noose and slipped it over his head, tightening the knot under his right ear. There was enough slack to give him a six-foot drop. He weighed one hundred fifty pounds. It was just about right to snap his neck clean and painlessly at the end of the drop. Peel poised, took a deep breath, and leaped—His only thought as he fell was a chaotic attempt to figure how much time he had left to live. Thirty-two feet per second square divided by six gave him almost a fifth of a second. Then there was a blinding jerk that racked his entire body, a dull crack that sounded large and blunt in his ears, and a sensation of intolerable pain in his neck.

And for the first time, Peel's iron control was broken.

It took him fully five seconds to realize that he was still alive. He hung by his neck in a kind of horror and slowly understood that he was not dead. The horror crawled over his skin like a wave of chill ants, and for a long time he hung and shuddered, refusing to believe that the impossible had happened. He shuddered while his arms flailed helplessly and the chill reached his mind numbing it with terrible trepidation.

At last he reached into his pocket and withdrew a penknife. He opened it with difficulty, for his body was slowly turning palsied and unmanageable. After much sawing he at last severed the rope and dropped the last few feet to the landing. While he still crouched, he reached up fingers and felt his neck. It was broken. His head was tilted at an angle that made everything seem topsy-turvy. He could feel the jagged edges of the broken cervical vertebrae. He shuddered again.

As Peel dragged himself up the stairs, he realized that something too ghastly to understand was taking place. There was no attempting a cool appraisal of this; there was no data to be taken, no logic to apply. He reached the top of the stairs and lurched through the bedroom to the bath. In the mirror he examined his twisted neck.

With fumbling hands he groped in the medicine cabinet until he grasped his razor. He closed the cabinet door, then opened the blade, faintly admiring the six inches of gleaming steel. There was promise in the hair-fine, hollow-ground edge. He gripped the handle firmly, tilted his chin back as far as the twisted neck would allow, and with a firm, steady stroke sliced the steel across his throat.

Instantly he was deluged with a great gout of blood, and, as he drew breath, his windpipe was choked. He doubled over, coughing, and his throat was lathered with red foam. Still coughing and gasping, with the wind whistling madly through the ragged slit in his neck, Peel slowly crumpled to the tile floor and lay there while the blood gushed with every heartbeat and soaked him through. Yet as he lay there, gasping with little hacking, foaming coughs, he did not lose consciousness.

For the first time in all his life, Peel was afraid--desperately afraid. The agony of his twisted neck was nothing to the agony in his mind. He floundered on the bathroom floor and realized vaguely that life was clinging to him with all the possessiveness with which he had clung to life and the things he owned.

He crawled upright at last, not daring to look at his wax-white, bloodless face in the mirror, nor at the yawning red slash in his throat. The blood--what remained of it--had clotted slightly. He still could breathe normally at times. Gasping and almost completely paralyzed, Peel stumbled back into the bedroom and searched through Sidra's dresser until he found her revolver.

It took all his presence of mind to steady the muzzle at his chest and still his shaking hands. Deliberately, he pumped three shots into his heart. And when the echo of the reports died away and the sharp powder tang lifted, he was still alive, with a great ghastly hole torn in

him.

It's the body, he thought crazily. Life clings to the body. So long as there's a body--the merest shell to contain a spark--then life will remain. It possesses me, this life, but there's yet a solution. I'm still enough of an engineer to work out a solution.

That solution, he knew, would have to be absolute disintegration. Let him shatter this body of his to particles--to bits--to a thousand pieces--and there would no longer be the cup of flesh to contain that persistent life. For that he needed explosives, and there was nothing in the house. Nor could he drag himself to his laboratory.

He lurched into his study and removed a deck of washable plastic playing cards from his drawer. For long minutes he cut them to pieces with his desk scissors, until he had a bowlful of minute pieces. He carried them to the bathroom and with the little strength that was left in his shattered body he removed a section of brass pipe from the tap inlet and carried it to his study.

There was a small spirit lamp on his desk, used to keep pots of coffee hot. Peel lit the lamp, placed a dry pot over it on the gimbals and dropped a lead paper weight in. After hours, it seemed, the lead melted. He used half the molten metal to plug one end of the pipe tight.

It took all his remaining energy to return to the bathroom for the forgotten bits of playing cards, but he knew it would be the last trip he would have to make. He rammed the frayed shreds of nitrocellulose into the brass pipe, using a heavy pencil as a ramrod. When the pipe was packed solid, he put in the heads of three matches and sealed the open end with the remaining lead and then placed the end of the pipe directly in the spirit flame.

With a sigh, he drew his desk chair close and hunched before the heating bomb. Nitrocellulose--a powerful-enough explosive when ignited under pressure. It was only a question of time, he knew, before the pipe would burst into violent explosion and scatter him around the room--scatter him in blessed death.

The agony in his chest and neck made him rock gently and sway from side to side. He began to whimper like a child as each individual nerve took up the screaming chorus of pain. The red froth at his throat burst forth anew, while the blood on his clothes caked and hardened.

Slowly the bomb heated.

Slowly the minutes passed.

Slowly the agony increased.

Peel rocked and whimpered, and when he reached out a palsied hand to push the bomb a little closer into the flame, his fingers could not feel the heat. He could see the red-caked flesh scorch and blister but he felt nothing. All the pain writhed inside him--none outside.

It made noises in his ears, that pain, but even above the blunt sounds he heard the dull tread of footsteps far out in the house. They were coming toward him, slowly and almost with the inexorable tread of fate. Panic struck him at the thought of the police and Sidra's triumph. He tried to coax the spirit flame higher.

The steps passed through the downstairs hall and then began to mount the steps of the stairway. Each steady thud sounded louder and more terrifying. Peel hunched lower and in the dim recesses of his mind began to pray. The steps reached the top of the stairs, turned and advanced on his study. There was a faint whisper as the study door was thrust open. Running hot and cold with pain and fear, Peel refused to turn.

So abruptly that it jarred him, a voice said: "Now then, Bob, what's all this?"

He neither turned nor answered.

"Bob!" the voice called hoarsely, "don't be a fool!"

Vaguely he understood that he had heard that voice somewhere.

Steps sounded again, then a figure stood at his elbow. With

bloodless eyes he flicked a frightened glance up. It was Lady Sutton. She still wore the sequined evening gown.

"My hat!" she gasped, her tiny eyes goggling in their casement of flesh, "you've gone and messed yourself up, haven't you!"

"Go away--" His words were cracked and whistling as half his breath hissed through the slit in his throat. "I will not be haunted."

"Haunted?" Lady Sutton laughed shrilly. "That's a good one, that is."

"Go away," Peel muttered. "You're dead."

"What've you got there?" Lady Sutton inquired in brassy tone. She hesitated for a moment. "Oh, I see; a bomb. Going to blow yourself to bits, eh, Bob?"

His lips formed soundless words. Still he hunched over the heating bomb.

"Here," Lady Sutton said. "Let me--" She reached forward to knock the brass tube off the gimbals. With a convulsive effort Peel struggled to his feet and grasped her arm with clawing hands. She was solid for a ghost. Nevertheless he flung her back.

"Let be!" he wheezed.

"Now stop this, Bob!" Lady Sutton ordered. "I never intended this much misery for you."

Without bothering to puzzle at her words, he struck at her feebly as she tried to get past him to the bomb. She was far too strong for him. He turned quickly and flung himself forward toward the spirit lamp, arms outstretched to infold it and protect it from interference.

Lady Sutton cried: "Bob! You damned fool!"

There was a blinding explosion. It smashed into Peel's face with a flaring white light and a burst of shattering sound. The entire study rocked and a portion of the wall fell away. A heavy shower of books

rained down from the jolted shelves. Smoke and dust filled space with a dense cloud.

As the cloud cleared, Lady Sutton still stood alongside the place where the desk had been. For the first time in many years--in many eternities, perhaps, her face wore an expression of sadness. For a long time she stood in silence. At last she shrugged and began to speak.

"Don't you realize, Bob," she said in a low voice, "that you can't kill yourself? The dead only die once, my boy, and you're dead already. You've all been dead for days. How is it that none of you could realize that? Perhaps it was that ego that Braugh spoke of--Perhaps--But you were all dead before you reached the shelter that night. You should have known when you saw your bombed house. That was a heavy raid last Thursday--very heavy."

Slowly she raised her hands and began to unpeel the gown that covered her. In the dead, unnatural silence, the little sequins rustled and tinkled. They glittered as the gown dropped from her body to reveal--nothing. Mere empty space.

"I enjoyed that little murder," she said. "It was amusing--quite amusing to see the dead attempt to kill. That's why I let you go on with it. It was amusing--"

She removed her shoes and stockings. She was now nothing more than arms, shoulders and a gross head in space. Nothing more. The face was still heavy and still wore the slightly sorrowful expression.

"But it was ridiculous trying to murder me," she went on, "seeing who I was. It was even a little ridiculous producing that play. Because, Bob, Astaroth does happen to be a lady--so to speak--and I happen to be Astaroth."

With a sudden motion, the head and arms jerked into the air and then dropped to the floor alongside the heaped-up dress. They clattered dully like waxen figures, and yet the voice continued from the smoke-filled space. Where the dusty mist swirled, it revealed a figure of

emptiness--a mere outline in space--a bubble--and yet a figure horrible to behold.

"Yes," the voice went on, softening slightly to a quiet tone, "I am Astaroth, Bob--Astaroth, as old as the ages--as old and bored as eternity itself." It took on a pleading note. "That's why I had to play my little joke on you back in the shelter. I had to turn the tables and have a bit of a laugh. Satan knows, you cry out for a bit of novelty and entertainment after an eternity of arranging hells for the damned! And Satan knows, there's no hell like the hell of boredom--"

The passionate, pleading voice broke off.

And a thousand scattered bloody fragments of Robert Peel heard and understood. A thousand particles, each containing a tortured spark of life, heard the voice of Astaroth and understood.

"Of life I know nothing," Astaroth cried out, "but death I do know--death and justice. I know that each living creature creates its own hell forevermore. What you are now, you have wrought with your own hands. Hear ye all, before I depart--if any of ye can deny this--if any one of you would argue this--if any one of you would cavil at the Justice of Astaroth--let him speak! Speak now!"

Through all the far reaches the voice echoed, and there was no answer.

A thousand pain-thorned particles of Robert Peel heard and made no answer.

Theone Dubedat heard and made no answer.

A questing doubt-crazed Christian Braugh heard and made no answer.

A rotting, self-devouring Digby Finchley heard and made no answer.

All the damned of all eternity in an infinity of self-made hells heard and understood and made no answer.

For the Justice of Astaroth is unanswerable.