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CONTENTS FOR JUNE, 1941 VOL. V NO. 1

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SHORT STORIES

READERS' DEPARTMENTS

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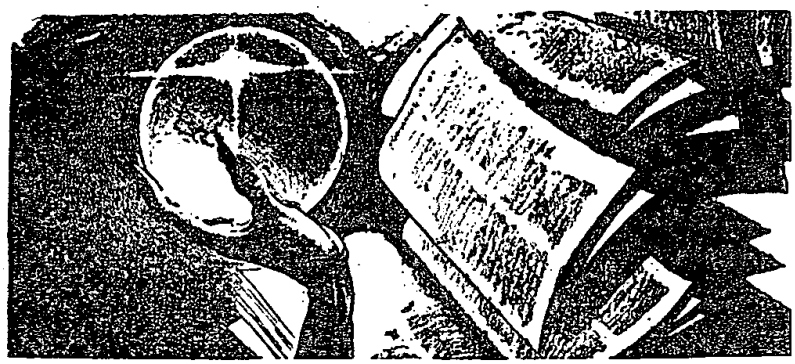

THE IRISH "PUCK"

In the folklore of most nations there appears some type of mischievous being—the personified essence of the orneriness of the inanimate. Considering the fiendish skill with which a collar button can conceal itself, or a pencil seen in its proper place not ten minutes ago can vanish, it is abundantly clear that some invisible—and ill-natured—visitant must be at work.

The English—see Shakespeare—called it the work of Puck, the jokester fairy. The Irish seemingly had more trouble; they required a whole race of jokester-tricksters to explain away their difficulties. Ireland had the Leprechaun—or at least they were so called in the Leinster district. In south Ireland they were the Cluricaune, but Cluricaune or Leprechaun, they were a troublesome lot.

Normally, they were pretty much solitary beings, unlike the friendly fairy folk who generally went in troops. There were suggestions, as a matter of fact, that the Leprechauns were outcasts from the fairy folk, exiled for their bad dispositions, a fact which naturally did nothing to improve those dispositions.

Sometimes they were—or became—attached to a place or a family. If such was the case, they'd do many good turns—but cause more than enough trouble to recompense. Many a family moved out of their house to seek a home elsewhere, hoping to escape the unwelcome help of the local Leprechaun, only to discover to their despair that the Leprechaun was attached to the family, not the house. Many are the sad tales of the hard-working peasant family that packed its bag and baggage, labored twenty or thirty miles across the countryside with ox-drawn cart to a new home—only to find, as they began the task of unpacking, that high on top of the goods rode the Leprechaun they'd hoped to leave behind.

Among the richer members of the community, the Leprechaun was unpopular for his sottish tendencies. They couldn't be kept out of a cellar of good wine, no matter how stout the bolts—or such was the report the lord of the manor received. One way or another, at least, good wines vanished, and empty bottles remained behind, with many a butler or footman to swear to the inexplicability of the whole affair.

Such haunters of wine cellars tended to be dandies, too, if somewhat sottish. The Leprechauns who settled themselves on a peasant family, however, tended to adopt a less foppish manner of dress, still with a brave touch withal. One was

seen dressed in a leather apron, with a little red nightcap on his head, light-blue stockings, and shining little shoes with huge silver buckles. His face was like a withered winter apple, brightened a bit by a crimson nose with a purple tip.

Still others of the outlaw fairy type were entirely solitary, living alone and on their own, though frequently seen to be doing cobbling work. (Perhaps the fairy folk gave their outlaws a bit of help by way of shoe repair?) One seen so engaged was described as "A bit of an old man, not a quarter so big as a new-born child, with a little cocked hat on his head, and a stump of a little clay pipe in his teeth, smoking away, and a plain, old-fashioned coat with big buttons on its back, and a pair of massy silver buckles on his shoes, and he worked away as hard as could be heeling a little pair of brogues."

Now evidently so unpopular a type of supernatural character was fair game for anybody who could catch him and make him reveal the secrets his magical nature made clear to him. They were small, and feared human strength—the strength of giants—if they were once caught. Buried treasures were plainly evident to their magical ways, but their naturally sullen disposition and general cussedness made them keep it hid—or hide it somewhere else so the proper owner couldn't find it again. Now if a man could once catch a Leprechaun, he could be forced to reveal the hiding place of such treasure—unless he slipped away.

But that was the trouble. They were a slippery folk, and let the lucky man take his eyes off the wee one for an instant, and he was vanished for good by his magic. Many and sly were the tricks reported by which the Leprechauns induced the human captor to look the other way for that vital instant—and *whooosh!* and the wily bit of a fellow was gone!

Or, if he were finally forced to reveal the treasure, many and sly were the tricks by which he made the revelation useless. One sturdy farmer having caught his Leprechaun, and kept him under eye every instant, finally forced him to reveal the secret—a treasure hidden beneath the roots of a small sapling in a nearby forest. Joyfully the peasant tied a scarf about the sapling, and made the Leprechaun swear not to disturb that marking while the farmer was off getting tools to dig. But the sly rascal outwitted the man still, for when the farmer returned, exactly similar scarves were tied in the identical manner about all the trees in the whole forest!

The Cluricaune had one advantage over their Leinster cousins; they were equipped, according to those who had seen them, with a little leather pouch containing a single shilling. But the shilling was there, no matter how many times the Cluricaune might find reason to spend it. With the Cluricaune, the dream of every man who thought he knew where one might be, was to get that little leather pouch—but the Cluricaune were no less wily than their northern kin. Now and then a human captor succeeded in laying hands on the precious pouch, but always, to his sorrow, it wound up back in the tiny hands of the Cluricaune, by one means or another.

But another man was always ready to try, for while most supernatural beings were to be placated, appeased in any needful way, the Leprechauns and Cluricaunes didn't warrant that. Like the famous even-tempered man, they were always mad.

THE EDITOR.

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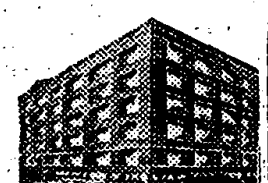

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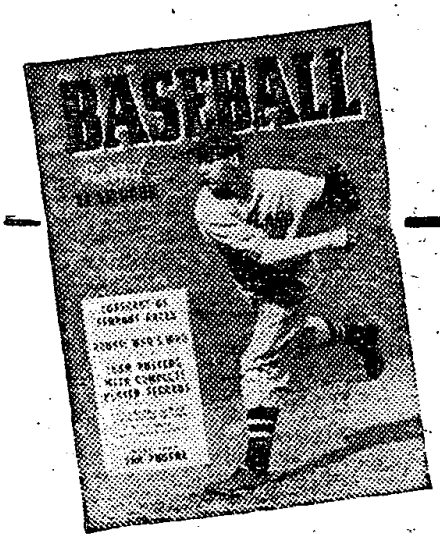

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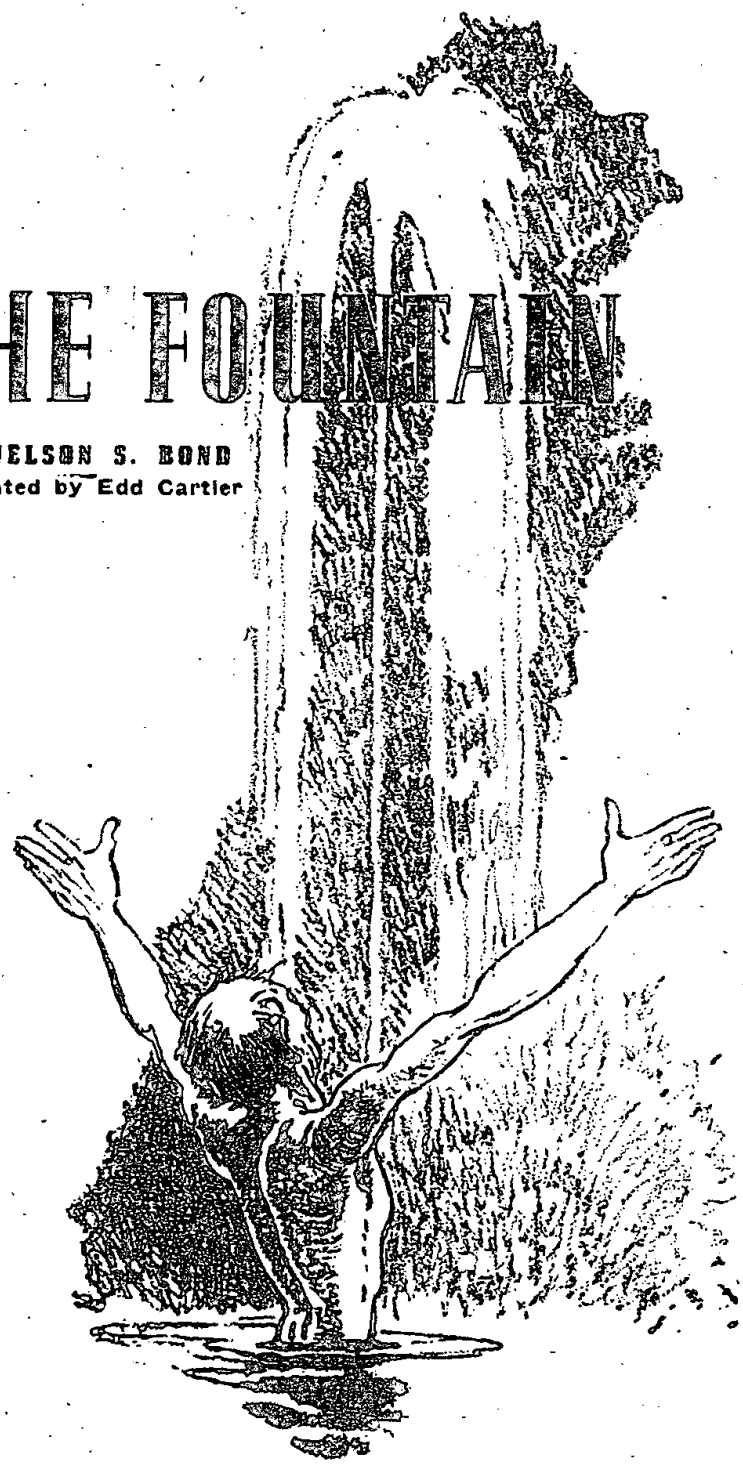
THE FOUNTAIN

by NELSON S. BOND
Illustrated by Edd Cartier



There was a Fountain of Youth—and it was in Florida; so far Ponce de Leon was right. But—he didn't know the strange way in which it worked.

It didn't fool Jonathan Preston one tiny bit to see that misty haze sifting lazily from the swamp beds that lined the road; he was not beguiled by that ruddy, cheerful, lying sun, nor by the galaxy of gaudy-plumaged birds flashing

from tree to tree, fluttering and twittering and chirping angrily as the throb of a motor violated their woodland sanctuary.

It was cold. The mist was an evil, marrow-chilling fog; the sun's rays thin and feeble; those damned birds just another Chamber of Commerce prop, like the daily temperature reports on the beach and in the newspapers, like the bathing beauties and the lemonade stands and the palm trees, to make tourists believe it was warm in Florida.

Actually, it was cold. Bitter cold. Preston could feel it in his veins, in his very bones; he shrugged himself more snugly into his camel-hair coat and glared with mingled amazement and anger at Squires who, on the other side of the thick, plate-glass panel that separated the tonneau from the chauffeur's seat of the town car, slouched behind the wheel, hatless, topcoatless, uniform jacket unbuttoned, defying the damp, chill winds that ruffled his hair.

Only a fool, thought Preston irately, would venture out on a day like this. Especially with other home problems demanding immediate attention. That business about Enid and Ralph, for instance. If they thought for a moment he didn't know what they had up their sleeves— And Robertson, with his glib talk of a merger! And that quack doctor, Foster—

"Bah!" said Jonathan Preston.

Squires peered into the rear vision glass; his lips sought the speaking tube. "I beg pardon, sir?"

"Nothing!" growled Preston. "Keep going!" He added sharply, "And slow down! Watch the road! Are you trying to kill us both?"

For an instant he had glimpsed his own reflection in the mirror; the sight was a frightening one; it reminded him of a never-absent fear. The fear of death. The face he saw was seamy and lined; his hair was a frosty smudge. Jonathan Preston frowned and looked away swiftly. He dreaded age; he hated being old. Only a fool, he thought; a fool or—a man with a purpose.

But he had a purpose. Recollection of it came back to him now, suddenly, and he thrust a thin, blue-veined hand into his coat pocket, drew forth a scrap of paper. His lips moved as he read its legend for the hundredth time.

"Wher stinkinge Fennes a skulle-shoop Tor surrond,
Wher Treen are alwey yonges, and Beestes kenne feres,
This Playce let him all Men bewair, wher's fond
Th' Espayniard's curséd Font that sheddes Men's yeers."

THE SLOW PULSE surged unsteadily in Preston's veins as once again he read a hopeful message into the awkward Old English phraseology. This was his purpose—to somewhere in these stinking Florida marshes find a skull-shaped hill, and a spot avoided by animals wherein the trees were always young and green, and a fountain of water—

For Jonathan Preston knew, or thought he knew, what this fountain was. The "Font that sheddes Men's yeers"; the precious well of life which an ancient Spaniard sought vainly, and seeking, died. Juan Ponce de Leon's long-lost Fountain of Youth!

It was a fantastic thought, yes. But no more fantastic than that this key

or threat or warning, this scrap of paper he now clutched, should have survived the centuries in the pages of an old volume recently picked up at a used-book stall. It was no more fantastic, thought Preston defiantly, than the legend of El Dorado, which modern search had proven to be based on fact, than the elder tales of alchemic transmutation, now validified by twentieth century cyclotrons, or than a thousand other newfangled ideas for the preservation of youth: vitamin capsules, gland treatments, sulphur compounds.

He held in his hands, believed Jonathan Preston, an indubitable guide to the location of the one spa at which he might lave himself of a fear which, each passing day, hovered more darkly about him. The fear of encroaching age—and age's dour companion, Death.

Therefore, he dared the bleak and miserable day, the long ride through interminable wastes; therefore, he strained his eyes for sight of that skull-shaped hill, half hoping to see it, half fearing to hope—

And suddenly, rounding a curve—it was there!

Not a high hill, for there are no high hills in low Florida. A rounded rise, sharp-limned against the sky. Its shape was that of a skull, fleshless, with shallow pockmarks for eye sockets, a noseless, slack-jawed thing. But the sight of it wakened a swift, hot gleam in Preston's eyes. Because at its base nestled a patch of vivid, green, *young* trees!

Excitedly, Preston hunched forward and rapped horny knuckles on the pane. "Squires! Stop here!" he said. When the car ground to a standstill, he was already fumbling with the door handle. Squires let him out. Despite his preoccupation, Preston noticed that the chauffeur's brow was beaded with perspiration, and this was a most amazing thing, for as he stepped from the car the wind that greeted him was chill.

But now was no time to worry about trifles. Beyond the road lay the swamp, beyond the swamp the tor, beyond the tor—what? Preston was afire with anxiety. Over the swamp hovered a sultry, brooding silence, but to Preston it seemed that a myriad of wraiths peopled these lonely depths. *Young* figures, all of them. Gay, laughing cavaliers in gaudy silk and bright-plumed bonnets; copper-skinned braves; lean-jawed buccaneers; scouts, lithe in buckskin trappings; *'quistadors,* breasted and helmed in gleaming silver.

These beckoned him to the hidden Fountain, welcomed him to fellowship in their company of eternal youth. A cold wind blew, and Jonathan Preston pulled his coat more tightly about him. "Wait here!" he ordered.

Squires stared at him incredulously.

"But, Mr. Preston, sir!" he said. "The damp—"

"Wait here!" repeated Preston pettishly. "Don't go away. I'll be back directly."

He stepped from the road into the swamp, and toward the distant patch of green—

HE DID NOT at first see the other man. He saw only murky swamp waters and the fading of golden sunlight as tree boughs, joining above him,

filtered the rays to a wan ocher. He saw the black, rich soil and the profuse wealth of living things squandered on this wasteland by a lavish nature. The live oak and citrus, the cucumber, pawpaw and custard apple, the wild rubber, the multi-hued and delicate orchids, everywhere the razor-edged sedge thrusting its fronds up from the mossy slime. He saw the gray mourning veils of Spanish moss that hung like faded banners of defeat, and felt the wet mud suck at his plodding feet.

Then he felt the mud give way to more solid ground, and the swamp was gone; with it had vanished the gray moss and the ancient oaks, and he moved through a copse that was all cypress. All sapling growth! He noticed with a swift excitement. All young trees!

Then the sky brightened before him, and he was past the trees, standing in a tiny, circular glade. The "skulle-shoop" hill was on his right, and before him—

The Fountain!

There was no doubt in Jonathan Preston's mind that he had found the spot he sought. For never elsewhere had he looked upon a fountain just like this. Surrounded by a pool of emerald green, rising from a mossy hillock fresh and new, its frail plume wavered and spiraled and played in the restless breeze like a live thing; now dancing, now twisting—ever tossing its mist of molten silver into the pool beneath with the abandon of a wastrel king.

With a choked cry, Preston surged forward. He felt no coldness now, no slow paralysis of years; there was an urge within him to plunge his hands, his arms, his face, into these green-flaming waters, to hurl himself into the pool bodily, opening his lips and pores to its life-giving savor.

But the silence livened only by the tinkle of falling drops was broken now by a ruder sound, the sound of a moving body. Jonathan Preston looked up. It was then that he saw the other man.

THE STRANGER was standing on the other side of the fountain. Who or what he was, Jonathan Preston could not rightly say; certainly he had no business in such an out-of-the-way spot as this, for he appeared to be a tradesman or a peddler of some sort. Slung over one shoulder he carried a round wheel; Preston recognized it as the kind of grindstone which, in his youth, itinerant scissors grinders had been in the custom of bearing. Over the other shoulder was slung a leather bag, and in his left hand he held—though his hand concealed it, and Preston could not be quite sure—something that looked very much like—of all things!—an old-fashioned hourglass.

These things Preston noticed only subconsciously. Consciously, he was suffused with a petulant anger that anyone should be here at this moment to share his hour of triumph. He spoke, and his voice was harsh.

"Who," he demanded, "are you? And what are you doing here?"

The stranger pushed a battered old fedora back from his eyes and studied Preston calmly. He stroked his cropped beard with a calloused hand, and his beard was, Preston noted with some disgust, stained and untidy.

"I might," he said, "ask the same thing of you, Mr. Preston."

Jonathan Preston started. "How—" he began, then paused. If the man knew who he was, it was obvious that he was from, or around, Miami. Everyone there—even the white trash—knew the wealthy Prestons. And he was in no mood to bandy words with a swamper. A poacher, most likely.

"Well, get along with you!" he said roughly. "This is no place for you. Get on about your business!"

"Why," said the scissors grinder, "I *am* minding my business." And he pawed his untidy beard reflectively. "By any chance, Jonathan Preston," he said, "would you be thinking of taking a little dip in *that?*" He nodded at the pool, and Preston felt a flush staining his cheeks.

"I might," he said stiffly, "or I might not. But I don't see where that concerns you one way or another. So if you'll move along, my good man—"

"I wouldn't if I were you," said the stranger earnestly. "You see—it wouldn't do any good. It would merely complicate matters."

Preston glared at him wrathfully.

"What? I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Oh, yes, you do! We understand each other perfectly, Jonathan Preston. But, you see, it's this way. Nothing will really help. Your story is already written in the book of time. The beginning and the end. Three score and ten is your allotted span, and not even the Fountain can help *that!* Of course, it may *alter* things a bit. But I'm not so sure you'd take a dip if you understood the situation.

"Now, look, Jonathan Preston," he continued gently, "why don't you give up this nonsense and go home? You'll be better off in the long run; I guarantee you that. How about it? I don't like to see you make a mistake."

"For the last time," said Preston, "will you go?"

"Well," shrugged the scissors grinder, "if that's the way you feel about it. I'm sorry. But, look, Jonathan Preston—you didn't find this place all by yourself. If I go away and leave you alone, will you do me a little favor? Will you give me the clue that led you here?"

"Anything," snarled Preston, "to get rid of you!" The dancing laughter of the Fountain had roused an echoing tumult within him; he was aflame with the desire to be alone by this wondrous pool. "Anything!" He hurled the scrap of paper at the other man. "And now—" he said.

But he was speaking to himself. The scissors grinder had kept his bargain. He was gone. But Preston wasted no time in pondering his departure. The chill had fled from his bones; the air was soft and warm on his naked flesh as he prepared himself for the pool—

How long he lingered in that well of lambent green, he could not afterward say. Hours, perhaps. Surely hours—for when he finally returned to the road, a dozen cigarette stubs and a crumpled, empty pack littered the roadway beside the driver's seat, and Squires was dozing.

But Preston was not in the least tired. His dip in the Fountain had re-

freshed him enormously; he felt gratefully alive in every fiber and muscle. Warm, too! He carried his topcoat over his arm, wondering why he had ever worn it on a sultry day like this.

He felt good, better than usual, but he felt a pang of disappointment, too. Completely unreasonable disappointment, he tried to tell himself. After all, legends of magic fountains, Eternal Youth, were so much poppycock. Yet, in an innermost chamber of his heart he had nurtured a credence in this ancient tale. The hope had budded when he actually saw the skull-shaped hill and evergreen grove, had flowered when he looked upon that strange, woodland pool.

But meeting a stranger—and an insolent mendicant, at that!—had taken some of the edge off his enthusiasm. And when he had stepped from the emerald waters to study his body carefully, painstakingly, heart-poundingly, to find its flesh still creased and old, his veins no less swollen, his hair no less scant and silvered, hope had died, and Jonathan Preston realized his quest had been only a mad example of an old man's folly.

Yet—and he shrugged—the afternoon had been good for him. The Fountain might not be magic, but its water was tonic. He stepped forward and tapped Squires' shoulder, and the chauffeur woke with a start.

"Oh! Sorry, sir!. I didn't mean to—"

"That's all right, Squires. We'll go home now."

Squires turned the car. With him had awakened his curiosity. As he drove, he kept peeking at his employer in the rear-vision mirror. The miles sped by; the tires hummed a soggy reel on the road. Finally he could restrain himself no longer.

"You were gone quite a while, sir."

"Yes," said Preston. "I suppose I was."

A moment's silence, then, "I trust you enjoyed your little stroll, sir?"

It amused Preston to ignore the implied query.

"Why, yes, Squires, I did. Thank you, Squires."

"Not at all, sir. I . . . I hope you didn't overexert yourself, sir."

Preston smiled. "Not a bit, thanks. I feel fine."

"Yes, sir," said Squires politely. "You're looking well, sir." Again he glanced at his employer in the mirror. There came a faint look of surprise into his eyes, a greater tone of surprise to his voice. "You . . . you are looking *well,* sir! *Very* well!"

"Why, thank you, Squires," said Preston, gratified. "I feel—" And stopped suddenly. He had glimpsed, in the glass panel, that which had elicited rare surprise from the usually emotionless Squires. His own reflection. The sight was—startling.

His cheeks seemed somehow rounder, more bright with color. In his eyes was such a sparkle as they had not known for years. And it seemed to Jonathan Preston that his hair was less gray than he remembered it as being!

He was not just looking "well." He was looking—*younger!*

IT WAS SATURDAY, and as usual, Enid was entertaining week-end guests. A cocktail party was in loud progress when Preston got home. The house, the grounds, the swimming pool, were noisy with people he neither knew nor wanted to meet.

He entered through a side door, hoping to escape to his private apartment without being seen. He might have succeeded, too, had not an overripe blonde in an underripe swimsuit, playfully evading the pursuit of a broker old enough—but not sober enough—to know better, bumped into him as he slipped through a darkened hallway.

She screamed, and the commotion brought a throng of curious people, including Enid herself. Enid's normal reaction to any situation was to burst into an immediate and meaningless torrent of words. She reacted normally.

"Why, Lana, darling, whatever *is* the matter, sweet? What is all the fuss about? Did you hurt yourself? Someone get her a drink. Poor child, her nerves—"

"She's all right," snapped Preston, "and she didn't hurt *herself*—she knocked the wind out of *me!* And don't get her a drink; she's had too many already. Young lady, *please* stop making those noises! You're splitting my eardrums!"

Enid said, "Oh, it's you!" starkly, and for a split second the tight lines settling about her lips and eyes told her real feelings toward her father-in-law. Then she gained possession of herself. Preston found her effusive affection more sickening than her concealed dislike. "Why, Lana, dear—it's just Popsy! You must be frightened, honey child! He didn't mean to scare you, did you, Po—"

"For Heaven's sake," exploded Preston, "don't call me Popsy!" He glared. "That child should be whipped and put to bed," he said grimly, "with an ice pack on her head! Now, if you'll all excuse me—"

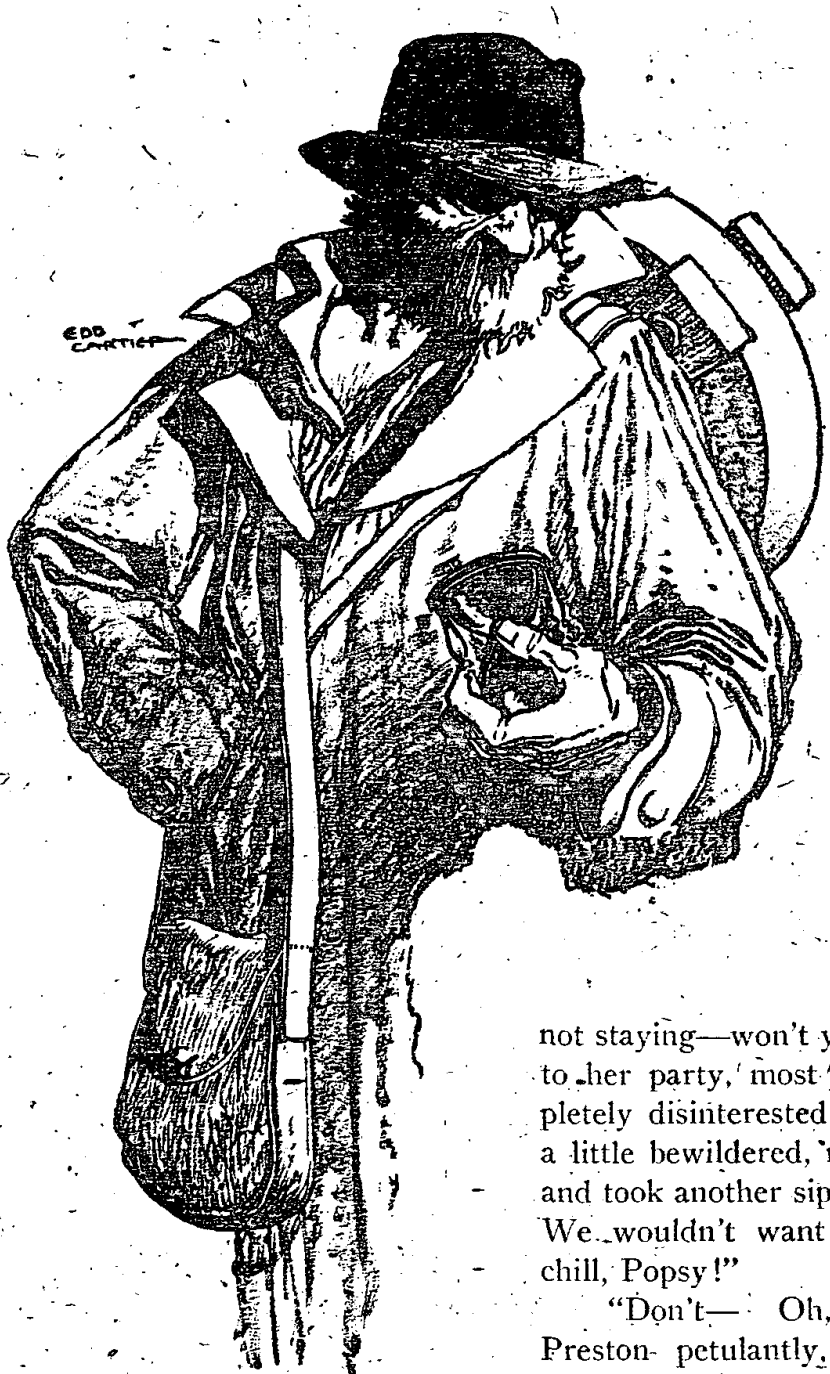
He started to elbow his way through the glassy-eyed group that had gathered. He wanted to be alone in his rooms with his mirror. While he hardly dared admit it to himself, Squires' comment and that brief glimpse of his strangely altered features in the glass had reawakened a hope within him that his earlier fancy might yet prove fact. That the green pool might—might barely possibly—have been the legendary one he had sought.

But Enid, performing magnificently before her house guests, refused to let him go without loosing a full barrage of daughterly affection. She clung to him, pursing her lips in the *petit moue* which Preston so detested.

"Now, Popsy! You mustn't run off. You haven't met all these nice people. Come out into the patio, where it's nice and shady. We'll have—Why, *Popsy!*" Chiding reproof in her little cry. "Your shoes are all damp and muddy!"

"I like 'em that way!" growled Preston. "And don't call me Popsy, damn it!"

"You run right upstairs," insisted Enid, "and put on dry shoes. Right away, now! Before you catch your death of cold. They'll forgive you for



not staying—won't you?" This last to her party, most of whom, completely disinterested and more than a little bewildered, nodded owlishly and took another sip. "Now hurry! We wouldn't want you to take a chill, Popsy!"

"Don't— Oh, hell!" blurted Preston petulantly, and fled. A trifle too precipitately, perhaps, because he found himself winded at the second landing. He paused to rest for a moment. Thus, quite by accident, he gained a vantage point for the anticlimax to the little playlet just enacted below.

THE GROUP dispersed, and as the last guest went back to the portable bar, Jonathan Preston's son, Ralph, appeared. Ralph was plump, pale and puffy; his bloodshot eyes were supported by dusky, veined lumps of flesh. He walked with a revelatory deliberation.

"Whuzzup?" he demanded muzzily. "Whazzall the noise about? Who came in? The old man?"

There was no sugariness in Enid's voice now.

"Who else? Your delightful father, breaking up one of my parties again. He never fails!"

Ralph gestured precarious apology with his highball. "Skip it! Old boy doesn't mean any harm. Have a drink!"

"I won't have a drink! I won't have anything. I'm sick and tired of this! Ralph, you've got to do something! We simply can't go on this way, with that doddering old wreck snooping around my house, frightening my guests, sticking his nose into everything, simply . . . simply *haunting* the house like a ghost too stubborn to die!"

Ralph said cautiously, "Now, wait a minute! Mustn't get excited. What would we do without him? Can't just kick him out, y' know. He's the moneybags around here."

"*You* know what to do! I've told you a hundred times. Speak to your lawyer; have the old man's financial interests transferred to your care. *Any* court will give you a judgment. Why, he's sixty-nine years old; seventy, week after next! And getting crustier and crabbier and more annoying every single day!"

Jonathan Preston stifled a snort of outrage, also a desire to inform Enid that he was listening. He awaited his son's reply. Ralph's voice was worried.

"Don't talk nonsense, Enid! The courts won't strip him of his powers just because he's old and crochety. Don't forget, the old man's still pretty keen. He'll fight us—"

"We won't get a commitment on those grounds. There are other more convincing proofs that his mind is weakening. Did you see what happened this afternoon? He came home with his feet soaking with mud! He must have been out walking in the glades. No sane man would do that. And besides—"

Enid's tone was suddenly shrill with triumph. "And *another* thing—did you see what he did to Lana? Caught her in the dark hallway and tried to *kiss* her! The poor girl was terrified!"

Ralph said thoughtfully, "He did that, eh?"

"Did it? Why, I have a dozen witnesses—"

"Sure, I know. But how about Lana? Will she swear to it in court? That he tried to kiss her, I mean?"

Jonathan Preston could not see his daughter-in-law, but in his mind's eye he could see the smug, satisfied smile on her lips.

"But, *darling!* Lana? Why, she and I are just like sisters."

There was grudging agreement, now, in Ralph's tone. "Well, maybe you're right. Perhaps he would be better off in some institution with men his own age for company. I'll speak to Rodgers tomorrow. No—today's Saturday, isn't it? Monday, then."

"You will? Grand, darling! Now perhaps we should join our guests. They'll be wondering where—"

A door slammed, and their voices faded away. Jonathan Preston, his face heavy with anger and disgust, stalked to his apartment. He had suspected that something like this was in the wind for some time. Now he knew. So Ralph would get in touch with Rodgers on Monday, eh? Well, Monday would be twenty-four hours too late, as Ralph and Enid would learn to their sorrow. Not without reason had Jonathan Preston at one stage of his Wall Street career been known as Lightning Preston. His legal representatives were paid fatly to dance attendance at an instant's notice. His wire would bring one flying from Manhattan. Meanwhile, a pen, ink, foolscap, and a brace of servants to witness his signature would stop this nonsense! Preston fumed. If he were a younger man—

The thought reminded him of his mission. A younger man! And what—he thought dizzily—and what if he were?

With suddenly quickened stride he hastened to his rooms.

FIFTEEN MINUTES later he sat on the counterpane of his bed, staring dazedly before him, weakened not so much by overexertion as by the stupendous discovery he had made.

There was no longer any doubt about it! The mirror in the auto had not lied, nor had the several mirrors in his apartment, from one to another of which, in those first panic-stricken moments of awareness, he had darted frantically.

There was no doubt about it. He—Jonathan Preston—had found the true, the veritable Fountain of Youth! And he was getting younger!

Oh, he was no beardless stripling, callowly abustle with eagerness; neither was he the firm-bodied Preston he had been in middle life. He was still an old man, as the world reckons age; he was still lean-shanked and gray, blue-veined and rounded of shoulder. But there were changes. He was, he thought, much as he had been—oh, say a year or so ago! At the time that a *"PIC"* photographer had done a full-page tale on his daily activities. "Retired Tycoon Basks 'Neath Southern Sun—"

Yes, that was it! It was as though he had sloughed a year off his true age. Jonathan Preston remembered, of a sudden, that it had been just about a year ago his eyes had started to bother him. Had begun blurring images, throwing a veil about faraway objects. But now—that haze was quite gone. He sat numbly on the edge of his bed and read without difficulty the tiny numerals on his desk calendar. *March 3, 1941.* Yet yesterday, on March 2, 1941, he could not have read those figures without hunching over them.

Some one tiny cell within his brain keened over and over again, "But it can't be! It is too incredible! Men do not grow younger!" But this tiny message faded into insignificance before the stronger evidence of his eyes. Logic be damned; it *was* so!

"And how far," thought Preston, "will it continue?" He studied the

glass intently, as though by watching sharply he might see the marks of age dissipating. But he could see no further change.

Perhaps the powers of the pool were limited. Maybe the regaining of his lost vigor required that he bathe regularly in its emerald waters, each time sloughing off another modicum of his age? He laughed happily. Well, why not? He had a clue to the Fountain's location. *"Wher stinkinge—"*

What in blazes was that doggerel, anyway? He could not remember offhand. But he had the scrap of parchment; or no! He had given it to someone. Who? Oh, what difference? He could find the place again; would do so tomorrow. Or the next day.

Meanwhile, there was something he should do. About a telephone call to someone. It, too, was vague in his memory. Everything was beclouded by the wonder that had overcome him.

Deliberately he cast aside all bothersome thoughts. Like an elder Narcissus, he lingered before his mirror, wondering at the change he saw, not daring yet to share his awe with anyone else.

Later, dinner was served to him in his room. Still later he bathed and prepared himself for bed. He slept well.

HE WOKE the next morning ravenously hungry. It was an unfamiliar sensation, this feeling of gaunt hollowness in the belly. For a moment fear seized him; this emptiness was another symptom of the creeping age he dreaded. He had not, for a number of years, had a good appetite. His diet was an old man's diet of milk toast and eggs, cereal beverages, and light gruels.

Then suddenly he recognized the pangs for what they were, and recollection of yesterday's astonishing adventures flooded back on him. He sprang from his bed nimbly, noting as he did so that his clock gave the hour as 10:30. That, too, was surprising. Age had made Jonathan Preston a light sleeper. Not since his retirement from business had he lingered so long abed.

He sought the full-length mirror of his closet door. What he saw reflected therein brought a gasp of amazement to his lips. The potency of the Fountain had not failed. This Preston who stared back at him from the glass, gasping, was a younger man than the Preston who had gone to bed last night. He was a Preston who could not possibly be a day over sixty-five!

A great exultation welled up within Preston, but he did not have time to savor this moment as he desired. A rap sounded on his bedroom door, and Lorrimer entered, bearing a breakfast tray. It was one of the unplumbed mysteries of the household how Lorrimer always divined the exact time of each member's rising, and appeared instantly with steaming food.

He moved directly to Preston's bedside table.

"Good morning, sir. You slept well, sir?"

"Very well, thanks." Preston moved to the butler's side, eyed disdainfully the single, melancholy poached egg that stared back at him with un-

winking reproach, sniffed the weak, watery coffee substitute. "Ugh!" he said.

"I . . . I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I said," repeated Preston firmly, "'ugh'! You can march that pap right back to the kitchen, Lorrimer. Bring me some decent food. Real coffee—pancakes—sausage—"

"P-pancakes!" said the startled Lorrimer. "S-sausage, sir? But your diet—" For the first time within the recollection of man, Lorrimer's aplomb was shaken. He gazed at his employer blankly. Then his brain accepted the testimony of his eyes, and his jaw dropped.

"Well, what are you staring at?" demanded Jonathan Preston testily. "Pancakes, I said. And country sausage—plenty of it! Get along!"

"Y-yes, sir!" said Lorrimer bleakly. He whisked up the tray and scurried to the door. Preston halted him there.

"A moment, Lorrimer. My appearance seems to have surprised you. No doubt you think I look younger?"

Lorrimer said cautiously, "You look very fit, sir."

"There's no need to say anything about it to anyone downstairs," said Preston. "I've been taking a series of . . . er . . . health treatments recently. This can be our secret for a little while. The others will find it out soon enough."

"Yes, sir. Very well, sir," said Lorrimer, and was gone. When he returned with the heartier breakfast Jonathan Preston had demanded he was once again the impassive butler who had served the Prestons for a decade. Neither by deed, word, nor expression did he show any signs of ever having seen anything out of the ordinary.

JONATHAN PRESTON, however, was finding a great many things out of the ordinary. His bewilderment began when, as he ate, he read his morning newspaper. The name of the paper was known to him, the format familiar; he found no startling changes in the stock market report to which, from old habit, he first turned.

But the news! The headlines on Page 1 were utterly incomprehensible!

Preston stared at the bold-face type, completely at sea. "RAF Blasts Cologne!" read one. "Churchill Hints Nazi Blitz Stalled!" claimed another, and "FDR Repledges American All-out Aid to Britain," a third.

"Raf?" muttered Preston. "What in thunderation is a raf? And why should it blast Cologne?" What, too, he wondered, was a "Nazi blitz"? And why was Churchill blowing off his face? Which Churchill, by the way? Old Winnie? But he was practically in retirement. The Conservative member from Epping, playing no active part in the good, sound "business-as-usual" Baldwin government.

He read the columns avidly, but such information as he gleaned left him even more confounded. When he paused at last, shaken, his forehead was damp with perspiration.

Something was frightfully wrong! Either the entire world was mad—or *he* was! This paper spoke glibly, and as if all its readers would understand, of a war in Europe! It was Great Britain against the "mighty armed forces" of that comic-strip jackanapes in Berlin—Hitler! And that was, of course, ridiculous. Everyone knew the French army was the world's greatest military machine. Yet these articles spoke of "occupied France"—and of a Graeco-Roman struggle in Albania—and of Australian troops in Libya!

Preston stared suspiciously at the date line of the paper. Had he somehow lost track of time? Was this a crazy April Fool's Day joke? Newspapers sometimes issued prankish sheets on April 1st.

But no! As he had thought, it was March 4, 1941. And this news purported to be *true!*

A sudden dizziness assailed him, and a brain-chilling fear. The whole world could not be mistaken. It was he who was at odds with mankind, and with mankind's history. A period of time had elapsed of which he was completely ignorant. It was insanity! Insanity, or—

AMNESIA! He grasped at the straw gratefully. Yes, that was it! That *must* be it. Amnesia. He had suffered a loss of memory—for how long he could not tell—and awakened in a strange, new world. But his body was sound, more strong and healthy than for many months, and his brain still retained its vigor, for he could remember a lifetime of experiences. His schooldays—his young manhood—the smile on Beth's face as he stepped forward to take her hand at the altar.

Their first child, Walter, and his bursting parental pride at the clutch of the baby's tiny fist about his finger. Then Ralph's coming. Then long years of struggle in a highly competitive world. The first tiny successes—the greater ones that followed. His progress gathering momentum as he took unto himself assurance. The frame dwelling supplanted by a brownstone mansion on Park Avenue. Work and play and scheming. Grover Cleveland—Teddy Roosevelt—the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill. The corner on wheat that made him a millionaire. Years of business success and prosperity. Happy years.

And then—the shadow of an ancient pain hovered in his eyes—less joyous years. Beth's midnight operation, and the numb, lost ache in his heart as he realized she was gone forever. The World War—and its aftermath. His quarrel with Walter, and his command that Walter's name never again be spoken in his presence. Ralph's marriage to Enid. Then his retirement from business. The home in Miami—

And then—what?

It was at this point that a darkness descended over intervening years. His last clear recollection was of a day in 1936. After that—nothing. Until this morning, when he awoke feeling much the same, looking much the same, as on that fateful day when forgetfulness claimed him.

Or—wait a minute! There *was* something else. Dim recollection of

going somewhere—meeting someone—doing something unusual. Green, and a woodland dell—of course! The Fountain!

Then the full implication of what had happened burst upon him. The Fountain's miraculous rejuvenescence was not yet at an end. As he slept, more years had been sloughed from him. He was now the Jonathan Preston he had been back in 1936. A man of approximately sixty-five years of age!

Excitedly he rose and studied himself in the glass. He scarcely knew he spoke aloud:

"It's true, then!" he said. "It's true. The magic still runs in my veins. I will be young again, and strong!"

Once again Lorrimer's polite rap interrupted him. The butler ignored, with polite acquiescence, his employer's changed appearance.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but Mrs. Preston says good morning, and will you join them on the terrace, sir."

Preston nodded. "Tell my daughter—" he began

Then he stopped. No—he would not see them immediately. He would wait until this period of slow change ended; then he would confront them with the full, triumphant evidence of his rejuvenation.

"Tell Mrs. Preston," he said, "that I am sorry, but I prefer to remain in my apartment today. Tell her—oh, anything. Tell her I have a slight cold, Lorrimer."

"Very good, sir." Lorrimer withdrew. And Jonathan Preston returned to the mirror that held him like a magnet.

There remained with him throughout the day a creeping, insistent thought that there was something he had meant to do and had not done. It was not until after he had sought his bed at eleven, however, that he suddenly remembered what it was.

His lawyers! He had intended to wire them, bring a legal representative down from New York. Ralph. Enid. He yawned. Drowsiness overcame him and he slept.

HE WAKENED in an unfamiliar room. A strangely vivid sun lighted walls and furnishings completely new to him. He lay there blinking stupidly for a moment, vainly attempting to orient himself. Then he rose and walked to the window. And looked incredulously upon a garden riotous with rich, tropical blossoms. Coconut and palm—flaming hibiscus—the soft, waxen petals of magnolia.

Why—why this was Florida!—he thought confusedly. But what on earth was he doing here? He had business obligations to meet in New York. Conferences to attend. Boards to sit on. And how had he—

A movement at the door of his bedroom startled him, spun him about. He was relieved to find his visitor only the butler, Lorrimer. Lorrimer had been with him for just a few months, but he was a good man. Perhaps he could explain?

"Lorrimer—" he said.

"Good morning, sir," said Lorrimer. "Yes, sir?" A bland mask overlay the butler's features, but his hands were not altogether steady on the tray. There were, Lorrimer was thinking, limits. Yesterday's experience had been unnerving; this morning's was even more so. It was, thought the butler, most disconcerting to look upon a Jonathan Preston who was the exact image of the man for whom you had gone to work ten years ago! "Yes, sir?" he repeated uncertainly.

"Where are we?" demanded Preston. "This is Florida, isn't it? How did we get here?"

Lorrimer stared at him blankly.

"But we've *been* here, sir, for almost seven years!"

"Seven—" It was Preston's turn to look stunned. "You say we've lived here for seven years?"

"Yes, sir. Ever since your retirement, sir." Lorrimer uncovered the tray nervously. He felt a most unseemly desire to do his duty and get away. "I took the liberty of ordering you a more . . . er . . . substantial breakfast this morning, sir. Bacon and omelette. Very tasty, sir."

"Bacon and omelette! Are you crazy, Lorrimer? You know perfectly well I'm under medical orders to avoid greasy foods! Take that bacon away! And where are my tablets?"

"Y-your—" Lorrimer's voice squeaked. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Your *tablets,* sir? But . . . but you haven't found it necessary to take tablets for years!"

Preston sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed.

"I haven't, Lorrimer?"

"No, sir."

"And this is Florida? We've lived here for almost seven years?"

"Seven years come April, sir."

"That will do, Lorrimer. You may go," said Preston faintly. The butler said, "Thank you, sir," and slipped away hurriedly. Preston placed his hands to his temples, rocked his head gently. It didn't make sense. Unless—

Understanding burst upon him. Of course! That was it! Amnesia. Loss of memory! For ten years he must have been living under a cloud of forgetfulness, from which, this morning, he had suddenly emerged.

Ten years of his life a total blank! Preston groaned. Then he was ten years older than at the time this tragedy had befallen him. Ten years farther along the pathway of age he detested; ten years nearer the death he feared!

He moved to his mirror, fearful of what he might see there. But the image reflected was that of a lean but well-conditioned man in his late fifties or early sixties. Gray of temple, but still bright of eye, keen of sense. In other words—he had not changed a particle! He was exactly as he remembered himself being!

A host of questions flooded his brain. If he was in Florida, where were

Enid and Ralph? What had happened to his business affairs? What of that deal in Consolidated he had been planning in 1931? And had the market ever recovered? Or had the whole financial world gone smash, as everyone feared?

He ate his breakfast hastily, so eager to dress and get out, learn something about this new world in which he had awakened, that he forgot to worry about his stomach ulcers—which, apparently, the passage of time had cured. He found suits in a dressing closet. The coats had three buttons, and they looked silly.

He had just finished dressing when someone knocked on his door. At his invitation, Lorrimer entered dubiously.

"A . . . a Dr. Ormerod to examine you, sir."

"Aah!" said Preston. Then he *did* still have those ulcers, eh? Amnesia or no amnesia. He glared at Lorrimer. "Well, send him in!" he said.

Dr. Ormerod was brusque and noncommittal and coolly efficient. He parried Preston's queries with evasive grunts and went about the task assigned to him with evidence of neither approval nor distaste. He poked and peered and fiddled; he took Preston's temperature and timed his pulse.

"All this," said Preston, "for ulcers?"

Ormerod said, "M-mp!" He wrapped a clammy something around Preston's arm and measured his blood pressure; he made Preston jog across the room and back; he tapped the old man's knees with a rubber-tipped mallet; he punctured the tip of Preston's thumb and took a blood smear.

Preston said indignantly, "Times have changed! This is rank nonsense. A little bismuth subcarbonate—"

Ormerod stood up. He said, "I don't know anything about your ulcers, Mr. Preston. I was sent here to examine your general physical condition. It will probably please you to learn that, considering your advanced years, you are in perfect shape."

"Well!" said Preston, gratified.

Ormerod unbent. The shadow of a smile touched his lips. "As a medical man it makes me happy to see such physical condition. As a native Floridian, I take pride in the good health our beautiful Sunshine State has endowed on you. Cases like yours almost make one believe in the ancient legend of the Fountain of Youth."

The words were like a charm. Suddenly it was as if a mantle had been lifted from some clouded chamber of Preston's mind. He started, the events of yesterday and of the day before yesterday suddenly returning to him in vivid completeness. His reply was spontaneous.

"The Fountain! Why, yes—that's it, of course! I *did* bathe in the Fountain. That's why—"

"Eh?" Ormerod looked startled.

"I found it. An old verse told me where it was. I bathed in it last Saturday. And I've been growing younger ever since." Having started,

now, the words flowed eagerly. "I'm going to be young again, doctor! Young again. No fear of age nor death! Just think, a whole new life before me—"

Ormerod snapped shut the little book in which he had been writing. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He said, "You aren't joking, Mr. Preston? You mean you really believe this . . . er . . . about the Fountain of Youth?"

"But of course! Look at me. Isn't my physical condition proof that I'm telling the truth? Two days ago I was an old man, just two weeks short of seventy. Today I'm the same Jonathan Preston I was ten years ago. Hale and hearty, strong. Except," added Preston, "for these damned ulcers."

"I see," said Ormerod. "I see." He picked up his bag. "Well, good day, Mr. Preston. I'll give a report to your son."

"Wait!" said Preston. "You mean Ralph? Is he—"

But the doctor was gone. Preston stood looking after him uncertainly for a moment, mind tumultuous with half-formed thoughts. It was as though he possessed a dual mind, one half of which recalled the days of his years up to 1931, the other half of which held a dimmed, hazy recollection of the past two days only.

This shorter second memory was evanescent, hard to grasp, harder to retain. Only by an effort could he hold his thoughts upon it. But he made that effort now. And making it, suddenly he realized who Dr. Ormerod was —and why he had come!

He was the physician employed by Ralph's barristers! The man on

whose testimony Jonathan Preston might be stripped of all his legal rights. And to this man Preston had babbled a fantastic tale of a magic fountain—

Preston sprang to the door. Up the stairwell there drifted the sound of conferring voices; two masculine voices, one feminine. Ormerod was speaking.

"—physique and stamina of a fifty-nine-year-old man, Mr. Preston. Any doctor would be forced to admire your father's superb physical condition—"

Enid's interruption, sharp, incisive:

"But surely there must be *some* grounds on which our case can be built, doctor. A man of that age *must* have some physical disability—"

"Not physical, Mrs. Preston. But mental! There is absolutely no doubt but that your father is suffering a late, and perhaps dangerous form of paranoia. He is prey to one of the most remarkable delusions it has ever been my experience to encounter. The belief that—but never mind! I need not upset you by describing its nature.

"However, I shall turn in my report immediately. I think I may assure you that your claim will be sustained."

Ralph said hesitantly, "And . . . and my father?"

"I shall send an ambulance for him immediately upon my return to the hospital. I consider it most essential that he be placed instantly under benevolent supervision," Ormerod said. "And now, if you will excuse me—"

Preston heard no more. The voices faded away as his son accompanied the physician to the door.

Five minutes later Jonathan Preston roused himself from the dazed torpor into which the overheard conversation had stunned him. Five full minutes he had wasted in bootless self-pity. Now, suddenly, a flash of the old Lightning in him showed forth; he rose determinedly with the conviction that he must *do* something, and do it *now!*

Looking back, he realized that it had been stupid of him to confide his secret to the stranger physician. It did sound like a fantastic story. But he, Preston, knew it was true. And if this reaction continued for another day or so, converting him—as he hoped—to a strong, stalwart man of middle age, he would be able to confront his would-be usurpers and any court, physician, or corps of physicians they chose to summon, with demonstrative proof that he was, indeed, a rejuvenated son of the fabulous font.

But—an ambulance was coming for him immediately! He could not linger here. Once incarcerated in an asylum, his task would become a thousandfold more difficult. So he must remain at liberty until such time as he was ready to appear before them. Furthermore, he must have his freedom in order to communicate with his own lawyers—

He did not burden himself with bothersome luggage. He gathered up all the money he could find in his apartment and tore a handful of blank checks from his checkbook. A glance at his clock told him it was almost

noon, another at his mirror heartened him for his flight. Then, fearing lest he meet Enid or Ralph, he slipped down the back stairway and out through the kitchen.

No one saw him. He fled across the grounds like a marauder on his own premises, and within a few minutes was boarding a bus for downtown Miami.

FOR ALL he recognized the city in which he found himself, he might have been a visitor from an alien planet. It was not so much the City of Miami itself—that he had not expected to remember, having never laid eyes upon it until his sixty-second year. And Preston had realized by now that the curious bifurcation of his memories was due to the fact that as his body was rejuvenated, so, correspondingly, were his memories returned down the pathway of time to that point which corresponded with his apparent age.

In other words, at every stage of his backward progress, his mind became *exactly* that mind which he had possessed at the age he returned to. Perhaps the very convolutions of his brain were ironed out; about that he was not sure. There was, though, he knew, only one minor difference between his mind here, at this moment, as he strode through downtown Miami, and the mind he had possessed when he was a mature man in the year 1930. Superimposed upon his basic memories was a recollection, ever increasingly dim and hard to retain, of those events which had actually transpired since his dip in the magical Fountain.

Thus the world in which he found himself was quite new to him, and strange. Fantastic were the buildings, with their black, glistening façades; there had been nothing like that in his knowledge of architecture. More fantastic still were the automobiles that scudded past him on the street like thick, purring beetles. The automobiles of Preston's memory were disk-wheeled boxes, recognizably divided into tonneau, hood and undercarriage.

These newer vehicles were all of one piece, all of one glissading form; many of them had no running boards, and the wheels were fat-tired little things concealed beneath huge, dripping fenders.

There were other changes. An ubiquitous new material called "plastic"—unfamiliar magazines on the corner newsstands—as dusk fell over the city, harsh illumination from glaring, twisted tubes of glass; crimson, green, blue, gold.

He knew, of course, that it was too late to contact his representatives in New York tonight. Nor did he see any particular need for doing so. There was time and aplenty for that. Just now he was enjoying the experience of seeing the world of 1941 through the eyes of a visitor from 1930.

He had dinner at seven in the evening; a light dinner, ordered with careful avoidance of greasy foods. He had been right about the ulcers; tiny, gnawing fangs of discomfort had bothered him all afternoon. Preston sincerely hoped that when the Fountain's magic ceased, it would be at some period wherein his bodily condition was perfect; he pledged himself that he would,

in the future, take every precaution to avoid any painful illness to which he had in the past been prey.

And that night he engaged rooms in one of the older, quieter hotels. He used a fictitious name in registering, since he felt positive that before morning Enid and Ralph, alarmed by his absence, would set up a hue and cry. He read his evening paper long before turning out the light. It was no newspaper to him; it was an elaborate tissue of fancy he could admit, but never quite conceive. A Sino-Japanese war—peacetime conscription in the United States—Franklin D. Roosevelt president for the *third* time—the Cincinnati Reds holders of the baseball World's Championship—

A mad, mad world, thought Preston. Then weariness overcame him. He slept.

WHEN he wakened, his hand stretched automatically to the head of his bed. When it found no button there, he sat bolt upright, unable to comprehend the room in which he found himself.

This surely was not his home! No sound-proofed walls to bar the din of Manhattan traffic, no servant to answer his signal, no stock ticker conveniently located beside his bed.

Blazes! Had he been drunk last night? He couldn't risk such escapades as that. With the market going hog-wild, fortunes being made by those who bought heavily and wisely, money dirt-cheap and credit unlimited. He had work to do!

But his head felt all right. And the blanket at the foot of his bed bore the interwoven legend, Fountain House.

Fountain House! The name roused a spark in the slower, less certain portion of his brain. And instantly it was clear to him that this morning was but a repetition of yesterday morning, and of the morning before that. Again, while he slept, years of his lost youth had been regained. He was now—he paused to search the knowledge of his "other mind"—he was J. R. Preston. The year was 1926. He was fifty-five years of age.

And he had much to do!

He rose swiftly, phoned room service for his breakfast, showered and dressed before it was brought to him. The fragrance of steaming coffee put an edge to his appetite. He attacked the food with relish.

With relish, too, he read the headlines and saw that his premonition of the night before had been verified. Pushing secondary war *communiqués* completely off Page 1 was a screamer concerning himself. "AGED TYCOON MISSING FROM MIAMI MANSE!" Then, in smaller type, "Jonathan Preston Disappears; Son Posts $1,000 Reward Offer; Retired Financier Feared Victim of Mental Collapse."

"Mental collapse!" sniffed Preston. That was some of Enid's work. Clever, though. Femininely, devilishly neat bit of business. Taking advantage of his disappearance to establish the question of his sanity. "Well, we'll

soon see about *that!*" snorted Preston. He reached for the telephone. "Long distance," he said. Then, "New York, operator—"

His legal representatives were overjoyed to get his call. They had heard of his disappearance. Was he feeling . . . er . . . perfectly well? Where was he? What was this all about? Was there anything they could do—

"There most certainly is!" snapped Lightning Preston. "For one thing, you can stop blithering like an old-maid schoolteacher. Fotheringham! This call's costing me money. I want you to hop a plane and be down here in jig time. Ask for me at the desk of the Fountain House, under the name of James Smith."

Oh, yes, sir! They'd send a man down right away.

"You'll send no one, blast you! Come yourself! And, by the way—" Preston was overlooking no loopholes from now on. "By the way—that confounded son of mine may attempt to tie up my finances in some way or other. Keep him from doing so. Stall him. Get an injunction, or a stay, or a writ of hoopy-coopy or something. But stop him, understand?"

Fotheringham understood, and would leave for Florida immediately.

Preston said, "Good!" and hung up.

It was almost eleven o'clock. Fotheringham would have missed the daily New York-Miami now; he could not very well get here until late tonight or perhaps not until tomorrow.

And tomorrow morning might bring Preston another of those temporary fogs of forgetfulness, such as had disturbed him for the past three days. But he had a plan to counteract *that*. He sat down at his desk, cudgeled his brain, and began writing.

He wrote down everything he could recollect of his experiences during the past three days. Some of it was already more than a little dim in his memory. He knew he had been served by a butler in his own home in Miami, but could not, for the life of him, remember what this butler's name was, nor what he looked like. Only by strenuous effort could he recall the location of his Miami "home." A curious anomaly, he thought. He had lived in that home for seven years. Yet this body he now inhabited had never set foot within it, and there was no recollection of it in this body's younger brain.

But by the dint of much effort, he forced his *other* brain—his three-day-old brain—to relieve his recent experiences. Thus he prepared a diary of the events dating from his ride into the Everglades up to the present moment. He prided himself on remembering such small details as the name of the squawking young woman whom, according to Enid's lie, he had "tried to kiss." Lana. And he remembered the name of the restaurant in which he had eaten last night. And there was something about a stranger—a peddler—a scissors grinder—whom he had met at the pool. The scoundrel had threatened him with—what? The exact nature of his threat escaped Preston.

When this task had been completed, he collected the closely written sheets and pinned them securely to the head of his bed where they would meet his eye

tomorrow morning. He then set himself to the task of devising how best to cope with Ralph and Enid. Rage at their perfidy was the one violent emotion of his renascent existence. Preston was firmly resolved that, come what might, from this moment henceforward, neither of them should ever profit one penny from his wealth.

When Fotheringham came, he would alter his will. He was not quite sure whom he would make his beneficiary. Both his sons now came under the shadow of his displeasure. Ralph, because of his recent treachery; Walter, because of marrying that cheap stenographer in defiance of his father's wishes.

How long ago, thought Preston, had that been? Five—no, almost eight years ago. In '18. Right after Walter's return from France. The "shorter half" of Preston's memory cried correction, and Preston smiled grimly as he realized the interlude had taken place almost twenty-two actual years ago. Where, he wondered briefly, was Walter now? Still out in Cincinnati? Had he a family now? Was he doing well?

Well—what matter? Jonathan Preston's fifty-five-year-old brain still harbored an unbending grudge against his elder son. There was one solution. Should anything happen to him, his money would go to charity. Or perhaps to the foundation of a great, permanent sanitarium beside the magic Fountain! Marvelous thought! A spa, a refuge of health for all aging

humanity. A mecca for the old to which, journeying, they might bring their years and exchange them for new ones!

Not that Preston expected anything to happen to him. Judging by these past few days, he would soon have regained the youthful health and vigor he had mourned. He would have another life before him. After that, another dip in the Fountain, and again Youth! Perhaps, thought Preston dizzyingly, he was immortal! Only by accident—

But it was for the possible accident that he must provide. He had found a way to defy Death, but if anything *should* happen to him, those he despised must not profit by his death.

He had sat long in speculation. He rose, now, and left his room. With time to waste, he wished again to taste the enjoyment he had experienced yesterday; that of seeing a new world through the old world's eyes. The clerk was not at the desk when he left his room key. He went out into the streets.

THE THING that amused him most was that he walked, unnoticed, the white Miami thoroughfares, while his picture blazoned the front pages of newspapers at every corner stand. Ralph, he noticed with grim enjoyment, had raised the ante. There was now a $5,000 reward posted for information leading to the recovery of the missing Jonathan Preston. Preston's photograph was four columns wide across the top of Page 1; newsboys were hawking his name like a litany. But there was little similarity, thought Preston, between that newspaper halftone and the face he saw mirrored in shop windows.

Thus, unnoticed, he spent the late afternoon strolling the business district of this stranger city, reveling in the scents, the sights and sounds of it.

He dined at a quiet restaurant, experiencing a pleasant surprise to learn that wine lists were offered along with the menu. There was, then, no Prohibition in 1941. He had a bottle of excellent white burgundy with his fowl, Chablis '29-Sichel et Fils, and even as he savored its dryness, could not help but marvel at the fact that this wine was warming a body three years its junior.

His greatest thrill, however, came later that night, when he visited a motion-picture house. He was stunned, momentarily, to hear the voices of the actors apparently emanating from their vividly colored images on the screen; then he remembered that both of these devices had been tested experimentally at the period of his last "true" memory. There had even been some talk of an "all-speech" picture in the process of making—a thing called "The Singing Fool," starring a chap named Jolson.

Preston wondered, vaguely, if that picture had ever been finished; if so, had it been successful? Then he stopped trying to rationalize, and surrendered himself to the enjoyment of tonight's film. He especially liked the antics of a character named Donald Duck.

By eleven, he was tired. There was an outside possibility that Fotheringham might have chartered a special airplane, too. So he hurried back to his hotel, questioned the night clerk at the desk.

"Has a Mr. Fotheringham of New York come in?"

The clerk leafed his records languidly, shook his head. "No, sir."

"I feared not. Very well—let me have the key to my room, please?"

The clerk stared at him. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"The key," repeated Preston, "to my room. 803."

"Eight-oh—" The clerk's lips tightened, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. He said in a cautious voice, "Your name, sir. I'm afraid—"

"Pres—" began Preston; then stopped. "Why, James Smith, of course! Come, come, my dear fellow, what's ailing you? What's all this about?"

The clerk's eyes were definitely hard and suspicious now. He made a slight gesture with his hand, and Preston saw a lounging, derby-hatted figure stir from a foyer chair and slouch toward the desk.

"That's exactly what *I'd* like to know," sneered the clerk. "James Smith, eh? Well, it so happens I checked Mr. Smith in last night, and he's a *much* older man than you are. I never saw *you* before in my life!"

Then another voice rumbled over Preston's shoulder.

"O. K., wise guy!" said the house detective. "Will you scram peaceable, or shall I call the cops?"

IT WAS that night, when despite fatigue, Jonathan R. Preston hunched late over the desk of the new hotel to which he retreated, frenziedly scratching a new diary for the morrow's advisement, that he first began to feel the cold shadow of fear upon him.

It was not so much that he had lost his hotel room, and the portion of his money which he had cached there in the desk drawer. He could still contrive to meet Fotheringham in the lobby of the Fountain House, and he had blank checks.

His fear was twofold. First, that should this happen to him again he would not be able to write a "diary" for himself—tonight he found his task ten times as difficult as it had been this morning—and second, that if this sloughing of age continued, he would not be able to convince anyone that he was Jonathan Preston!

There was a third fear, an increasingly stronger and more logical fear, that he did not even dare frame mentally. It was too utterly terrifying. He thrust this thought from his brain, forced himself to bed and to sleep.

His wakening the next morning was again a moment of agonizing uncertainty—but this time he took a grasp on normality quickly with the help of the mnemonic aid on his bedpost.

A glance at his watch told him it was nine o'clock. A glance at the bathroom mirror told him his veins still ran with the magic of the Fountain. His face—somehow tauntingly familiar to him, only slightly gray of temple, firm-fleshed and ruddy—was that of a hale, well-exercised fifty-year-old man!

Fotheringham!

Preston went immediately to the Fountain House. Happily, neither the

night clerk nor the house detective was on duty. His query brought a negative reply; Mr. Fotheringham had not yet come in.

Preston went to the Coffee Shoppe of the hotel, ate his breakfast in reckless haste. The waitress brought him a morning paper, but he could not even interest himself in the headlines concerning himself; he let it lie unopened.

His return to the lobby was perfectly timed. Just as he entered the side door, Fotheringham came in the front, squirreling his head from side to side anxiously, searching for—Preston supposed—him. He hurried forward.

"Fotheringham!" he cried.

The little lawyer smiled falteringly, and heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, it's *you*, Mr. Preston. I was afraid *he* might see me first." He added, "You're looking exceptionally well, sir. The Florida climate—"

"Never mind that! We have more important matters to attend to." Preston literally dragged him to a concealed conversation niche. "You got my telephone call? Did you do what I told you to?"

Fotheringham nodded. "Yes, Mr. Preston. It's all taken care of. It's strange that you should call just five minutes after *he* did—"

"He? Who?"

"Why, your father, of course. I told you when you spoke to me on the phone—"

THE IMPACT of the words struck Jonathan Preston like the crush of a massive fist. For a moment, all was confusion. Then, suddenly, he realized what was in Fotheringham's mind.

The lawyer thought *he* was Ralph Preston! That was why his face in the glass had been doubly familiar to him this morning. He not only looked as he himself had looked in 1921; he also looked like a healthier, less dissipated image of his younger son!

And apparently Fotheringham, in whom he had placed implicit trust, was no worthier of that trust than was this son. He wore the guilty air of a conspirator, and even now he was again craning about to make sure Jonathan Preston was not in sight.

Not meaninglessly, however, had Jonathan Preston been called "Lightning" by his business associates. He took the blow to the heart, but didn't crack under it. His quick brain sought a way to turn this startling denouement to his advantage.

"Yes," he said swiftly. "Yes, of course. I forgot for a moment. I've been so upset about this whole, unhappy affair. But tell me—what did you do?"

"Just what you suggested, sir. Got a court order restraining your father from incurring any new obligations, establishing new contracts or disturbing old ones without your consent. His securities are tied up completely. Also his bank capital. The only persons who have not yet been placed under legal restraint are his investment brokers. I couldn't withdraw his powers there without your signature as power-of-attorney. I've prepared the document—"

Preston waved it away.

"Forget it!" he ordered. "Tear it up!"

Fotheringham stared at him confusedly. "But if he should take a whim to dabble in the market, sir, he could run through all his financial resources despite our other efforts. He—"

"I know that!" thought Jonathan Preston grimly. "I know that very well, you damned, double-dealing blackguard!" But aloud, he said, "I'm sure we can ignore that angle. Too much red tape to bother with. And with my father's present mental state what it is—" He paused significantly. Fotheringham looked ghoulishly eager.

"Is it—" He licked his lips. "Is he—*bad?*"

Preston nodded gravely.

"Awful! He thinks—do you know what he thinks?"

"No."

"He thinks," intoned Preston solemnly, "he's found the Fountain of Youth!"

FOTHERINGHAM gasped, scandalized.

"Gracious! And to think that for years his brain was so keen!"

"Was!" thought Preston. "Was," you hypocritical old witch? It's still keen. Wait and see!

But aloud he said, in what he thought was a good imitation of Ralph's unctuous voice, "Yes, we're all terribly grieved about it. Well, Mr. Fotheringham, I'm sorry to have caused you all this trouble. Had I known yesterday what I know now, I would have advised you to stay right there in New York—"

"New York?"

"Why, yes. You see, the police have picked up his trail. They've learned that he took the New York train yesterday afternoon. Apparently he has some idea of visiting you. I think it would be wisest, therefore, if you returned immediately. If he comes to your office, call Bellevue—"

"But I just got here!" wailed Fotheringham.

"I know. It's really too bad. But you *do* want to co-operate, don't you? Or—" Preston put an edge on his voice. "Or don't you? Perhaps you'd rather I retained some other firm to—"

"Oh, nothing of the sort, Mr. Preston!" Fotheringham babbled hastily. "Of course. I'll be delighted to do anything you think best. And we wouldn't think of having you go elsewhere. Our firm has served your father faithfully and well for more than thirty years—"

"Faithfully and well!" thought Preston. Liar! Humbug! Benedict Arnold in modern dress! But he said, "That's settled, then. You take the first train back to New York and wait. Don't attempt to communicate with me; I'm having our home telephone watched day and night. If anything comes up, I'll give you a call. Good-by, Fotheringham!"

"G-good-by," repeated the lawyer miserably. He had a vague feeling that

he was being shoved around. But there was nothing he could do about it. Now that old Jonathan was roaming the streets with the delusion he had discovered the Fountain of Youth, Ralph Preston was in the driver's seat. "Good-by!" he said. He started toward the door, remembered something, and turned. "Oh, by the way—did you know your brother was on his way to Miami?"

For a moment Preston was caught off guard. "What?" he said. "Brother? I have no—oh!" He was alert again. "You mean Walter?"

"Yes. He saw the newspaper accounts of your father's disappearance, phoned me in New York. I . . . I gave him your Miami address."

The wolves, thought Preston grimly, were descending now. Walter was moving in for his share of the spoils, too. He said, with more meaning than Fotheringham could ever hope to grasp, "Well, I'll take care of him when he comes. Now I must go, Fotheringham. Good-by!"

The lawyer trudged away. Preston let him disappear, then started to cross the foyer. He had taken barely a step when the entrance of another figure caused him to duck behind a convenient potted palm. As the figure paused, looked about querulously, then moved to the desk for information, Preston sidled swiftly out the side door. As he hurried down the street, he chuckled at the confusion he had caused both conspirators. The man who had arrived a few minutes too late was his son Ralph.

THE CASHING of his last twenty-dollar bill at noon reminded him that he must get some money. The problem of doing so, though, stumped him for a little while. He had lots of blank checks, but he could not just walk into a bank and present a check bearing his own signature and payable to himself. Nor could he cash a check made out to "Bearer" without being known to someone at the bank—

Fotheringham's error gave him the answer. If the lawyer had thought he was Ralph Preston, so, too, might the teller at Ralph's bank. A check bearing Preston's signature would pass unchallenged, likewise, since Preston had for years supplied his son with funds.

The only risk was that of actually meeting Ralph at the bank. That, however, was a mild one, and one that must be taken. He hoped Ralph's bank was the one on which these checks were drawn. At any rate, that was the bank he went to, and apparently his guess had been correct, for as he entered, the uniformed doorman nodded politely and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Preston. Any news of your father yet?"

Preston shook his head and moved to the counter. He wrote a check for five hundred—not an unreasonable sum, and one sufficient to tide him over until this period of change should come to an end—then presented it to the teller.

The clerk glanced at the check, then up at its passer. Then the quick suspicion in his eyes faded. He said, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Preston?"

"Of course it's me!" snapped Preston. "Please don't keep me waiting. I'm in quite a rush."

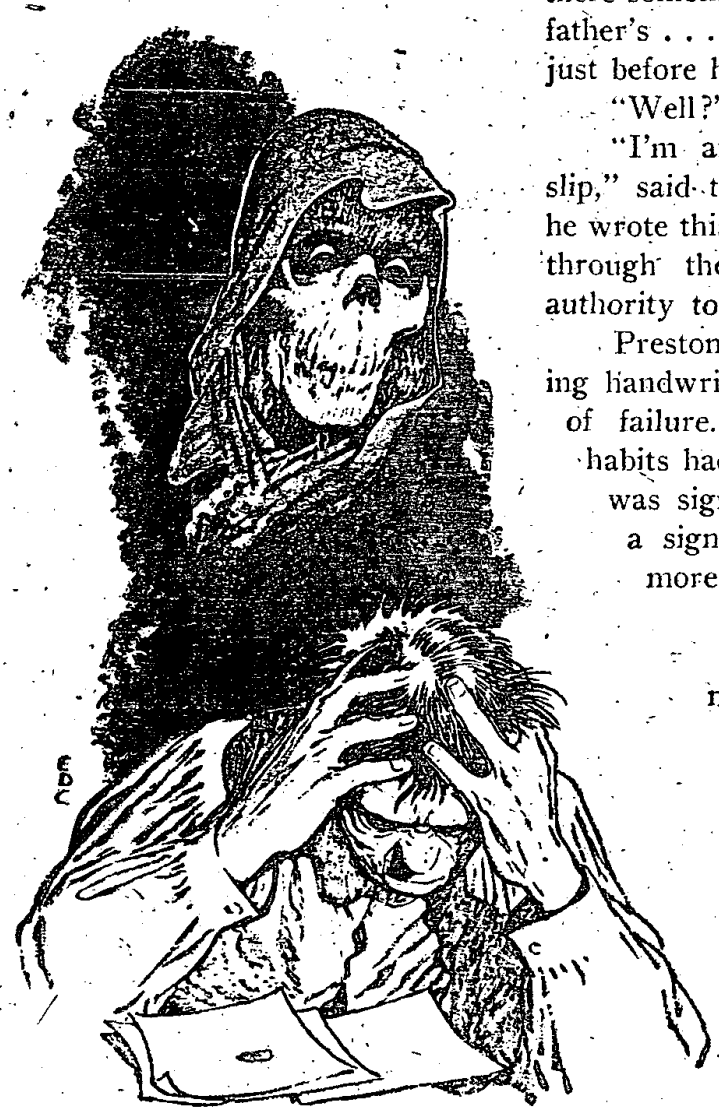
The teller nodded sympathetically. "I know you must be, sir. I've been reading about your father. Too bad. He was a fine old man. I always said—"

"Look," said Preston, "I have no time to waste. May I have the money? Tens and twenties will do."

The teller said, "I know, Mr. Preston. And I'm sure we can fix this up in a few seconds if you'll just wait till I call Mr. Flint. Your credit is absolutely unlimited here, of course, but as a mere matter of form—"

"Wait a minute!" said Preston. Lansing Flint was the last man on earth he wanted to meet face to face. Flint was his son's closest crony, a golfing-drinking-nightclubbing associate; if anyone could pierce his masquerade, Flint was the man. "Mere matter of poppycock! Is there something the matter with that check?"

The teller said soothingly, "If you'll forgive my mentioning it, sir, wasn't there something in the paper about your father's . . . er . . . mind being affected just before his disappearance?"



"Well?" demanded Preston.

"I'm afraid it was beginning to slip," said the clerk regretfully, "when he wrote this check." He tossed it back through the wicket. "We have no authority to honor this signature, sir."

Preston gazed at the loose, scrawling handwriting with a sickening sense of failure. Again his fifty-year-old habits had betrayed him. The check was signed, "J. Robert Preston"—a signature he had not used for more than twenty years—

THE REST of the afternoon comprised the least happy day Jonathan Preston had known since his renascence started. Somehow he beat an exit from the bank before the teller summoned Lansing Flint. He went to the reading room of the Y, there wasted several hours and a dozen sheets

of paper trying to recall the signature that meant the difference between hunger and solvency.

Try as he might, he could not seem to get it. His reflexes were trained to the scrawl that spelled "J. Robert Preston"; they could not smoothly create "Jonathan R. Preston" as some instinct told him it should appear. And he could not take a chance on being arrested on a forgery charge. To be apprehended at this stage of the game would be to give up, forever, all chance of defeating Ralph's aims.

For that matter, he could not go back to that bank again. By this time, some word may have leaked to Ralph of his "visit" there. And Jonathan Preston's "short-term" mind knew of no other bank used by his son.

For the first time in his either existence, Preston went into a sort of funk. He left the Y and wandered through darkening streets, thinking furiously, viciously, but getting nowhere because his every thought was surfeited with a sense of overwhelming odds.

So intense was his preoccupation that he did not even notice the red light, nor hear the cry of warning from the sidewalk, nor the raucous klaxon of the suddenly braking van. His first intimation of anything amiss was the clutch of a hand on his shoulder—a toppling over backward. Then suddenly he realized that his ears were deafened with the scream of grinding brakes, the squeal of tormented rubber on asphalt. A shaken truck driver was leaning down from his cab, swearing jerkily at him through ashen lips. "Ya wanna git *killed,* mister? Good goddlemitey, ya *blime?* Cancha see the lights, mister?"

It had all happened so quickly that Jonathan Preston could not, now, know fright. He felt ashamed of himself for having thus disturbed the poise of a fellow man; he said to the van driver, "I'm sorry. It was my fault. I'll be more careful." Then, as the truck groaned away, he turned to the one who had saved him. "Thank you," he said. "Thanks ever so much. I didn't even notice—"

"Why, that's all right, Jonathan Preston," said the other man. "That's perfectly all right. Don't give me credit. I just did what I had to."

Preston peered at this man who, in a city where none recognized him, called him by name. In the gathering dusk the stranger's face was dim, but there was something vaguely familiar about him. Somewhere he had seen a man in a battered old fedora—a man with a stained, untidy beard, carrying over one shoulder an old-fashioned grindstone, and in one hand a—

"I know you!" said Preston suddenly. "You're the man I met at the Fountain!"

"That's right," said the scissors grinder. "I see you *did* take that dip after all, Jonathan Preston. You look remarkably well. I hope you're feeling well?"

"I'm feeling fine," said Preston. "Never better in my life. You threatened me that day, didn't you? I'm pretty sure you did, but I can't exactly remember."

The scissors grinder clucked reproachfully. They were walking down the street together. He said, "Why, now, I wouldn't put it that way, Jonathan Preston. Warned, perhaps. But not 'threatened.' You see, I knew it would do no good. And I didn't want to see you make a mistake."

Preston laughed. It felt good, because it was his first laugh in hours. He said, "Well, that's where you made your mistake, friend. It *did* do me good. You'll find out. Everyone will see—pretty soon."

"Maybe," replied the stranger cautiously. They had come to a street corner. He stopped, and Preston with him. "Maybe so. I hope everything's going to be all right, Jonathan Preston. I like to be friends with everyone, you know. And I don't want to be hard on you."

"You talk," said Preston fussily, "nonsense! What do you mean—hard on me? I don't understand—"

"But I've got to go now," said the mendicant. "I have a lot of errands to run, a lot of work to do before tomorrow morning. But, look, Jonathan Preston—and remember this. If ever you regret your little dip, remember what I tell you now. 'All things end in the beginning.' Have you got that, now? I'll feel much better about it—"

Preston demanded irately, "Are you crazy? What do you mean? Why, damn you, fellow, you don't *know* what that Fountain did for me! It made me sound again. I'm going to be young again, and strong—"

But once again he was talking to himself, for his companion had vanished. There was only one small house on the lane up which he had strode, and he could not have gone in there because Preston, facing the door, had not seen it either open or close. Besides, the only lighted room in the house was one upstairs, a bedroom. And, as Preston watched, someone within drew down the blind very gently. He thought there came from within the house the sound of quiet sobbing.

He felt better, though, for having talked with someone. He ate and went to his new hotel. He had retained his key this time, and got in without difficulty. He carefully brought his "diary" up to date, pinned it to his bedpost, and went to sleep.

WHEN he woke the next morning, the first thing his eyes lighted upon was the newspaper placed under his bedroom door with the compliments of the hotel management. He got a not inconsiderable shock when he read the headlines: "ITALIANS LOOSE COUNTEROFFENSIVE AGAINST BRITISH!"

But that was impossible! The British and Italians were allies. Only yesterday he had delivered an address to the Brokers' Club on the necessity for unlimited credit to the impecunious Italian government, so hard-pressed by the Kaiser's Austrian partners-in-crime!

Then he saw the other headline, the one devoted to himself, and his "short memory" functioned. He rose, moved to the mirror, knowing what he would

see, for his rejuvenated brain had already advised him that it was the year of 1916, and that he was a trifle over forty-four years of age.

He gained complete command of himself by rereading, as he breakfasted, his diary. He supplemented this knowledge with a careful perusal of the newspaper story. Ralph Preston was becoming increasingly anxious about his father. He had again raised the reward offer. His wife, "one of Miami's most charming social leaders," to quote the newspaper, was prostrated with grief and apprehension—

At this point, Preston sniffed quite loudly. If Enid were prostrated, he knew the reason why. Because his disappearance would delay her getting her hands on his money for a long time—seven years, wasn't it?—until the courts could declare him legally dead.

A small, boxed item caught his eye.

"—meanwhile, Walter Preston of Cincinnati, Ohio, his wife and two children, took up residence in one of the local hotels. 'Though my father and I have been estranged for many years,' Mr. Preston told a reporter, 'I feel I should be here to help in any way possible. Since my brother does not seem to welcome my offer of assistance, I will conduct private inquiry. Any information will be greatly appreciated.'

"Ralph Preston, explaining his refusal to admit his brother to the palatial Preston mansion, said simply, 'I but try to carry out my poor father's wishes. More than twenty years ago he forbade Walter to ever again set foot within his home.'"

Preston stared at the item incredulously. What was that "Estranged"? Walter forbidden the Preston home? But Walter was his first-born, his favorite son! When had they quarreled? And for what reason?

This was some further proof of Ralph's skullduggery. Or, no, it couldn't be that, since Walter himself admitted to being at odds with his father. Preston stopped to puzzle it out. He found the answer finally. His "long memory" carried him forty-four years, up to a day in 1916. His "short memory" had no recollection whatsoever of a "Walter Preston" save as a name mentioned by Fotheringham, the lawyer.

There was within the heart of the rejuvenated Preston no rancor for his son Walter. There was, indeed, quite the opposite! A great, heartwarming affection. Evidently, then, his quarrel with Walter had occurred subsequently to 1916; there was no recollection of it in his present mind.

Preston sighed. He was transcendently happy at his new health and heartiness, he looked forward with joyous anticipation to the conclusion of this rejuvenation process, a settling into normality. But damn it! the magic had its drawbacks, too. Frightful confusion!

But—his jaw stiffened—today was the day on which he had planned to dispose of Ralph. He had pledged himself that should any unexpected fate strike him, Enid and her weak husband would not profit by it. There was no time like the present. He sent for some breakfast. As he ate, he scanned the pages of the local telephone directory.

He found his party at the fourth hotel he called. Yes, they had a Mr. Walter Preston registered. Who was calling, please?

"Never mind that!" said Preston crisply. "Give me his rooms."

A childish-treble answered the ring. Preston, who had been expecting to hear his son's bass voice, almost dropped the telephone in his astonishment. "Hello?" someone said. "Hello?"

"Who," demanded Preston, "are *you?*"

"I'm Johnny," replied the voice. "Who are you?"

Johnny! Would that be, wondered Preston, a diminutive for Jonathan? A strange, almost forgotten emotion choked him. With difficulty, he spoke again, ignoring the question.

"Let me speak to your father," he said.

A moment later, Walter's booming tones rephrased the query. "Hello? Who's calling?"

Preston said, "Hello, son!" He could almost feel the electric shock of his son's excitement.

Walter's voice came back to him in a shout; happy, incredulous, dazed. *"Dad!"*

"How are you, boy?" asked Preston.

"I'm fine. But . . . but I don't matter. How are *you?* And *where* are you? And what in the world is this all about? Did you run away on purpose? Are Ralph and Enid up to something phony? They're acting damned queer. If there's anything wrong, so help me, I'll tear them apart—"

"Easy, boy!" said Preston. "Easy does it! Always impatient, aren't you?"

"I'm impatient to see you. Where can I meet—"

Preston thought of his changed appearance, realized suddenly that it would be altogether too great a shock to Walter to meet a father whom he had not seen for over twenty years, and find him younger-looking than he had been at the time of their parting. He said, "You can't, son. Not just now, anyway. Later, perhaps. Now, listen—"

He chose his words carefully. There was lots to be done, and he wanted to get it over with quickly. "Listen," he said, "how much money have you?"

"Money? Why . . . why, not much *with* me, but my credit is good. I've done pretty well these past few years."

"Good!" said Preston. "I had to be sure. Now I'll tell you what you must do. Get in touch with your bankers. Scrape together every single penny you can beg, borrow, and steal. Tomorrow morning when the market opens, the Preston holdings are going to be thrown onto the floor. I want you to get control of those holdings. So start buying from the word go. And continue to buy, buy, buy, until you've bought up every last iota! Do you understand?"

"No," said Walter frankly. "I don't. Why should you do this, Dad? I realize you're offering me a tremendous gift in a roundabout way. But why—"

"Because it's the last ounce of control," explained Preston bitterly, "I

exercise over my own capital! Ralph and Enid have tied up everything I own but my corporation holdings. But if I milk my estate of those, they'll be left high and dry. Broke! And that's what I want to do.

"Oh, stop asking questions, will you? I'm too busy to explain any more now. I'll tell you all about it later. You just do what I say. You can swing it?"

Walter said, "I . . . I suppose so. Yes. I'm sure of it. But, Dad—if you'll let me come see you—"

"Stay away!" ordered Preston. "If Ralph found out where I am, they might spoil the whole scheme. He's trying to have me committed on grounds of insanity. Nonsense. I'm saner than I ever was.

"There's one thing you *can* do, though—" he added as an afterthought. "Slip a couple of hundred dollars in an envelope and send it to me at this address. Robert Thompson is the name I'm using. You will? Good! Well—see you in a few days then, son. You . . . you have a youngster, haven't you?"

Walter said proudly, "Two of them, Dad. Johnny and Sue. I want you to meet them. And my wife, too. I'm glad our . . . our fuss is a thing of the past."

A thing of the past, thought Preston. To him it was a thing that had never occurred. But he said, "So am I, boy. Well, don't forget. Buy! and keep buying!"

Then he called New York.

"EVERYTHING, Mr. Preston?" bleated his broker wildly. "Everything? But . . . but it will knock the bottom out of the whole market, sir? You can't mean to—"

"Do as I tell you!" snapped Lightning Preston. "I know what I'm doing, McLeod. Start selling the moment the market opens. And keep selling until I give you the order to stop."

There was a moment's studious silence. Then McLeod said, "There's been some talk up here, sir. I hope you'll forgive my mentioning it but—are you sure you're well, sir?"

Preston glanced at his reflection in the mirror of a lowboy and chuckled. "I haven't felt better," he said, "for decades! McLeod, I'll give you a little private tip. Start buying this stuff as it goes on the market and you'll clean up *big!* But don't pass the word around to any of your pals and don't try to grab too much, or by the pink horns of hell, I'll smash you! Do you understand?"

There was relief in McLeod's voice, and admiration.

"I think so, sir. It's a return to the good old days, eh? You're going to show 'em that you can still twist the old cat's tail?"

And the young one's, too, thought Preston grimly. But he grunted assent. "That's right. Now, remember—sell! And keep on selling till I tell you to stop. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. But if anything goes wrong—"

"Call me here!" Preston gave him the number. "But nothing *will* go wrong." And he hung up.

He took it easy the rest of the day. He wrote his diary with especial details as to his plan, lest it escape him overnight, then went out for a stroll. He had dinner in town and complained bitterly about the inferior quality of a white burgundy served him. He was thrilled by a motion picture in color, with speech apparently emanating from the actors on the screen, though a dimly tantalizing pseudomemory advised him he had experienced this same pleasure a day or so before. He found an envelope waiting for him upon his return to his room; it contained money from Walter and a plea that they meet "as soon as possible."

He had beer and sandwiches before retiring. Jonathan Preston, at middle age, had always been a hearty eater. His doctor had warned him that such midnight snacks paved the way for painful stomach ulcers, but this, Preston knew, was so much balderdash. Ulcers were the bogy man of weak-bellied hypochondriacs.

The beer made him comfortably drowsy.

HE WAS WAKENED in the morning by a clamorous jangling at his bedside. He groped for the alarm clock, but it wasn't an alarm; the bedlam came from a telephone. An odd-looking telephone in which mouthpiece and earpiece were curiously joined in one twisted unit. He snatched it up and growled into what he hoped was the right hole.

"Yes?" he said.

The excited voice of his stockbroker yammered into his ear. "Mr. Preston—are you sure you want me to keep on selling? Somebody's buying up the stuff as fast as I put it on the market! At this rate—"

Preston didn't know what the man was talking about, but he had presence of mind enough to keep his mouth shut until he found out. He said, "I'll call you back in a few minutes!" and reached for the closely written sheets of paper at his bedside which, some instinct told him, were essential to comprehension of this weird affair.

A few minutes later he was able to call McLeod with reassurance that everything was running according to expectancy. The broker mollified, though still apprehensive, Preston called his elder son. Walter was almost as apprehensive as had been the broker.

"Dad—is everything going all right?"

"Perfect!"

"I've been buying ever since the tape started. But the more I buy, the more comes on the market!"

"Well, what do you care? You're getting it cheaper now, aren't you?"

"That's just it. The Street's panicky. If Preston securities are valueless, what *is* worth anything? They're wondering. The S. E. C.—"

"Damn the S. E. C.!" roared Lightning Preston. "Has a man the right

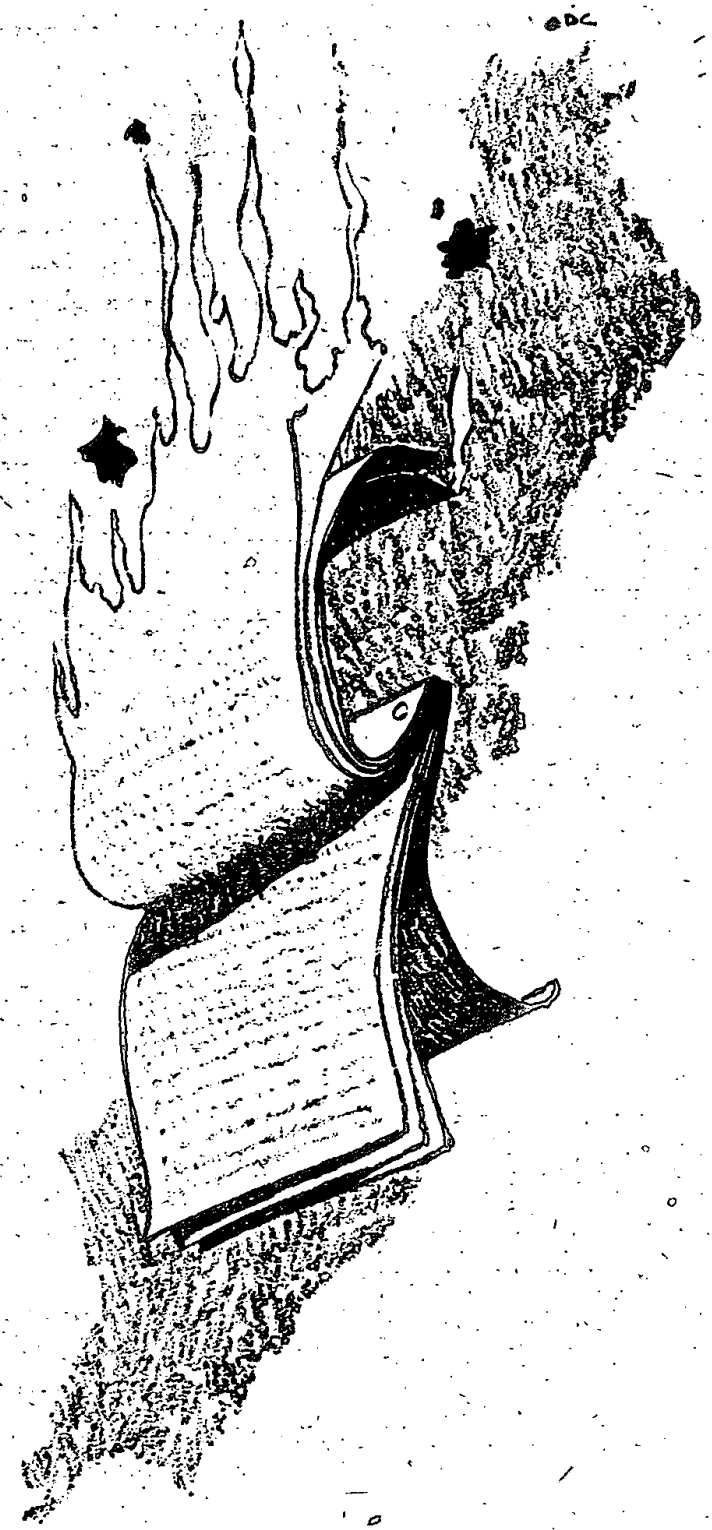
to diddle his own affairs, or hasn't he? Keep on buying! The price will stabilize after a while. When it does, you'll be in the driver's seat."

Walter said, "But I'm getting to the bottom of my resources, Dad—"

"Then borrow! Or pawn your family plate or hold up a bank. Get money somehow. And buy—buy—*buy!*" Jonathan Preston added, more quietly. "You've got to get complete control, Walter. This is the only way I can transfer my wealth to you. Ralph has stripped me of all other powers."

"Ralph—oh, yes! He called me. He's about to have a nervous breakdown. He knows you're behind this, Dad."

"Good!" said Preston. "I wanted him to know. Well, good-by, son!" And he hung up.



He sought a stockbroker's office shortly thereafter; spent the few remaining morning hours and the early hours of the afternoon watching, with grim satisfaction, the cryptic symbols of high finance slide across the illuminated screen.

He saw his own corporation holdings drop steadily for hours. 114—112⅞—109⅛—103—down to 100 even. Walter was making money now, he thought; the securities had a higher appraisal value than that! Then 96—92

—down to an all-time low of 88, matching the Black Friday price of '29 which Jonathan Preston now no longer remembered.

Then the reaction set in. The bulls sharpened their horns, and the bears turned tail for cover. Walter's steady buying began to make its influence felt; a few hopefuls leaped on the bandwagon, and the Street went into a buying frenzy. Preston's holdings, which had led the general collapse, now led the upward surge.

A sudden leap to 95. Another to 100, as the investors belatedly realized they had let a good thing slip through their fingers. Then 105—108½—110— "No Preston stocks available!" Preston heard the local stockbroker wail to a hundred eager would-be buyers. "No Consolidated—no Apex—not a share at any price!" 113—114—then *over* yesterday's quotation—116—120—122—

The juggled holdings were stabilized at 122 when the market closed. Jonathan Preston returned to his hotel. The gamblers in the board room did not recognize in the neatly dressed, thirty-nine-year-old stranger who had stood quietly watching the rise-and-fall of the market, the Jonathan Preston they were so wholeheartedly cussing out.

His phone was screaming madly when he got back to his room. It was McLeod. McLeod's voice was the worse for wear. He croaked hoarse relief at finally getting Preston.

"Mr. Preston, where have you been? I tried to get you all afternoon. Have you seen the papers?"

"I've seen the tape," said Preston. "Come, my dear fellow! Don't chatter like that!"

"B-but you don't understand, Mr. Preston! It's awful! You . . . you've lost everything! Your tail-twisting plan didn't work. Someone was buying all afternoon. You've been completely wiped out! Your estate will be entailed for your debts. Everything is gone!"

Preston chuckled. He said, "How did *you* make out, McLeod?"

McLeod admitted, "I . . . I made a slight profit, sir. I bought, as you told me to. But I don't want it, sir! Not at such a cost. You're welcome to what little I gained—"

Preston was strangely touched. Odd that this chap, whose veins had always seemed to run with the dust of facts and figures, whose fingers were grimy with the ink of stocks and bonds, should turn out to have a heart and a conscience. He said gently, "That won't be necessary, McLeod. That's my gift to you. Thanks for everything. Good-by."

McLeod cried, "But, Mr. Preston—"

"Good-by!" repeated Preston with finality. Then he called Walter. "Well, we swung it, son!"

Walter Preston seemed stunned with his good fortune. He said, "*You* swung it, Dad! I'm rich. Fabulously, rotten, stinking rich! But—I still don't understand why—"

"I'll explain it to you," said Preston, "shortly."

"When, Dad? Now? Shall I come over?"

"No! Don't try to find me. I'm checking out of here in a few minutes." Preston, seeing in the mirror that faced him the image of a man little beyond the prime of life, did not want his son to meet him without being prepared for a shock. If this constant rate of rejuvenescence continued, Preston figured that by tomorrow it would have reached its conclusion. He would have regained, then, the youth and vigor for which he had yearned. That was the time to meet Walter. "Perhaps tomorrow, Walter. Surely not later than the next day."

"Very well, sir. As you say."

Preston said, "By the way, son—don't be surprised if you notice some . . . er . . . change in me when we meet."

"Change?" Walter was suddenly anxious. "You're not ill, Dad?"

"Far from it. But you'll see. Good-by, boy!"

He had, he felt, lived a full and glorious day. He deserved a rest. So he spent the rest of the afternoon and evening luxuriously enjoying the fruits of his newfound well-being. He took a long, sweat-bringing walk through Miami's lovely and extensive suburbs, thrilling keenly to the feel of young, springy muscles beneath him, savoring to the full the rich, tropical scents of orange, palm and mimosa that mingled with the salt of nearby ocean air.

And at night, as he sought his bed in the new hotel to which he had gone, lest Walter impatiently seek him out, he read and reread the columns devoted to this latest evidence of Lightning Preston's financial acumen.

TREMENDOUS COUP ROCKS WALL STREET EDIFICE!

Walter Preston, Son of Missing Financier, Seizes Control of Father's Empire in Daring Attack!

Jonathan Preston chuckled heartily over that. He gained even more pleasure from a brief addendum to the story, though.

Reporters were unable to get a statement from the younger son of Jonathan Preston at the time the paper went to press. Ralph Preston, who was reduced from riches to rags in this afternoon's four-hour cataclysm, was reported to be hovering on the brink of a nervous collapse.

HE HAD HOPED that when he wakened the next morning it would be to look in the mirror upon a Jonathan Preston little changed from the Preston who had gone to bed. That hope, however, was blasted. His reflection showed him a man of thirty-four, a young man, black of hair and keen of eye, somewhat too heavy for the garments he wore, and certainly too youthful in appearance to be wearing an Oxford gray business suit with a piped vest.

He would, Preston knew, have to do something about the clothing situation. It was vitally essential that he be inconspicuous for a while; he could not be so in clothes too old for him and so tight that they strained at every seam.

He went to a clothier's. The salesman looked disapprovingly at the style of suit Preston was wearing, but with approval at its cut and cloth. He said, "A nice suit, sir. Lancaster Brothers, New York, isn't it? The touch is unmistakable. But too old for you, sir! Oh, much too old! A young man like you needs—"

He brought forth a dazzling creation of angular hues gone mad—and Preston shuddered. They compromised finally on a somewhat less gaudy, but still rather blatant, three-button job in shark's-tooth gray, with peaked lapels and welted seams. It needed alterations.

The salesman called the shop's tailor; the tailor sketched soapmarks and mumbled around a mouthful of pins, "You wan dit by dumorrow, mebbe? Or nexd day?"

"This afternoon," said Preston.

The tailor looked pained. "I god ten, perhabs twelf, odor suids come first? Dumorrow morning first thing?"

"Never mind," said Preston, shrugging off the coat. "I'll go somewhere else."

The salesman had sudden visions of seventy-five dollars winging blithely into a competitor's pockets. He said hastily, "It will be ready this afternoon, Mr. Er-umm! Won't it, Jake? *Won't* it?" he repeated dangerously.

Jake sighed but nodded. "Hokay," he assented glumly. "Bud tree o'clock. Can'd ged dit done sooner."

Preston went to a movie. His "short memory" classified these pictorial interludes as a pleasant form of amusement, but his "long memory," which every day seemed to waken fresh and new and startlingly naïve, interpolated a motif of surprise. One part of him thoroughly enjoyed the heroic antics of the handsome Hollywood juvenile and his lissom companion; the other half commented acidly that this form of entertainment could never replace the legitimate stage. These monstrously aggrandized Titans, weaving across a screen in a blaze of light, were no match for the theater of his day.

His day? What was his day? That thought, intruding on him, spoiled his pleasure. Furthermore, he did not feel particularly well. But he remained to the end of the picture, then returned to the clothing store.

The salesman bustled forward buoyantly. "Right on time, Mr. Hrrumph! Your suit's all ready for you. Beautiful suit, sir! You're going to like it. Here you are—"

He thrust it upon Preston, who carried it into the telephone-booth-sized dressing room and struggled into it. It didn't feel exactly right. He didn't know just how poor a fit it was until, a few minutes later, he looked into a full-length mirror. Then he, like the salesman and the tailor who stood beside him, stared hopelessly at a coat which draped on him like a quilt, at trousers too full in the waist which literally bagged at seat and knee.

The tailor wailed aloud, and pins flew. "Vot *is* id? Tventy years I been dailoring gloze; never in my life did I such a misdake make? Id *can'd* be! Either the wrong suid god aldered, else you been *shringink,* misder!"

"It . . . it's the suit!" faltered Preston., "You must have altered the wrong suit!" he said desperately.

But in his heart of hearts, even as he spoke, he knew he lied. He understood, because he knew something that these two men did not. He understood, because the Preston whom he looked upon in the mirror was leaner of face and body than the Preston who had risen this morning. He understood, for he remembered with a dull, sickening clarity that the young Jonathan Preston had always been slender—that it was not until his thirty-fifth year that he had begun to gain weight!

He bought a smaller suit, one that did not require alterations, and wore it from the store. He dumped his old suit into a Bundles for Britain container and set, anxious-eyed, about his search.

For he knew only too well, now, what he must do. This thing had gone too far. The Fountain's magic was working not only up to but far beyond his expectations. He had hoped to find his youth. Well, he had found it. Thirty or thirty-one, he thought, was the perfect age.

But the necromancy showed no signs of coming to an end. Would it, tomorrow say, when he was twenty-five? Or the next day, when he was twenty? Any age beyond that—

He must find the mysterious stranger whom he had met at the Fountain. Somehow and dimly he felt that this queer-talking old codger, with his unsightly beard and old-fashioned grinder, knew the answer to his riddle. Could advise him what to do. Perhaps there was something he had not done right? Perhaps another dip in the Fountain? He knew where it was, or—he stopped in his tracks—did he? The glades. It was somewhere in the glades. A piece of doggerel verse—

But, of course! He had given that to the old chap. He must get it.

Thus he began searching. His search was necessarily an aimless, haphazard one. He did not know the old chap's name, nor did he have a particularly clear mental picture of him. To further complicate matters, he dared not risk going to the police for aid. He did not fear identification. The change had gone too far for that, now. But he feared questioning. With his altered mind in its present chaotic state, there was no telling what fantastic thing he might say, what anachronism of speech or deed might rouse their suspicions.

But he had strength and youth and vigor and unlimited time. He began searching Miami for a sign of the old man.

His quest was even more hopeless than he had feared. He did not find him that day nor the next. After the first few fearful hours, he began asking questions. Guardedly, of course. "Excuse me, friend—have you seen an old chap with a dirty white beard around here? Scissors grinder?"

Always the shake of the head, often the blank response. "No, can't say that I have. Sorry. But I'm a stranger here myself."

Stopping people in downtown Miami. "Excuse me, but have you seen an old scissors grinder around here?"

"Sorry, bud!"

"Excuse me. A scissors grinder. He might be carrying something like an hourglass."

"Sorry." People looking at him strangely.

He almost found him once. That was on the afternoon of the third day of his search. By then he had sloughed off all signs of his once withered age. He was now the slender, tousle-haired Bob Preston he had been at the age of twenty-four. And by now, tormented by fatigue, despair, and a growing anxiety he hardly dared consider, he was willing to ask *anyone* his question.

He asked a traffic officer at a main intersection.

"Pardon me, officer, but have you seen a bearded old fellow around here lately? Scissors grinder chap?"

The policeman bawled, *"O. K., wise guy! Cancha see the lights?* What say, mister? A scissors grinder? Why, it seems like I did see him. Just a few minutes ago."

Preston's heart leaped. "You did? Which way did he go?"

"I didn't notice. Think it was down that way. *Hey, buddy! Walk in the lanes!"*

"Please try to remember," pleaded Preston. "Can't you? It's very important, officer. Well—down that way?" And he started to run in the direction the officer had designated. But the policeman grabbed his arm.

"Hold it, mister! Don't go bustin' out into the traffic like that! Seen a guy get knocked off here no more'n ten minutes ago doin' the same crazy thing!"

PRESTON did not find his mysterious friend that day. He did not find him the next morning, either. But he solved his problem. And the manner of its solution was strange.

He woke at seven, his sensations oddly torn between those of superb well-being and a deep-rooted melancholy. He knew, even before he glanced into the mirror which was fast becoming a horror to him, that he would look upon a stripling barely out of his teens. He was right. The Preston he saw was the young, volatile Bob Preston he had been at the age of twenty.

His faithfully kept diary was more than ever needful these days. Only with its aid could he each morning rebuild about him a recognizably logical world. Otherwise his 1896 brain would have been strained to insanity by the strangeness into which he stepped when he left his room.

He read the diary, realizing with certainty that he must, today, find the stranger in whose hands lay the answer to his problem. After breakfasting, he turned his footsteps toward the one remaining section of town as yet uncombed; the tenement district.

All morning he subjected its residents to the query now grown loathsome to his lips. "Excuse me, but—" And all morning he listened to the inevitable reply. "Sorry—" Noontime was approaching when he came upon a small, heavy-eyed Italian sitting upon the steps of his tenement home.

Preston almost didn't stop. There was such dejection in the little foreigner's attitude that he was inclined to pass him by. But force of habit, the desire to leave not a single stone unturned, the pressing urgency of his own need, halted him. "Excuse me, friend—" he said.

The little man looked at him, and Preston saw that his eyes were red. He had been weeping. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you. But—have you happened to see an old fellow around here? Bearded man with a grindstone slung over one shoulder."

"Yes," said the little man in a lackluster voice. "Yes, I saw him. He was here."

"You saw him!" Preston's hopes flamed. He gripped the Italian's shoulder fiercely. "You mean this is where he lives?"

"No, *signor*. He visited. Last night he was here. I passed him on these steps. But he is gone now. He called on one of my neighbors perhaps; who knows? I have not seen him today."

"But if he visited here," exulted Preston, "someone in these flats knows him! I'll find him now!" He pushed by the Italian, started up the steep steps. But the man halted him. "Please, *signor!* There is no one there now but . . . but my wife."

"Perhaps she knows? Women know all the peddlers—"

The little man shook his head. "I am sorry, *signor*. But my wife, she is dead. She died last night."

It was then that Jonathan Preston terribly knew the identity of the man he had been seeking—

HE COULD NOT afterward account for the remainder of the afternoon hours. All he knew was that he walked. And as he walked, there walked with him a cold, brain-maddening comprehension as weighty as the brazen scales of doom.

He should have known! That was the one tormenting cry that returned to him ever and again, beating at him with the insistence of a recurrent symphonic motif. How could he have been so blind? He should have guessed in the beginning. An old and bearded man—a scissors grinder—a sharpener of scythes—who bore in one concealed hand an hourglass—

The death of the sun, and the cool, scented breezes of evening soothed the chaos of his brain. His madness left him, and he sat down on a park bench to take calm appraisal of his situation.

With the application of reason, all things which he had considered mysteries now became clear. The old scissor grinder's warning. The frightening-swift action of the Fountain. His own rejuvenation, and its only logical end.

The Fountain he found *had* been the Font of Ponce de Leon. That, now, was undeniable. And it did, as legend and the verse betold, "shedde men's yeers." But not as most men thought. Not in the way Jonathan Preston had hoped when, an aged semi-invalid, he had bathed in its lambent green water.

What it did was turn backward the clock of life for him who dipped in it! Stayed evolution toward age, returning the bather back through the days he had lived. Back to the day of his beginning!

To some men, a dip in the Fountain would be a boon. PRESTON could see where a man of, say, forty, with an allotted span of eighty years, would benefit magnificently by the pool's magic. The days of his years would halt and reverse themselves; he would relive, day for day and hour for hour, twenty years of youth and twenty years of childhood.

How many men, long gone, thought Preston, had done just that? How many of those shadowy figures his imagination had conjured from the depths of the evergreen glade had lost their years through the Fountain's "curséd" necromacy? Many, perhaps. Some, of a certainty, else there would have been no legend, no cryptic warning—"Let him all men bewair!" There were folk tales, too, of changelings. Were these once-mature men upon whom the Fountain had worked its magic?

But in *his* case, time had not returned upon itself at a leisurely pace. The days of his years had sped by like lightning—Preston stopped to calculate the rate of speed at which the years had sloughed from him—and since his dip in the Fountain, he had been whirling back to infancy at a rate of five years per day!

Five years per day! Two and a half months per hour—thirty-odd hours each minute—each breath he drew into his lungs sped him backward in time, inexorably, toward that which was now at once the beginning and the end!

That was what the old scissor grinder, whose other name Preston now knew, had meant when he said, "Nothing will really help. Your story is

already written in the book of time—not even the Fountain can help *that!*" He had known that the return of youth, to Preston, could be but a brief, dizzy moment of gladness. And then—the finale. The book of time closed Preston's chapter in his seventieth year; it was but a monstrous joke that he should relive his entire sixty-nine years, eleven months and two weeks in fourteen days' time!

Yes, that was how it was. That was how it must be. No other explanation so perfectly dovetailed with Preston's experiences.

And having gone thus far, he took the last remaining logical step. He computed the little time that was left to him. Even as he sat here pondering, precious moments of this time had slipped away. It was now seven o'clock on the evening of Tuesday, March 13th. He was Jonathan R. Preston, whose age was perilously close to seventy, but whose brain and body were those of Bob Preston, aged eighteen.

There remained to him, figured Preston, approximately three days and sixteen hours. After that—

He stood up. He dared not think beyond that point.

Now that he ultimately knew what lay before him, it was as though a great, oppressive burden had been lifted off his shoulders. All his life, Jonathan Preston had lived beneath a cloud. The secret, dark-flowering fear of Death. It was a fear that had dulled the keen edge of every joy, every triumph and excitement, he had ever known. It had stolen the pleasure of his business successes, had stilled the delights of travel and adventure; its gall had flavored every bite of food he ever ate, fouled every scent he smelled, thrummed an undertone to every music he heard. Fear of Death had been a dark, unwelcome guest wherever Preston had gone. But now it was gone.

It was gone—and his house was in order! His last great fling in business had avenged him of a present wrong, atoned an older one. Ralph's treachery was punished. Enid was broken. Yet Preston knew, somehow, that Enid and Ralph would never know need. Walter would see to that. This, too, pleased Preston. In his present mood he harbored no resentment toward anyone. He did not want his younger son's fate to be too harsh—

Yes, his house was in order. And an ancient dread was gone from his heart. And time was a precious nectar he must drink in haste and riotously before it drip away.

His last night of warm-flowing youth was a night to long remember. What places he went, what sights he saw and what sounds he heard, what things he did with wild, lavish abandon, what joys of youth he embraced feverishly before it should be too late—these were memories to braven a man's heart whatever might afterward come.

But Preston did not remember them. When he wakened the next morning, clear-eyed and quick with health though he had been but three hours abed, his memory was that of young Bobby Preston—whose age was fifteen years.

IT WAS in leaving his hotel, stealing furtively out by a side entrance lest the desk clerk question his right to be there, that Preston realized there was one loose end left dangling in the skein of his waning existence.

The diary he had left in the room of the Fountain House! It must not be found. If Jonathan Preston must fade from the knowledge of man, it were better that his fate forever remain a mystery. The diary must still be where he had left it. The Fountain House was a quiet hotel, and his room rent had been paid in advance; apparently 803 was still reserved in the name of the absentee, James Smith.

It took some little doing. Bobby Preston lingered for more than an hour in the lobby of the Fountain House, trying to figure some way of getting the key to 803 from its pigeonhole. It was impossible. The day clerk hovered before the racks like a brooding mother hen.

Bobby even went to the manager, applied for a job as bellboy. He had some idea of getting hold of the master key— But the manager laughed at him and patted his back pleasantly. "Come back in a couple of years, sonny. You're too young. You should be in school—say, why *aren't* you in school, anyway?"

Preston fled, fuming indignantly. He dared not use the elevators, but he went around through the music room and climbed the back stairway to the eighth floor. Legitimate means were vain, therefore he must force an entrance to the room. He remembered, suddenly, that the maid was accustomed to "airing" the rooms about this time of day. The windows would be open.

Blind luck played into his hands. Beneath the windows of the eighth-floor rooms ran a foot-wide ledge. Plenty wide enough for an agile youngster to walk out upon, skirting the sharp corner of the building after he had gained an exit through the corridor window, facing the wall, pressing hands hard against too-smooth stone, sliding one foot at a time forward, not daring to look down at the streets below, where pygmy humans scurried back and forth, darted in and out of buildings like restless ants.

And then—he was in the room! It was just as he had left it except that his few spare articles of clothing, now valueless to a boy who had that morning been forced to swap "his brother's" new suit for wearing apparel, had been hung tidily in the wardrobe.

The money he had left in the drawer was untouched; Bobby stuffed it hastily into his pocket. Better yet, his diary still lay, sealed and unfolded, on his bedside table. He picked it up—

And at that moment a key grated in the lock!

IT WAS instinct rather than reason that made Bobby Preston leap to the door, slam on the deadlatch. As he did so, he heard a startled exclamation from without; a woman's voice cried shrill alarm. The chambermaid slip-slopped down the hall, bleating.

The ten-day-old brain of Jonathan Preston growled, "Damn!" and the

word sounded strange in the piping voice of Bobby Preston. He was in for it now! But they mustn't find these sheets—

He struck a match and cupped it to the envelope—felt the licking flame scorch his fingers, then tossed the blazing pages out the window. They drifted lazily downward, shedding black, feathery scales as they fell. Bobby ducked for the window ledge.

But even as he did so, the babble of voices sounded behind him, a head popped from the window of the room he had just quitted, startled eyes gleamed angrily as they saw him.

"Why, it's a kid! A lousy little sneak thief. You can't get away, kid! Head him off at the hall window, Bill. You might as well come back, you little punk!"

He was trapped, no doubt about that. There was no way out save down. And down was a long, long way. Bobby Preston gave up. Meekly he crawled back and surrendered himself to the ear-cuffing ire of the hotel detective.

The ride through Miami's bustling thoroughfares in a bright-red police car was thrilling. Bobby Preston would have enjoyed it much more if the gruff, burly officer who drove had let him sound the siren. But he wouldn't. Bobby decided maybe he wouldn't become a cop, after all; he'd be a fireman, instead. Cops were darn old grouches.

Thus swiftly, as the efferyescent thought-processes of boyhood claimed him, did Bobby Preston forget the reason for his being here. A few minutes later he stood studying with wide-eyed interest the interior of the city hoosegow as an harassed desk sergeant grumbled violently.

"There ain't no kid's court till tomorrow morning! We can't keep him here! If anybody found out about it, they'd raise— What's your name, kid?"

"Huh?" said Preston. "My name? Why—" He stopped. There was some reason he should not tell. He didn't know why not, but there was *some* reason.

"See?" complained the sergeant. "A feeb! He don't even know his own name. Ain't that flatfoot got nothin' better to do than nip half-wit youngsters? Lock him up overnight, Flannigan. We'll send him up to J. C. in the morning—"

Thus, three days short of his seventieth birthday, at the apparent age of fourteen, Jonathan Preston, lifelong member of the Civic Purity League and outspoken exponent of firm treatment for petty criminals, was for the first time in his dual existence heaved into durance vile.

Bobby Preston thoroughly enjoyed it. The barred cell was glamorous, and he liked the funny folding cot that hung from the wall. It made him itch, though, when he went to sleep that night.

WHEN HE WOKE in the morning he was scared, because he didn't know where he was. Everything was all wrong. He was not in his room, and

instead of the soft farm sounds he heard mysterious, frightening noises from outside. Barking noises like firecrackers made at the Fair on the Fourth of July, except they were more muffled and regular.

Then a man came and unlocked the door. "Come on, kid!" he said. Bobby shuffled out miserably. His clothes didn't fit right. He was hungry and scared. He didn't know where he was.

He said, "Where . . . where are we going, mister?"

The man had a blue suit with shiny buttons. He had a pistol, too. He took such long steps that Bobby was forced to trot. He answered briefly, "J. C."

"Where's that?"

"It ain't a where. It's a what. Juvenile Court." The policeman looked at him strangely. "They must have been nuts, putting a kid your age in hinky overnight. If you got any folks, they can raise an awful stink about it."

"What?" said Bobby.

"Nothin'. Skip it, kid."

A few minutes later they were standing in a tremendous room, all oak and plaster and shining brass, and an old man in a black suit was staring at Bobby curiously. "What's the charge against this boy?"

A man with spectacles read words Bobby didn't understand. "Petty larceny. Breaking and entering a hotel room with intent to steal, maraud, and otherwise—"

"Petty nonsense!" snapped the old man. "Who brings this charge? You, there . . . you're the house detective of the Fountain House, aren't you? What's the complaint?"

A big man with a red face came forward from the back of the room. He said, "Well, it was like this, your honor. The chambermaid on the eighth floor called and says somebody was in one of the rooms. When I come runnin', I found this here kid—"

He paused to jerk a thumb at Bobby, saw the boy and stopped in mid-sentence.

"Go on!" prodded the Juvenile Court judge. "Go on!"

"B-but that ain't him!" said the detective. "That ain't the kid!"

The old man turned toward the policeman. "Well?" he demanded. The cop shook his head. "It's the only kid was brought in last night," he declared.

"It ain't him!" repeated the detective stubbornly. "I oughta know; I seen him. He was a lot older than this here youngster. They must of made a mistake—"

"Your honor, this is the only youngster we kept overnight!"

"Nuts! You dumb cops pulled a boner. This ain't the kid. I never seen—"

"Boner! Listen, flatfoot, if anybody pulled a—"

"Stop it!" The old man banged a wooden hammer on his desk and Bobby jumped. An embarrassed silence settled over the room. "Am I to

understand," demanded the old man, "there is no charge against this boy?"

"*He* brought it," said the policeman. "He's supposed to identify the kid."

"Not me!" The house dick's face was scarlet. "Not me! I never seen this kid before in my life. Your honor—"

"That's enough of this nonsense! Case dismissed! I hope this child's parents don't press suit against you, sir; they can make it most uncomfortable for you. Officer, see that the boy is given a good breakfast and turn him loose." The old man leaned forward. "Sonny, can you find your way home?"

Bobby's lips trembled. "I . . . I don't know, mister. I—"

"Well, if you have any trouble, go to the nearest police officer. He'll help you. All right—*next case!*"

AN HOUR LATER he was trudging the unfamiliar streets of an unfamiliar city, seeking something or someone he could not name. All he knew was that he was Bobby Preston, whose home was in Burton's Crossing, who was nine years of age and terribly confused because he didn't know where he was.

He was the more confused because way back deep in his mind there was a tantalizing little memory that told him this was as things were and as they should be. Which, Bobby knew, was false. Because he should be in school now. Today was Parents Day. There would be visitors and recitations and prizes for the best at spelling and history and 'rithmetic.

He came at last to a broad, green lawn, sprawling up to a great white house with pillars. He felt, dimly, that he had somewhere seen this house before. But that was a fleeting thought, for as he stood staring at it a boy his own age appeared from behind a clump of hedge, looked at him appraisingly and said, "Hello."

"Hello!" said Bobby. "What you got there?"

"A ball," said the other boy proudly. "An official 'Merican League ball. I've got two gloves, too." He looked lonely. He said, "Want to catch?"

'Sure!" said Bobby. They played, and as they did they moved farther up onto the lawn, nearer the house. The sun was warm and fragrant. After a while the other youngster said, "I'm Johnny Preston. Who are you?"

"I'm Bobby." Again some instinct stronger than himself restrained him from giving his last name, so surprisingly identical with his playmate's. He couldn't explain why. He wasn't ashamed of his name. His father was one of the biggest farmholders around Burton's Crossing. Maybe Johnny *did* have a bigger front yard, but they had a farm and barns and cows at *his* house.

"Bobby what?" demanded Johnny, then forgot his question in disgust as a slim, excited figure came skipping down the lawn. "Aw, nuts! Here comes Sue! Now she'll want to play!"

Bobby didn't like girls, either, but he had to admit Sue had a good idea. She suggested swimming, and the three of them had a good time in the pool beside the house. He had to admit, too, that it was fun playing at Johnny's

house. In the late afternoon a tall, quiet, horse-faced man whom Johnny called "Lorrimer" brought them lemonade and cookies. Later, as they were sprawling on the grass playing like somebody had given them three wishes—"a solid-gold airplane," Johnny would wish for, "with diamond wings!"—a pleasant woman came down to speak to them. Johnny's mother.

It was, she said, almost dinner time. Hadn't they better run along now and get ready? Father would be home any minute. And who was this little boy?

This was Bobby, explained Johnny. His new friend.

That was nice. But it was getting late. His mother and father would be worried about him. Hadn't he better run along home now?

Inexplicable loneliness settled once again on Bobby. His eyes glistened. He had a home—somewhere—but it had disappeared that morning. Disappeared into a strange, warm world where the buildings and the trees and even the things people wore were strange. He shook his head.

"I . . . I don't have any home," he said.

"But your parents, child!"

"They're gone," said Bobby, wistfully.

Alice Preston looked at him, swift sympathy shining in her eyes. She noticed then, for the first time, that his clothes were someone's cast-offs, too large for his slender frame. His hair needed cutting. His face—

She gasped! It was remarkable! Walter would have to see this boy—and there was Walter now, walking to join them. "Walter!" she cried.

The tall, heavy-set man with pleasant smile wrinkles about his eyes linked his arm in hers, kissed her. He shook his head.

"No luck, darling. Not a sign of him anywhere. I don't understand it. I went to the hotel he called me from. They said no man answering that description had registered there. 'Robert Thompson' was a man younger than myself."

"Enid and Ralph?"

"Gone back to New York. They might as well use the town house. Ralph's a changed man. He asked me if I could put him to work in one of Dad's . . . my . . . companies. I'm going to give him a chance. He used to be a pretty fair businessman before he started this 'heavy-society' stuff." He laid aside his personal troubles, scooped his daughter into his arms and ruffled his son's hair. "Well, what have you two been doing all day? And who's *this* young man?"

"I'm Bobby," said Bobby. He liked Johnny's father. He was nice.

Alice Preston said eagerly. "Look at him, Walter! Doesn't he remind you of—someone?"

"Hm-m-m? Why, I don't know that—"

"Look closely! Remember that picture your mother gave me years ago? The one you used to pretend you hated?"

"By Jove!" Preston's eyes widened. "Why, he does, doesn't he? An amazing resemblance!"

Sue demanded, "Who does he look like, mamma? Who does Bobby look like?"

"Your father, dear. He's the image of your father, when *he* was a little boy—"

Bobby had dinner at the Preston's home that night. It was a good dinner. Afterward, as he and Johnny and Sue played parchesi, he heard Mr. and Mrs. Preston discussing him. He pretended not to hear, but he hoped Mrs. Preston would have her way.

"We can't just turn him out into the night, dear," she argued. "He has no home, no family, nowhere to go. We must let him stay here."

Preston said, "We-e-ell—I guess it would be all right. For tonight, anyway. But in the morning I'll try to see if I can find out where he came from. The child can't simply have dropped from nowhere. Where shall we put him?"

"In your father's room?"

So it was that an hour or so later Bobby, with the Preston children, was bundled off to bed in a huge room on the second floor. It was as he entered this room that, for the last time, a dying flicker of memory stirred through him. He experienced a strange sensation of having some time been here before.

But he was too tired to think much about it. The butler, Lorrimer, tucked him into bed and turned the lights out. And Bobby—Bobby what?—Preston? No, that was his friend's last name. Bobby yawned. And slept.

He was wakened in the darkness that precedes dawn by the touch of a hand on his shoulder. When he sat up in bed, there was a figure beside him. The dim silhouette of an old man with a close-cropped beard; a man whose shoulders were weighted with a heavy, awkward wheel.

"I think we'd better be going now, Bobby," said the scissors grinder.

"Going?" said Bobby.

"It wouldn't do to stay here, you know. There's very little time left, and we have a long way to go."

Bobby didn't understand, any more than he understood what he was doing in this strange, big room. But the old man seemed friendly enough, even if his whiskers were untidy. Bobby rose obediently and dressed. The scissors grinder waited patiently. He held something in his hand—a something on which the gray light of false dawn glinted. Bobby reached for it, touched it.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's the Sands, Bobby. You can see they've nearly run out. We must hurry now."

Bobby saw it was an hourglass, something like the one his mother used in the kitchen, only bigger. He saw how nearly all the sand had dripped, now, into the lower bell. But a few scattered grains remained on top, and

these made a hurried, ever increasingly fast whirlpool of black as they trickled into the bottom glass.

"I'm ready now," he said.

HE DID NOT KNOW how long they traveled or how far they went. It was a long, long way. It was dark of morning when they started; they left the city and walked into the girdling woodlands. The trees in the shadows rustled, and the trees in the moonlight glistened. The road was long and dusty.

Then the sun came up, gray-gold and warm. Bobby was hungry, but they did not stop to eat. They hurried on. Away from the paved roads, onto old, forgotten paths thick with neglect. Bobby took the old man's hand for comfort.

The scissors grinder said, "You're not afraid of me any more, Bobby?"

Bobby said stoutly, "I'm not afraid of anything. I'm going to be a soldier when I grow up. I'm going out West to fight Indians."

The sun climbed higher and higher, and Bobby grew more weary. For a while longer he matched the old scissors grinder's slow, forward march. Then he could no longer keep up to him. He was so very small; when he tried to walk it was heel-and-toe; he fell down once, and started to cry.

"It's not far now, Bobby," said the old man. "Just a little while—"

But he picked him up and carried him.

They came at last to a rounded hill, strangely out of place in these miasmic swamplands because its shape was the shape of a noseless skull, and at its base was a little glade of shining evergreen.

To this the old man bore him. In the heart of the grove they came upon a pool. Its waters were cool and green; from its center jetted a Fountain whose soft-pluming waters were like the glory of sunlight on countless precious gems.

Wee Bobby stirred in his guardian's arms as his eye was caught by the dancing beauty; he stirred and cooed and stretched forth tiny, formless hands. There was no thought in his baby mind save a desire to touch this wonder. The old man put him down. He crawled, weaving and uncertain, toward the beckoning Fountain.

He gained it as the bright sun, touching noon, smote the Fountain with a flaming burst of light. For an instant his senses knew the warmth of welcoming waters; the music of the Fountain was soft crooning to his ears. Then there was the rocking-sweet caress of liquid depths—a slow and pulsant happiness beyond conception—then no more—

The last dark mote of sand drifted lazily into the bottom of the glass.

"Sleep well, Bobby," said the old scissors grinder. "Sleep you well, Jonathan Preston—"

Then he, too, was off and away. It was only noon, and he had much work to do.

THE END.

NOT ACCORDING TO DANTE

by MALCOLM JAMESON

Hell wasn't what it used to be—but he found, waiting for him, a very special, private hell all his own—

Illustrated by R. Isip

For a long time he continued to lie face down on the hard pavement in the cold, gray light of that curious land where there was neither night nor day. He had no way of knowing how long he had slept, nor did he care. His sense of time had long since left him. How long, he could not guess. It could have been a matter of hours, it might easily have been an æon or so. He only knew that after seemingly interminable wanderings through dark glades, and after the passage of many rivers, he had eventually come to a place where a path struck off from the broad,

downward highway and led straight up the steep mountainside. He had looked dully upon the two signs, then chosen the easier road. And then, faced with yawning portal in a great, gloomy wall that barred his way, he had lain down to rest.

Before arousing himself he thought for a while on his previous journey, but it was all very vague and nebulous. In the beginning there had been another gate, and chained to it was the carcass of a dog—a three-headed dog, as he remembered it, badly emaciated. He had gone through it and walked along a river—the Acheron. He knew the name, for some historical society had evidently been along before him and marked the old historic spots with neatly embossed metal signs on iron stakes stuck into the ground. He had crossed another river lined with gaunt trees whose charred limbs still overhung the now dark river. It must have been a great sight once, that flaming Plegethon, but no longer. Cakes of hardened asphalt was all that there was left of it now.

And he remembered vaguely crossing the Styx at least fourteen times and wondering at its spiral course. He had done that by means of a modern causeway that cut straight across it, but he had not failed to note the aboriginal ferry landing at the place he first encountered it. He wondered whether the crude skiff lying there with wide-open seams had been the ferry; a peeling sign announced the fare to be one obolus. Another sign pointed toward a low, rambling building covering many acres. It said, "Waiting room for shades." Somehow it suggested that the ferryman was inefficient—or temperamental, which comes to the same thing.

At another river, prompted by the sign, he had washed the blood off his forehead and face and off his bloody knuckles. Somehow he could not recall the other details that went before. That river had been named Lethe. Miles beyond—thousands, for all he knew, and a long way past the dead town of Tartarus—he had come to that steep hill and the path leading up it.

He chuckled as he remembered the signs. The one a little way up the cliff said: "To the Pearly Gates." The one by the road said: "To—" The rest was blotted out, and scrawled below were the words, "the *other* place." That was the work, no doubt, of a prig bound up the mountain.

PETE GALVAN stirred uneasily and began to think of getting up. The stone flags he was lying on had already made deep dents in him and he had rested long enough. The impulse to go on was strong within him. He dragged himself to a half-sitting position and began to regard the dreary landscape about him.

It, like the rest, was gray and formless. Only the wall farther down the road had shape. He dropped his gaze to the stones underneath him and cast about to see whether any of his belongings had dribbled from his pockets to the pavement. His eye caught the inscription on the stone immediately below. It said, curiously enough, "Take this, it will make you feel better." Just that, and nothing more.

He looked at the next one. It said, "I'm sure she will like it." How odd, he thought. The adjacent four or five had simply this: "Never again!" He let it go. He couldn't hope to understand everything he saw. He got up and strolled on down toward the gates.

They were big ebony gates, each leaf a hundred feet wide and three times as high. At the bottom of one a small door

had been cut, and in it a sliding panel, for all the world like the door of a pre-repeal speakeasy. Above the keystone of the granite arch were cut these words:

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter."

"Huh!" commented Pete Galvan. Then he knocked.

No one answered, so he stepped back a few paces and began tearing up the pavement. It was after about the third or fourth of the paving blocks had bounced off the black doors that the cover to the peephole slid back and a beady black eye glared out.

"Knock that off!" came a snarling, screeching voice. But on the instant its tone changed to jubilation. Galvan saw the eye disappear and at the same time heard:

"Hey, fellows, what do you think? A customer! Whee!"

There was a rattle of chains, and the small door stood open. Galvan at once pushed on in.

He was considerably startled by his reception. It was hearty, but brief.

He was hardly inside the place than hundreds of little red imps rushed him, abandoning their card and crap games. The hellions were none of them over four feet high, and all wore stubby little horns like those of a bull yearling. The tiny, ruddy devils were also equipped with venomous, barbed tails which they lashed furiously all the time. Galvan would have been completely bowled over by them, despite their small size, if it had not been that they rushed him from all sides at once.

"He's mine, I saw him first!" was what they were yelling.

But just then a superior demon of some sort made his appearance. He, unlike the imps, was quite tall and had a set of really fearsome horns. He carried a long blacksnake whip, with which, in conjunction with his tail, he promptly began lashing the howling little fiends.

"Scat!" he hissed. "Back—all of you—or I'll take you off the bench and put you back on Cave Relief." He planted a sharp, cloven hoof squarely in the stern sheets of one and drew an ear-splitting yowl. Then he jerked a nod toward Galvan. "Come into the office. Let's see what you rate."

GALVAN FOLLOWED stolidly into a room let into the right-hand tower flanking the gates. The demon sat down on a handy potbellied cast-iron stove that was gleaming ruddily, and began inspecting the grime under his hideous talons. Behind a desk sat a sour-looking and very bedraggled angel.

"Name and denomination?" she asked, acidly, poising a quill pen.

"Galvan, Pete. None," he answered categorically. Then, "Say, what's going on? Where in Hell am I?"

"At the gate, dumbbell," spoke up the demon, shifting his seat slightly. The hair on his goat's thighs was beginning to smoke. It smelled abominably. "Where else in Hell did you think?"

"But I don't believe in Hell," protested Galvan.

"Oh, yeah?" said the demon, resuming his manicure.

"Silence!" snorted the angel, crossly. She was jabbing a buzzer. In a moment an imp came, capering about and making absurd faces.

"Get me file Number KF—2,008,335," she snapped. "And ask Mortality whether they have anything on a P. Galvan, and if so, why they didn't notify me. We could have had the quarantine furnace lit off."

"Yessum," said the imp, and turned a back handspring out the door.

"Not for us," she announced, disgustedly, after a cursory study of the asbestos-bound dossier the little hellion brought back with him. "He's not a Methodist, or a Baptist, or anything. He's not even dead! Belongs in Psychopathic, I guess."

"Nuts," remarked the demon. He spat viciously at a rat that had just nosed into the room. The rat scampered back into its hole with smoking fur, and there was a faint aroma of vitriol in the office. "Not a damned customer in months," he bemoaned.

"You are being redundant again, Meroz," she rebuked him, primly. "What other kind of customer could you get?"

"All right, *all* right," replied Meroz, testily. "Well, what do I do with the gink? He can't go back, and if we send him on by himself as likely as not that W.P.A. gang in mid-Gehenna would grab him and go to work on him. Then there would be Hell to pay—"

"Oh, those unemployed wraith prodders," she admitted reluctantly and with obvious annoyance, "you're right, Meroz—"

"Ha!" snorted he, ejecting two slim clouds of smoke from his shiny vermilion nostrils. "So after eighty-seven millennia of nagging, Eli Meroz is right once, huh? Think of that!"

The Deputy Recording Angel bit her lip. It was a regrettable slip.

"I mean," she hastened to say, still flustered, "that we can't afford to have any more jurisdictional disputes. After that last case the Council of Interallied Hells—"

"Yeah, I know," yawned Meroz, "but I'm asking you—what am *I* supposed to do? This bozo shows up here and some nitwit lets him in. Now *I'm* stuck."

"I know!" she cried. "You can escort him across. I'll make out a passport for him and you can get a receipt from the psychos." She reached for a sheet of blank asbestos.

"You could scratch it on a sheet of ice just as well," observed the demon with heavy sarcasm. He sighed wearily. Hell was not what it used to be.

"Galvan, Pete—U. S. A.—Earth—Solar System," she wrote. "Galorbian Galaxy—Subcluster 456—Major cluster 1,009—Universe 8,876,901—. Oh, bother the rest of it. *They'll* know."

She wrote some more. Then she affixed the Great Seal of Hell and under the stamped name of Satan, Imperator, she scribbled her initials.

"And here's the receipt," she added. "Delivered in good condition the soul—"

"I haven't got a soul," said Galvan, sullenly.

"—the soul of one Pete Galvan," she went on serenely, "a Class D sinner."

"Class D?" demanded Galvan, angry now. "Is that the best I get? After all the booze I've drunk and—"

"Come along," said Meroz, taking a couple of turns around his gesticulating arm with his tail. "You rate the D for vanity—otherwise you'd cop no more'n a G or an H. You gotta be really tough to get up in the pictures in this place. Some day you might read 'Tomlinson'."

The road inside was just as dreary as that outside the big black gate. On every side was the same monotonous gray landscape, broken only by the profile of ugly black dikes. Overhead was a lifeless pall, more like the roof of a vast, unlit cavern than a sky. The only hellish touch was the whiff of sulphur dioxide that Galvan scented once in a

while. On the horizon, far off to the left, was a single spot of light. That was the ruddy glow on the underside of some low-hanging smoke that seemed to indicate a minor conflagration beneath.

Meroz, who had walked this far in silence, gestured toward the glow with his remarkably flexible tail.

"That," he said, moodily, "is the only job we've had this year. A train hit a bus in the Ozarks, and there were a lot of people in it—coming back from a revival meeting."

"Hillbillies," said Galvan, scornfully.

"Yeah," grinned the demon, "but they look good to us. They believe in us. It helped a lot with the unemployment situation. We're practically shut down now, you know."

"I don't get it," said Galvan, ducking and striking at something that had just pinged down and hit him in the back of the neck. He fished out a bit of brown string and threw it away. "I thought you did your stuff for all eternity. What's the line about the 'fire that is never quenched' or something like that? How about the ten billion dead sinners that did believe in you? Awk!"

Something stung him on the cheek, then fell to his lapel, where it stuck. He flicked it off, it was another string—a black one this time.

"Oh, those? They're still going strong. It's this Billy Sunday Wing that's so hard hit. It's the same old story—overexpansion. You see, during that wonderful war you put on to end war there was a great revival of the old-school hell-fire and damnation brand of religion. The Stokes trial may have helped, too, though some of us think the other way. Anyhow, we built this wing. Now look at it. Thousands of square miles of brimstone lakes and not a pound of sulphur has been burned in more than one or two percent of 'em."

"It don't add up," objected Galvan, doing a little mental arithmetic. "You made a crack back there about a lot of millennia. How do you fit that into a quarter of a century?"

"Oh, me?" the demon said. "That's easy. You see, His Majesty knew I was a very earnest tormentor and was already at the top of the imp classes. He promoted me to Demon, Second Class and transferred me here to handle the gate detail. I jumped at it. How was I to know the place was going to be a flop?"

He paused in his stride and produced a flask from somewhere—probably a kangaroo pouch, for the fellow wore no clothes.

"Have a slug?" he offered, hospitably. "It's Nitric, C.P.—a lot better than issue vitriol."

"Thanks, no," said Galvan, sniffing.

The demon took a long pull and vented a grateful hiss.

Galvan winced again as a shiny object bounced off his forehead. He stooped and picked it up. It was a gilt collar button, and had evidently been stepped on. He tossed it away, wondering where it had come from, but Meroz, bucked up by his liquor, was talking again.

"Well, to make a long story short, Old Nick had to establish Relief—"

"In 1920 or so?"

"Yes—way back there. He's very proud of it. It's his own invention, you see, and quite appropriate to the locality. It appears he'd been keeping books on us all along, and everybody knows we are not exactly saints. So first there was Cave Relief, then came the W.P.A.—"

"That sounds familiar."

"Really? Wraith Prodders Aid is the full of it. Nine tenths of our work is

sticking the sinners with pitchforks, as you probably know. Nowadays the old boy keeps 'em busy—well, *reasonably* busy—cleaning up the grounds—"

Blam! A complete 1918 model tin lizzy struck the road not ten yards in front of them and disintegrated into flying fragments of cast iron. It must have fallen from a great height.

"—just such stuff as that," went on the demon serenely, "only it's mostly little things—half strings with knots in 'em and such trash."

"Where," Galvan wanted to know, "does the stuff come from?"

"I'll bite," said the demon, "where does it come from? You know the habits of the living better'n I do. All we know is that it just shows up. It's mostly junk, but why do they send it here?"

Galvan enlightened him.

"I'm damned," was all Meroz could say.

MILES farther on they could hear ribald singing ahead. As they came closer they could see a string of trucks going by on a crossroad. By then the dull-red reflection on the horizon was abreast of them.

The trucks were piled high with lemon-colored sulphur, and on the top of each truck there sat a group of wild imps, waving tridents and singing lustily. Upon sighting Galvan they broke into a string of invective that would have delighted and astonished an old bos'n. But after a sharp snarl from Meroz they cut that out and returned to their singing.

"The next shift going over to No. 16—that's where the Arkansas hillbillies are. That job took quite a lot of 'em off relief, what with the loaders and the brimstone haulers and three shifts of prodders. Besides those you've got to figure two blacksmiths on the job all the time—"

"Blacksmiths?"

"Yeah. Those prongs melt down. They have to weld new ones on every hour or so. Of course, they could throw the shafts away and simply use new ones—Satan knows there are stacks enough of them around, rusting—only"—wistfully—"business *might* pick up."

Eventually they came to the other side. There was another wall, but not so high. In it was set a moderately small gate, with ornamental bronze doors. The demon led the way on up to it and stopped.

"End of the line," he said. "Here's where you get off."

Pete Galvan had passed through two gates of Hell already with the minimum of emotion, but as he stared at this one something flopped inside his viscera and turned clean over. It was with a definite catch of the breath that he read the inscription over the door. It was:

Welcome, Petie!

A bronze plate beside it carried further interesting news. The first two lines read:

Marantha Middlebrook,
Architect and Donor
Anna Middlebrook Galvan,
Assistant and Co-donor

Below was this information:

Messrs. Freud, Jung and Adler, Consultant Soul Engineers, have inspected and mapped this place.

"Well, well," said Meroz, cheerfully, reading over Galvan's shoulder. "Look who I've been with all this time. A guy with a private, personal Hell, no less. Unholy Beelzebub! It must be

something to work in a joint like that."

He suddenly sprouted a pair of flapping bat's wings ending five feet above his head in curving clawed finials.

"But then," he added, "this newfangled stuff is out of my line. S'long, kid, and take it easy. It's the first million years that are the hardest."

With that Meroz polished off another swig of his bonded Nitric and swirled upward and off with a heavy flapping of wings. Pete Galvan watched him go with considerable regret. Then he turned and walked slowly toward the door. Those inscriptions had worried him a lot. For Marantha Middlebrook was his maternal grandmother, and she had died before he was born. Why should she have designed a Hell for him? And yet more mysteriously, why should the other one—Anna, his mother? And then he saw that the door was ornamented with bas-relief.

THE LEFT LEAF carried a representation of a beetling, overhanging cliff with a narrow path winding along the face of it supported by jutting ledges. In the canyon below twisty things were intertwined—snakes or giant worms, they might be either. The right-hand panel was covered with diminutive figures, some running about frenziedly with hands clapped to the ears. Other agonized ones were clawing at the smooth inner sides of eggs that seemed to surround them. And as Galvan looked wonderingly at the designs, the doors opened smoothly and quietly of their own accord. On the other side was—blackness, velvety utter blackness. There was no one, either human or diabolical, in sight. The doors, apparently, had opened of their own accord.

Like a somnambulist, Pete Galvan marched straight ahead into the darkness, and did not notice that the doors folded shut behind him as he did.

It was not until he came up against a wall of cold, hard granite that he looked backward and realized that the dark was all about him. He put out a hand to one side. There was another dripping granite wall; on the other side the same thing, beaded with cold moisture. Galvan experienced a momentary fright—he had walked into a blind alley. He took three hasty steps back—he wanted to get out badly; he had suddenly remembered that Meroz was to get a receipt signed by somebody and had gone off without it. He must call him back. Then he came up against a fourth wall, squarely trapping him.

Cold sweat trickled down his taut face. Something brushed his hair and an upflung hand scraped its knuckles against more damp granite, close overhead this time. Galvan lost all control and screamed. Shrieking, he beat wildly against the hard barriers that shut him in. He felt as if he was suffocating and that his life depended upon his being let out on the instant.

For a long time he kept that up, until he fell panting and sobbing to the stony floor, weak and exhausted.

He must have slept, or fainted. For when he returned to consciousness his environment was so different he knew that the change could not have taken place without his being aware of it. A smooth surface bore down on him from above, barely touching the point of his nose, his chest and the tips of his toes. He tried to rise, but could not. He tried to raise his hands, but could not. They were at his sides, and the pressure against his knuckles told him there were also boards penning him in laterally. Then the awful truth burst upon him. It was a coffin he was in.

He was buried alive!

Again he struggled for breath—that last one, it seemed to be. Yet in his frenzy of despair he screamed without restraint until he could scream no more but lay quivering with helpless panic. In time he lapsed into a state of dull apathy, too weak and hopeless to struggle more. And that was when he noticed the cold draft of air blowing down upon his shoulders.

He pulled himself together and tried to think the thing through. It must be that if he was in a coffin, it was one with open ends. Inch by inch he wriggled upward. And inch by inch he made progress. There was nothing to stop him. He continued, and after he had gone a long foot or so, he was aware there was a little more room around him. A few yards more and there was some gray light, enough to let him see he was in a narrow tunnel. At the end of what could have been an hour he sighted the full light of day—a circular blob of bright sunshine shining into his rabbit warren. He could roll over then and make the rest of the way on hands and knees.

Once he was outside in the blessed space and light, he drew a deep breath and rested, reproaching himself for his mad panic. If he had not let the shutting of the door upset him, he would no doubt have found the tight tunnel and escaped through it long before. In fainting he had doubtless fallen directly before it, and later, in his restless coma, he must have wriggled well into it. So in that manner, strengthened by the glorious sunlit and unlimited space, he laughed the incident off. Now he could get about his business of exploring this Hell his forbears had so kindly bequeathed him. What had he to fear? Had he not already passed the Hells devised by twenty-five centuries of ancestors and been none the worse for it? He began to take stock of this sunlit place where he was.

He appeared to be on a broad stone platform at the base of a high cliff. He got up and walked out a little way from the cliff so he could look up at it better. But to his surprise the flat rock was not so wide as he thought, nor so flat. A few paces away it began to slope down, until it took such a sharp angle that he doubted his footing. Then to his horror he observed that it came to an end another yard below him. And beyond that was nothing—nothing but empty air. Through the violet haze of great distance he could just make out another mountain range on the other side of the incredibly deep valley that lay between the one he was on and it. He stood precariously on the brink of a precipice of unguessable height. And at that moment of horrid realization, his foot slipped!

Galvan fell flat on his face and clung for a while with outstretched hands to the slippery rock. This time he resolutely fought off panic, but he did not dare move until he was quite sure of the grip on himself. When that time came he crawled cautiously upward until he was once more on level stone.

It was clear that he was on the shoulder of a mountain and the ledge he was on curved both ways out of sight. Which led up and which down he could only guess and he told himself it did not matter, though, all things considered, he preferred to go down. But the nature of the ledge soon settled that problem for him. To the left, after about forty steps, he found that it narrowed to nothing. He retraced his steps and

took the other trail. For a well-defined path, he noticed now, led from the mouth of the cavern he had come out of.

The ledge narrowed in that direction, too, but not unbearably. At the end of some minutes he found himself walking along the ledge that was still all of four feet wide, and he took the precaution to keep his eyes glued to the path immediately in advance of his feet. He dared not so much as glance over the edge, for the earlier glimpse of that sheer drop of many thousands of feet had frozen him to the marrow and covered him with goose pimples. Nor did he neglect to keep his left hand trailing against the cliff wall, caressing it with his fingertips as he went along. He was hideously uncomfortable; nevertheless, and it was only the occasional sight of old footprints in sandy patches that reassured him sufficiently to keep him going. If others had come this way, he could make it too, he told himself frantically.

It was when the ledge and cliff turned from stone to clay that cold fear again beset him. His first warning was when his trailing fingers struck an embedded stone and clung to it a moment while he debated exactly where he was going to place his foremost foot next. As he relinquished his hold upon the stone, it became dislodged and thundered down the face of the precipice in the vanguard of an avalanche of loose earth that tumbled down in the wake of it. Galvan gasped and flattened himself against the vertical clay bank as the torrent of dirt and gravel roared past him. When the dust had dissipated, he stared with bulging eyes at the path he had just come over. It was not there! Behind him there was only a crumbly, vertical wall down which a few belated pebbles were bounding. Faint sounds from below told him that the avalanche was still crashing earthward, despite its already long fall.

Pete Galvan's skin was white as snow and as cold as he stood there against the treacherous wall of clay. He was afraid to make a movement, yet he knew he dared not stay. For the path beneath him, disturbed by the recent dirtfall, was sloughing away by inches and sliding into the depths.

With a heart thumping like a pounded tympanum, he forced himself to edge along. A little farther he discovered to his horror that the path was not only narrower—something less than a yard—and softer, but blocked here and there by obstacles. He could step over most of them, but eventually he came to one that was too big. It was a boulder that

stood waist high, and he wondered how it got there, for the cliff above hung out over him like a sidewalk awning.

He paused and studied that boulder for a long time. He must pass it, but how? It touched the bank on the one hand, and protruded over the precipice's edge on the other. It was too high to step over, and the path beyond was too unstable to sustain a body landing from a jump. There was but one course left. He must climb up onto it, then down again.

Pete Galvan bent over and placed both hands atop the boulder, then brought up a wobbly knee. The rock trembled a little and Pete froze in his awkward position. But the rock did not roll, so he transferred a few more pounds of his weight to the pressure of his hands and the advanced knee. Again the rock trembled, but did not roll. With the courage of despair Galvan put his full weight upon it and drew up the idle leg. The boulder teetered wildly, dust rose from the canyon as the rotten soil below the boulder began shedding itself away. The boulder turned sluggishly, then like a startled hare it bounded downward, tons of dry clay tumbling after it.

Galvan leaped wildly forward as he felt the rock turn beneath him. His heels struck the path beyond, and it in turn crumpled beneath him and fell rumbling down the cliffside. He never knew how his hand managed to connect with that root, but it did. An instant later he was dangling over the chasm, clinging to a gnarled tree root that stuck out of the face of the cliff.

To his tortured mind it was all of a century that he hung there expecting every moment to have to let go and drop. Though his eyes were firmly shut, the bare thought of the bottomless abyss under him was vastly more painful than his cramped hand and the agonized arm muscles. He knew that the end was at hand, yet he clung on to the last eternal moment. And then, just as sheer horror was about to turn to black and irrevocable despair, he made that last superhuman effort. Summoning up his last ounce of reserve, he twisted and grabbed with the other hand. It, too, caught a root. He had a respite!

THAT TRIP up the face of the crumbling cliff was as arduous a one as man ever made, but he made it. Though he was winded and weak as a baby, he did not cease his exertions until he had placed a long distance between himself and the maddening brink. He found a spot among some trees on top of that tableland and threw himself down in the grass. He tried to sleep.

A tree nearby creaked. Yes, *creaked*. He thought at first it was a rocking chair with a loose rail, then it seemed that it was a door with unoiled hinges. He listened to its rhythm with growing disgust, but hardly had he adapted his ears to it than the damnable thing changed its rhythm. It not only dropped one creak from the series, but the next three were irregularly spaced. Then it took up another rhythm.

More sounds were added—the zooming buzz of some wheeling insect, now blatant, now requiring straining ears to keep up with it. Then came a pattering, as of naked feet on concrete, a noise that meant nothing to him, but annoyed him intensely; last of all, the raucous "caws" of a race of cynically derisive birds. Galvan stood it as long as he could, then rose and fled the place. A flock of carrion birds he had not noticed earlier rose as he did and sailed in ever-

widening circles above him, swooping now and then as if to bite at him.

Galvan ran on, until he could run no more. Then he stopped, panting. His feet were sore and cut and he wondered how he had become unshod. He had quite forgotten that he had thrown his shoes away while on the slippery ledge. But he wished now he had not, for his feet felt indescribably uncomfortable. They were not only hurt from the running, but some nasty, oozy stuff had stuck to them and was squeezing up between his toes. He looked down at them, wishing for water with which to wash them.

Despite the other horrors of this inherited Hell, he knew when he looked at those feet that he had attained the ultimate. He was standing barefooted in two inches of blended caterpillars and groveling, blind worms, and as far as the eye could reach the ground was covered with them. The vile creatures slithered and crawled, working over and under each other, and both varieties trailed a repulsive slime. But the most sickening detail was that fully half the caterpillars were covered with ulcerated knobs that grew and grew until they burst with a faint plop, throwing gouts of dirty orange liquid in every direction. And wherever those drops of infection struck, fresh ulcers grew. Galvan's own legs were speckled halfway to the knees with dirty orange droplets, and those spots itched unbearably. He watched wild-eyed as the ulcers formed.

He paused in his wild race away just once. That was in a sand spot not quite covered by the odious caterpillars. The violent rubbing with sand that he gave his rotting flesh was only an added pain. Then he knew that sand, or even water, if he had it, would not be enough. He must get somewhere where more drastic treatment—amputation, perhaps—was available, for he could not bear the thought of having those ulcers climb higher than they were already—at midthigh.

He charged on, trampling the squirming, hateful pests underfoot, not caring any longer where he went, so long as it was away from those diseased foul worms. He did not see the edge of the cliff until he was at it. Nothing could check the momentum of his plunge.

Down, down he went, turning slowly over and over as he fell, now glimpsing blue sky and bright sun, now the gaunt face of the unstable cliff, now the canyon bottom rushing up to smite him. He set his teeth and waited—waited for that terrible final impact that would blot out all the other horrors of this Hell.

When it did come it was a blessed relief. He struck headfirst and there was one sharp crack—hardly worse than an ordinary knockout. There was a brief explosion of light, and he slipped into cool darkness.

"He'll do now," Pete heard a feminine voice say, and he felt cool fingers relinquish his wrist after placing it back on the bed. He opened his eyes to see a girl in nurse's uniform and two white-smocked men standing looking at him.

"A-are you demons, too?" Galvan stammered, looking at them with one eye. The bandage over his head covered one. The question seemed to him to be a perfectly logical one. If, as the inscription on the gate suggested, this was his own private and personal Hell, doctors would do as well as anything for tormentors. He couldn't forget a certain dentist.

One of the doctors laughed. "That

is a matter of opinion, sonny. But you'd better knock off going around breaking up religious services or you'll have some real demons after you. The way those Holy Sons and Daughters of the Pentecost went after you when you tried to bust up their service should have taught you that. Do you remember? You started a free-for-all and they crowned you and tossed you out on your ear."

"I don't remember nothing since I washed my face in that River Lethe," mumbled Pete Galvan, sullenly.

The first doctor looked at the second one quizzically. The other nodded.

"It's all in here," he said, tapping a roll of shorthand-covered sheets of paper. "He was delirious most of the night. The nurse on duty recorded the high spots. Most of it is commonplace enough, but what interests me in the case is that it was his own unprompted mind that designed that last gate—especially . . . uh . . . the inscription over it. It is little mysteries like that that make my job fascinating at times."

"Oh. You mean the stuff about his mother and grandmother?"

"Exactly. Of course, we already had a history of dipsomania, and in these ravings we get a glimpse of demonomania, claustrophobia, acrophobia and mysophobia, but those, as you know, are run-of-the-mine symptoms. But he also rather clearly indicates that his grandmother was one of the old orthodox with an active New England conscience. I suspect his mother tried to do without any. He inherited the inevitable conflicts and no doubt added a few embellishments of his own—"

"Say, doc," interrupted Pete Galvan, bored with talk that had nothing to do with him that he could see, "did you know I've been to Hell and back? And what's more, it's a private, special Hell built just for me? Gee, ain't that something!"

But the doctor was looking at him disapprovingly.

"Oh, you don't believe it, huh?"

"Yes, son, I do. You were in Hell the live-long night."

THE END.

★ ★

★ ★

THE CREST OF THE WAVE

by JANE RICE

● He was riding the crest—'til a Delilah and a Judas tipped him into the river. After that—he rode them!

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

BIG MIKE settled back against the dove-gray velour upholstering with a well-fed grunt. His little eyes imbedded in rolls of fat gazed serenely out at the shifting scenery of Lindell Boulevard sliding past the car windows, three-

inch and bulletproof.

Women in furs, their tiny hats and sheer hose belying the scurrying wind that nipped at their silken ankles, and shook cascades of rusty leaves from the threadbare trees to send them whirling in the gutters; the stuccoed Coronado; tall, thin apartment buildings with blank inscrutable fronts; a house, incongruously out of place, draped with dried brown ivy; the Park Plaza with its circular drive of crushed stone and swank iron grillwork; an old crone huddled in her shapeless coat and exhibiting shoelaces, and toothless gums, to passersby; the Chase, its clipped shrubbery curtsying to the wind, its doorman spanking his white gloved hands for warmth. And beyond, Forest Park—the baseball diamonds deserted and forlorn, the trees trying desperately to make their tattered garments cover their twisted limbs; a trickle of people, bent against the wind, coming up the walk from the Monkey House; a small boy jumping up and down on the pedal of a drinking fountain, its bowl stained and discolored and choked with trash.

The car turned left. Neon signs began to make their slow appearance: Italian Spaghetti; Clark Gable in "Boom Town"; Beer To-Take Out; Hamburgers 10c; "Gone with the Wind" at Popular Prices; Thrifty Dry Cleaning, Pants Pressed While You Wait; Closing Out, Everything Must Go, Prices Slashed; Edward G. Robinson in "Brother Orchid" All Seats 15c; Poske's Barbecue; a policeman on the corner teetering back and forth on his heels; Ladies' Entrance; We Buy Old Gold and Silver; a walnut-faced man in a dirty newspaper apron yelling, "Read all about it; big jewel robbery; read all ABOUT it, read ALL ABOU—" His voice was lost in the derisive toot the chauffeur gave the horn as Big Mike swept by.

Big Mike picked up the speaking tube.

"Mebbe we shoulda bought a paper, hey, Joe?" and he laughed a thick, gurgling laugh of padded contentment.

The chauffeur only smiled. It was a mirthless smile, barely curved, and did not come anywhere near the outer corners of his lips. He didn't answer. Which was as it should be, for Big Mike had let the speaking tube slip from his pudgy fingers and had given himself up to meditation.

It had been a haul, all right. Fifty thousand bucks, easy. Of course, the boys had to get their cut but he could tone that down some. He knew how to soap the boys. And then that crook Zacchus wouldn't handle anything hot for less than a third. He ought to have his can spiked. He was *going* to handle it, though, and the way the D. A. was putting on the screws most of the mobs let out a squawk fit to bust your eardrums, if you brought in anything that didn't have six months' age on it. Oh well, say twenty thousand take after the payoff. Twenty G's complete. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Big Mike laughed again. Silently. His stomach shaking like pastry dough. Nobody could say he hadn't made good. Seven years ago slicing up codfish in the Market, resting his hands on the porcelain counter and saying, "What's yours?" to a lot of beefy-faced housewives who watched the scales like a brood of hawks. Well, that was seven years ago. A lotta water'd gone over the dam since then. Seven years. He'd done O. K. Plenty O. K. *Big* Mike instead just Mike. The Kingpin some of them called him. That was him, all right. The Kingpin.

Big Mike heaved himself up by the

window strap and unanchored his watch from its hiding place among the folds of his blue-serge paunch. He picked up the tube.

"Slow down, Joe. Ain't no rush."

He settled back once more against the velvety cushions. Never wait for a doll. That was his policy. Keep *them* waiting. Made 'em feel like they was lucky he come at all. Of course, Flo wasn't no ordinary doll. She had class. Well, wait'll she laid her blinkers on what he'd save out for her. Them sparklers was class, too, all right.

The short, stubby fingers caressed a jewel box beside him on the seat.

Twenty thousand clear. He might even take Flo down to one of them resorts. One of them smart jobs with mineral springs and all the fixings. Nothing was too good for Flo. Funny, her calling him up and asking him to pick her up way out here. She'd never done that before. It'd been his place, or her place, or Garselli's downtown. But that was Flo for you. Just when you thought you had her tagged and figgered, she'd do something and you was right back where you started. She was a pistol, all right. Yes, sir, mebbe one of them ritzy joints with a swimming pool right inside the building. That'd suit Flo to a T.

The car swerved over to the curb and purred to a smooth stop so the rear door was exactly even with the yawning cave of a faded green canopy flaunting on its canvassed sides the legend, "Floor Show Every Hour."

A GIRL in a squirrel-skin coat, with a jeweled butterfly caught in her platinum-blond hair, was standing just inside the gloomy shelter. She was nervous. You could tell by the way she kept touching a sausagelike ringlet that drooped becomingly low over one mascaraed eye. As the car drew up she seemed to grow tense, as if every nerve had gone taut as piano wire. But that was only for a moment—a split second. An instant later her powdered face was wreathed in smiles and, letting her coat hang loosely so that the decided V of her neckline showed like a demarcation on an alabaster column, she stepped swiftly to the door of the car.

Big Mike hoisted himself up and pressed down the safety catch. The door swung open.

"Keep yuh waiting?" he asked.

The girl flashed two rouged dimples at him. "Don't you always," she said archly and kissed him. Big Mike's face was momentarily buried in a full shirred collar of squirrel skin faintly redolent of perfume. And that was where Big Mike made his first and only mistake. And his final one.

Two men, slim-hipped, pinch-waisted, with dark slouch hats, swung from the shadowed twilight of the canopy and when Big Mike looked up he looked right down the barrels of two .38s. His hand darted underneath his coat but he was too late.

Flo, the rouge standing out in symmetrically round spots on her chalky cheeks, backed away—Big Mike's gun concealed in the voluminous squirrel-skin sleeves. Her blue eyes were locked with the blazing slits that were Big Mike's and a muscle at the corner of her mouth twitched, as if it held a hidden spring. She whirled suddenly and ran back under the canopy and up the steps. The blare of a band playing "My Gal Sal," sounded brassily as she opened the door and was cut off with its closing.

The silver and maroon custom-built Cadillac swept away from the curb and

out into the stream of traffic headed north.

All in all the entire performance had taken one and three-quarter minutes.

"WHAT'S the gag, boys?" Big Mike asked softly.

"It's no gag," the slimmest of the men answered. Straight-browed, clear, round eyes, a sensitive flaring nose, he just escaped being handsome. It was hard to say why. Was it the very clearness of those eyes, as if they had been chosen carefully from a vast selection in an optician's drawer? Or was it the immobility of those chiseled features, or the lines of the jaw—too soft, perhaps?

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, Toki?"

"No, I wouldn't kid you," Toki said.

There was a long silence broken only by the traffic noises and the distant melancholy "aug—aug—aug" of a paddle-wheeler loaded with crated poultry and machinery and bolts of bright calico, going down the Mississippi bound for Natchez and Shreveport and New Orleans.

Big Mike picked up the speaking tube.

"You in on this, Joe?"

Joe looked in the rear-view mirror and away again. Muffled and toneless his voice came through the tube.

"Whadda *you* think, Fatso?"

Fatso! He, Big Mike, being called Fatso! His neck above his collar turned an angry mottled shade of red. These—these pipsqueaks with their patent-leather hair and their pasty pusses *daring* to—why he'd *made* them. What'd they been before he took over. Poolroom Johnnies, penny matchers, hanging out on corners and cadging drinks in saloons, and rolling drunks in areaways. And Flo. She'd been a hostess at Saebeck's guzzling ginger ale for Scotch and getting a cut on the bill. Flo! That she would do this to him, to Big Mike. Smiling that smile and taking him for what he was worth. And him not knowing it. That was what rankled. Him being played for a dumb gimp and not conning to it. And all the while Toki biding his time and waiting for a chance to step in. Waiting for a haul like this. Waiting until the stuff was planted with Zacchus and the all-clear signal had gone through. Flo and Toki. Toki and Flo.

"You won't get away with it, Toki."

"No?"

"No."

"Where you're going it'll be too hot to worry about it. If I were you, I'd concentrate on saying prayers—if you know any."

"It may be hot," Big Mike said slowly, "but it won't be too hot for me to make a return trip to see you. That goes for Flo, too. Tell her for me I'll be seeing her. Soon."

"Stow it."

"I'll square this if it's the last thing I do."

"The last thing you'll do will be to kiss the Buckley Bridge good-by."

"So that's it."

"That's it. Now cut the gab. You talk too much."

There was this to be said for Big Mike, he took it without belly-aching. He didn't bat an eyelash. They trussed him up with baling wire and weighted him. Weighted him good. So he'd stay down. When they carried him over to the railing he even derived a sort of grim pleasure out of the fact that it took the three of them to do it and that they breathed heavily, in great, gulping lungfuls.

Funny, he thought looking up, he'd never noticed before how many stars

there were. Kind of pretty. And the sky all pinky in one spot where the downtown lights hit it.

The three men gave a heave and he was clear. He would've screamed then but he couldn't, because there was adhesive tape over his mouth.

There was a splash and a white spray of water and finally only ever-widening ripples mirroring the wavy reflection of the green channel marker.

"Aug—aug—aug" went the paddle-wheeler bound for Natchez and Shreveport and New Orleans.

THE SILVER and maroon Cadillac nosed up to the green canopy. Toki got out and said, "Make it one o'clock, Joe," slammed the door and watched the red taillight until it disappeared. He lighted a cigarette, flipped the match into the street, inhaled deeply, let the smoke dribble from his nostrils and, chuckling, he went inside. He spun his hat through the air to the check girl and walked down the red-carpeted hall to stand for a moment looking at the jammed dance floor, pocket size, and the perspiring Negro band, and the cavorting patrons, before he descended the steps on cushiony tiptoe and threaded his way through the maze of tables and jabbering humanity to Flo.

"Hi ya, gorgeous," he said laying a proprietary hand on her shoulder.

She jumped. "Cripes," she said, "you scared the gizzard out of me."

"What you so jittery about?" Toki sat down and signaled to a waiter in a limp Tuxedo. "A bottle of champagne," he said. "Best you got in the house."

The waiter grinned affably. "Sure thing, Toki."

Toki's hand shot out and stopped him as he prepared to move off. "From now on it's Cruseppi, see. *Mister* Cruseppi. Got it!"

The grin vanished from the waiter's face as if it had been wiped with a damp sponge.

"Yes, sir," he said hurriedly and, giving a jerky little bow, he hastened away calling, "A bottle of Mums for Mr. Cruseppi." He knew his psychology.

Flo relaxed. "Then you did it. No hitch."

"Listen, baby, when I do something, I *do* it."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Say what's eating you anyway?"

"Nothing. Only sitting here waiting like this gave me the wimmies. I kept thinking suppose . . . suppose he *didn't* die. Supposing he got away somehow. The way he looked at me. It was like . . . it was like . . . it was awful . . . like he'd have— Oh, Toki . . . it was awful."

"The guy's dead, I tell you. In three days those Mississippi river cat'll have picked him clean."

"What if he come up?"

"He won't."

"Did anybody see you?"

"Do I look like a goop?"

"Did he say anything? About me, I mean?"

"He said to tell you he'd be seeing you, soon."

Flo shivered. "The way he looked at me," she said.

"Oh, come off it. From now on, baby, you ain't got a thing on your mind but me. Look, I got something for you." He edged a jeweler's box under the table. "Open it under your napkin."

Flo lifted the hinged velvet cover and gave a delighted squeal.

"Oooooooh, Toki!"

"Like it, eh? We'll get you a new

outfit to match and do one of them soup-and-fish joints. Whadda you say? How about the Windermere, Satiddy. They're opening up a new night club on the top floor. The Crazy House. I seen the announcement in the papers. We'll put on the dog. This place stinks. Ain't got no atmosphere. Hey! Waiter! Where's that there champagne. We ain't going to sit around here all our lives."

"Yes, Mr. Cruseppi. Right away, Mr. Cruseppi. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Cruseppi."

"Oh, Toki, you're wonderful."

Toki leaned back and permitted himself to expand.

"I'm riding the crest of the wave, baby. Yes siree, the crest of the wave."

It was quiet down in the shanty boat. Axel Kohler puffed at his pipe and squinted at the oil lantern slung from the cross beam.

"River mighty fidgety," he said.

His wife wiped her hands on her apron and listened. "It's the wind. Been chopping at the river all day."

Axel Kohler puffed on in silence. After a while, he said:

"I can feel her swelling. Uneasylike. Like maybe she had got something in her craw that wasn't settling any too well."

His wife put her hands on her ample hips and surveyed him exasperatedly. "If you're thinking of getting out of mending those fishing nets, you've got another think coming." She waddled over and tapped the homemade barometer. "It's steady. This time of year there's always wind."

Her husband arose and, shielding his eyes with his cupped hands, peered out the dingy window.

"Crested waves," he said, "she's a-trying mighty hard to spit it up." He turned back into the room. "Something's heavy on her stomach. She's riled underneath."

"You talk about that river like it was human," the woman snapped. "Get started on those nets, Axel Kohler, afore I get my dander up."

It was dusk. The hurried bustle of early Saturday night was accentuated by a cold drizzle of rain. The streets were capped with umbrellas. Men walked with their heads down, coat collars up, and here and there a woman scurried for shelter with a newspaper held over her hat. Clerks, salesgirls, bookkeepers, bundle-laden shoppers streamed out of the stores and office buildings, hung by straps in the crowded streetcars, jammed shoulder against shoulder in the busses, overflowed the corners and the yellow concrete safety islands. Lights were going out one by one in the high, soot-stained, rain-streaked towers of business, whose empty corridors were beginning to echo with the shuffling footsteps of bent-backed cleaning women and the slosh of sudsy mops and the scrape of buckets along the tiled floors. And lights were going on in kitchens, in homes, in apartments, in the murky back rooms of taverns, shining out all over the city in tiered squares, chasing endlessly around and around the glittering names on theater marquees, polishing the white raincoats of traffic cops and the drenched boulevards which danced with a thousand smeary, upside-down reflections.

A swell night for a job, Toki thought, going up the steps of the brownstone front; its iron balustrade glistening and wet. A helluva swell night. All of the coppers warming themselves in lunch wagons or parking their number

twelves in doorways outta the rain. Oh well, what the hell. He was in the bucks or would be soon as Zacchus coughed up. He didn't have to worry none for a while. Tonight was his and Flo's night. They were going to eat lobster tails and drink some of that there sparkling Burgundy and have some of them little glasses of stuff—cordial was it?—after they'd finished putting on the feed bag. None of this apple pie alamode. Roquefort cheese with crackers and a cordial, please. That was it. That was the way the highbrows did it. Offhandlike. Didn't even have to pop a gander at the menu.

He opened the door with his latchkey and went upstairs. Place smelled like cabbage. He'd have to look around for something more elite. Apartment hotel, maybe. A quiet one. Genteel. But classy. With a fire escape handy.

He unlocked the door of his room and switched on the light. A faded Brussels carpet, nodescript wallpaper showing pale oblongs and ovals attesting to the pictorial habits of former tenants, a dirty sock hanging limply from the open drawer of a cheap, veneered dresser, a white iron monstrosity of a bed, its thin mattress veiled by a sleazy pink rayon counterpane with a cigarette burn in the center of it, a table boasting a soiled, crocheted doily and a vase of flyblown artificial roses, and a brown paper package.

Toki stopped. His eyes narrowed. His nostrils dilated like a hound dog casting for a scent. That package. He hadn't ordered no package. He approached it warily. There wasn't no name on it. No writing. What th—Maybe Flo'd sent him something. Maybe the boys had bought him a fountain-pen set with engraving on it like they'd done for Big Mike. There wasn't no tick coming out of it, so it wasn't no pineapple, anyway.

He gave it an experimental push. It was heavy. Probably a gift from the boys. Bronze, maybe. He took out his knife, slit the package open and spread the flaps. In the bottom of the box, half covered with a layer of silt and mud, was a roll of baling wire, a jumble of sash weights and a water-soaked strip of adhesive plaster.

Involuntarily Toki took a step backward, his breath hissing out from between his clenched teeth. For a full moment he stood there, his eyes glued to the parcel, the color slowly draining out of his face. Then inch by inch he backed across the room, felt for the China knob with his hand, wrenched open the door and was out in the hall—his heart hammering against his ribs.

He went downstairs and knocked on Mrs. Weatherbee's door. Hard.

Mrs. Weatherbee, a worn, strawflower of a woman with her hair strained tightly back from a worried forehead, eased her door open a crack and peeped out nearsightedly, clutching with one scrawny hand a shoddy Japanese kimono.

"Yes?" Oh. Mr. Cruseppi! I was just laying down. I declare this weather gets in my bones something terrible, though I'm not one to complain if I do say so mysel—"

"I got a package and I—"

"Oh dear, I hope I didn't break anything. It was so heavy. I could've died when I dropped it, and it made the most awful racket. Fit to wake the dead. I thought I—"

"Who brought it?"

"A man. I was out in the dining room setting the plates and the doorbell rang. And I answered it. Raining cats and dogs it was. And there was this

man holding the package and he—"

"What'd he look like?"

"He was big, and kind of solid fat, and he had little squinched-up eyes. I remember his eyes because they didn't move. They stared right straight ahead all the time he was talking. Set, they was." Mrs. Weatherbee drew her dressing gown closer around her neck. "And wet. He was wet as water. Looked like he was soaked through. I'll bet you could've wrung out every last stitch he had on." Mrs. Weatherbee paused in her recital. "He . . . he . . . he looked —drowned," she said.

"What'd he say?"

"He said to put the package in your room and to tell you not to forget he'd be seeing you soon. Why? Is something the matter, Mr. Cruseppi? If I broke anything I'll be glad to—"

"No," Toki said in a staccato voice. "You didn't break nothing. It was some . . . some tools I ordered—some wood-working tools."

Mrs. Weatherbee sighed gratefully. "Oh. Well, I'm glad I didn't break anything." She peered at Toki. "Why you look like you've caught a chill, Mr. Cruseppi. I declare you're real blue. Come in and I'll fix you up a nice cup of hot tea. I declare this weather gets right into the marrow. Makes you feel the nearness of the grave, that's what it does. Come in and—"

"No thanks," Toki said, "I've got a date." He forced his lips into a stiff semblance of a smile and left Mrs. Weatherbee shaking her head and "declaring" to herself.

TOKI WENT DOWN the hall, put a nickel in the coin box of the telephone and dialed a number. He stood with his back against the wall and his body rigid, only his eyes were alive, darting up and down the hall and investigating the deeper shadows.

"Hello. That you, Joe? Toki speaking. Any of the boys been looking for me? Ain't, eh. Well, look, don't pick me up tonight. No. No, I got some things to do. If I want you, I'll give you a buzz. That's right. Yeah, I got a date with Flo. The Crazy House. Yeah. What's that? Yeah, I'm kinda hoarse. Got a cold. O. K., Joe."

He replaced the receiver, sent a probing glance along the hallway, and started back upstairs. He looked over his shoulder twice before he reached the top and he pushed open his door with his foot and stood outside flattened against the jamb, listening, before he went in.

When he opened his door again he was wearing a Tuxedo under his belted overcoat and was carrying a satchel. A heavy one. There was a nick on his chin as if he had shaved not only hastily but unsteadily. He stood for a moment on the threshold and then went back into his room and took an empty box off the table and stuffed it under the bed. He switched off the light, looked quickly up and down the hall, went down the stairs and let himself out into the night.

It had stopped raining but the sidewalks were still wet and puddles had collected where the paving had settled. An occasional car droned by, its tires making a *chzzzzzing* sound on the slick streets.

Toki walked to the corner, turned, went half a block and entered an alley. He lifted the lid off a garbage can, snapped the catch on the satchel and upended it. There was a series of dull thuds. Swiftly he replaced the lid, closed the satchel and retraced his steps. At the corner he hailed a roving cab. "The Windermere," he said as he climbed in.

The thing to do was to keep your eyes and ears peeled and your yap shut. Toki patted a bulge in his coat pocket. And your safety catch off. It *might* be the boys' idea of a joke. Rig some one of 'em out like Big Mike and send him over to see if he crawfished. What was it Mrs. Weatherbee had said? He looked—drowned. The old bat couldn't see worth a hoot without her specs. Like as not it was one of the boys. You'd think they'd have stuck around to watch though, wouldn't you? There wasn't no point in giving the box to Mrs. Weatherbee. Besides it was too damn risky. She mighta took it on herself to open it. Where'd they get them sash weights, anyhow? He'd 'a' swore the ones they used on Big Mike was the last of the lot. What was it she'd said he said—tell him not to forget I'll be seeing him soon.

Toki straightened his lips into a knife-edged line. When you was dead, you was dead. That's all there was to it. There wasn't no way of getting around it. He'd had a aunt when he was a kid who used to claim she saw spooks. Used to carry on regular conversations with 'em like they was setting right there in plain sight. And she'd been clapped in the nut hatch. Well, they wasn't going to clap *him* in no nut hatch. Big Mike was dead. He'd been dead for going on to three days and when you was dead for three days and rubbing elbows with river cat you was deader'n a doornail.

Mrs. Weatherbee had dished him up a lot of mush once about some guy in the Bible who'd been dead for three days and had gotten back. Resurrected was the word. Supposing there *was* something in this resurrection business. Aw nuts, this wasn't no Bible. This was St. Louis. It was probably one of the boys. Probably Joe. Or Nickels. Well, let 'im try it again. He'd pin his nose up for him. They wasn't going to make no booby outta him.

The taxi crawled up in front of the cream-brick façade of the hotel and a doorman resplendent in plum livery and gold epaulets opened the door with a practiced twist of his wrist. Toki got out and put the satchel on the sidewalk. He paid the fare and waved away the nickel change with a lordly gesture.

The doorman picked up the satchel.

"I'll carry it," Toki said quickly.

"Be glad to help you, sir."

"I'll carry it. It ain't heavy."

"Yes, sir." The doorman gave him an odd look.

Toki took the bag and nearly dropped it. For one spinning minute he thought he was going to be sick and his knees felt as if they were filled with milk. He gaped foolishly at the satchel, his mouth tightened into a hideous cartoon of a smile and, moving as if his feet were leaden, he maneuvered the steps and disappeared through the revolving doors.

"WHAT they won't do to save a dime," the doorman observed to the cab driver. "It ain't heavy," he mimicked. "Not much, it ain't!" He spat on the pavement and rubbed it in with his foot. "Felt like it was loaded with brickbats."

"Takes all kinds to make a world," the cabby said philosophically. He yawned, pocketed his nickel, switched on the ceiling light and picked up a dog-eared copy of a magazine from the seat beside him.

"Like ghost stories?" he asked. "There's a dandy in this isue. About a bloke haunting another bloke because this here second bloke, which was his

partner, double-crossed him. Boy, he's got this here second bloke sweating buckets."

"Not me," the doorman said. "Ghosts is the bunk. Give me something real, something that actually happens, some-

The light faded away above as he sank through murky water.

thing I can get my teeth into. Westerns, now that's my ticket. *They're* stories."

Toki didn't go through the lobby. He went downstairs to the lower level, paused at a door lettered neatly "Men," and stalked inside. He took the last stall in the row and waited until a florid-jowled man finished wiping his hands on a paper towel and left. Then he put the satchel on the floor and opened it. In the bottom was a roll of baling wire, some sash weights, and a strip of water-soaked adhesive.

He mopped his clammy forehead with his handkerchief. The door whished open and someone came in whistling merrily, blundered into the last stall, said, "Oh, sorry," and retreated. Toki waited until he had gone. Then he locked the bag, went cautiously out into the gleaming expanse of white tile and mirrors and wedged the satchel behind a low-slung sofa. He went over to a wash-basin and rinsed his face.

A youth in his early twenties came in and surveyed him with tipsy glee.

"You looksh like youshh dwon-dwron-drownded," he hiccuped. "Dwronded in the bottom of the shea."

But Toki had gone. Hurriedly.

The youth's eyes blurred and with intense concentration he re-focused them and stared in bewildered puzzlement around the empty room.

"Sh'funny," he said musingly, "I would've shworn there wash a man in here." He held up two fingers and wiggled them before his nose. "Twoo. A grea' big man. An' a eenshy-weenshy midde-shized man. Dwroned man . . . men." A look of vague queasiness overspread his countenance. He put his hand over his mouth and staggered into the last stall.

Toki hoped Flo had arrived. He needed company. Needed it bad. And he wanted a jolt. A good three fingers. Neat. Clear his head. It felt like it was full of flies. Or angleworms. Like his head was a jar and his brains was squirming around the sides trying to get out. Like they was alive and making snail tracks inside his skull. He'd better get hold of himself. As long as he didn't shoot off his yap he'd be hunky dory. Nobody'd know. No matter *what*, they wasn't going to clap him in no nut hatch. They wasn't going to lace him up the back in one of them sleeveless nightgowns and give him the bye bye. They wasn't going to do it! There was Flo. Now, easy does it. Sweet-talk her. Act natural. Give her the old sauce and sit tight. Don't keep gawping over your shoulder. And get a table against the wall. Yeah, smack against the wall.

"Hi ya, gorgeous. Keep yuh waiting?"

Flo coquettishly lowered one blue shadowed eyelid. "Don't you always," she said, dimpling.

They gravitated toward the elevator and were shot upward by a uniformed attendant who intoned with nasal boredom, "The Crazy House, floor show in twenty minutes, dinner from three-fifty, check room on your right, watch your steppleasethiscarmakesnostopsgoing down."

Toki checked their wraps, unobtrusively transferring the .38 from his overcoat to a cleverly designed inner pocket of his Tuxedo, while Flo with the aid of a vanity case applied another layer of powder on her pert nose. She linked arms with Toki and they went down the thickly carpeted steps into The Crazy House.

It was that literally. Except for a

lurid, surrealist mural over the bar, which was doing a tremendous business at the far end of the room, the walls were solid sheets of mirrors, the kind that are so popular with amusement park concession, and whose sole purpose is to distort one's image as grotesquely as possible. Add to this a red-velvet ceiling draped like a circus tent, a close-packed thicket of zebra-skinned chairs and tables, a maze of white shoulders and brocade and satin and taffeta and fire-struck jewelry, punctuated by the black coats of men, and hazed over with a flickering sheen of candle shine, and all this bounding and rebounding in caricatured deformity from the mirrored walls —and you can well imagine the effect was indeed all that the decorator had striven for. Yea, and full measure, and pressed down, and running over.

Flo squeezed Toki's arm delightedly. "It's the berries," she said.

The maître d'hôtel advanced with remote hauteur. He bowed from the waist.

"You have a reservation?" The manager had sent him up from below to add tone to the proceedings and he was—as a result—in none too good a humor.

"No," Toki said. "But I want a table against the wall."

The maître d'hôtel shrugged expressively. "I am sorry but I am afraid there is nothing available." He brushed an imaginary fleck from an impeccable coat sleeve and waited.

TOKI EXTRACTED a bill from his wallet and folded it carefully so that the denomination was uppermost. The maître d'hôtel assumed a thoughtful expression.

"But, perhaps," he said, "someone has turned in a reservation."

The bill changed hands.

"Right this way, m'sieu," said the maître d'hôtel. The only difference between this man and his lowly brethren at Saebeck's, and Kitsy Dikes, and Roy's Casino was that the maître d'hôtel capitalized on his psychology.

Toki ordered a Martini for Flo and a double brandy for himself. "And don't die," he told the waiter. The waiter didn't. He knew a sure thing when he saw one. This gink was good for about three double ones and the lobster-tail dinner with an imported wine, and an excellent chance to pad the bill on the side.

As a matter of fact he was good for four. They warmed his stomach and relieved the constricted feeling across his chest. They acted as a sporific and lulled his subconscious into a sense of security.

When he'd dumped out them sash weights there was probably some stuck in the bottom, or something. Musta been. After all he hadn't *seen* nothing had he? It was like circumstantial evidence, more or less. Hearsy mostly. And any goof knew you could beat the rap every time on circumstantial evidence. He was Toki Cruseppi, wasn't he? The boss. Sure he was. He didn't have to take shenanigans from anybody. Dead or alive.

He even danced with Flo. And enjoyed it. And he ordered the lobster-tail dinner with the imported wine. And ate it. And he was entertained by the floor show, although in his own opinion they wore too many clothes. And he actually remembered to order Roquefort cheese and crackers *and* a cordial without having to refer to the menu.

Flo was having the time of her life. When balloons had appeared she had popped the nearest ones with her cigarette. Her blond hair was spangled

with multi-colored confetti and the bracelets on her bare arms tinkled together and sparkled red and green and violet when she threw serpentine at the other tables. She wished the other tables would throw some back at her. And she had a hat of cone-shaped crepe paper with rosettes pasted on it. Toki had one, too.

She twisted her neck so she could see their irregular reflections in the mirrors. She giggled. They looked like dwarfs. Little bitty. The hats hardly showed. She punched Toki.

"Look at us," she said, "we're all scrooched up."

Toki obediently swiveled his head toward the wall. And the fatuous smirk vanished from his face. Not all at once, but gradually, as if it had melted by degrees, or had slipped, or been jarred, from its moorings.

Drifting toward him *through* the mirror was the figure of a man, his lips parted in a frightful, gloating grin. He moved slowly with a curious buoyant lift and his scant hair stood about his head and was wafted gently back and forth as if it were washed by invisible ripples of water. His features had the swollen stretched appearance of the drowned and the pallor of his skin was accentuated by a mottled bluish tinge. There was a fragment of muddy weed like a makeshift patch plastered over one of the small piglike eyes. The figure came on, deliberately, and, when it was separated from Toki by only a thin layer of glass, it began to raise its dripping hands, the pudgy fingers curved to fit smoothly around Toki's throat.

There was a crash, the brittle sound of splintering crystal, and Toki, pale as death, faced the amazed Flo across the overturned table. A bevy of waiters materialized, apparently from thin air.

"I'm sick," Toki said harshly. "I'll be back in a minute," and he fled, heedless of the sea of questioning upturned faces, of the dancers, of the tables, of anything at all except the wild desire to get away—as far away as he could—from where he was.

He jabbed the elevator button savagely. Again and again.

He had to get that bag outta the men's room, too. It had his initials on it and, if it was turned in, and the house dick saw them weights, and got to inquiring around, and if the bee was put on him— He felt like he was hollow inside and somebody had poured fizz water in the hole. Big Mike! It couldn't have been Big Mike. Big Mike was dead. Cold as a cucumber. But it *was* Big Mike. And he'd looked at him outta them marble eyes just like he'd looked at Coky Gallagher when Coky had held out on some of the numbers. And two days later Coky had been found doubled up in a trunk in the check room at Union Station.

It couldn't have been Big Mike. But it was. It *was*. Where was that elevator? He pressed his thumb on the buzzer and held it there.

The metal door clanged open to emit a stream of chattering people. Toki was the only one going down.

The elevator plummeted to the lower level and Toki lurched out and in the direction of the washroom. The attendant sniffed. Keep his finger on the buzzer would he. He knew how to take care of those babies. Let 'er ride, straight down the shaft, and bring 'er up short. Look at 'im wobble. *Phftt*, stick your finger on the buzzer again sometime, buddy.

The men's room was vacant. Toki let the door swing to behind him and leaned against it breathing deeply.

drops of perspiration beaded his brow, and his tongue was heavy and thick and glued to the roof of his mouth. Over and over the words chased through his mind in an endless circle of monotony—"Big Mike—he had to get outta here—get that bag—and get out. Big Mike—it *was* Big Mike—get the bag—and get out—"

The light glared from the white walls and ricocheted from the tiled floor. Wadded paper towels spewed from the wire baskets and one of the basins was filled with stagnant water. The room was odoriferous with tobacco, and disinfectant, and liquid soap, and of stale, exhausted air.

Toki swayed over to the sofa and dragged it out from the wall. He grasped the handle of the satchel and tugged it free.

There was a click and the lights went out.

TOKI froze. His eyes strove frantically to pierce the darkness which was illumined only by the dull, red glow of a bulb showing faintly through from the other side of the frosted transom. His ears sang with the desperate yammering of his heart.

"Who's there," he called softly.

There was no answer.

The satchel slid from his cold hands. He drew his revolver from his pocket and, pressing close to the wall, began to work his way toward the door. There was no sound except that of his own labored breathing. He was halfway around before he saw the form standing by the door waiting for him.

The gun fell with a *clang* from Toki's nerveless fingers and Toki, his arms outthrust before him as if to ward off the thing confronting him, began to back away, his throat working convulsively, his voice a shrill, babbling squeal of horror.

The figure came on. Relentlessly. And Toki's very brain reeled with the damp river smell that seemed to permeate the atmosphere. His hip struck a washbasin, he stumbled, and would have fallen if he had not been gripped firmly by two icy hands that slowly, inexorably forced his head down, down, down into the soap-scummed water of the bowl.

He kicked out frantically and his arms flailed in a vain endeavor to grapple with his unseen adversary. But his struggles were impotent on the shadowy mist that surrounded him—a mist as intangible as river fog.

There was a succession of gurgles, the water spilled over the sides of the basin and splashed on the floor. Toki's limbs twitched once, twice, and went lax. And there was silence, except for the *dlop—dlop—dlop* of dripping water.

"HEY, where's the light!" The florid-jowled man was just a bit tight. "By Harry, it's an outrage." He felt for the switch and snicked it on. "Damned outrage that's wha—" His voice tore raggedly and his complexion changed quickly from apoplectic to tubercular. He blinked at the sprawled form with its head in the basin.

"Good heavens!" he said and wheeled on his heel. His voice could be heard diminishing down the corridor. "Help! Murder! Police!" He was not the type of clientele cherished by innkeepers who want to keep their hotels out of the newspapers.

FLO POWDERED her nose and rerouged her lips for the tenth time. Her rhinestone slippers beat an impatient tattoo under the table. She consulted the di-

minutive watch on her wrist and her eyes were angry blue slashes.

Well! This was the first time in her young life she'd been ditched. Ditched. Plain, common, ordinary ditched. And that waiter hanging around the table emptying ash trays, and putting water in the glasses, and rearranging the salt cellars. Thought he was going to get hauled for the bill, did he. She'd show him.

She summond him imperiously.

The only one who was going to get hauled was Toki Cruseppi. And sure as her name was Flo Davis he was going to get hauled, and what I mean *hauled*. She'd make him wish he'd never known anybody named Flo Davis, she'd fix him so he— She halted her thoughts to smile sweetly at the hovering waiter.

"I'm afraid my escort has been taken ill," she said demurely. "May I have the check?"

It came to forty-one fifty. Cripes, they really laid it on.

Flo put a fifty-dollar bill on the silver salver and said graciously, "You keep the change." That'd show him she wasn't no two-timer.

The waiter became suffused with cheer. Could he get modom's coat, could he call the starter and see that modom's car was waiting, could he—"

"Thank you, no," Flo said. Modom's car in a pig's eye. Modom's jitney cab and it'd better not cost more'n three ninety or there was going to be a sore taxi driver. Just wait'll she got her hands on Toki Cruseppi. Ditched. And raked for fifty bucks to boot. Just wait.

She gathered up her long kid gloves and evening bag, arose and swept across the floor and up the steps, trying to act as if she were only on her way to the powder room.

She collected her coat from the check girl and went down in the elevator. Maybe Toki *was* sick like he'd said. So what? If he had any manners, he'd have sent a bellhop or somebody to tell her, and to see that she was put in a cab, *and* to pay the bill. As far as she was concerned he could go take a fast running jump in the reservoir.

Little clusters of people stood about in the lobby talking excitedly and the manager, looking very harassed, was trying his best to break up the groups and keep them moving.

There was an ambulance drawn up outside. The doorman whistled a cab for her.

"What's the matter," she asked him.

"Nothing," he said. "I guess it's some lame brain's idea of a lark." He'd had his instructions direct from the manager, himself.

Flo climbed in and gave her address. The driver folded down the corner of a page of a dog-eared copy of a magazine, shoved in the gears, and they moved out into the night.

THE METER read three dollars and ten cents when the cab drew up in front of the remodeled flat. Thirty cents tip. That left fifty cents. Just enough to buy a few lilies. And Toki'd be ripe for them when she got through with him.

She ran lightly up the steps and into the building.

A girl with her hair in tin curlers and a pink bath towel over her arm trailed her froufrou housecoat down the hall of the second floor.

"Hi," she said. "Have a good time?"

"Swell," Flo answered.

"My, you're sure all diked out." The girl sighed enviously. "I don't know what you've got I haven't got but

whatever it is, it's potent. Go out with one guy and have another guy send you flowers."

"It's my feminine appea— Flowers?"

"Gardenias. I nearly snuffed a hole in the box. You get gardenias and I'm lucky if my boy friend buys me a bunch of cloth daisies for my last year's coat."

"When did they come?"

"About half-hour after you left. I put them out on my window sill so they'd keep. Just a sec and I'll get them." The girl gave her a knowing look and she went off down the hall saying, "Anytime you want to give me lessons, dearie, holler."

Half an hour after she'd left. Toki hadn't sent them, then. Who had? Could it be that man in the Buick coupé who'd given her a ride home that day she'd gone to the matinee at the Bijoux, or the trombone player at Saebeck's. He'd had a crush on her for ages—scared of Big Mike, though. Big Mike. He used to say, "Phfah! Gardenias! Smell like funerals." Flo felt a little chain of goose pimples quiver along her spine. She wondered if she'd ever forget the way Big Mike had looked at her. It was enough to give you the bejums. She pulled herself together at the *slap, slap* of returning bedroom slippers. Well, whoever'd sent 'em would have put a card in the box.

She accepted the white pasteboard carton with careless nonchalance.

"Sure," she said, "anytime. Five bucks a lesson. Give me a knock when you're through with the tub, will you?"

"Oke doke, I'll leave the water running."

FLO LET herself into her suite. She called it a suite to distinguish it from the other apartments whose boudoirs pulled down from a closet in the living room. She always made it a point to add, "Suite 2," when she gave her address to department stores for a delivery.

She turned on the lamps, threw her coat across the flowered-brocatelle arm of a chair and went into her bedroom. Flo really prided herself on her bedroom. It had been lifted bodily out of the Louis Quinze section at Stix, Baer & Fuller and was, as Flo said, a dilly. To be sure the brocade drapes were streaked from the radiator, and the vanity had a whitish irregular splotch on its inlaid top where she had spilled nail-polish remover, but it still looked like the kind of bedroom that might have belonged to Madame DuBarry. Flo was a bit hazy as to Madame DuBarry's identity—anyway a king had been ga-ga about her, and that was enough recommendation for Flo.

She usually walked languidly around her bedroom when she came in, dropping frilly heaps of clothing here and there. It gave her a sense of luxury, even if she would have to pick them up herself in the morning.

But tonight she didn't bother. Her resentment at Toki momentarily shelved, she snapped on the rose silk bed lamp and proceeded without further delay to open the florist's box. She lifted the gardenias out and hunted for the card. There was none. She shook the paper and ransacked the carton and even poked among the silver stems and creamy petals of the corsage. There simply wasn't a card. Anywhere.

That was damned queer. If you sent somebody flowers, you wanted to get the credit for it, didn't you? Unless it *was* the man in the Buick coupé. Maybe he was married or something. You'd think he'd have written a line on it though, wouldn't you? Like, "here's

to the Bijoux," or, "To an enjoyable ride," or something like that. You couldn't tell about married men, though. They were cagy. They might want to eat cake but, by gosh, most of them were darn careful they were going to keep what cake they had at home, too. Well, whoever it was would turn up. They always did.

She'd wear her black crêpe tomorrow. They'd look well on black, and the fox furs, and that off-the-face turban with the veil.

She slipped out of her gown and into a full-skirted moire negligee. And she'd wear the diamond bracelet Toki had given her, *over* her gloves like in the ads.

She took a jar of theatrical cold cream and a container of tissues off the shelf of the closet and walked across to her dressing table to light the tall, thin, lace-shaded lamps on either side of the scrolled mirror. And she'd wear her new doeskin pumps and her— She gave a stifled gasp and the jar of cream fell from her grasp, bounced off the grained wood and rolled bumpily around on the rug.

On the mirror was written in bold, blood-red letters, "It's your funeral." A lipstick, its scarlet tongue blunted, lay on the table top.

—

Flo looked wildly around the room and back at the scrawled words. The cloying scent of gardenias arose chokingly in her nostrils. Her head swam and she gripped the edge of the table to retain her balance.

Who? Her door was locked. Nobody had a key, except Toki. Toki had one. Big Mike had one. But he was dead. Toki. Toki *must* have done it. Why? Why would he do a thing like that? Had he ditched her to come down here and write that on her mirror? That wasn't like Toki. But he *must* have. Why? Why? *What* was her funeral? Was this his way of telling her she was washed up? That there was somebody else? It looked—it looked nasty hanging there in midair like that. Damn those gardenias. They *did* smell like funerals. They did! If Big Mike wasn't dead—but he was dead—his eyes that night she'd—she'd stood there under the canopy—but he was dead. He was. He *had* to be.

There was a rap on the hall door. With an immense effort Flo said, "What is it?" Her voice quavered and broke.

"Your bath's running."

"Thanks."

"What's the matter? You sound kind of shaky."

"Nothing. Nothing at all. See you in the morning."

"Oke doke. 'Night."

"G'night."

Flo took a handful of tissues and wiped the mirror frenziedly. The words smudged and ran together. Another handful, another and another and, finally, there was no trace except for faint pinkish film. She sat down on the French-blue bench and stilled the trembling of her lips with a cold forefinger.

There was no sense in getting excited. It was some of Toki's doings and that's all there was to it. He just had a perverted sense of humor. She'd make him wish it was *his* funeral. She'd knock his props for him! Lord, those gardenias. They made her sick to her stomach.

She put them outside on the window sill.

And nuts with a bath. She wasn't dirty. And, besides, the masseuse at the Adelphia Turkish Baths said that

too many of them weren't good for your skin. Dried it out. She'd turn the water off and nuts with it. What she needed was sleep. She wanted to be in fine fettle tomorrow when she saw Toki. She'd funeral him!

She wrapped her negligee around her and went out and down the hall into the bathroom.

The place was black as pitch. Gladys must have turned on the taps full tilt. Couldn't hear yourself think. Smelled like the pipes could stand some cleaning. A muddy, river smell. Dank. Where was the light chain?

She felt in one of her quilted pockets, found a paper packet of matches and struck one.

The door closed behind her. Softly, Easily.

She whirled. The match burned her fingers. She dropped it and tore off another. It broke in the middle.

"Gladys?"

There was no answer.

"Who is it?" she said hoarsely, tearing at the matches. But there was no reply—only the rush of water into the tub.

A third match flamed and this time Flo didn't know when it burned her fingers. She was conscious of nothing but the blotched, bloated features of the man moving toward her with dripping outstretched arms. She couldn't even shriek. She tried. But her voice was locked fast in her throat. The match burned down to the end, flared, and went out.

Tink—tink—tink—

Mrs. O'Donnell broke off in the middle of a snore, turned over in her mammoth bed and began on a different note.

Tink—tink—tink—

She wrinkled her nose sleepily and hitched up her covers.

—Tink—tink—tink—

Mrs. O'Donnell sat up and listened.

Tink—tink—tink—tinktink—tink—

She switched on the light. A dark, wet stain was spreading over Mrs. O'Donnell's ceiling and a miniature pond was collecting, drop by drop, on Mrs. O'Donnell's pillow.

Her lips blew out in an exclamatory poof, and she got out of bed with an alacrity astonishing for one of her ponderous bulk, to shrug into a shabby bathrobe and stuff her archless feet into broken-down Daniel Greens.

These boarders! Forget to turn the lights out, forget to close the windows so that most of the time she was heating up all outdoors, and the bathtub! This would make the third time in six months. Did they care how much a plasterer charged. Did they care if the ceilings fell down? Did they care about anything but their own sweet selves? Not them! She'd bet dimes to dill pickles it was that Flo Davis again. The worst of the lot. Shiftless, no 'count. What did Flo Davis care if the ceiling fell down and killed innocent people, not to speak of the mess after the plasterer got through, and the *prices* he charged!

Mumbling and muttering, Mrs. O'Donnel climbed the stairs and padded down the hall to the bathroom. Water was seeping along the baseboards and the runner was a soggy mush.

Mrs. O'Donnel bunched her nightgown and bathrobe around her knees, opened the bathroom door, felt blindly for the light chain, and gave it a violent yank.

The bunched clothing unbunched and fell to her ankles where it sloshed loosely in the running water. Mrs. O'Donnell

put a hand on the wash bowl to steady herself, and without taking her gaze from the bathtub, she began to scream methodically, evenly, and with monotonous persistence.

THE MORNING sun tried its best to pierce the gray sky and did succeed in striking a brassy response from the portals of the Windermere before it retired for the day behind its conglomerate layer of sulphurous clouds, gasoline fumes and coal smoke.

The cabby looked up from his paper and frowned. One dumb day, if you asked him. Dead as ditch water. Quiet as an old maid's parlor. The funnies weren't even any good. Same brand of news, too.

Fire on Tenth Street. The regular run of accidents. The Windermere had managed to keep their little accident out of the papers, he'd noticed. Some pull. Shucks, he couldn't blame them, though. It wasn't their fault a bloke with a skizzler full had to pass out face down in a washbasin.

And, let's see, a streetcar smash-up, and a beer truck, and the usual school bus and train, and a hit-and-run in a silver-and maroon Cadillac. Two people killed outright. Joe Somebody and Nickels Somebody-else. The guy driving had escaped. Well, he wouldn't *stay* escaped with that car and that description. Big and fat with small eyes, height five-ten, weight two-fifty, wearing a blue-serge suit believed to be wet.

And a dame had jumped out of a window, or been pushed, during a party and another dame had slipped in a bathtub and knocked herself out long enough to get drowned. He'd had a fare last night at that second address. Or near it. Some looker. Acted like she knew her way around town. He'd bet *she* didn't fall in no bathtub. Not that babe. Not unless there was a bunch of pearls or a stack of dollar bills in the bottom of it. He wondered if it was true that there were more deaths caused in bathtubs than automobiles. He grinned. He'd have to tell *that* to the old lady next Saturday.

The jewel robbery had been solved. A fence named Zacchus—criminently the *names* some of these birds sported—had been caught with the goods. Only one piece missing, a bracelet.

And the ads. Pages of 'em. Sears were having a sale. The old lady was griping for a new ice box. Maybe, he'd get her one. Christmas was coming.

And one of those shantyboat dodos—Krohler was it?—Kohler—had caught a stiff in his fishing net. Haw, bet *that* played hob with your breakfast, brother.

And the weather. Clear tomorrow, not much change in temperature. River 40.8, 40.8, 40.8, calm.

The cabby put the paper alongside him on the seat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, scounged on the back of his neck, sighed gustily, and slept.

THE END.

THE HOWLING TOWER

by FRITZ LEIBER JR.

● On all that bleak plain, there was only a broken old tower—that howled!

Illustrated by M. Isip

THE SOUND was not loud, yet it seemed to fill the whole vast, darkening plain, and the palely luminous, hollow sky. A wailing and howling, so faint and monotonous that it might have been inaudible save for the pulsing rise and fall. An ancient, ominous sound that was somehow in harmony with the wild, sparsely vegetated landscape and the strange, barbaric garb of the three men who sheltered in a little dip in the ground, lying close to a dying fire.

"Wolves, would you say, Fafhrd?" questioned the small man.

The tall barbarian raised himself on one elbow and pushed back his long, tangled, copper hair to listen better. His shaggy cloak fell away from his massive shoulders. Firelight gleamed on a brooch of beaten gold and a brass dagger pommel; glinted in his somber green eyes. After a while he lay back.

"Wolves, perhaps. I have heard them howl that way on the Cold Waste when they hunted me down. Yet there's a difference, Gray Mouser."

The Mouser pulled his gray woolen cloak closer around him. Then they looked at the third man, who had not spoken. The third man was meanly clad, and his cloak was a little ragged and the scabbard of his short sword was frayed. With surprise, they saw that his eyes stared, white circled, from his pinched, leathery face and that he trembled.

"You've been over these plains many times before," Fafhrd said to him, speaking the guttural language of the guide. "That's why we've asked you to show us the way. You must know this country well." The last six words pointed the question.

The guide gulped, nodded jerkily. "I've heard it before, not so loud," he said in a quick, vague voice. "Not at this time of year. Men have been known to vanish. There are stories. They say men hear it in their dreams and are lured away—not a good sound."

"No wolf's a good wolf," rumbled Fafhrd amusedly.

It was still light enough for the Mouser to catch the obstinate, guarded look on the guide's face as he answered.

"I never saw a wolf in these parts, nor spoke with a man who killed one." He paused, then rambled off abstractedly. "They tell of an old tower somewhere out on the plains. They say the sound is strongest there. I have not seen it. They say—"

Abruptly he stopped. He was not trembling now; seemed withdrawn into himself. The Mouser prodded him with a few tempting questions, but the answers were a little more than mouth noises, neither affirmative nor negative.

The fire glowed through white ashes, died. A little wind rustled the scant grasses. The sound had ceased now, or else it had sunk so deeply into their minds that it was no longer audible. The Mouser, peering sleepily over the humped horizon of Fafhrd's great cloaked body, turned his thoughts to far-

You'll drink it yourself this time, Wizard!"

off, many-taverned Lankhmar, the homeland to which he and Fafhrd were seeking to return, leagues and leagues away across alien lands and a whole uncharted ocean. The limitless darkness pressed down.

NEXT MORNING the guide was gone. Fafhrd laughed and made light of the occurrence as he stood stretching and snuffing the cool, clear air.

"Foh! I could tell these plains were not to his liking, for all his talk of having crossed them seven times. A bundle of superstitious fears! You saw how he quaked when the little wolves began to howl. My word on it, he's run back to his friends we left at the last water."

The Mouser, fruitlessly scanning the empty horizon, nodded. Indeed, there seemed no other explanation. To have gotten away without waking them, the man must have crept with intentional noiselessness. The Mouser felt through his pouch.

"Well, at least he's not robbed us—except for the two gold pieces we gave him to bind the bargain."

Fafhrd's laughter pealed and he thumped the Mouser between the shoulder blades. The Mouser caught him by the wrist, threw him with a twist and a roll, and they wrestled on the ground until the Mouser was pinned.

"Come on," grinned Fafhrd, springing up. "It won't be the first time we've traveled strange country alone."

They tramped far that day. The springiness of the Mouser's wiry body enabled him to keep up with Fafhrd's long strides. Toward evening a whirring arrow from Fafhrd's bow brought down a sort of small antelope with delicately ridged horns. A little earlier they had found a clear, unsullied waterhole and filled their skin bags. When the late summer sunset came, they made camp and munched carefully broiled loin and crisped bits of fat.

The Mouser sucked his lips and fingers clean, then strolled to the top of a small nearby hummock to survey the line of their next day's march. The sun haze that had curtailed vision during the afternoon was gone now, and he could peer far over the rolling, swelling grasslands through the cool, pellucid air. At that moment the road to Lankhmar did not seem so long, or so weary. Then his sharp eyes spied an irregularity in the horizon toward which they were tending. Too distinct for trees, too evenly shaped for a rock; and he had seen no trees or rocks in this country. It stood out sharp and tiny against the pale sky. No, it was built by man; a tower of some sort.

At that moment the sound returned. It seemed to come from everywhere at once; as if the sky itself were wailing faintly, as if the wide, solid ground were baying mournfully. It was louder this time, and there was in it a strange confusion of sadness and threat, grief and menace.

Fafhrd jumped to his feet and waved his arms wildly, and the Mouser heard him bellow out in a great, jovial voice, "Come, little wolves, come and share our fire and singe your cold noses. I will send my bronze-beaked birds winging to welcome you, and my friend will show you how a slung stone can buzz like a bee. We will teach you the mysteries of sword and ax. Come, little wolves, and be guests of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser!"

The huge laugh with which he ended this challenge drowned out the alien sound, and it seemed slow in reasserting itself, as though laughter were a stronger thing. The Mouser felt

cheered, and it was with a light heart that he told Fafhrd of what he had seen, and reminded him of what the guide had said about the noise and the tower.

Fafhrd only laughed again and guessed, "Perhaps the sad, furry ones have a den there. We shall find out tomorrow, since we go that way. I would like to kill a wolf."

The big man was in a jolly mood and would not talk with the Mouser about serious or melancholy things. Instead, he sang drinking songs and repeated old tavern jokes, chuckling hugely and claiming that they made him feel as drunk as wine. He kept up such an incessant clamor that the Mouser could not tell whether the strange howling had ceased, though he rather imagined he heard it once or twice. Certainly it was gone by the time they wrapped themselves up for sleep in the wraithlike starlight.

NEXT MORNING Fafhrd was gone. Even before the Mouser had halooed for him and scanned the nearby terrain, he knew that his foolish, self-ridiculed fears had become certainties. He could still see the tower, although in the flat, yellow light of morning it seemed to have receded, as though it were seeking to evade him. He even fancied he saw a tiny moving figure nearer to the tower than to him. That, he knew, was only imagination. The distance was too great. Nevertheless, he wasted little time in swallowing some cold meat, which still had a savory taste, in wrapping up some more for his pouch, and in taking a gulp of water. Then he set out at a long, springy lope, a pace he knew he could hold for hours.

At the bottom of the next swell in the plain he found slightly softer ground, cast up and down it for Fafhrd's footprints and found them. They were wide-spaced, made by a man running.

Toward midday he found a waterhole, lay down to drink and rest a little. A short way back he had again seen Fafhrd's prints. Now he noted another set in the soft earth; not Fafhrd's, but roughly parallel to his. They were at least a day older, wide-spaced, too, but a little wobbly. From their size and shape they might very well have been made by the guide's sandals; the middle of the print showed faintly the mark of thongs such as he had worn about the instep.

The Mouser loped doggedly on. His pouch, wrapped cloak, water bag, and weapons were beginning to feel a burden. The tower was appreciably closer, although the sun haze masked any details. He calculated he had almost covered half the distance.

The slight successive swells in the prairie land seemed as endless as those in a dream. He noticed them not so much by sight as by the infinitesimal hindrance and easing they gave his lope. The little low clumps of bush and brush by which he measured his progress were all the same. The infrequent gullies of erosion were no wider than could be taken in a stride. Once a coiled greenish serpent raised its flat head from the rock on which it was sunning and observed his passing. Occasionally grasshoppers whirred out of his path. He ran with his feet close to the ground to conserve energy, yet there was a characteristic leap to his stride, for he was used to matching that of a taller man. The flat nostrils of his snub nose flared wide, sucking and expelling air. The wide mouth was set. There was a grim, fixed look to the black eyes above the wide-boned, browned cheeks. He knew that even at his best he would be

hard put to equal the speed in Fafhrd's rangy, long-muscled frame.

Clouds sailed in from the north, casting great, hurrying shadows over landscape, finally blotting out the sun altogether. He could see the tower better now. It was of a darkish color, with darker specks that might be small windows.

It was while he was pausing atop a rise for a breathing spell that the sound recommenced, taking him unaware, sending a shiver over his flesh. It might have been the low clouds that gave it greater power and an eerie, echoing quality. It might have been his being alone that made it seem less sorrowful and more menacing. But it was undeniably louder, and its rhythmic swells came like great gusts of wind.

The Mouser had counted on reaching the tower by sunset. But the early appearance of the sound upset his calculations and did not bode well for Fafhrd. His judgment told him he could cover the rest of the distance at something like top speed. Instantly he came to a decision. He tossed his big pouch, waterskin, bundled cloak, sword, and harness into a clump of bushes; kept only his light inner jerkin, long dagger, and sling. Thus lightened, he spurted ahead, feet flying. The low clouds darkened. A few drops of rain spattered. He kept his eyes on the ground, watching for inequalities and slippery spots. The sound seemed to intensify and gain new unearthliness of timbre with every bounding stride he took forward.

AWAY from the tower the plain had been empty and vast, but here it was desolate. The sagging or tumbled wooden outbuildings, the domestic grains and herbs run wild and dying out, the lines of stunted and toppled trees, the suggestion of fences and paths and ruts—all combined to give the impression that human life had once been here but had long since departed. Only the great stone tower, with its air of obstinate solidity, and with sound pouring from it or seeming to pour from it, was alive.

The Mouser, pretty well winded, though not shaky, now changed his course and ran in an oblique direction to take advantage of the cover provided by a thin line of trees and wind-blown scrub. Such caution was second nature with him. All his instincts clamored against the possibility of meeting a wolf or hound pack on open ground.

He had worked his way past and part way around the tower before he came to the conclusion that there was no line of concealment leading all the way up to the base. It stood a little aloof from the ruins around it, isolated.

The Mouser paused in the shelter afforded by a weather-silvered, buckled outbuilding; automatically searched about until he found a couple of small stones whose weight suited his sling. His sturdy chest still worked like a bellows, drinking air. Then he peered around a corner at the tower and stood there crouched a little, frowning.

It was not as high as he had thought; five stories or perhaps six. The narrow windows were irregularly placed, and did not give any clear idea of inner conformation. The stones were large and rudely hewn; seemed firmly set, save for those of the battlement, which had shifted somewhat. Almost facing him was the dark, uninformative rectangle of a doorway.

There was no rushing such a place, was the Mouser's thought; no sense in rushing a place that had no sign of defenders. There was no way of getting

at it unseen; a watcher on the battlements would have noted his approach long ago. One could only walk up to it, tensely alert for unexpected attacks. And so the Mouser did that.

Before he had covered half the distance his sinews were taut and straining. He was mortally certain that he was being watched by something more than unfriendly. A day's running had made him a little light-headed, and his senses were abnormally clear. Against the unending hypnotic background of the howling he heard the splatters of the separate raindrops, not yet become a shower. He noted the size and shape of each dark stone around the darker doorway. He smelt the characteristic odor of stone, wood, soil, but yet no heavy animal smell. For the thousandth time he tried to picture some possible source for the sound. A dozen hound packs in a cavern underground? That was close, but not close enough. Something eluded him. And now the dark walls were very near, and he strained his eyes to penetrate the gloom of the doorway.

The remote grating sound might not have been enough of a warning, for he was almost in a trance. It may have been the sudden, very slight increase of darkness over his head that released the taut bowstrings of his muscles and sent him lunging with catlike rapidity into the tower—instinctively, without pausing to glance up. Certainly he had not an instant to spare, for he felt an unyielding surface graze his escaping body and flick his heels. A spurt of wind rushed past him from behind, and the jar of a mighty impact staggered him. He spun around to see a great square of stone half obscuring the doorway. A few moments before it had formed part of the battlement.

Looking at it as it lay there denting the ground, he grinned for the first time that day—almost laughed in relief.

THE SILENCE was profound, startling. It occurred to the Mouser that the sound had ceased utterly. He glanced around the barren, circular interior, then started up the curving stone stair that hugged the wall. His grin was dangerous now, businesslike. On the first level above he found Fafhrd and—after a fashion—the guide. But he found a puzzle, too.

Like that below, the room occupied the full circumference of the tower. Light from the scattered, slitlike windows dimly revealed the chests lining the walls, and the dried herbs and dessicated birds, small mammals, and reptiles hanging from the ceiling, suggesting an apothecary's shop. There was litter everywhere, but it was a tidy litter, seeming to have a tortuously logical arrangement all its own. On a table was a hodgepodge of stoppered bottles and jars, stone basins and mortars, odd instruments of horn, glass, and bone, and a brazier in which charcoal smoldered. There was also a plate of gnawed bones, and beside it a brass-bound book of parchment, spread open by a dagger set across the pages.

Fafhrd lay supine on a bed of skins laced to a low wooden framework. He was pale and breathed heavily—looked as if he had been drugged. He did not respond when the Mouser shook him gently and whispered his name. But the thing that baffled the Mouser was the multitude of linen bandages wound around Fafhrd's limbs and chest and throat, for they were unstained and, when he parted them, there were no wounds beneath. They were obviously not bonds.

And lying beside Fafhrd, so close that his big hand touched the hilt, was Fafhrd's great sword, unsheathed.

It was only then that he saw the guide, huddled in a dark corner behind the couch. He was similarly bandaged. But the bandages were stiff with rusty stains, and it was easy to see that he was dead.

The Mouser tried again to wake Fafhrd, but the big man's face stayed a marble mask. The Mouser did not feel that Fafhrd was actually there, and the feeling frightened and angered him.

It was as he stood nervously puzzling that he became aware of slow steps descending the stone stair. Slowly they circled the tower. The sound of heavy breathing was heard, coming in regularly spaced gasps. The Mouser crouched behind the table, his eyes glued on the black hole in the ceiling through which the stair vanished.

The man who emerged was old and small and bent, dressed in garments as tattered and uncouth and musty-looking as the contents of the room. He was partly bald, with a matted tangle of gray hair around his large ears. When the Mouser sprang up and menaced him with a drawn dagger he did not attempt to flee, but went into what seemed an ecstasy of fear—trembling, babbling shrill, throaty sounds, and darting his arms about meaninglessly.

The Mouser thrust a stubby candle into the brazier, held it to the old man's face. He had never seen eyes so wide with terror—they jutted out like little white balls—nor lips so thin and unfeelingly cruel.

The first intelligible words that issued from the lips were hoarse and choked; the voice of a man who has not spoken for a long time.

"You are dead. You are dead!" he cackled at the Mouser, pointing a shaky finger. "You should not be here. I killed you. Why else have I kept the great stone cunningly balanced, so that a touch would send it over? I knew you did not come because the sound lured you. You came to hurt me and to help your freind. So I killed you. I saw the stone fall. I saw you under the stone. You could not have escaped it. You are dead."

And he tottered toward the Mouser, brushing at him as though he could dissipate the Mouser like smoke. But when his hands touched solid flesh he squealed and stumbled away.

The Mouser followed him, moving his knife suggestively. "You are right as to why I came," he said. "Give me back my friend. Rouse him."

To his surprise, the old man did not cringe, but abruptly stood his ground. The look of terror in the unblinking eyes underwent a subtle change. The terror was still there, but there was something more. Bewilderment vanished and something else took its place. He walked past the Mouser and sat down on a stool by the table.

"I am not much afraid of you," he muttered, looking sideways. "But there are those of whom I am very much afraid. And I fear you only because you will try to hinder me from protecting myself against them—from taking the measures I know I must take." He became plaintive. "You must not hinder me. You must not."

The Mouser frowned. The ghastly look of terror—and something more—that warped the old man's face seemed a permanent thing, and the strange words he spoke did not sound like lies.

"Nevertheless, you must rouse my friend."

THE OLD MAN did not answer this. Instead, after one quick glance at the Mouser, he stared vacantly at the wall, shaking his head, and began to talk.

"I do not fear you. Yet I know the depths of fear. You do not. Have you lived alone with *that sound* for years on years, knowing what it meant? I have.

"Fear was born into me. It was in my mother's bones and blood. And in my father's and in my brother's. There was too much magic and loneliness in this, our home, and in my people. When I was a child they all feared and hated me—even the slaves and the great hounds that before me slavered and growled and snapped.

"But my fears were stronger than theirs, for did they not die one by one in such a way that no suspicion fell upon me until the end? I knew it was one against many, and I took no chances. When it began, they always thought I would be the next to go!" He cackled at this. "They thought I was small and weak and foolish. But did not my brothers die as if strangled by their own hands? Did not my mother sicken and languish? Did not my father give a great cry and leap from the tower's top?

"The hounds were the last to go. They hated me most—even more than my father hated me—and the smallest of them could have torn out my throat. They were hungry because there was no one left to feed them. But I lured them into the deep cellar, pretending to flee from them; and when they were all inside I slipped out and barred the door. For many a night thereafter they bayed and howled at me, but I knew I was safe. Gradually the baying grew less and less as they killed each other, but the survivors gained new life from the bodies of the slain. They lasted a long time. Eventually there was only one single thin voice left to howl vengefully at me. Each night I went to sleep, telling myself, 'Tomorrow there will be silence.' But each morning I was awakened by the cry. Then I forced myself to take a torch and go down and peer through the wicket in the door of the cellar. But though I watched for a long time there was no movement, save that of the flickering shadows, and I saw nothing save white bones and tatters of skin. And I told myself that the sound would soon go away."

The old man's thin lips were twisted into a pitiful and miserable expression that sent a chill over the Mouser.

"But the sound lived on, and after a long while it began to grow louder again. Then I knew that my cunning had been in vain. I had killed their bodies, but not their ghosts, and soon they would gain enough power to return and slay me, as they had always intended. So I studied more carefully my father's books of magic, and sought to destroy their ghosts utterly or to curse them to such far-off places that they could never reach me. For a while I seemed to be succeeding, but the scales turned and they began to get the better of me. Closer and closer they came, and sometimes I seemed to catch my father's and brothers' voices, almost lost among the howling.

"It was on a night when they must have been very close that an exhausted traveler came running to the tower. There was a strange look in his eyes, and I thanked the beneficent god who had sent him to my door, for I knew what I must do. I gave him food and drink, and in his drink I mingled a liquid that enforced sleep and sent his naked ghost winging out of his body. *They* must have captured and torn it,

for presently the man bled and died. But it satisfied them somewhat, for their howling went a long way off, and it was a long time before it began to creep back. Thereafter the gods were good and always sent me a guest before the sound came too close. I learned to bandage those I drugged so that they would last longer, and their deaths satisfy the howling ones more fully."

The old man paused then, and shook his head queerly and made a vague, reproachful, clucking noise with his tongue.

"But what troubles me now," he said, "is that they have become greedier, or perhaps they have seen through my cunning. For they are less easy to satisfy, and press at me closely and never go far away. Sometimes I wake in the night, hearing them snuffing about, and feeling their muzzles at my throat. I must have more men to fight them for me. I must. He"—pointing at the stiff body of the guide—"was nothing to them. They took no more notice of him than a dry bone. That one"—his finger wavered over toward Fafhrd—"is big and strong. He should hold them back for a long time."

IT WAS DARK outside now, and the only light came from the guttering candle. The Mouser glared at the old man where he sat perched on the stool like some ungainly plucked fowl. Then he looked to where Fafhrd lay, watched the great chest rise and fall, saw the strong, pallid jaw jutting up over high wrappings. And at that, a terrible anger and an unnerving, boundless irritation took hold of him and he hurled himself upon the old man.

But at the instant he started his long dagger on the downward stroke the sound gushed back. It seemed to overflow from some pit of darkness, and to inundate the tower and plain so that the walls vibrated and dust puffed out from the dead things hanging from the ceiling.

The Mouser stopped the blade a hand's breadth from the throat of the old man, whose head, twisted back, jiggled in terror. For the return of the sound forcibly set the question: Could anyone but the old man save Fafhrd now? He wavered between alternatives, pushed the old man away, knelt by Fafhrd's side, shook him, spoke to him. There was no response. Then he heard the voice of the old man. It was shaky and half drowned by the sound, but it carried an almost gloating note of confidence.

"Your friend's body is poised on the brink of life. If you handle it roughly it may overbalance. If you strip off the bandages he will only die the quicker. You cannot help him." Then, reading the Mouser's question: "No, there is no antidote." Then hastily, as if he feared to take away all hope, "But he will not be defenseless against them. He is strong. His ghost may be strong, too. He may be able to weary them out. If he lives till midnight he may return."

The Mouser turned and looked up at him. Again the old man seemed to read something in the Mouser's merciless eyes, for he said, "My death by your hand will not satisfy those who howl. If you kill me, you will not save your friend, but doom him. Being cheated of my ghost, they will rend his utterly."

The wizened body trembled in an ecstasy of excitement and terror. The hands fluttered. The head bobbed back and forth, as if with the palsy. It was hard to read anything in that twitching, saucer-eyed face. The Mouser slowly got to his feet.

"Perhaps not," said the Mouser.

"Perhaps as you say, your death will doom him." He spoke slowly and in a loud, measured tone. "Nevertheless, I shall take the chance of killing you right now unless you suggest something better."

"Wait," said the old man, pushing at the Mouser's dagger and drawing a pricked hand away. "Wait. There is a way you could help him. Somewhere out there"—he made a sweeping, upward gesture with his hand—"your friend's ghost is battling them. I have more of the drug left. I will give you some. Then you can fight them side by side. Together you may defeat them. But you must be quick. Look! Even now they are at him!"

The old man pointed at Fafhrd. The bandage on the barbarian's left arm was no longer unstained. There was a growing splotch of red on the left wrist—the very place where a hound might take hold. Watching it, the Mouser felt his insides grow sick and cold. The old man was pushing something into his hand. "Drink this. Drink this now," he was saying.

The Mouser looked down. It was a small glass vial. The deep purple of the liquid corresponded with the hue of a dried trickle he had seen at the corner of Fafhrd's mouth. Like a man bewitched, he plucked out the stopper, raised it slowly to his lips, paused.

"Swiftly! Swiftly!" urged the old man, almost dancing with impatience. "About half is enough to take you to your friend. The time is short. Drink! Drink!"

But the Mouser did not. Struck by a sudden, new thought, he eyed the old man over his upraised hand. And the old man must have instantly read the import of that thought, for he snatched up the dagger lying on the book and lunged at the Mouser with unexpected rapidity. Almost the thrust went home, but the Mouser recovered his wits and struck sideways with his free fist at the old man's hand so that the dagger clattered across the floor. Then, with a rapid, careful movement, the Mouser set the vial on the table. The old man darted after him, snatching at it, seeking to upset it, but the Mouser's iron grip closed on his wrists. He was forced to the floor, his arms pinioned, his head pushed back.

"Yes," said the Mouser, "I shall drink. Have no fear on that score. But you shall drink, too."

The old man gave a strangled scream and struggled convulsively. "No! No!" he cried. "Kill me! Kill me with your knife! But not the drink! Not the drink!" The Mouser, kneeling on his arms to pinion them, pried at his jaw. Suddenly he became quiet and stared up, a peculiar lucidity in his white-circled, pinpoint-pupiled eyes. "It's no use. I sought to trick you," he said. "I gave the last of the drug to your friend. The stuff you hold is poison. We shall both die miserably, and your friend will be irrevocably doomed."

But when he saw that the Mouser did not heed this, he began once more to struggle like a maniac. The Mouser was inexorable. Although the base of his thumb was bitten deep, he forced the old man's jaws apart, held his nose and poured the thick purple liquor down. The face of the old man grew red and the veins stood out. When the gulp came it was like a death rattle. Then the Mouser drank off the rest—it was salty like blood and had a sickeningly sweet odor—and waited.

He was torn with revulsion at what he had done. Never had he inflicted

such terror on man or woman before. He would much rather have killed. The look on the old man's face was grotesquely similar to that of a child under torture. Only that poor aged wretch, thought the Mouser, knew the full meaning of the howling that, even now, dinned menacingly in their ears. The Mouser almost let him reach the dagger toward which he was weakly squirming. But he thought of Fafhrd and gripped the old man tight.

Gradually the room filled with haze and began to swing and slowly spin. The Mouser grew dizzy. It was as if the sound were dissolving the walls. Something was wrenching at his body and prying at his mind. Then came utter blackness, whirled and shaken by a pandemonium of howling.

But there was no sound at all on that vast alien plain to which the blackness suddenly gave way. Only sight and a sense of great cold. A cloudless, sourceless moonlight revealed endless sweeps of smooth black rock and sharply edged the featureless horizon.

He was conscious of a thing that stood by him and seemed to be trying to hide behind him. Then, at a distance, he noted a pale form which he instinctively knew to be Fafhrd. And around the pale form seethed a pack of black, shadowy animal shapes, leaping and retreating, worrying at the pale form, their eyes glowing with the color of the moonlight, but brighter, their long muzzles soundlessly snarling. The thing beside him seemed to shrink closer. And then the Mouser rushed forward toward his friend.

The shadow pack turned on him, and he braced himself to meet their onslaught. But the leader leaped past his shoulder, and the rest divided and flowed by him like a turbulent black stream. Then he realized that the thing which had sought to hide behind him was no longer there. He turned and saw that the black shapes pursued another small pale form.

It fled fast, but they followed faster. Over sweep after sweep of rock the hunt continued. He seemed to see taller, man-shaped figures among the pack. Slowly they dwindled in size, became tiny, vague. And still the Mouser felt the horrible hate and fear that flowed from them.

Then the sourceless moonlight faded, and only the cold remained, and that, too, dissipated, leaving nothing.

WHEN HE awoke, Fafhrd's face was looking down at him, and Fafhrd was saying, "Lie still, little man. Lie still. No, I'm not badly hurt. A torn hand. Not bad. No worse than your own."

But the Mouser shook his head impatiently and pushed his aching shoulders off the couch. Sunlight was knifing in through the narrow windows, revealing the dustiness of the air. Then he saw the body of the old man.

"Yes," Fafhrd said as the Mouser lay back weakly. "His fears are ended now. They've done with him. I should hate him. But who can hate such tattered flesh? When I came here first he gave me the drink. There was something wrong in my head. I believed what he said. He told me it would make me a god. I drank, and it sent me to hell. But now it's done with and we're still on earth."

The Mouser, eying the thoroughly and unmistakably dead things that dangled from the ceiling, felt content.

THE END.

THE SHAPE OF DESIRE

It was a—something. It was anything, and everything, it was what everyone most desired! And it was ruin!

Illustrated by F. Kramer

It was washed up out of the sea; that is certain. But only a blind man, perhaps, could have told its true size and shape, by taking it into his hands. Perhaps—

DEATH, thought John Lackland as he strode along the windy beach, was not exactly what Harris Wildin deserved. But, barring miracles, he would be forced to kill Wildin in six hours, as soon as darkness fell.

He pulled his topcoat tighter against the raw wind which flung sullen waves high on the sand, and concentrated his furious thoughts on ways and means to kill Wildin and escape detection. That was his only hope to wriggle from under that Damoclean sword of knowledge that suspended by the fraying thread of his ability to pay blackmail.

Another payment was due tonight. He could not meet it. He must kill, for Wildin, he knew, would brook no delay.

Pay off or fry in the Big House, Wildin had told him.

In better days, Lackland had owned jewels which would have bought back the documentary evidence of his one infraction of the law. Yes, Wildin would have sold his soul for a small fraction of that famed collection of gems odd and rare.

A glint of fire caught Lackland's eye, a glint of green fire near the scalloped edge of the water. John Lackland checked his long-legged stride. There it was again, a brilliant living flash. Probably a bit of glass, he thought as he approached the spot, but I'll have a look.

The look jackknifed his long frame as he snatched an object from the sand.

"The Seven Faces," he said in tones of reverent wonder. "The Seven Faces!"

He shot a quick dark glance along the curving strip of sand. He was alone, and the road was too far away for passing motorists to see his find. His burning eyes returned to the object.

They saw an emerald as large as a baby's fist. It was carved in the shape of a beautiful woman with seven faces. On each face was a living emotion—love, hatred, anger, fear, grief, joy, and lust. When revolved slowly, she became a succession of different women. She was all women; yet such was the genius who created her, she was the same *person* from each facial angle.

She was not a famous jewel, but her history, before she was lost in the first month of her creation, was bloody and swift. A single paragraph in an obscure volume told how the nameless artist who fashioned her in the time of Genghiz Khan was murdered by a common thief; who, in turn, was murdered by the bawd whose favor he bought with the jewel. She was killed within the week by an unknown, and the Seven Faces vanished from public life.

That dry and factual paragraph had stirred John Lackland. He had read it again and again. His desire for the gem caused him fiercely to believe that it had survived seven hectic centuries of successive ownerships, and that he would see it some day before he died.

"Now," he thought exultantly, "I've got it in my hands and it's worth a fortune!"

Thoughts of money brought Wildin to mind, and John Lackland wondered for a moment how this could have happened so pat. This was the miracle that would end his payments of hush money, that would allow Wildin to live. Had Providence intervened? Lackland shrugged away his questions. It had happened. That was enough.

He shoved the jewel in his pocket and strode out to the road, where he hailed a bus to the city. He hurried into a drugstore and telephoned Wildin.

"With the right build-up," he told Wildin, "it's worth a hundred times more than I can ever pay you. In ten days I could—"

"Tonight," Harris Wildin's silky voice cut in. "Tonight is the deadline. Remember? If this rock is what you say it is, bring it along. Maybe we can make a deal."

"And have one of your thugs take it away from me?" Lackland scoffed. "Thanks, no. I'll come and talk about it with you, though, and tell you my price."

"Your price is whatever I'll pay."

"Wildin! I tell you this stone is worth a fortune. It weighs around two thousand carats. I could sell it today, but without a publicity campaign it won't bring one tenth its true value. I'll make a deal with you. I'll give it

to you and outline a campaign in return for certain papers you hold, in addition to a signed alibi for the period in question."

"Why the alibi?"

"So you can't use the photostatic copies you would undoubtedly have made."

"Bring it over at eleven, Lackland."

"I'll come at eleven. If you have a suitable alibi already signed, I'll get the stone within fifteen minutes."

"O. K. I'll be in my office."

Back on the sidewalk, John Lackland checked his habitual impulse to hail a taxi. With the market acting like a dive bomber, economies were necessary. He patted his pocket to check the safety of the emerald and boarded the next bus. He did not even see the dapper little man who followed him.

GILPIN BARDLEY sometimes thought of himself as the world's most accomplished pickpocket. If this were true, he believed it was because picking pockets was an activity secondary to his study of psychology.

He loved crowds: subway, bus, bargain day, baseball, political—all kinds of crowds. But he flattered himself that his unerring and polished fingers never touched a victim who might be dangerous. He never picked the pockets of a happy man, and he never snatched a purse.

The happy man, he reasoned, has nothing in particular on his mind and is all the quicker to notice any untoward act. Purses, of course, were evidence, no matter how quickly you dump them.

The frowners were Gilpin Bardley's meat. The pacers, on crowded train platforms or docks, who were afraid of whoever, or whatever, was arriving; the speakers at political rallies who pushed through the crowd memorizing their speeches; the thin, pallid men who came furtively away from the $2 window at racetracks,—these owned the pockets where delved the supple digits of Gilpin Bardley.

Pickings, he agreed, were slimmer than more catholic foraging—if you got away with it. That, he often told Molly, his common-law wife, was the crux of the matter. Sure, the big boys who handed out dollar cigars and yards of toothy grins had fat rolls more often than not, but that jollity was only a veneer for a suspicious, cop-calling nature.

By sticking to the worriers, he had kept his name off police blotters. He had kept it off everything, in fact, and not even Molly knew him by any other than Gyp.

Gyp had not intended to take the bus with John Lackland until he saw the harried dullness of Lackland's eyes. Here was a man with something on his mind and, judging by the small bulge, something in his pocket.

As he followed Lackland from the drugstore, Gyp speculated idly on the nature of that object in the topcoat pocket. The coat had an expensive cut, and the man moved through the thin stream of shoppers with authority. The object, Gyp decided, was probably a cigar case. Then, as Lackland patted the pocket, Gyp concluded it might be something valuable, and swung on the bus.

Before Lackland had paid his fare, Gyp had transferred the object to his own pocket; and before Lackland was seated, Gyp had asked the conductor a silly question and was on the street again.

He did not take it out at once and examine it. He followed the bus with his eyes to the next stop and saw that

his victim did not get off. He was safe, then.

Gyp strolled toward his boarding-house, where he and Molly lived in a two-room apartment with both hot and cold water. Once there, he could examine his booty without fear of the curious eyes of prowling police.

Molly was out when Gyp arrived. He locked the door and took the object from his pocket.

As he had thought, a tooled leather case housed whatever of value—if anything—he had acquired. It was an expensive case with an intricate clasp, and Gyp felt that something more precious than cigars lay inside.

He finally worked it open and caught his breath. There, on white velvet, was the largest star sapphire Gyp had ever seen!

He had dreamed of sapphires on lean and hungry afternoons in a whipping rain, but even his hungriest dreams had never aspired to such a stone as this.

It was a breathless blue against the snowy velvet bed, and the murky sunlight that filtered through the grimed window struck glittering stars from every facet. Gyp felt, for a second, that the blazing asters were not reflected light, but the living stuff that stars were made of.

He set the case on the table and frowned at it. That stone was hotter than a basket of stolen crown jewels. It was an incredible rock, and certain to be famous. As soon as that guy missed it, he was sure to yell for a yard full of cops, and woe to the dip who tried to hock it! Every pawnshop in town would have a complete description and orders to hold the man who offered it.

The hall door rattled, and Molly called. Gyp unlocked it and Molly came in, her blond hair in fixed new waves.

"Any luck?" she asked. Her eyes fell on the open case and she stared, crimson lips parted in wonder. "Oh, Gyp!" she exclaimed tenderly. "You needn't 've!"

To Gyp's astonishment, she appar-

ently picked up this fabulous star sapphire and slipped it over her ring finger!

She turned it this way and that under moist blue eyes. "Gee, honey," she said. "'Course I been wantin' one just exactly like this, but I didn't care, really." She came over to Gyp, laid her cheek against his and gave him a huge squeeze. "This makes it kind of legal now, don't it?"

Gyp, his eyes still frozen on the phenomenon, rubbed moist brow with sweating palm.

"How did you do it?" he asked faintly.

"Do what?"

"Give it to me a minute." He held out his hand.

Puzzled, she laid the object in his palm. Gyp tried to push his ring finger through it and failed.

"It's too little for you," Molly said.

"Is it?" He put his hand beside hers for comparison. "Is it?"

"No," she said softly. "Your fingers are slimmer than mine. What . . . what's the matter, Gyp? What are you lookin' like that for?"

Gyp laid the stone back in the case and turned to Molly. "Do you know you just pushed a finger through a star sapphire? What I want to know is, how did you do it?"

"What's this star-sapphire talk?" Molly asked. "All I done was to put on that wedding ring. Wasn't I supposed to? You didn't mean it for somebody else, didja, Gyp? I'm the one, ain't I?"

A KNOCK on the door sent Gyp into a tense crouch, lips snarling. He looked at the case, at Molly, then straightened and said casually:

"Who is it?"

"Me, Abrams," said a voice. "I'm bringing back the pants."

Gyp opened the door and the little aproned tailor stepped inside.

"As good as new," he said proudly, handing Gyp a pair of light trousers. "Their own loom couldn't be telling they been mended. For only a quarter, you're getting a bargain."

Gyp examined the mended spot negligently and reached into his pocket. The little tailor's sharp eyes fell on the object on the table.

"Oy!" he said. "Such a beautiful shears! Four dollars thirty-two cents they're costing, wholesale. My Sammy is saying he'll buy me some, which I'm needing just like these, but Sammy he ain't working now. Maybe we could make a trade, Mr. Gyp? Maybe I can be giving you some work for the shears?"

"I'll let you know," Gyp said thickly. He handed the old man a twenty-five-cent piece and ushered him out. He faced Molly, dark wonder in his eyes, a creeping fear in his heart.

"To me," he said, half to himself, "it's a star sapphire. To you it's a wedding ring, and Abrams sees a pair of shears. I wonder what the guy I took it from thought it was?"

"What—I don't understand, Gyp!"

"Me, either," Gyp said. He sank into the room's single chair and stared at the object on the table top. "You only see one thing on there, don't you, Molly?"

"Yeah, just the wedding ring, Gyp."

"Hm-m-m. Is anybody else home in the house?"

"That young Mrs. Williams, upstairs, Gyp. Her baby's awful sick. I think it's gonna die. I keep askin' her why don't she get in touch with her husband

and get some money."

"Maybe she hasn't got a husband. Ask her to come down a minute, will you?"

Molly went out and returned presently with a young and once-pretty dark-haired girl with lusterless black eyes. She smiled wanly at Gyp as Molly closed the door.

"What do you see on that table, Mrs. Williams?" Gyp asked gently.

The dark eyes flickered to the table top and back to Gyp. "This is a poor time to joke with me," she said.

"I'm not joking," Gyp said earnestly.

"Then it's for me?" she asked, the dull eyes taking on a gleam.

"We-e-ell," Gyp said, "not exactly."

"How can you do this to me!" she said passionately. "Baby is dying, I'm willing to give my soul for a bottle of fresh milk and you flaunt one in my face. You're inhuman!" She turned blindly toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Gyp said. "Here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled dollar bill. "That bottle wouldn't do your baby any good, I'm afraid."

She took the bill, stammered embarrassed thanks, and went out. Gyp and Molly once more stared into each other's bewildered eyes.

"It's got the devil in it, Gyp!" Molly whispered. "Throw it away, out the window! Now, Gyp!" She extended a hand toward the case, but Gyp halted her.

"Wait, Molly. Let me figure." He got to his feet and paced the floor, muttering a monologue.

"I've been wanting a star sapphire for years, an' that's what this turns out to be. You wanted a ring, an' that's what it is, and the same with Abrams an' Mrs. Williams. It was what they wanted it to be. What would it be to a fence?"

Gyp thought this over for a moment, then whirled on Molly, his eyes shining.

"Molly, we're rich!" He gave her no time to reply. "Harris Wildin, by golly!"

"But I thought he was mad at you," Molly said.

"Yeah, but he wants a big ruby for that dame he took out of the 'Teasy Revue.' All I got to do is tell him I got one worth twenty grand. He'll think I'm boostin' the value, so maybe he'll see a ten-grand pigeon's blood and pay me at least two for it!"

"But not Harris Wildin, Gyp! I'm scared of him. You know how mad he was over that paste ring."

"Oh, I got that straightened out with him. Besides, before he tumbles to what this is, we'll be on our way to the coast. They got premiers out there, an' people with dough."

"But not Harris, Gyp! Why not Uncle Joseph?"

"Because Uncle Joseph won't pay over twenty dollars for anything. If you walked into his joint with a deed for the Island of Manhattan and asked a hundred dollars for it, Uncle Joseph would scream his lungs out. An' I can't take it to a jewelry store or a hock shop, even if it's not hot like I thought it was. Suppose I showed it to some guy with a backache. He'd give me an appraisal on a mustard plaster. No, it's gotta be Harris Wildin."

JOHN LACKLAND discovered his loss after he had walked the two blocks from the bus line to his home. As he entered the gate he shoved a hand into his coat pocket. Its emptiness was instantly duplicated by a sick feeling in his stomach. He stood motionless, one clenched hand

on the iron gatepost, his long face set in grim lines.

Harris Wildin must die, then.

He went into the house with a dead, expressionless face, mounted the wide stairs to his own room and took a .38 revolver from a dresser drawer. He swung out the cylinder, saw that it was loaded, stuck the gun in his pocket and hung his coat in a closet. Then he sat down on the side of his bed to think.

He knew the interior of Wildin's luxurious office. Big chair facing the ebony desk, second-story window opening on an alley. He could shoot Wildin from the chair, grab the papers Wildin would have ready, drop out the window and escape—maybe.

If he could get close enough to club Wildin to death with the gun there would be no sound of a shot. Such procedure, however, was fraught with a certain risk, for there was a silken, deadly quality, like a strangler's cord, about Harris Wildin.

One plan or the other Lackland felt he must use. Circumstances would dictate his choice.

He heard a chatter of arriving voices downstairs and stifled a groan. Carla had brought home dinner guests. The prospect of dressing and donning a mask of politeness filled him with aversion.

She came into his room in a few moments, slim and polished and bronze. She was, he thought, like a cluster of precious stones: emerald eyes set in topaz between ruby hat and mouth.

"Hello, you," she said. "We have the Hartfords for dinner."

"Send me up a crust," he replied. "I don't feel up to company."

"Oh, sorry. What's the matter?"

"Nothing in particular. Hard day at the office."

She gave him a long, level stare.

"John, you've never seen fit to tell me, but something has been wrong for

about a year. I know. I'd like to help."

He forced a laugh. "If I had your imagination, I'd become an editorial writer."

"All right, all right. If you're not ready yet to tell me, I'll wait. If you need me, though, I'll be right in there, pushing—up. Now, what say I run the Hartfords home and you and I have dinner alone for once?"

"Don't disappoint them," he answered. "I've got to go out on business late, anyway. Thanks, though, for both offers."

"I just wanted to remind you," she said over her shoulder as she went out, "that you're still my favorite husband."

With a feeling of self-disgust, John Lackland thought of the secret in Harris Wildin's possession and what its revelation would do to Carla. What would she do if she learned that he brought an alien into the country, bearing forged papers as Mrs. John Lackland? More important, how would she feel?

If he had loaned his name to a refugee fleeing from some honest-to-God menace, Carla would approve. John Lackland knew that. But he had imagined himself in love with the woman, and had been ready to throw Carla over. This same Carla, who would make any sacrifice for him, and make it with a green-eyed grin.

When the voluptuous foreigner had gone gayly off with Harris Wildin, Lackland had tried to find her and kill her. Someone, Wildin perhaps, had beaten him to it, for her unidentified body turned up one day under a wharf.

Wildin had not been slow to begin collecting from John Lackland on the strength of documentary evidence of Lackland's complicity.

Lackland had never been afraid for himself. The immigration department would take care of his future. But he shrank from exposing Carla to sordid truths that certain letters, held by Wildin, would reveal, and had paid out nearly all of his considerable fortune.

Tonight it must end, must end without involving Carla.

A servant brought him food which he ate automatically, not tasting or knowing its nature. He chain-smoked until it was time to start for Wildin's Club Zero.

After Gyp had gone, Harris Wildin held the huge ruby up to the light, turned it this way and that, feasted his gaze on its scarlet fire. Then he set it on his desk blotter and looked at it for a long time, a blob of flame against the green blotter. He clasped his manicured hands and thought of Dixie. The ruby, suspended on a green gold chain, would be like a great drop of blood against her slender white throat.

He snapped the ruby in its case, pushed it to one side, took fountain pen and a sheet of paper and began to write a letter to John Lackland. He dated the letter back eighteen months and began a fictitious tale of a woman who boasted of obtaining illegal entry into the United States with forged papers identifying her as Mrs. John Lackland. The woman had later disappeared, he went on to say, but Lackland could count on his, Wildin's, testimony if trouble ever arose concerning the matter.

He did not sign the letter. He rose and glided silently across the room to a tall filing case. He unlocked one of its drawers, took out the Lackland papers, relocked it and put the papers in his desk. He looked at his wrist watch and folded his hands again. Lackland was due any minute.

When Lackland came in, Wildin did not rise or change expression. He waved a slim hand at the big chair and said, "What is this talk of an emerald statue?"

John Lackland looked at the object on Wildin's desk and, for the third time that day, murmured reverently, "The Seven Faces!" Then his eyes slitted, turned on Wildin. "You dirty, double-crossing rat!"

Harris Wildin said softly: "That sort of talk will get you killed."

Lackland's gun was in his hand, pointed steadily at Wildin's stomach. "I'm going to give you a chance. Give me that passport and the letters and you can have the damned jewel. Where are they?"

"In that filing cabinet."

"Where's the key?"

"Here." Wildin cautiously fished a key ring from his vest pocket and tossed it across the desk.

Lackland took the keys, backed across the office to the filing cabinet, keeping his gun trained on Wildin, and fumbled for the lock. His eyes shifted for an instant, and Wildin leaped with desperate speed. Lackland twisted away and smashed Wildin above the ear with the gun barrel. Wildin crumpled, and Lackland smashed again and again, until the skull was pulp—

He straightened finally, and sanity came back to him slowly, pulling lips back over his teeth.

He searched the office then until he found the documents he wanted. He put these and the great jewel in his pocket, lowered himself out the window and dropped into the alley.

At home he burned the papers in the library fireplace. He went quietly up to his room and hid the Seven Faces in the drawer with his shirts. He took a sedative, hoping that sleep would prevent his thinking of what he had done.

Two hours later police came, charged him with murder, and took him away.

JOHN LACKLAND'S sole defense was a flat denial of the charge. The prosecutor introduced witnesses who had seen him enter Wildin's office and a small boy who, foraging in the alley garbage cans, had seen him drop from the window sill. The prosecutor also produced many enlarged photographs of John Lackland's fingerprints, picked off the filing case, the desk, and the window ledge.

There was also the bloodstained gun, still in his topcoat pocket—

The jury was out only a few minutes. Guilty of murder in the first degree was the verdict, and the sentence was death.

John and Carla had a short half-hour together before he was taken to the State penitentiary, where his execution would be effected thirty days later.

"I'm not sorry, Carla," he told her, haggard from the strain of the perfunctory trial. "I'm not sorry, except for the fact that I won't see you any more."

"Oh, why," she wailed, "why didn't you plead self-defense? They couldn't have disproved it! Your attorneys pointed it out to you time after time."

His smile was one of tired triumph. "Maybe I'm a little bit crazy," he said, "but I feel that I should pay this debt. Not to the society which demands a human life for the life of a rat, but to—" He caught himself, was abruptly silent.

"To what?" she prodded.

"Never mind," he evaded. "I'm satisfied with the verdict. Please forget it. You must readjust your life."

"But *you* are my life, you big fool! And I won't forget it! I'll get you free if it's humanly possible." She blinked

away tears and grinned. "They're not going to snatch a man of mine away from me if I can stop it!"

Carla Lackland laid siege to officialdom during the next two weeks. She conferred with attorneys, checking the record for possibilities of claiming a mistrial. She haunted prominent politicians, promising anything for pressure on the governor to grant a reprieve.

The wording varied, but the answers all added up to: "Something's fishy. I don't want to touch it."

She prostrated herself before the governor in the final fortnight, a suppliant for her husband's life, and came away empty-handed and empty-hearted.

Then, on the fifth day before his scheduled execution, a letter arrived from John—

DEAREST:

In the press of circumstances, I had almost forgotten to mention something very important. I have succeeded in smuggling this letter out to you, so I can be as specific as necessary. Look in my top dresser drawer. Under a stack of shirts you will find a valuable object. Then, in the library, on the bottom shelf, third book from the north window, Page 38, Paragraph 2, you will find its history. Guard coming—no more time.

JOHN.

Abandoned hope sprang up anew in her heart. Perhaps he had remembered something that would get him free. She ran into his room and rummaged under his shirts. Her fingers encountered flat metal, and she pulled out a hacksaw blade.

She stared, a puzzled frown tugging at her brows. Her eyes lighted as a word formed in her mind: *escape.*

Escape! Of course! John's carefully worded message was simply a request for this conqueror of steel window bars. But the book—why the book?

She raced downstairs and found the large old volume whose title, if ever it had a title, had been smudged away in forgotten years. She turned to Page 38, Paragraph 2—

Emerald—seven faces—1184 A. D.—

She could see no connection between the hacksaw blade and this description of a long-vanished jewel. Yet a connection must exist. The note was definite on that point.

She gave a little cry as the solution struck her. Phrases from John's letter —smuggle—book—a valuable object. What simpler way to smuggle it to him than to place it between the leaves of the book, glue those two leaves together, and send it to him?

Suiting action to the thought, she soon had the book ready for mailing, with an innocent note accompanying it:

JOHN:

Once you recommended a certain paragraph. I believe that it will bring you solace in this time of great trial. My everlasting adoration.

CARLA.

She dispatched the package and began preparations to sell all the Lackland possessions. She would scrape together all available cash, and she and John would flee the country—

JOHN LACKLAND found that, as the hour drew nearer to execution, his horror of death in the electric chair increased. All the stories he had heard came back in fearful vividness; the charred victims, not yet dead, who had waited with smoking flesh while a blown-out fuse was repaired and the final shock made possible; the man who had cried out after doctors had pronounced him dead; of other scenes which had sent hardened newsmen retching from the death chamber.

He had faced the thought of death

many times without fear. He had been, as most men have, close to the edge of death on several occasions, and had been prepared to meet it with a certain equanimity not unmixed, it is true, with fear.

But never had he experienced this slow waiting that dissolves the sinew of bravery, this agonizing crawl of time toward the inexorable hour of unimaginable terror. This he knew, if anything could be, was worse than death itself.

The changing of the guard, the bringing and taking away of untasted meals, these were the formal routine and nerve-racking details of official killing. He could understand how many men went mad under this slow pressure and wondered if he would do so.

The arrival of Carla's note and the book brought a return to sanity, for the event and the note were puzzling. He read the message, and the paragraph to which it referred leaped into his mind verbatim. He derived no solace from the well-remembered passage except for the knowledge that Carla would be kept in comfort.

He opened the book and found Pages 38 and 39 glued together. Vagrant excitement stirred his fingers to pry them apart, and hope and gladness burned as he saw—a razor blade!

A flat piece of metal, worth less than a penny, but escape from the writhing horror of death in the chair.

He computed the time before a guard would visit his cell again and decided there was plenty.

Once more he read the paragraph, and the remembered beauty of the Seven Faces brought him a certain peace. From a lost treasure it had become a symbol of Carla's future safety.

He sent out a silent prayer of thanks, that he had been able to avert a terrible damage to her life and substitute for himself a concrete security.

Then he went to the basin in the corner of his cell. Extending his hands over the white porcelain, he slit the veins of first one wrist and then the other, and dropped the blade.

As he leaned against the wall and drowsily watched his life splotch and streak the porcelain bowl, he contemplated the phenomenon of a razor blade that apparently dissolved and joined his blood on its long journey through drains, rivers, and, finally, to the sea.

It was washed up out of the sea; that is certain. But only a blind man, perhaps, could have told its true size and shape, by taking it into his hands. Perhaps—

THE END.

YESTERDAY WAS MONDAY

by THEODORE STURGEON

The scene-shifters slipped—and a man woke up on Wednesday, though yesterday was Monday. But Wednesday wasn't finished—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

HARRY WRIGHT rolled over and said something spelled "Bzzzzhha-a-aw!" He chewed a bit on a mouthful of dry air and spat it out, opened one eye to see if it really would open, opened the other and closed the first, closed the

second, swung his feet onto the floor, opened them again and stretched. This was a daily occurrence, and the only thing that made it remarkable at all was that he did it on a Wednesday morning, and—

Yesterday was Monday.

Oh, he knew it was Wednesday all right. It was partly that, even though he knew yesterday was Monday, there was a gap between Monday and now; and that must have been Tuesday. When you fall asleep and lie there all night without dreaming, you know, when you wake up, that time has passed. You've done nothing that you can remember; you've had no particular thoughts, no way to gauge time, and yet you know that some hours have passed. So it was with Harry Wright. Tuesday had gone wherever your eight hours went last night.

But he hadn't slept through Tuesday. Oh no. He never slept, as a matter of fact, more than six hours at a stretch, and there was no particular reason for him doing so now. Monday was the day before yesterday; he had turned in and slept his usual stretch, he had awakened, and it was Wednesday.

It *felt* like Wednesday. There was a Wednesdayish feel to the air.

Harry put on his socks and stood up. He wasn't fooled. He knew what day it was. "What happened to yesterday?" he muttered. "Oh—yesterday was Monday." That sufficed until he got his pajamas off. "Monday," he mused, reaching for his underwear, "was quite a while back, seems as though." If he had been the worrying type, he would have started then and there. But he wasn't. He was an easy-going sort, the kind of man that gets himself into a rut and stays there until he is pushed out. That was why he was an automobile mechanic at twenty-three dollars a week; that's why he had been one for eight years now, and would be from now on, if he could only find Tuesday and get back to work.

Guided by his reflexes, as usual, and with no mental effort at all, which was also usual, he finished washing, dressing, and making his bed. His alarm clock, which never alarmed because he was of such regular habits, said, as usual, six twenty-two when he paused on the way out, and gave his room the once-over. And there was a certain something about the place that made even this phlegmatic character stop and think.

It wasn't finished.

The bed was there, and the picture of Joe Louis. There were the two chairs sharing their usual seven legs, the split table, the pipe-organ bedstead, the beige wallpaper with the two swans over and over and over, the tiny corner sink, the tilted bureau. But none of them were finished. Not that there were any holes in anything. What paint there had been in the first place was still there. But there was an odor of old cut lumber, a subtle, insistent air of building, about the room and everything in it. It was indefinable, inescapable, and Harry Wright stood there caught up in it, wondering. He glanced suspiciously around but saw nothing he could really be suspicious of. He shook his head, locked the door and went out into the hall.

ON THE STEPS a little fellow, just over three feet tall, was gently stroking the third step from the top with a razor-sharp chisel, shaping up a new scar in the dirty wood. He looked up

as Harry approached, and stood up quickly.

"Hi," said Harry, taking in the man's leather coat, his peaked cap, his wizened, bright-eyed little face. "Whatcha doing?"

"Touch-up," piped the little man. "The actor in the third floor front has a nail in his right heel. He came in late Tuesday night and cut the wood here. I have to get it ready for Wednesday."

"This is Wednesday," Harry pointed out.

"Of course. Always has been. Always will be."

Harry let that pass, started on down the stairs. He had achieved his amazing bovinity by making a practice of ignoring things he could not understand. But one thing bothered him—

"Did you say that feller in the third floor front was an actor?"

"Yes. They're all actors, you know."

"You're nuts, friend," said Harry bluntly. "That guy works on the docks."

"Oh yes—that's his part. That's what he acts."

"No kiddin'. An' what does he do when he isn't acting?"

"But he— Well, that's all he does do! That's all any of the actors do!"

"Gee— I thought he looked like a reg'lar guy, too," said Harry. "An actor! 'Magine!"

"Excuse me," said the little man, "but I've got to get back to work. We mustn't let anything get by us, you know. They'll be through Tuesday before long, and everything must be ready for them."

Harry thought: this guy's crazy nuts. He smiled uncertainly and went down to the landing below. When he looked back the man was cutting skillfully into the stair, making a neat little nail scratch. Harry shook his head. This was a screwy morning. He'd be glad to get back to the shop. There was a '39 sedan down there with a busted rear spring. Once he got his mind on that he could forget this nonsense. That's all that matters to a man in a rut. Work, eat, sleep, pay day. Why even try to think anything else out?

The street was a riot of activity, but then it always was. But not quite this way. There were automobiles and trucks and buses around, aplenty, but none of them were moving. And none of them were quite complete. This was Harry's own field; if there was anything he didn't know about motor vehicles, it wasn't very important. And through that medium he began to get the general idea of what was going on.

Swarms of little men who might have been twins of the one he had spoken to were crowding around the cars, the sidewalks, the stores and buildings. All were working like mad with every tool imaginable. Some were touching up the finish of the cars with fine wire brushes, laying on networks of microscopic cracks and scratches. Some, with ball peens and mallets, were denting fenders skillfully, bending bumpers in an artful crash pattern, spider-webbing safety-glass windshields. Others were aging top dressing with high-pressure, needlepoint sandblasters. Still others were pumping dust into upholstery, sandpapering the dashboard finish around light switches, throttles, chokes, to give a finger-worn appearance. Harry stood aside as a half dozen of the workers scampered down the street bearing a fender which they riveted to a 1930 coupé. It was freshly blood-stained.

Once awakened to this highly unusual activity, Harry stopped, slightly

open-mouthed, to watch what else was going on. He saw the same process being industriously accomplished with the houses and stores. Dirt was being laid on plate-glass windows over a coat of clear sizing. Woodwork was being cleverly scored and the paint peeled to make it look correctly weather-beaten, and dozens of leather-clad laborers were on their hands and knees, poking dust and dirt into the cracks between the paving blocks. A line of them went down the sidewalk, busily chewing gum and spitting it out; they were followed by another crew who carefully placed the wads according to diagrams they carried, and stamped them flat.

Harry set his teeth and muscled his rocking brain into something like its normal position. "I ain't never seen a day like this or crazy people like this," he said, "but I ain't gonna let it be any of my affair. I got my job to go to." And trying vainly to ignore the hundreds of little, hard-working figures, he went grimly on down the street.

WHEN HE GOT to the garage he found no one there but more swarms of stereotyped little people climbing over the place, dulling the paint work, cracking the cement flooring, doing their hurried, efficient little tasks of aging. He noticed, only because he was so familiar with the garage, that they were actually *making* the marks that had been there as long as he had known the place. "Hell with it," he gritted, anxious to submerge himself into his own world of wrenches and grease guns. "I got my job; this is none o' my affair."

He looked about him, wondering if he should clean these interlopers out of the garage. Naw—not his affair. He was hired to repair cars, not to police the joint. Long as they kept away from him—and, of course, animal caution told him that he was far, far outnumbered. The absence of the boss and the other mechanics was no surprise to Harry; he always opened the place.

He climbed out of his street clothes and into coveralls, picked up a tool case and walked over to the sedan, which he had left up on the hydraulic rack yester— that is, Monday night. And that is when Harry Wright lost his temper. After all, the car was his job, and he didn't like having anyone else mess with a job he had started. So when he saw his job—his '39 sedan—resting steadily on its wheels over the rack, which was down under the floor, and when he saw that the rear spring was repaired, he began to burn. He dived under the car and ran deft fingers over the real wheel suspensions. In spite of his anger at this unprecedented occurrence, he had to admit to himself that the job had been done well. "Might have done it myself," he muttered.

A soft clank and a gentle movement caught his attention. With a roar he reached out and grabbed the leg of one of the ubiquitous little men, wriggled out from under the car, caught his culprit by his leather collar, and dangled him at arm's length.

"What are you doing to my job?" Harry bellowed.

The little man tucked his chin into the front of his shirt to give his windpipe a chance, and said, "Why, I was just finishing up that spring job."

"Oh. So you were just finishing up on that spring job," Harry whispered, choked with rage. Then, at the top of his voice, "Who told you to touch that car?"

"Who told me? What do you—

Well, it just had to be done, that's all. You'll have to let me go. I must tighten up those two bolts and lay some dust on the whole thing."

"You must *what?* You get within six feet o' that car and I'll twist your head offn your neck with a Stillson!"

"But— It has to be done!"

"You won't do it! Why, I oughta—"

"Please let me go! If I don't leave that car the way it was Tuesday night—"

"When was Tuesday night?"

"The last act, of course. Let me go, or I'll call the district supervisor!"

"Call the devil himself. I'm going to spread you on the sidewalk outside; and heaven help you if I catch you near here again!"

The little man's jaw set, his eyes narrowed, and he whipped his feet upward. They crashed into Wright's jaw; Harry dropped him and staggered back. The little man began squealing, "Supervisor! Supervisor! Emergency!"

HARRY GROWLED and started after him; but suddenly, in the air between him and the midget workman, a long white hand appeared. The empty air was swept back, showing an aperture from the garage to blank, blind nothingness. Out of it stepped a tall man in a single loose-fitting garment literally studded with pockets. The opening closed behind the man.

Harry cowered before him. Never in his life had he seen such noble, powerful features, such strength of purpose, such broad shoulders, such a deep chest. The man stood with the backs of his hands on his hips, staring at Harry as if he were something somebody forgot to sweep up.

"That's him," said the little man shrilly. "He is trying to stop me from doing the work!"

"Who are you?" asked the beautiful man, down his nose.

"I'm the m-mechanic on this j-j— Who wants to know?"

"Iridel, supervisor of the district of Futura, wants to know."

"Where in hell did you come from?"

"I did not come from hell. I came from Thursday."

Harry held his head. "What *is* all this?" he wailed. "Why is today Wednesday? Who are all these crazy little guys? What happened to Tuesday?"

Iridel made a slight motion with his finger, and the little man scurried back under the car. Harry was frenzied to hear the wrench busily tightening bolts. He half started to dive under after the little fellow, but Iridel said, "Stop!" and when Iridel said, "Stop!" Harry stopped.

"This," said Iridel calmly, "is an amazing occurrence." He regarded Harry with unemotional curiosity. "An actor on stage before the sets are finished. Extraordinary."

"What stage?" asked Harry. "What are you doing here anyhow, and what's the idea of all these little guys working around here?"

"You ask a great many questions, actor," said Iridel. "I shall answer them, and then I shall have a few to ask you. These little men are stage hands— I am surprised that you didn't realize that. They are setting the stage for Wednesday. Tuesday? That's going on now."

"Arrgh!" Harry snorted. "How can Tuesday be going on when today's Wednesday?"

"Today isn't Wednesday, actor."

"Huh?"

"Today is Tuesday."

Harry scratched his head. "Met a feller on the steps this mornin'—one of these here stage hands of yours. He said this was Wednesday."

"It *is* Wednesday. Today is Tuesday. Tuesday is today. 'Today' is simply the name for the stage set which happens to be in use. 'Yesterday' means the set that has just been used; 'Tomorrow' is the set that will be used after the actors have finished with 'today.' This is Wednesday. Yesterday was Monday; today is Tuesday. See?"

Harry said, "No."

Iridel threw up his long hands. "My, you actors are stupid. Now listen carefully. This is Act Wednesday, Scene 6:22. That means that everything you see around you here is being readied for 6:22 a. m. on Wednesday. Wednesday isn't a time; it's a place. The actors are moving along toward it now. I see you still don't get the idea. Let's see . . . ah. Look at that clock. What does it say?"

Harry Wright looked at the big electric clock on the wall over the compressor. It was corrected hourly and highly accurate, and it said 6:22. Harry looked at it amazed. "Six tw—but my gosh, man, that's what time I left the house. I walked here, an' I been here ten minutes already!"

Iridel shook his head. "You've been here no time at all, because there is no time until the actors make their entrances."

Harry sat down on a grease drum and wrinkled up his brains with the effort he was making. "You mean that this time proposition ain't something that moves along all the time? Sorta—well, like a road. A road don't go no place— You just go places along it. Is that it?"

"That's the general idea. In fact, that's a pretty good example. Suppose we say that it's a road; a highway built of paving blocks. Each block is a day; the actors move along it, and go through day after day. And our job here—mine and the little men—is to . . . well, pave that road. This is the clean-up gang here. They are fixing up the last little details, so that everything will be ready for the actors."

HARRY SAT STILL, his mind creaking with the effects of this information. He felt as if he had been hit with a lead pipe, and the shock of it was being drawn out infinitely. This was the craziest-sounding thing he had ever run into. For no reason at all he remembered a talk he had had once with a drunken aviation mechanic who had tried to explain to him how the air flowing over an airplane's wings makes the machine go up in the air. He hadn't understood a word of the man's dis-

course, which was all about eddies and chords and cambers and foils, dihedrals and the Bernouilli effect. That didn't make any difference; the things flew whether he understood how or not; he knew that because he had seen them. This guy Iridel's lecture was the same sort of thing. If there was nothing in all he said, how come all these little guys were working around here? Why wasn't the clock telling time? Where was Tuesday?

He thought he'd get that straight for good and all. "Just where is Tuesday?" he asked.

"Over there," said Iridel, and pointed. Harry recoiled and fell off the drum; for when the man extended his hand, it *disappeared!*

Harry got up off the floor and said tautly, "Do that again."

"What? Oh— Point toward Tuesday? Certainly." And he pointed. His hand appeared again when he withdrew it.

Harry said, "My gosh!" and sat down again on the drum, sweating and staring at the supervisor of the district of Futura. "You point, an' your hand—ain't," he breathed. "What direction is that?"

"It is a direction like any other direction," said Iridel. "You know yourself there are four directions—forward, sideward, upward, and"—he pointed again, and again his hand vanished—"*that* way!"

"They never tol'e me that in school," said Harry. "Course, I was just a kid then, but—"

Iridel laughed. "It is the fourth dimension—it is *duration*. The actors move through length, breadth, and height, anywhere they choose to within the set. But there is another movement —one they can't control—and that is duration."

"How soon will they come . . . eh . . . here?" asked Harry, waving an arm. Iridel dipped into one of his numberless pockets and pulled out a watch. "It is now eight thirty-seven Tuesday morning," he said. "They'll be here as soon as they finish the act, and the scenes in Wednesday that have already been prepared."

Harry thought again for a moment, while Iridel waited patiently, smiling a little. Then he looked up at the supervisor and asked, "Hey—this 'actor' business—what's that all about?"

"Oh—that. Well, it's a play, that's all. Just like any play—put on for the amusement of an audience."

"I was to a play once," said Harry. "Who's the audience?"

Iridel stopped smiling. "Certain—Ones who may be amused," he said. "And now I'm going to ask you some questions. How did you get here?"

"Walked."

"You *walked* from Monday night to Wednesday morning?"

"Naw— From the house to here."

"Ah— But how did you get to Wednesday, six twenty-two?"

"Well I— Damfino. I just woke up an' came to work as usual."

"This is an extraordinary occurrence," said Iridel, shaking his head in puzzlement. "You'll have to see the producer."

"Producer? Who's he?"

"You'll find out. In the meantime, come along with me. I can't leave you here; you're too close to the play. I have to make my rounds anyway."

Iridel walked toward the door. Harry was tempted to stay and find himself some more work to do, but

when Iridel glanced back at him and motioned him out, Harry followed. It was suddenly impossible to do anything else.

Just as he caught up with the supervisor, a little worker ran up, whipping off his cap.

"Iridel, sir," he piped, "the weather makers put .006 of one percent too little moisture in the air on this set. There's three seventenths of an ounce too little gasoline in the storage tanks under here."

"How much is in the tanks?"

"Four thousand two hundred and seventy-three gallons, three pints, seven and twenty-one thirty-fourths ounces."

Iridel grunted. "Let it go this time. That was very sloppy work. Someone's going to get transferred to Limbo for this."

"Very good, sir," said the little man. "Long as you know we're not responsible." He put on his cap, spun around three times and rushed off.

"Lucky for the weather makers that the amount of gas in that tank doesn't come into Wednesday's script," said Iridel. "If anything interferes with the continuity of the play, there's the devil to pay. Actors haven't sense enough to cover up, either. They are liable to start whole series of miscues because of a little thing like that. The play might flop and then we'd all be out of work."

"Oh," Harry oh-ed. "Hey, Iridel—what's the idea of that patchy-looking place over there?"

Iridel followed his eyes. Harry was looking at a corner lot. It was tree-lined and overgrown with weeds and small saplings. The vegetation was true to form around the edges of the lot, and around the path that ran diagonally through it; but the spaces in between were a plane surface. Not a leaf nor a blade of grass grew there; it was naked-looking, blank, and absolutely without any color whatever.

"Oh, that," answered Iridel. "There are only two characters in Act Wednesday who will use that path. Therefore it is as grown-over as it should be. The rest of the lot doesn't enter into the play, so we don't have to do anything with it."

"But— Suppose someone wandered off the path on Wednesday," Harry offered.

"He'd be due for a surprise, I guess. But it could hardly happen. Special prompters are always detailed to spots like that, to keep the actors from going astray or missing any cues."

"Who are they—the prompters, I mean?"

"Prompters? G.A.'s—Guardian Angels. That's what the script writers call them."

"I heard o' them," said Harry.

"Yes, they have their work cut out for them," said the supervisor. "Actors are always forgetting their lines when they shouldn't, or remembering them when the scrip calls for a lapse. Well, it looks pretty good here. Let's have a look at Friday."

"Friday? You mean to tell me you're working on Friday already?"

"Of course! Why, we work years in advance! How on earth do you think we could get our trees grown otherwise? Here—step in!" Iridel put out his hand, seized empty air, drew it aside to show the kind of absolute nothingness he had first appeared from, and waved Harry on.

"Y-you want me to go in there?" asked Harry diffidently.

"Certainly. Hurry, now!"

Harry looked at the section of void with a rather weak-kneed look, but

could not withstand the supervisor's strange compulsion. He stepped through.

And it wasn't so bad. There were no whirling lights, no sensations of falling, no falling unconscious. It was just like stepping into another room—which is what had happened. He found himself in a great round chamber, whose roundness was touched a bit with the indistinct. That is, it had curved walls and a domed roof, but there was something else about it. It seemed to stretch off in that direction toward which Iridel had so astonishingly pointed. The walls were lined with an amazing array of control machinery — switches and ground-glass screens, indicators and dials, knurled knobs, and levers. Moving deftly before them was a crew of men, each looking exactly like Iridel except that their garments had no pockets. Harry stood wide-eyed, hypnotized by the enormous complexity of the controls and the ease with which the men worked among them. Iridel touched his shoulder. "Come with me," he said. "The producer is in now; we'll find out what is to be done with you."

They started across the floor. Harry had not quite time to wonder how long it would take them to cross that enormous room, for when they had taken perhaps a dozen steps they found themselves at the opposite wall. The ordinary laws of space and time simply did not apply in the place.

They stopped at a door of burnished bronze, so very highly polished that they could see through it. It opened and Iridel pushed Harry through. The door swung shut, Harry, panic-stricken lest he be separated from the only thing in this weird world he could begin to get used to, flung himself against the great bronze portal. It bounced him back, head over heels, into the middle of the floor. He rolled over and got up to his hands and knees.

He was in a tiny room, one end of which was filled by a colossal teakwood desk. The man sitting there regarded him with amusement. "Where'd you blow in from?" he asked; and his voice was like the angry bee sound of an approaching hurricane.

"Are you the producer?"

"Well, I'll be darned," said the man, and smiled. It seemed to fill the whole room with light. He was a big man, Harry noticed; but in this deceptive place, there was no way of telling how big. "I'll be most verily darned. An actor. You're a persistent lot, aren't you? Building houses for me that I almost never go into. Getting together and sending requests for better parts. Listening carefully to what I have to say and then ignoring or misinterpreting my advice. Always asking for just one more chance, and when you get it, messing that up too. And now one of you crashes the gate. What's your trouble, anyway?"

There was something about the producer that bothered Harry, but he could not place what it was, unless it was the fact that the man awed him and he didn't know why. "I woke up in Wednesday," he stammered, "and yesterday was Tuesday. I mean Monday. I mean—" He cleared his throat and started over. "I went to sleep Monday night and woke up Wednesday, and I'm looking for Tuesday."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Well—couldn't you tell me how to get back there? I got work to do."

"Oh—I get it," said the producer. "You want a favor from me. You

know, someday, some one of you fellows is going to come to me wanting to give me something, free and for nothing, and then I am going to drop quietly dead. Don't I have enough trouble running this show without taking up time and space by doing favors for the likes of you?" He drew a couple of breaths and then smiled again. "However—I have always tried to be just, even if it is a tough job sometimes. Go on out and tell Iridel to show you the way back. I think I know what happened to you; when you made your exit from the last act you played in, you somehow managed to walk out behind the wrong curtain when you reached the wings. There's going to be a prompter sent to Limbo for this. Go on now—beat it."

HARRY OPENED his mouth to speak, thought better of it and scuttled out the door, which opened before him. He stood in the huge control chamber, breathing hard. Iridel walked up to him.

"Well?"

"He says for you to get me out of here."

"All right," said Iridel. "This way." He led the way to a curtained doorway much like the one they had used to come in. Beside it were two dials, one marked in days and the other in hours and minutes.

"Monday night good enough for you?" asked Iridel.

"Swell," said Harry.

Iridel set the dials for 9:30 p. m. on Monday. "So long, actor. Maybe I'll see you again some time."

"So long," said Harry. He turned and stepped through the door.

He was back in the garage, and there was no curtained doorway behind him. He turned to ask Iridel if this would enable him to go to bed again and do

Tuesday right from the start, but Iridel was gone.

The garage was a blaze of light. Harry glanced up at the clock— It said fifteen seconds after nine-thirty. That was funny; everyone should be home by now except Slim Jim, the night man, who hung out until four in the morning serving up gas at the pumps outside. A quick glance around sufficed. This might be Monday night, but it was a Monday night he hadn't known.

The place was filled with the little men again!

Harry sat on the fender of a convertible and groaned. "Now what have I got myself into?" he asked himself.

He could see that he was at a different place-in-time from the one in which he had met Iridel. There, they had been working to build, working with a precision and nicety that was a pleasure to watch. But here—

The little men were different, in the first place. They were tired-looking, sick, slow. There were scores of overseers about, and Harry winced with one of the little fellows when one of the men in white lashed out with a long whip. As the Wednesday crews worked, so the Monday gangs slaved. And the work they were doing was different. For here they were breaking down, breaking up, carting away. Before his eyes, Harry saw sections of paving lifted out, pulverized, toted away by the sackload by lines of trudging, browbeaten little men. He saw great beams upended to support the roof, while bricks were pried out of the walls. He heard the gang working on the roof, saw patches of roofing torn away. He saw walls and roof both melt away under that driving, driven onslaught, and before he knew what was happening he was standing alone on a section of the dead white plain he had noticed before on the corner lot.

It was too much for his overburdened mind; he ran out into the night, breaking through lines of laden slaves, through neat and growing piles of rubble, screaming for Iridel. He ran for a long time, and finally dropped down behind a stack of lumber out where the Unitarian church used to be, dropped because he could go no farther. He heard footsteps and tried to make himself smaller. They came on steadily; one of the overseers rounded the corner and stood looking at him. Harry was in deep shadow, but he knew the man in white could see in the dark.

"Come out o' there," grated the man. Harry came out.

"You the guy was yellin' for Iridel?"

Harry nodded.

"What makes you think you'll find Iridel in Limbo?" sneered his captor. "Who are you, anyway?"

Harry had learned by this time. "I'm an—actor," he said in a small voice. "I got into Wednesday by mistake, and they sent me back here."

"What for?"

"Huh? Why— I guess it was a mistake, that's all."

The man stepped forward and grabbed Harry by the collar. He was about eight times as powerful as a hydraulic jack. "Don't give me no guff, pal," said the man. "Nobody gets sent to Limbo by mistake, or if he didn't do somethin' up there to make him deserve it. Come clean, now."

"I didn't do nothin'," Harry wailed. "I asked them the way back, and they showed me a door, and I went through it and came here. That's all I know. Stop it, you're choking me!"

The man dropped him suddenly.

"Listen, babe, you know who I am? Hey?" Harry shook his head. "Oh—you don't. Well, I'm Gurrah!"

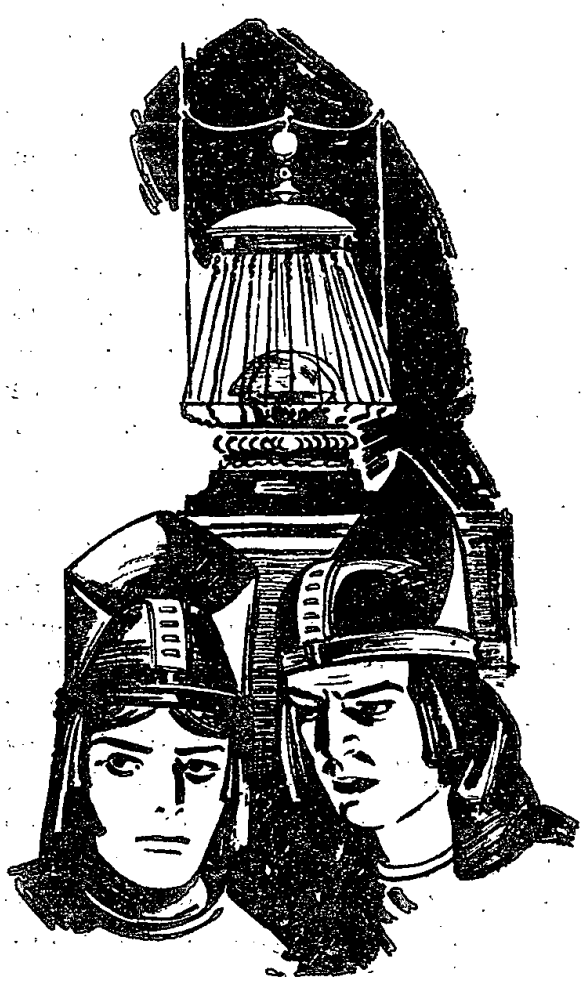
"Yeah?" Harry said, not being able to think of anything else at the moment.

Gurrah puffed out his chest and appeared to be waiting for something more from Harry. When nothing came, he walked up to the mechanic, breathed in his face. "Ain't scared, huh? Tough guy, huh? Never heard of Gurrah, supervisor of Limbo an' the roughest, toughest son of the devil from Incidence to Eternity, huh?"

Now Harry as a peaceable man, but if there was anything he hated, it was to have a stranger breathe his bad breath pugnaciously at him. Before he knew it had happened, Gurrah was sprawled eight feet away, and Harry was standing alone rubbing his left knuckles—quite the most surprised of the two.

Gurrah sat up, feeling his face. "Why, you . . . you hit me!" he roared. He got up and came over to Harry. "You hit me!" he said softly, his voice slightly out of focus in amazement. Harry wished he hadn't—wished he was in bed or in Futura or dead or something. Gurrah reached out with a heavy fist and—patted him on the shoulder. "Hey," he said, suddenly friendly, "you're all right. Heh! Took a poke at me, didn't you? Be damned! First time in a month o' Mondays anyone ever made a pass at me. Last was a feller named Orton. I killed 'im." Harry paled.

GURRAH leaned back against the lumber pile. "Dam'f I didn't enjoy that, feller. Yeah. This is a hell of a job they palmed off on me, but what can you do? Breakin' down—breakin' down. No sooner get through one job, workin' top speed, drivin' the boys till they bleed, than they give you the devil for not bein' halfway through another job. You'd think I'd been in the business long enough to know what it was all about, after more than eight hundred an' twenty million acts, wouldn't you? Heh. Try to tell *them* that. Ship a load of dog houses up to Wednesday, sneakin' it past backstage nice as you please. They turn right around and call me up. 'What's the matter with you, Gurrah? Them dog houses is no good. We sent you a list o' worn-out items two acts ago. One o' the items was dog houses. Snap out of it or we send someone back there who can read an' put you on a toteline.' That's what I get—act in and act out. An' does it do any good to tell 'em that my aid got the message an' dropped dead before he



got it to me? No. Uh-uh. If I say anything about that, they tell me to stop workin' 'em to death. If I do that, they kick because my shipments don't come in fast enough."

He paused for breath. Harry had a hunch that if he kept Gurrah in a good mood it might benefit him. He asked, "What's your job, anyway?"

"Job?" Gurrah howled. "Call this a job? Tearin' down the sets, shippin' what's good to the act after next, junkin' the rest?" He snorted.

Harry asked, "You mean they use the same props over again?"

"That's right. They don't last, though. Six, eight acts, maybe. Then they got to build new ones and weather them and knock 'em around to make 'em look as if they was used."

There was silence for a time. Gurrah, having got his bitterness off his chest for the first time in literally ages, was feeling pacified. Harry didn't know how to feel. He finally broke the ice. "Hey, Gurrah— How'm I goin' to get back into the play?"

"What's it to me? How'd you— Oh, that's right, you walked in from the control room, huh? That it?"

Harry nodded.

"An' how," growled Gurrah, "did you get inta the control room?"

"Iridel brought me."

"Then what?"

"Well, I went to see the producer, and—"

"Th' *producer!* Holy— You mean you walked right in and—" Gurrah mopped his brow. "What'd he say?"

"Why—he said he guessed it wasn't my fault that I woke up in Wednesday. He said to tell Iridel to ship me back."

"An' Iridel threw you back to Monday." And Gurrah threw back his shaggy head and roared.

"What's funny," asked Harry, a little peeved.

"Iridel," said Gurrah. "Do you realize that I've been trying for fifty thousand acts or more to get something on that pretty ol' heel, and he drops you right in my lap. Pal, I can't thank you enough! He was supposed to send you back into the play, and instead o' that you wind up in yesterday! Why, I'll blackmail him till the end of time!" He whirled exultantly, called to a group of bedraggled little men who were staggering under a cornerstone on their way to the junkyard. "Take it easy, boys!" he called. "I got ol' Iridel by the short hair. No more busted backs! No more snotty messages! *Haw haw haw!*"

HARRY, a little amazed at all this, put in a timid word, "Hey—Gurrah. What about me?"

Gurrah turned. "You? Oh. *Tel-e-phone!*" At his shout two little workers, a trifle less bedraggled than the rest, trotted up. One hopped up and perched on Gurrah's right shoulder; the other draped himself over the left, with his head forward. Gurrah grabbed the latter by the neck, brought the man's head close and shouted into his ear, "Give me Iridel!" There was a moment's wait, then the little man on his other shoulder spoke in Iridel's voice, into Gurrah's ear, "Well?"

"Hiyah, fancy pants!"

"Fancy— I beg your— Who is this?"

"It's Gurrah, you futuristic parasite. I got a couple things to tell you."

"Gurrah! How—*dare* you talk to me like that! I'll have you—"

"You'll have me in your job if I tell all I know. You're a wart on the nose of progress, Iridel."

"What is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of this is that you had instructions sent to you by the producer an' you muffed them. Had an actor there, didn't you? He saw the boss, didn't he? Told you he was to be sent back, didn't he? Sent him right over to me instead of to the play, didn't you? You're slippin', Iridel. Gettin' old. Well, get off the wire. I'm callin' the boss, right now."

"The boss? Oh—don't do that, old man. Look, let's talk this thing over. Ah—about that shipment of three-legged dogs I was wanting you to round up for me; I guess I can do without them. Any little favor I can do for you—"

—"you'll damn well do, after this. You better, Goldilocks." Gurrah knocked the two small heads together, breaking the connection and probably the heads, and turned grinning to Harry. "You see," he explained, "that Iridel feller is a damn good supervisor, but he's a stickler for detail. He sends people to Limbo for the silliest little mistakes. He never forgives anyone and he never forgets a slip. He's the cause of half the misery back here, with his hurry-up orders. Now things are gonna be different. The boss has wanted to give Iridel a dose of his own medicine for a long time now, but Irrie never gave him a chance."

Harry said patiently, "About me getting back now—"

"My fran'!" Gurrah bellowed. He delved into a pocket and pulled out a watch like Iridel's. "It's eleven forty on Tuesday," he said. "We'll shoot you back there now. You'll have to dope out your own reasons for disappearing. Don't spill too much, or a lot of people will suffer for it—you the most. Ready?"

Harry nodded; Gurrah swept out a hand and opened the curtain to nothingness. "You'll find yourself quite a ways from where you started," he said, "because you did a little moving around here. Go ahead."

"Thanks," said Harry.

Gurrah laughed. "Don't thank me, chum. You rate all the thanks! Hey—if, after you kick off, you don't make out so good up there, let them toss you over to me. You'll be treated good; you've my word on it. Beat it; luck!"

Holding his breath, Harry Wright stepped through the doorway.

He had to walk thirty blocks to the garage, and when he got there the boss was waiting for him.

"Where you been, Wright?"

"I—lost my way."

"Don't get wise. What do you think this is—vacation time? Get going on the spring job. Damn it, it won't be finished now till tomorra."

Harry looked him straight in the eye and said, "Listen. It'll be finished tonight. I happen to know." And, still grinning, he went back into the garage and took out his tools.

THE END.

JOSHUA

by R. CREIGHTON BUCK

A little story about a man who bought an old clock—a very old clock—and tried to set it to read the local time—

Illustrated by F. Kramer

"Good morning, sir. Mighty bad storm we're having."

Professor Mackee jerked his head up out of the depths of his overcoat and bobbed at the red-faced constable. *He* didn't seem cold; maybe a person *could* get used to it after ten or twenty years in this God-forsaken place. He shiv-

ered. What a ghastly thought! One year in Aunt Agatha's frozen mausoleum was enough. He'd be damned if he stayed through another Maine winter, in spite of her idiotic will! She'd drawn it up herself, and it was full of tart, biting sarcasm.

I bequeath to my nephew, Arthur Quincy Mackee, who, I am to understand, is teaching English at some school in Alabama, the balance of my estate on the proviso that he live for the remainder of his life in my house in Maine.

(Signed) AGATHA QUINCY.

So here he was, at the age of fifty-three, spending a cold winter north of the Mason-Dixon Line for the first time in ten years.

A sudden gust of snow-laden air swept around him. Mackee shivered again and thrust his scrawny neck even farther into his coat collar. It was a vain attempt, for the soggy flakes squirmed their way inside in spite of all his efforts.

The house was as bad as the climate. It had turned out to be a museum piece, full of Colonial relics; some were still able to walk. These, he'd learned, were Aunt Agatha's servants. They came with the house. A bevy of house-broken ghosts would have been preferable. After the warmth and informality of Alabama, the cold austerity of Maine was too much. Entirely too much.

At the corner, Mackee stopped and peered through the flying snow at the signpost. He tugged at his hat and made his way down the street toward a large sign, creaking in the wind, on which were carved the words:

ANTIQUES
Isaac Laquedem, Prop.

The door slammed behind him, setting the little bell tinkling madly. He shook the show from his coat and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the mist from his bifocals. The dumpy proprietor bustled from the rear of the shop.

"Good morning, Mr. Mackee. It's about the clock that you've come? Well, here it is, just like I got it."

Proudly he pointed to a massive paneled box bearing a multitude of clock faces. Obviously a very old clock, for the carvings were worn and the markings on the dials were almost effaced.

Mackee bent forward to examine it more closely. In appearance it resembled the elaborate clocks built by the seventeenth or eighteenth-century artisans. Some of them, he remembered, made clocks that showed the day of the month as well as the time of day. Perhaps this was one of those. Cautiously he inquired the price.

"Well, for you it's cheap. Ninety-five dollars."

Mackee swallowed and pulled out his checkbook. The habits of fifteen years on a teacher's pay were hard to break. He filled in the amount and gave it to the antique dealer with instructions for the delivery of the clock.

"Don't worry, Mr. Mackee. I'll bring it up personal, tomorrow morning."

Mackee wrapped his coat around him tightly, wished that his spare shanks weren't so thinly covered, and left the shop. Leaning against the icy wind, he slowly made his way homeward.

SURPRISINGLY, the next morning was clear. Mackee rolled out of bed, damned the cold floor of the room, shiveringly pulled on his clothes, and went down to breakfast. With the steaming oatmeal inside him, his outlook on things changed and he eagerly fell to work, shifting antiques around in the room he

called the "museum" until he had a suitable place for the clock. By eleven o'clock the workmen had come and gone and he was admiring his new acquisition.

Closer examination convinced him that the clock was unusual in more ways than one. The carvings on the panels definitely did not date from the England or France of the seventeenth or eighteenth century. They resembled more the Turkish or Arabic inscriptions he'd seen on exhibit at the university. Odder yet was the string of characters that surmounted the central panel, above the three large clock faces. They were unmistakably old Hebrew!

Shrugging his shoulders, Mackee went to work to remove the layer of oily dust that clung to the surfaces. On the front panel, the three clock dials were arranged in a triangle. The top one was marked into twelve divisions, probably indicating hours. At a rough guess, the ornate brass hands pointed to a few minutes before eight. The other two dials were divided into seven and thirteen sectors.

Carefully he finished wiping away the encrusted grime that had covered the front panel and turned his attention to the side panels. They were replete with oriental imagery. The only figures he recognized were ibis-headed Thoth and winged Asshur.

Mackee walked around the clock again and stepped back to admire it. Queer! It didn't look the same. His eyes narrowed as he tried to catch the annoying difference. His puzzled gaze fell on the top dial and he gasped. The hands now pointed to eight fifteen! The clock was still running! He bent over and placed his ear against the case. Not a sound. Perplexed, he tried to find a way of opening the clock. Nowhere could he find a single sign that the case was meant to be opened. This *was* queer! A mechanism that ran without a sound and with apparently no provision for rewinding! Sounded like perpetual motion. Well, that better wait until he could get some expert. *He* certainly was no mechanic.

Curious, Mackee pulled out his watch. Three minutes of twelve. The old clock was only about eight hours too fast. Might as well set it. He reached out, took hold of the long minute hand and tugged. With a protesting creak that sent shivers trotting along his spinal column, the hand moved. Slowly he forced it backward. The brass pointer responded sluggishly, as though it were moving in a viscid fluid. Perhaps he should've moved it forward to twelve instead of backward. Too late now. He found himself squinting at the dial in his efforts to see the markings. They seemed to be getting more and more difficult to distinguish. In sudden comprehension, he ran to the window. The sky had become overcast again. Overhead it was night black. Toward the east there was a faint lightness; almost, he thought, like the first light of dawn. Shrugging, he dismissed the matter as no business of his. He vaguely recalled some mention in the Sunday supplement of an eclipse that was to occur soon. Let the scientists worry about that. He snapped on the lights and finished setting the clock.

The door to the museum swung open to admit the peering head of Hepzibah, the housekeeper.

"Your dinner's ready, professor. Mighty dark day, isn't it? Reminds me of the winter of '91. For two whole days you couldn't see the sun. Most everybody was snowed in. Mighty cold winter."

"Thanks, Hepzibah. I'll be right out."

MACKEE GLARED at the closed door and thrust his hands into the deep pockets of his jacket. She seemed to relish cold weather. And if there was one thing he hated, that was it. Winter. *Br-r-r-r.* What was it Shakespeare said? "Blow, blow thou winter wind, thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude." Bet he never felt a cold Maine wind!

Mackee glanced outside once more, into the bewildering blackness, then switched on the radio.

"—tesy of the Blue Label Baking Powder Co. Ike and Mike will come to you tomorrow at the same time. This is James McLiesh, speaking for Blue Label Baking Powder Co., and bidding you all a *schlurp!*—

"Special news flash! The Newfoundland Observatory has just released a bulletin on the strange darkness that has so suddenly caused a 'blackout' of almost the entire Western Hemisphere. Here is the bulletin: 'At 12:01 today the sun was observed to stop, reverse direction and rapidly sink toward the eastern horizon, where it came to rest and resumed its normal motion. Three minutes later, at 12:04, the sun changed direction again and disappeared below the horizon. No explanation is as yet forthcoming.'

"This station will keep you informed with up-to-the-minute flashes. We now return you to the scheduled program."

The subdued music of an orchestra filled the room. Mackee stood in the center of the rug as an expression of shocked dismay played fitfully across his face.

"It's incredible! Positively unbelievable!"

He ran his fingers through his stringy

hair and then, with faltering steps, he returned to the clock. He hesitated for a moment, rubbed his unsteady hands together, and began to turn the hands of the clock forward. When they once more pointed to eight twenty he took a deep breath and slowly turned around.

The electric lights seemed pale in the warm sunlight that beat in through the windows!

His brain whirled with the implications of his discovery. He'd done Edison one better! He changed day into night! But how did it work? A vague recollection of a legend he'd once read foamed to the surface of his mind for a moment and then was gone. His brow furrowed as he concentrated. The library at Cauldwell University. He'd been classifying a collection of books donated to the library. One rather dusty book—what was that title? Suddenly the fragments dropped into place. A page of printing drifted into focus.

Then did the Lord spake unto the craftsmen of Gehalemot and command them to construct a great temple, and in this temple shall they place his gift, the ikon of Chronos that was the ordering of the earth and the heavens. And they shall know that by this gift may they control the seasons, even unto the motion of the sun itself. And lo, the people did and they were amazed. Thus did the Lord God Jehovah overthrow the idolatrous priests of the sun worshipers.

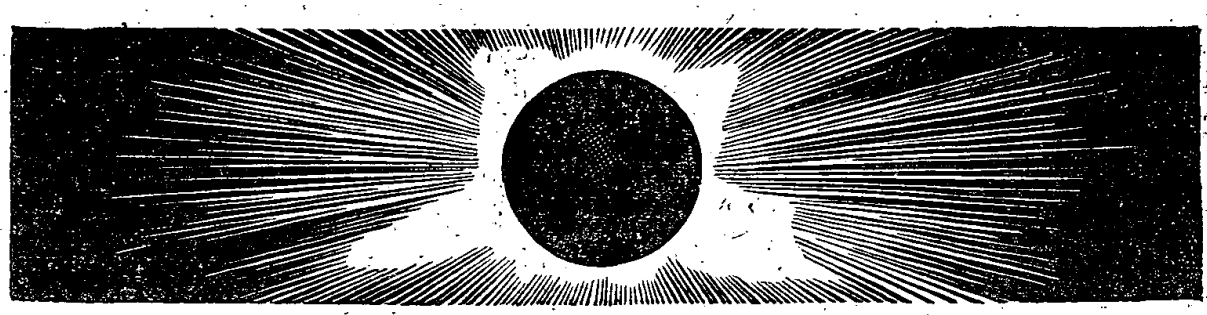
Perhaps that had not been a figurative parable! Perhaps it had been literally true! Of course the clock must've been actually made by some scientist-priest such as the great legendary Kinar, the craftsman. A thousand different plans swirled through his brain. Edgar Perkins, fraternity brother, had been professor of physics at the university. Wire him to come up at once. He'll find out what makes it tick.

What might have happened if Agatha Quincy's house hadn't been drafty is hard to say. A prankish gust of icy wind whirled in a dervish dance and brushed lightly across the nape of Professor Mackee's moist neck. His long, bony nose wrinkled; he sniffed twice and then he sneezed! Not just once, but three separate and distinct sneezes! His face began to grow red, and the words he muttered might have shocked Hepzibah out of her respectability. For the first time in his life, Arthur Quincy Mackee had caught cold!

Visions of Alabama drifted through his mind. Alabama and cotton fields, and the sweet nostalgia of "Deep River" floating on the sultry air. Canna beds and hollyhocks. Warmth, summer.

Summer!

He ran toward the clock and then checked himself. The hands had been difficult to move. In order to change



winter into summer he'd have to turn the hands around nearly three hundred times! Entirely too slow. There ought to be some way to work it. Electricity? That was it! He'd buy an electric motor!

Mackee ran to the hallway, fumblingly pulled himself into his heaviest overcoat, yelled to Hepzibah to hold his dinner, and started off down the street.

NEXT DOOR, Miss Julia Parrish stared out of her window at the retreating figure of the usually sedate professor. Her curiosity aroused, she squashed her aquiline nose against the pane in order to see better. Suddenly the professor stopped and looked up at the sky. Julia followed his gaze but saw nothing. She shrugged her prim shoulders and turned back to her tatting. Most men were pixilated, anyway.

In a way, it was a good thing that Julia Parrish was slightly deaf. Otherwise the loud clap of thunder that followed might have startled her.

Maine Evening Post

Jan. 23—Professor Arthur Quincy Mackee died today as the result of being struck by lightning. The accident, called by the coroner an "act of God," occurred a few minutes after the strange phenomenon that caused darkness over the whole Western Hemisphere for a period of some ten minutes today. Witnesses of the accident said that the sky was clear at the time the bolt struck. Professor Mackee moved to this city a year ago after resigning from the faculty of the University of Alabama. He was a nephew of the late Miss Agatha—

Maine Evening Post

Feb. 6—The antique collection of the late Professor Mackee was sold at auction today. The bulk of the collection was bought by an antique dealer in the city, Mr. Isaac Laquedem.

A quaint old clock was purchased by a Mr. L. G. Jehova of Kansas City.

THE END.

NIGHTMARE ISLAND

by E. WALDO HUNTER

If he hadn't been so thoroughly drunk for so long, he couldn't have accepted the situation—or acted so intelligently.

Illustrated by Schneeman

THE governor took a sight between two leaves of carefully imported mint, lining the green notch up with the corner of the bamboo veranda and the bowed figure of the man on the beach. He was silent so long that his guest became restless, missing the easy drone of the governor's voice. That was the only thing to do, he thought, watching the old man pressing the cool glass against his cheek, peering through the leaves at the beachcomber; the only thing a man could do in this dreary, brilliant group of little islands—you could only talk. If you didn't keep a conversation going, you thought of the heat and the surf-etched silences, and the weary rattle of palm fronds, and that brought you back to the heat again. God, he thought suddenly, the governor dresses for dinner in this heat, every last damn day.

"Poor crazy devil," muttered the governor.

His American visitor asked, "Who?"

The governor gestured with his glass toward the sea and the beachcomber, and then sipped.

The American swiveled and stared. The beachcomber stood dejectedly with the surf tumbling about his knees, and the sun was sinking so rapidly that his shadow crept and crawled along the beach like something with a life of its own. A trick of the light seemed to make the man's flesh transparent for a split second, and it appeared to the American that the man was a broad-shouldered skeleton standing there staring out to sea. A slight shift of shades showed him up again for what he was, the thin husk of a man, sharp-boned, stringy.

The American grunted and turned back toward his host. "What's the matter with him?"

The governor said, "Him? He just doesn't give a damn any more. He lost something and he can't—I can't let him —get it back."

"What did he lose?"

The governor regarded him gravely. "You're a businessman. You deal in dollars and cents and tons— You wouldn't believe me if I told you, and you might not let me finish."

The American opened his mouth to protest, but the governor held up his hand and said, "Listen to that."

The beachcomber's cracked wail drifted out over the cluttered beach and the whispering surf. "Ahniroo!" he cried. "Ahni— Ahniroo!" Then for a long while he was silent, and it grew darker. Just as the sleepy sun pulled the blanket of horizon over its head, they saw the beachcomber's shoulders slump. He turned and walked up the beach.

The American squinted at him. "I

As he drank, the room wabbled some more, and the Things grew bolder around him.

take it he isn't as crazy as he looks?"

The governor shook his head. "You can put it that way."

The American settled himself more comfortably. He didn't care about the 'comber particularly, or the governor either, for that matter. But he had to stay here another forty-eight hours, and there would be nothing to do until the mail steamer came except to sit and talk with the old boy. The man seemed to have at least one good yarn to tell, which was promising.

"Come on—give," he grinned. "I'll take your word for it. Don't forget, I'm not used to this kind of country, or the funny business that goes on in it. Who is he, anyhow? And why is he calling out over the water? Gives me the creeps. Who's Ahniroo—or what is it?"

The governor leaned back and looked up at a spider that would probably drop down someone's collar before the evening was over, and he said nothing for quite a while. Then he began:

AHNIROO was a . . . . a friend of the fellow's. I doubt that any man has had a friend like that. As far as the man himself is concerned—yes, you may be right. Perhaps he isn't quite all there. But after what he went through, the surprising thing is that he can talk fairly sensibly. Of course, he's peculiar there, too—all he'll talk about is Ahniroo, but he does it quite rationally.

He was a seaman, much like any other seaman. He had relatives ashore and was going to marry one of these years, perhaps; and there was a visit to the place where he was born, some day, when he could walk into the town with a hundred-dollar bill in every pocket of a new suit. Like other seamen he saved his money and spent it and lost it and had it stolen from him, and like some other seamen he drank.

Being on the beach really started the whole thing for him. A sailor's unemployment is unlike any other kind, in that it is so little dependent on the man's whereabouts. A silk-mill worker must starve around a silk mill before he can get his job, but a seaman can starve anywhere. If he is a real seaman, he is a painter and a general handyman, a stevedore and roustabout. Chances are that he can drive a truck or play a little music or can turn his hand at any of a thousand semiskilled trades. He may not know where he will eat next, but he can always find a bit of a drink to warm him or cool him as the weather dictates. But Barry—our beachcomber over there—didn't care much for eating, and didn't do much of it for quite a while, except when it was forced on him. He concentrated on the drinking, and the more he drank the more reasons he found for drinking, until he couldn't walk or sleep or work or travel or stay still without a little snort or two as a persuader. Not so good. He lost a lot of jobs ashore and afloat. When he had a job he'd guzzle to celebrate, and when he lost one he'd guzzle to console himself. You can imagine what happened.

It hit him in a small town on the Florida coast. He had just been fired from a little four-thousand ton freighter that ran coastwise and found that stopping in such half-forgotten whistle stops paid expenses. It was on the North American continent, but aside from that it hardly differed from these islands. It was hot and humid and a long, long way from anywhere else.

And Barry found himself sitting on the edge of a wooden sidewalk with his

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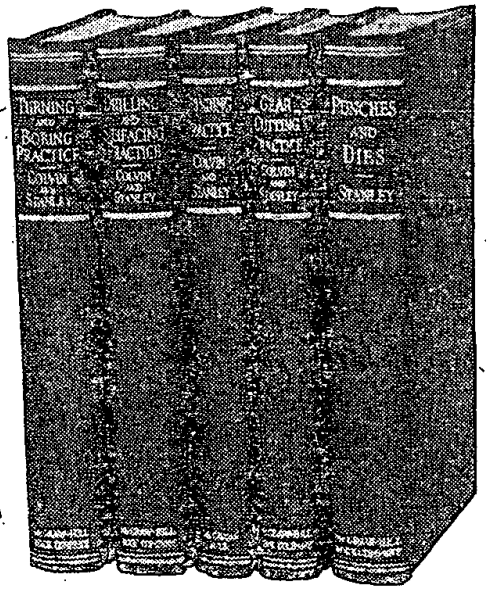

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feet and his soul in the gutter, with no money and no job and no food in his stomach. He felt pretty good, being just halfway between a binge and a hangover. He stared for twenty minutes at a painted stone in the dusty road, just because his eyes happened to be directed that way. And before long a scorpion crept out from behind the stone and stood looking at him.

It was like no other scorpion he had ever seen. It was no larger than any other, and the same dark color, but instead of the formidable pincers, it had *arms*. They were tiny and perfect and pink and soft, and had delicate hands and little diamond specks of fingernails. And—oh yes; no joints, apparently. They were as sinuous as an elephant's trunk. It was such an unheard-of thing to see that Barry stared at it for a long moment before he let himself believe what he had seen. Then he shook himself, shrugged drunkenly, and said:

"I'll be damned!" And then, addressing the strange scorpion, "Hi!"

The scorpion waved one of its perfect, impossible arms, and said, "You will be!" and then, "Hi yourself."

Barry started so violently that he came to his feet. The liquor he had been sopping seemed to have collected in his knees; at any rate, those members were quite liquid and buckled under him, so that he fell on his face. He remembered the scorpion scuttling away, and then his forehead struck the painted stone and the lights went out for him.

BARRY HAD BEEN a strong man, but after two years of nursing from flat bottles, you wouldn't have known it. He was no beauty. He had a long leather face and a purple nose. His eyes were nearly as red as their lids, and his broad shoulders were built of toothpicks and parchment. Skin that had been taut with the solid muscle under it was now loose and dry, and fitted him as badly as the clothes he wore. He was a big fellow—six feet three at least, and he weighed all of a hundred and twenty-seven pounds.

The scorpion was the start of it, and the crack on the skull brought it on full strength. That's right—the horrors. The good old creeping, crawling horrors. When he came to and hauled his ragged body back up to the sidewalk, he found himself in a new world, horribly peopled by things he couldn't understand. There were soft white wriggling things—a carpet of them under his feet. Standing at bay in the doorway of a general store down the street was a gryphon, complete with flaming breath, horns and tail, frighteningly real, lifted bodily from an old book that had frightened him when he was a child. He heard a monstrous rustle over his head, and there was a real life prototype of Alice-in-Wonderland's bucktoothed Jabberwock, and it was out to get him. He shrieked and tried to run, and fell choking and splattering into the Slough of Despond from "Pilgrim's Progress." There was someone else in there with him—a scantily clad girl on skis from the front cover of a Paris magazine. She laughed and turned into a six-legged winged snake which bit at him viciously and vanished. He scrambled to his feet and plunged sobbing down the dusty road, and people on the sidewalks turned and stared and said, "Crazy with th' heat" and went on about their business, for heat madness was common among beached sailors in that country in August.

Barry staggered on out of town,

which wasn't very far, and out among the sand dunes and scrub and saw grass. He began to see things that he could not describe, monsters made of other monsters, devils and huge spiders and insects. In the angry blaze of the sun he slumped to his knees, sobbing, and then something clicked in his mind and he collapsed from sheer psychic exhaustion.

IT WAS NIGHT, and very cool, when he woke again. There was half a moon and a billion stars, and the desertlike dunes were all black velvet and silver. The black and the gleam were crowded with strange life, but it was worse now than it had been in the daytime, because now he could feel what he couldn't see. He *knew* that twenty feet away from him stood a great foul buzzard that stared steadily at him, and yet he could not see it. It was more than a fearsome sensation that the thing was there; he could feel each feather, every wrinkle of the crusted, wattled neck, each calloused serration on its dry yellow legs. As he stared tremblingly into the mounding distances, he felt the grate of a bison's hoof as it eyed him redly, ready to charge. The sound of a wolf's teeth impacted on his skin rather than his eardrums, and he felt its rough tongue on its black lips. He screamed and ran toward the town, guided by his omnipresent seaman's instinct, dodging and zigzagging among the silver dunes. Oh, yes—he had 'em. He had the horrors really thoroughly.

He reached town about eleven at night. He was pretty much of a mess—covered with grime, cut and bruised and sick. Someone saw him leaning rockily against the sun-dried wall of a gin mill, trying to revive himself with the faint clinking of glasses and the fainter odor of liquor that drifted from inside. Someone else said, "Look at the hulk; let's feed him a drink." It was a lucky break for Barry; with his metabolism in the pickled state it was, he would most certainly have dropped dead if he had not had that sniffer.

They led him in and gave him a couple more, and his garbled mutterings were amusing to them for a time, but after a while they went home and left him cluttering up a round table with his spent body.

Closing time—which meant the time when there was no one left around to buy a nickel beer—came, and the bartender, a misplaced Louisiana Cajun, came over to throw the sailor out. There was no one else in the place but a couple of rats and some flies. One of the rats had only two legs and wore a collar and tie even in that heat. The other rat had some self-respect and scuttled under the beer pulls to lap suds, being a true quadruped with inherited rat reflexes.

The two-legged rat's name was Zilio. He was a small oily creature with swarthy skin, a hooked nose supported by a small mustache, an ingratiating manner and a devious way of making a living. His attention was attracted toward Barry by the barkeep's purposeful approach. Zilio slid off his stool and said:

"Hold it, Pierre; I'm buying for the gentleman. Pour a punch."

The name did not refer to the ingredients of the drink but to its effect. The barkeep shrugged and went back to his bar, where he poured a double drink of cheap whiskey, adding two drops of clear liquid from a small bottle, this being the way to mix a Zilio punch.

Zilio took it from him and carried it over to Barry. He set it on the table

in front of the seaman, drew up a chair and sat close to him, his arm on Barry's shoulder.

"Drink up, old man," he said in an affected accent. He shook Barry gently, and the sailor raised his head groggily. "Go on," urged Zilio.

Barry picked up the glass, shaking and slopping, and sipped because he had not energy for a gulp.

"You're a sailor, eh?" murmured Zilio.

Barry shook his head and reared back to try to focus his disobedient eyes on the oily man. "Yeah, an' a damn good one."

"Union member?"

"What's it to you?" asked Barry belligerently, and Zilio pushed the glass a little closer. Barry realized that the smooth, swarthy character was buying a drink, and promptly loosened up. "Yeah; I belong to the union." He picked up the glass.

"Good!" said Zilio. "Drink up!"

Barry did. The raw liquid slid down his throat, looped around and smashed him on the back of the neck. He sank tinglingly into unconsciousness. Zilio watched him for a moment, smiling.

Pierre said, "What are you going to do with that broken down piece o' tar?"

Zilio began to search Barry's pockets diligently. "If I can find what I'm looking for," he said, "this broken down piece of tar is going to be removed from the rolls of the unemployed. Another minute's searching uncovered Barry's seaman's papers. "Ah—able seaman—quartermaster—wiper and messman. He'll do." He stood back and wiped his hands on a large white handkerchief. "Pierre, get a couple of the boys and have this thing brought down to my dock."

Pierre grunted and went out, returning in a few minutes with a couple of fishermen. Without a word they picked up the unconscious Barry and carried him out to a disreputable old flivver, which groaned its way out of sight down the dusty road.

Zilio said, "'Night, Pierre." He handed the bartender two clean dollar bills for his part in the shanghai, and left.

WHEN BARRY swam up out of the effects of Pierre's Mickey Finn, he found himself in all too familiar surroundings. He didn't have to open his eyes; his nose and his sense of touch told him where he was. He was lying in a narrow bed, and the sparse springs beneath him vibrated constantly. His right side felt heavier than his left, and he rolled a little that way, and then the weight shifted and he rolled back. He groaned. How did he ever get working again?

He opened his eyes at last, to see what kind of a box it was that he had shipped out on. He saw a dimly lit fo'c's'le with six bunks in it, only one of which was occupied. The place was filthy, littered with empty beer cans, dirty socks, a couple of pairs of dungarees, wrapping paper from laundry parcels, and cigarette butts—the usual mess of a merchant ship's crew's quarters when leaving port. He closed his eyes and shook his head violently to rid himself of this impossible vision—he didn't remember catching a ship, *knew* he was on the beach, and was good and sick of seeing things he could not believe. So—he closed his eyes and shook his head to clear it, and when he did that he groaned in agony at the pain that shot through it. Oooh—that must have been a party. Wow! He lay very still until the pain subsided,

and then cautiously opened his eyes again. He was still in a ship's fo'c's'le.

"Hey!" he called weakly.

The figure on the lower bunk opposite started, and a man pushed his head into the light that trickled in from the alleyway.

"Hey, where am I? Eh—when is this?"

Apparently the man could make sense out of the vague question. "Tuesday," he said. That meant nothing to Barry. "Ye're aboard th' *Jesse Hanck*. Black oil. Far East."

Barry lay back. "Oh," he moaned.

The Hanck ships were famous—or was it notorious? They were old Fore River ships, well-deck tankers. They were dirty and unseaworthy, and they were hungry ships and paid ordinary seamen's wages to their petty officers, grading it on down from there. Twenty-eight lousy dollars a month. No overtime. Eighty-six-day runs.

Barry got up on one elbow and said half to himself, "What did I do—*ask* for this job?"

The other man rolled out and sat on the edge of his bunk, putting on tankerman's safety shoes. "Damfino. Did you ever meet a guy called Zilio?"

"Ah— Yeh."

The man nodded. "There you are then, shipmate. He gave you a drink. You passed out. You wake up aboard this oil can. That's Zilio's business."

"Why the dirty— I'm a union member! I'll tie this ship up! I'll have her struck! I'll report her to the Maritime Commission! I'll—"

The other man rose and came across the fo'c's'le to lean his elbows on Barry's bunk and breathe his gingivitis into Barry's face. "You'll do your work

and shut up. When you sober up enough to look around, you'll find out you're sailing without seaman's papers. If you're a good boy and play along with the seahorse that calls himself a chief mate, you'll get them back. Step off the straight and narrow and you'll be beached somewhere without your livin'. An' listen—better dry up with that union talk. You got picked up by a fink-herder and shipped on a fink ship. They don't go for that around here, that fellow-worker stuff."

"Yeah?" Barry swung his feet over the side of the bunk and had to clutch his pounding head. "I'll jump ship in Panama! We got to go through the canal!"

"Ain't nobody jumpin' no ship in Panama nowadays, friend. They'll send out a fifth-colyum alarm fer you from the ship an' you'll spend somethin' like fifty years in a military bastille. Besides—time we get to Colon you won't want to be jumpin' ship. Better cool off now. G'wan back to sleep. I got the eight to twelve. You got the twelve to four."

So BARRY went to work again. He spent his days and nights in the utmost misery. The packing around the porthole beside his bunk had kicked out some years ago, and every time the weather got a little drafty, his bunk shipped water. The food was atrocious, and the crew was composed of bootblacks, kids on vacation, ex-tenant farmers, and one or two bona-fide seamen like himself, either outright finks or shanghaied wrecks. But all of this didn't stack up to his horrors. They persisted and they grew.

It isn't often a man gets them that badly, but then it isn't often that a man lets himself get into the state that Barry was in. He walked in a narrowing circle of ravenous beasts. When he

slept he dreamed horrible dreams, and when he lay awake he could feel tiny, cold, wet feet crawling over his body. He was afraid to stand a lookout watch by himself, and the mate had to batten down his ears for him before he would go out on the fo'c's'le head at night. He was dead sure that there was something horrible hiding in the anchor engine, ready to leap out at him and wrap him up in the anchor cables. He was just as afraid to be in a roomful of men, because, to his sodden eyes, their faces kept running together fluidly, assuming the most terrifying shapes. So he spent his hours off watch hovering on the outskirts of small groups of men, making them nervous, causing them to call him Haunt and Jonah.

He found out what the eight-to-twelve man had meant when he'd said that Barry wouldn't feel like jumping ship in Panama. A day before they made the canal, those who might make trouble were called to the second mate's room, each secretly, and fed rotgut liquor. They hadn't learned—not one of them. It was a Mickey again. When they came to, they were in the Pacific.

The *Jesse Hanck* steamed well out of the usual steamer lanes. The Hanck fleet were charter boats, and they saw to it that they were always behind schedule sufficiently to enable the captains to pad the fuel and store consumption accounts enough so that pockets were lined all around, except for those of the crews. A thoroughly rotten outfit. At any rate, Barry had his little accident eight days out of the canal.

The ship was shuffling along somewhere on the tenth meridian, and it was hot. It was one of those evenings when a man puts clothes on to soak up perspiration and rips them off thirty seconds later because he can't stand the heat of them; when sleeping in the fo'c's'le is impossible and sleeping on deck is just as bad.

The men bunked all over the place, throwing mattresses down on the after boat deck, swinging hammocks from the midship rigging, crawling under the messroom tables, which were out on the poop now—sleeping anywhere and everywhere in impossible attempts to escape the cruel heat. Calling the watch was a hit-or-miss proposition; you might find your relief and then again you might wake the wrong man from a rare snatch of real sleep and get yourself roughed up for your mistake.

Barry came off watch at four that morning. He turned in somewhere back aft. He never got up for breakfast anyway, and when the eight-to-twelve ordinary seaman tried to call him for lunch at eleven-twenty, he couldn't be found. It was one-thirty before the bos'n missed him. Sometime between four in the morning and one in the afternoon, then, Barry had left the ship.

It gave all hands something to talk about for a couple of days. The captain wrote up a "lost at sea" item in the log and pocketed Barry's wages. An ordinary seaman was given Barry's duties with no increase in pay. Barry was forgotten. Who cared, anyway? Nobody liked him. He wasn't worth a damn. He couldn't steer. He couldn't paint. He was a lousy lookout.

BARRY HIMSELF always gets that part of his story garbled. How a man trained at sea, capable in any emergency of looking out for his own skin, no matter what the weather or his state of sobriety, could possibly *fall* off a ship at sea is beyond understanding. I don't believe he did. I think he jumped off. Not because of the way he was being

treated aboard that slave ship; he hadn't self-respect enough left for that. It must have been his horrors; at any rate, that, according to him, is the last thing he remembers happening to him aboard the *Jesse Hanck*.

He had just drifted off to sleep, when he was aroused by some shipboard noise—the boilers popping off, perhaps, or a roar from the antiquated steering engine. At any rate, he was suddenly dead certain that something was pursuing him, and that if he didn't get away from it, he would be horribly killed. He tried, and then he was in the water.

As the rusty old hull slid past him in the warm sea, he looked up at it and blinked the brine out of his failing eyes and made not the slightest attempt to shout for help. He trod water for some moments, until the after light of the tanker was a low star swinging down on the horizon, and then he turned over on his back and kicked sluggishly to keep himself afloat.

Now delirium tremens is a peculiar affliction. Just as the human body can be destroyed by a dose of poison, but will throw off an overdose, so the human mind will reach a point of supersaturation, and return to something like normality. In Barry's case it was a pseudosanity; he did not cease to have his recurrent attacks of phantasmagoria, but he became suddenly immunized to them. It was as if he had forgotten how to be afraid—how, even, to wonder at the things he saw and felt. He simply did not care; he became as he is today, just not giving a damn. In effect, his mind was all but completely gone, so that for the first time in weeks he could lie at ease and feel that he was not mortally afraid. It was the first time he had been in real danger, and he was not afraid.

He says that he lay there and slept for weeks. He says that porpoises came and played with him, bunting him about and crying like small children. And he says that an angel came down from the sky and built him a boat out of seaweed and foam. But he only remembers one sun coming up, so it must have been that same morning that he found himself clutching a piece of driftwood, rocking and rolling in a gentle swell just to windward of a small island. It was just a little lump of sand and rock, heaped high in the middle, patched with vegetation and wearing a halo of shrieking sea birds. He stared at it with absolutely no interest at all for about four hours, drifting closer all the while. When his feet struck bottom he did not know what it meant or what he should do; he just let them drag until his knees struck also, and then he abandoned his piece of wood and crept ashore.

THE SUN was coming up again when Barry awoke. He was terribly weak, and his flesh was dry and scaly the way only sea-soaked skin can be. His tongue was interfering with his breathing. He lolled up to his hands and knees and painfully crawled up the sloping beach to a cluster of palms. He collapsed with his chin in a cool spring, and would have killed himself by overdrinking if he had not fallen asleep again.

The next time he pushed the groggy clouds from him, he felt much better. He was changed; he knew that. He was basically changed; he felt different about things. It took him quite a while to figure out just how, but then it occurred to him that though he was still surrounded with the monsters and visions and phantoms of his own drink-

crazed creation, he did not fear them. But it was more than that. It was not the disinterest he had experienced out there when he was adrift. It was a sullen hatred of the things. It was an eagerness to have one of them come near enough for him to attack. He crouched by the spring and looked craftily about him, trying to find an object to kill and tear. He found it. Near him was a coconut. He picked up a stone and hurled it, and cracked the coconut. He caught it up and drank greedily from the streaming cracks, and then broke it and ate the meat until it made him sick. He was enormously pleased with himself.

All around him the ground pimpled and dimpled, and from the little depression what he thought were strange plants began to grow. They were sinuous stalks, and they seemed to be made of two rubbery sheaths that wound about each other spirally, forming a tentaclelike stem, and spreading out at the tip in two fleshy extensions like snail's eyes. He reached out and touched one as it grew visibly, and it writhed away from him and began clubbing the ground blindly, searchingly. He'd never dreamed up anything like this before. But he was certain he had nothing to fear from them. He got up, kicking one out of the way disgustedly, and began to climb the central hill for bearings. Just as he left, one of the growths spurted up out of the ground, curved over his head and smashed wetly down on the spot he had just vacated. He didn't even look over his shoulder. Why should he, for a figment of his imagination? The mistake he made was

that the things were real. Just as real, my friend, as you and I!

BARRY, poor crazed wreck, couldn't realize it then, because the growing, writhing trunks all around him were mixed and mingled with things of his own creation, dancing and gibbering around him. There were things harmless and beautiful, and things too foul to mention, and it is little wonder that the stemlike things were of little importance.

Barry went on up the hill. He picked up a thorny stick, quite heavy, and strode on, casually swiping at his monsters, real and imaginary. He noticed subconsciously that when he stuck at a unicorn or a winged frog, it would vanish immediately, but when he swung at a growing tentacle it would either duck quickly or, when struck, twist into a tight knot about its wound. He even looked back and noticed how the stalks kept pace with him, sinking back into the ground behind him and sprouting ahead. It still meant nothing to him.

A few hundred yards from the top he stopped and sniffed. There had been a growing, fetid odor about the place, and he didn't like it. He connected it somehow with the smell of the ichor that exuded from the wounded stalks after he had slashed them, but he was incurious; he didn't really care. He shrugged and finished his climb.

When he had reached the top he stood a moment wiping his forehead with his wrist, and then sighted all around the horizon. There were no other islands in sight. This one was small—nearly round, and perhaps a mile by a mile and a quarter. He spotted two more springs and a tight grove of coconut and breadfruit. That was encouraging. He stepped forward as a rubbery trunk poured out of the ground

and lashed at his legs with its two prehensile tentacles. It missed.

A puff of wind bearing an unspeakable odor brought his attention back to the crest of the hill. It was nearly round, almost exactly following the contours of the island, and fell in the center to form a small crater. Down at the bottom of the crater was a perfectly round hole, and that was the source of the noisome smell.

Barry walked down toward it because he happened to be facing that way and it was the easiest way to go. He was halfway down the slope when two points of what looked like pulpy flesh began to rise out of the hole. They seemed to be moving slowly, but Barry suddenly realized that it was an illusion due to their enormous size. Before he could bring himself to stop, they had risen twenty feet in the air. They began leaning outward, one directly toward him, the other across the hole, away from him. They grew thicker as they poured upward and outward, and finally they lay flat on the slope and the near one began licking up toward him.

It was the most frightening phantasm that had yet presented itself to Barry's poor alcoholic brain, but now he would not be frightened. He stood there, legs apart, club at the ready, and waited. When the thing reached his feet he raised himself on his toes and brought the thorny club down with all his strength on its fleshy tip. It winced away and then poured back. He hit it twice more and it retreated. He ran after it and smashed it again and again. It suddenly rocketed up in the air, as did its mate from the other side of the crater. They struck together with a mighty wet *smack!* and stood there, a pale-green, shining column of living flesh, quivering in the sunlight. And then, with unbelievable speed, they plunged into the ground, back into their hole. Barry dropped his club, clasped his hands over his head and smirked. Then he turned and went back to his spring.

And all the way back, not another trunk showed itself.

He slept well that night under a crude shelter of palm leaves. Not a thing bothered him but dreams, and of course they didn't bother him much any more. His victory over the thing in the crater had planted a tiny seed of self-esteem in that rotten hulk of a man. That, added to the fact that he was too crazy to be afraid of anything, made him something new under the sun.

In the morning he sat up abruptly. At his feet was a pile of breadfruit and coconuts, and around him was a forest, a wall of the waving stalks. He leaped to his feet and cast about wildly for his club. It had disappeared. He drew his sheath knife, which by some miracle had stayed with him since he left the *Jesse Hanck,* and stood there, palisaded by the thickly planted, living stems. And he still was not afraid. He took a deep breath and stepped menacingly toward the near wall of stalks. They melted into the ground before he reached them. He whirled and rushed those behind him. They were gone before he could get within striking distance. He paused and nodded to himself. If that was the way they wanted it, it was O. K. He put away his knife and fell to on the fruit. The stems ranked themselves at a respectful distance, as if they were watching. And then he noticed something new. Deep within his brain was a constant liquid murmur, as if thousands of people were talking quietly together in a strange tongue. He didn't

The huge stalk would have had him in another instant if something hadn't yanked him out of the way—

mind it very much. He'd been through worse, and he wasn't curious.

After he was quite finished he noticed a rustling movement in the wall surrounding him. The creatures were passing something, one to the other—his club! It reached the stalk nearest him; it was taken and laid gently by his side. The stalk straightened and dropped into the earth quickly as if it were embarrassed.

Barry looked at the waving things and almost grinned. Then he picked up the club. Immediately the things on one side of him melted into the ground, and those on the other side doubled in number. A couple of them began sprouting under his feet; he jumped away, startled. More sank into the earth from his path, and more sprang up behind. He looked at them a little uneasily; it occured to him that they were a little insistent, compared with his usual disappearing monsters. He walked away from them. They followed; that is, they massed behind him, sprouting in his footsteps. And the murmuring in his mind burst into a silent cacophony; gleeful, triumphant.

He wandered inland, followed by his rustling company of pale-green stalks. When he turned aside they would spring up around him, and it was no good trying to press through. They made no attempt to harm him at all. But—they were *forcing* him toward the hill! Perhaps he realized it—perhaps not. Barry, by this time, was totally unhinged. Any other man could not have lived through what he did. But his peculiar conditioning, the subtle distortion of his broken mind, gave him the accidental ability to preserve himself. Certainly he himself could take no credit for it. His fantastic world was no more strange to him than ours is to us. If you or I were suddenly transported to that island, we would be as frightened as—well, a gorilla in Times Square, or a New Yorker in the African jungle. It's all a matter of receptivity.

And so he found himself marching up the central slope, being driven gently but firmly toward that monstrous thing in the crater by his entourage of pale-green stalks. They must have been a weird-looking company.

And the thing was waiting for him. He came up over the crest of the rise, and the tip of one of the two great green projections curled up over his head and lashed down at him. He threw himself sideways and belted it with his club as it touched the ground. It slid back toward the hole. He took a step or two after it. It was huge—fully sixty feet of it stretched from him to the hole in the center of the crater. And no telling how much more of it was in there. At the first movement from the thing, there had been a rustle behind him and every one of the stalks had dropped from sight.

As Barry ran forward to strike again, a shape shot up out of the ground at his side, whipped around his leg and flung him down. He rolled over and sat up, to see the other great green arm come swooping down on the stalk that had tripped him and—saved his life. The two huge tentacles slapped together, twisted the slender stalk between them, and began to pull. The stalk tried to go underground, and for a moment held, while its spiraled body stretched and thinned under tons of pull. Then the ground itself gave, and with a peculiar sucking sound, the stalk came up out of the earth. And for the first time Barry saw it for what it was.

The "root" was a dark-green ovoid,

five or six feet long, about two and a half feet thick at the middle. It was rough and wrinkled, and gleamed with its coating of slime. The stalk itself was nearly eight feet long. The creature hung for a moment in the twin tentacles of its captor, and then it was infolded, the bulge of it sliding visibly down the two arms which had closed together and twisted, forming a great proboscislike tube. And Barry heard it scream, deep down in his mind.

Barry rose and scrambled back over the crest of the hill. It had ocurred to him that the monster in the crater had stuck at a victim—himself—and that the stalk had sacrificed itself to save him. Having a victim, it would be satisfied for the time being. He was right. Peering back, he saw the great column rise in the air and slip swiftly back into its hole. And he realized something else, as the two tips disappeared underground. The divided proboscis—the ability to rise from and sink into the earth—why, the big fellow there was exactly the same as all the rest of these creatures, except for its huge size!

What was it? Why, Barry never knew exactly, and though I took a great deal of trouble to find out, I never bothered to tell him. There they were; more than that, Barry did not care. He still doesn't. However, as closely as I can discover, I think that the creatures were a species of marine worm—one of the *Echiuroidea*, to be exact—*bonellia viridis*. They grow large anywhere they grow, but I'd never heard of one longer than four feet, proboscis and all. However, I think it quite possible for a colony to develop in a given locality, and mutate into greater size. As for the big one—well, Barry did find a thing or two out about that monster.

Barry went back down the hill and headed for cover. He wanted to sit somewhere in the shade where he would not be bothered by such things. He found himself a spot and relaxed there. And slowly, then faster and faster, the stalks began to spring up around him again. They kept their distance, almost respectfully; but there was a certain bland insistence in their presence that annoyed Barry.

"Go away!" he said sharply.

And they did. Barry was utterly astonished. It was the first really human reaction that had struck him in weeks. But the sight of these curious creatures, so dissimilar to anything that he had ever even heard about, obeying him so implicitly, struck some long-buried streak of humor in the man. He roared with laughter.

"Hello."

His laughter cut off and he peered around. Nothing.

"Hello." The sound seemed to come from no specific direction—as a matter of fact, it seemed to come from no direction at all. It seemed to come from inside him, but he hadn't spoken.

"Who said that?" he snapped.

"I did," said the voice. He looked around again, and his eyes caught a movement down low, to his left. There, just peeping out of the ground, were the twin tendrils that tipped the ubiquitous stalks.

"*You?*" asked Barry, pointing.

The creature rose another two feet and swayed gently. "Yes."

"And what the hell might you be?"

"I don't understand you. What is hell?"

"It speaks English!" gasped Barry.

"I speak," agreed the monster. "What is English?"

Barry rose to his knees and stared at it. "What are you?" he repeated.

"Man."

"Yeah? What does that make me?"

"You are different. I have only your words for everything. Your name for yourself is Man. My name for myself is Man, too. I have no name for you."

"I'm a man," asserted Barry, half truthfully.

"And what would you say I am?"

Barry looked at it carefully. "A damned nightmare."

The thing said seriously, "Very well. Hereafter we shall be known as nightmares. I shall tell all the people."

THE THOUGHT of actually having a conversation with this unpleasant-looking beast struck Barry again and almost overwhelmed him. "How the devil can you speak with me?"

"My mind speaks to your mind."

"Yeah? Gee!" was the only comment Barry could think of.

"What are you going to do?" asked the creature.

"Whatcha mean?"

"You have proved yourself against the Big One. We know you can destroy him. Will you do it soon, please?"

"The Big One? You mean that thing in the crater?"

"Yes."

"What can I do?"

"You will know, all-powerful one."

Barry looked around to find out who was being addressed in such prepossessing terms, and then concluded that it was he. He puffed his chest. "Well," he said, "I'll make a deal with you. Get me a drink and I'll fix you up."

It was an old mental reflex, one he had used all over the coast to get himself plastered when offered any kind of a job, aside from shipping out. His technique was to demand more liquor until he was so drunk he was of no value

to any kind of an employer; and they would go away and leave him alone.

The stalk said, "It shall be done."

A whirring telepathic signal sounded in Barry's brain, and two or three dozen of the things leaped out of the earth.

"The master desires a drink. And pass the word; hereafter we are to be known as nightmares. It is his wish."

The stalks dropped out of sight, all but the one Barry was talking with.

"Well; that's something like service," breathed Barry.

"All things are yours for the service you will do us," said the nightmare.

"This is the damnedest thing," said Barry, scratching his head. "Why didn't you talk to me before?"

"I did not know what your intentions were, nor whether or not you were an intelligent animal," said the nightmare.

"Y'know now, huh?"

"Yes, master."

"Hey— How come none of 'em talk to me but you?"

"I differ slightly from the rest. See those birds?"

Barry looked up at the wheeling, screaming cloud of gulls and curlews. "So?"

The nightmare gave a peculiar telepathic whistle. The birds wheeled and hurtled downward toward them. In an instant the glade was filled with them. Barry was cuffed and slapped by their wings as they crowded about him. He snatched at a large bird, caught it by the leg, and promptly twisted its neck.

At the nightmare's sudden signal, the rest of the birds turned and fluttered and soared up and away.

"Why did you do that?" asked the nightmare.

"I'm going to eat it."

"You eat birds?"

"Why not?"

"You shall have all you want. But as I was saying— I am different from

these others. Of all of us, I alone can call the birds. Apparently, only I may speak with you."

"Seems like. I can—hear the others, but I dunno what they're driving at. What about this Big One? Where'd he come from?"

"The Big One was one of us. But he differed also. He was a mutant, like me, but he is unintelligent. He eats his own kind, which we cannot do. He is very old, and every time he eats one of us, he grows larger. He can't move from the crater because it is rockbound, and he can't burrow through it. But the larger he grows the farther he can reach. If you were not going to kill him, he would grow until he could reach the whole island, or so they say. It used to be, a thousand years ago, that he could travel our roads—"

"Roads? I didn't see no roads."

"Oh, they are underground. The whole island is honeycombed with our burrows. We never put more of ourselves above the surface than our proboscis. We catch our food that way, feeling about the ground and the water's edge for small plants and animals. We can dig, too, almost as fast as we can travel through our roads— Here's your drink."

BARRY WATCHED fascinated as a column of stalks approached, bearing gourds of coconut shells filled with water, coconut milk, and breadfruit juice. Never a drop was spilled, as the stalks progressed. Two or three would sprout swiftly, lean back toward the gourd bearers. They would take the burden, bend swiftly forward and pass it on to some newly sprouted nightmares, and then sink into the ground and appear ahead.

"Why don't they carry it underground?" asked Barry.

"It might not suit you then, master. You live in the sun, and the foods you have eaten have grown in the sun. It shall be as you wish it."

Barry extended his hand and a coconut shell full of cool water was deposited in it. He sipped once and threw it down. "Call this a drink?" he roared. "Get me a *drink!*"

"What would you like?"

"Whiskey, damn you! Gin, rum—beer! Wine, if you can't find anything better." The more he thought of it, the thirstier he got. "Get me a drink, you—what's your name?"

"Ahniroo."

"Well, get it anyway." Barry slumped sullenly back.

"Master—we have none of these things you ask. Could we perhaps make one of them?"

"Make one? I don't—wait a minute." Barry did a little thinking. If he had to make a drink—brew it up, wait for it to ferment, strain it—well, he'd just as soon do without. But it seemed as if these goofy critters were aching to work for him. "O. K.—I'll tell you what to do."

And so Barry gave his orders. He knew very vaguely what to do, purely because he had some idea of what alcoholic drinks were made out of. And it passed the time pleasantly. He had plenty to eat and drink and never had to lift a finger to get it. For the first time in his life he had the kind of existence he'd dreamed about—even if it was mixed up with nightmares.

The base of his brew was coconut milk. He'd heard somewhere that an otherwise innocuous drink would ferment if you put in a raisin and closed the container tightly. No raisins,

though. He tried several things and finally got fair results with chunks of breadfruit dried on the rocks in the sun. These were put into a plugged coconut shell, the opening carefully sealed with a whittled wooden stopper and sealed with mucous from the hides of the nightmares. Barry wasn't finicky.

It was a pleasure to watch them work. They co-operated admirably, grouping about a task, each supplying one or both of the "fingers" at the tips of their proboscises. To see a coconut held, plugged, doctored with breadfruit and sealed up again, was a real pleasure, so swiftly and deftly was it done. Barry had only to whittle one plug when the knife was taken from him and three of the stalks took over the task, one to handle the knife, two to hold the wood. And do you know how many coconuts Barry had them prepare? By actual count, according to Ahniroo—over nine thousand!

And when it was done, Barry announced that it would be, anyway, six months before the stuff was worth drinking. The nightmares, in effect, shrugged that off. They had lots of time. One of them was detailed to mark off the days; and in the meantime they waited on Barry hand and foot. No mention was made of the Big One. And Barry lay and dreamed the days away, thinking of the binge he was going to go on when he could get his hands on nine thousand bottles of home brew!

"GOVERNOR," said the American, as the old man stopped to light a cigar, "tell me something. Isn't it a little tough to believe this drunkard's yarn? That business of the worms having intelligence and talking with him. Isn't that a little strong?"

The governor considered. "Perhaps. But once you get over the initial surprise of an idea like that, try taking it apart. Why shouldn't they be intelligent? Just what is intelligence anyway?"

"Why"—the American fingered his Adam's apple uneasily—"I'd say intelligence was what we have that makes us the leading race on the planet."

"Are we, though? We're outnumbered by thousands of other species—worms, for instance, if numbers is your idea of racial supremacy. We are not as strong as the elephant or as quick as the antelope—strength and speed have nothing to do with supremacy. No, we use our intelligence to make tools. We owe our position on earth to our ability to make tools."

"Is that intelligence—tool-making?"

The governor shook his head. "It is one of the ways to use intelligence."

"What about these worms of Barry's, then—why didn't they have cities and literature and machines?"

"They didn't need them. They were not overcrowded on the island. There was plenty to eat for all. The only menace they had was the Big One, and even that wasn't a complete menace—he could have lived another twenty thousand years without endangering the life of any but those who wandered too close. His presence was a discomfort. As to their literature—how can we know about that? Barry was a seaman, and a very low-type seaman, an ignoramus. What did he care about the splendid brains that Ahniroo and his people might have had? Intelligence of that sort must have produced superb developments along some lines. Barry never bothered to find out.

"No, you can't judge the intelligence of a race by its clothes or its automo-

biles or its fancy foods. Intelligence is a cellular accident affecting the nervous cysts of certain races. It might strike anywhere. It seems as if it is a beautiful jest handed about by the gods, like a philanthropist giving away beautiful grand pianos to uneducated children. Some may learn to play them. Some may build intricate machines with the parts. Most would destroy them, one way or another. What do you think our race is doing with its great gift? Well?"

The American grinned. "Better get on with your story."

WELL, for those six months Barry lived in the lap of luxury. Yes, raw sea birds and coconut and breadfruit and clams can be luxury, once you're used to them. It isn't what you have that makes luxury, anyway; it's how it's given to you. A raw albatross, carefully cleaned and cut up, is as great a luxury when it is brought to you in style as is a twelve-dollar French meal that you have to cook yourself. Barry had nothing to kick about. He had never felt better in his life; he hadn't sense enough to realize that it was largely due to his being on the wagon. He used to dream about coconut shells filled with rare old Scotch now, instead of winged dragons and snakes.

The months went by far faster than he realized; it was a real surprise to him when Ahniroo came to him one morning bearing a coconut.

"It is ready, master."

"What?"

"The drink you asked to have us make for you."

"Oh boy, oh boy! Give it here."

Ahniroo leaned toward him and he took the nut. A jab with his knife drove the plug in, and he took two gulps. One went down and the other went immediately out.

"Phhhtooey! Ahni, take this some place and bury it. Holy sweet Sue! It tastes like th' dregs of a city dump!"

Ahniroo took the nut gravely and swayed away. "Yes, master."

Barry sat there running his tongue around the inside of his mouth to get rid of the taste. The tongue moved more and more slowly; he stopped; he swallowed twice, then leaped to his feet. "Hold it!" he bellowed. "I've drank worse'n that an' paid money for it. Bring that back. Bring fifty of 'em." He snatched the nut and drained it. It was alcoholic, after all. It tasted like nothing on earth, but it had a slight wallop.

Three hours later found Barry sprawled out amid a litter of broken coconut shells. There was a peaceful smile on his long horsy face, and in his mind was unalloyed bliss. Ahniroo bent over and touched the back of his neck with a slimy tentacle. Barry rolled his head and lay still again. Ahniroo was very persistent. Barry finally rolled over and sat up, promptly falling over the other way and lying prone again. Ahniroo and two of his fellows helped to roll him over on his back and sit him up again. Ahniroo shook him gently for some eight minutes until he began to grumble.

"Master—it is time! Come, please; we are waiting."

"Time? What time?"

"Your promise, all powerful one. We have fulfilled your desire. You promised us you would kill the Big One when we had brought you a drink. You have had your drink, master."

Barry clapped his hand to his brow and winced. Promised? Was that what— Then this wasn't all for nothing? He had to pay off? The full import of it struck him. He was deputized to rid the island of that monstrosity that lived in the crater!

"Now let's be reas'n'ble," he coaxed. "You can't make me do that job, now; y'know y'can't, huh?" Getting no answer from Ahniroo, he said belligerently, "Listen, bean pole, you can't push me around. S'pose I don't even try to do that job?"

Ahniroo said quietly, "You will. You have promised. Come now."

A shrill signal, and Barry found himself lifted bodily and set on his feet. Spluttering and protesting, he was shoved by a solid wall of nightmares toward the hill. Twice he tried to simply quit—sit down, the way he had on the tank ships when he thought he was getting the runaround. The *Echiuroidia* did not understand modern labor methods. They picked him up and carried him when he would not walk. And once he tried to run away. They let him—provided he ran toward the hill. He finally settled to a hesitant plodding, and marched along, wishing the island was ten times as big and he was twenty times smaller.

WHEN they reached the top of the hill, the nightmares disappeared into the ground, all but Ahniroo. Barry was in tears.

"Ahni—do I hafta?"

"Yes—master."

Barry looked toward the hole. It was sixty feet away and thirty feet in diameter. "Big, ain't he?"

"Very."

"How's about a little drink before I go down there?"

"Of course, master!"

Ahni gave his signal. In a few minutes a stream of coconuts began to pop out of the earth. They were the only thing of Barry's that Ahniroo would allow to be transported underground.

When fifty or sixty had arrived, Barry broke and drained three. "I tell you, Ahni," he said, "just you keep 'em coming. I'll need 'em."

He gave a hitch at his belt and started down the slope, a coconut in each fist. There was no sign at all of the Big One. He walked to the edge of the pit and looked down, trying to hold his breath against the smell of the thing. Yeah—there he was, the little rascal. He could just see the tips of his proboscis.

"C'mon up and fight!" Barry yelled drunkenly.

Still no movement. Barry grinned weakly and looked back toward the edge of the crater. Ahniroo was there, watching. Barry felt a little foolish.

"Come on," he coaxed. "Here; have a drink." He cracked open a coconut and let the foul liquid run into the pit. There was a stir of movement, and then silence.

Ahni's mental voice came to him. "The Big One is not hungry today."

"Maybe he's thirsty then. Roll me down a couple dozen nuts, pal."

The obedient nightmares shoved at the pile of doctored coconuts. They came rolling and bouncing down the slope. He broke them and pitched them in—about thirty of them. He had not countermanded his order—they were still coming up there.

The Big One thrust up a tentacle, waved it and let it slump back. The last few drinks were getting Barry down. He was long past the stage when he knew what he was doing.

"Hey! My pal wants more! Come on—fill 'em up! He's a big feller—he needs a man-size drink. Couple o' you guys give me a hand!"

Two stalks immediately appeared beside him. He gave no thought to the fact that he was possibly leading them to their deaths. The three began breaking coconut shells and pouring the contents into the pit.

Now just why this happened I could not say. Perhaps the Big One was allergic to alcohol. Perhaps it tripped up his co-ordination so that he couldn't control a movement once it started. But suddenly, with a wheezing roar, the Big One rose up out of his lair.

It is all but impossible to describe that sight. The proboscis alone was fully one hundred and twenty feet long, and it rose straight up in the air, twisting slowly, and then fell heavily to the ground. It lay on the floor of the crater, reaching from the center pit all the way up and over and well down the hill. If it had fallen on Barry it would have crushed him instantly beyond all semblance of a man. And it didn't miss him by much. The two tips of the proboscis were out of sight now, but the whole mass, eighteen feet thick, pulsed and twitched with the violent movement that must have been going on at the extremity.

Barry fell back aghast, in that instant cold sober. Ahniroo's message cut through his awed horror:

"The bristles, master! Cut the bristles!"

Barry drew his knife and ran to the edge of the pit. The actual body of the thing, that thick ovoid part, was just visible, and he could see the bristles—the powerful muscled projections by which the creatures, all of them, burrowed. But the flesh about the Big One's bristles was soft and flabby—it had been decades since he had been able to use them. Barry leaned over and hacked hysterically at the base of one of them. The steel slid through the layers of tissue, and in a moment the bristle hung loose, useless. Barry flung himself aside to avoid a foul gush of ichor, and dove for the other bristle He couldn't do as much to this one; it sank into the side of the pit, trying to force the great body back into the hole. The earth yielded; the bristle whipped up through the ground and smacked into the Big One's side. That was its last anchorage, and its last refuge was gone.

Immediately the crater was alive with the wavering stems of Ahniroo's kind. Like ants around a slug, they fastened to the gigantic body, dragged and tore at it, tied it to earth. Barry danced around it, his mind drink-crazed again;

he waved a full coconut shell aloft in one hand and with the other cut and slashed at the prone monster. He laughed and shrieked and sang, and finally collapsed weakly from sheer exhaustion, still murmuring happily and humming to himself.

Ahniroo and some others carried him back down and laid him on the beach. They washed him and put soft leaves under his body. They fed him continuously out of the huge stock of coconut shells. They almost killed him with kindness. And for his sake, I suppose, they shouldn't have left him on the beach. Because he got—rescued.

A GOVERNMENT launch put into the cove to survey, since these days you never can tell what salty little piece of rock might be of military value. They found him there, dead drunk on the beach. It was quite a puzzle to the shore party. There he was, with no footprints around him to show where he'd come from; and though they scoured the neighborhood of the beach, they found no shelter or anything that might have belonged to him. And when they got him aboard and sobered him up the island was miles astern. He went stark raving mad when he discovered where he was. He wanted to go back to his worms. And he's been here ever since. He's no use to anyone. He drinks when he can beg or steal it. He'll die from it before long, I suppose, but he's only happy when he's plastered. Poor devil. I could send him back to his island, I suppose, but— Well, it's quite a problem. Can I, as the representative of enlightened humanity in this part of the world, allow a fellow human being to go back to a culture of worms?

The American shuddered. "I—hardly think so. Ah—governor, is this a true yarn?"

The governor shrugged. "I'll tell you— I was aboard that launch. I was the one who found Barry on the beach. And just before we lost sight of the island, some peculiar prompting led me to look at the beach again through my glasses. Know what I saw there?

"It was *alive!* It was one solid mass of pale-green tentacles, all leaning toward the launch and Barry. There was an air about them—the way they were grouped, their graceful bending toward us—I don't know—that made me think of a prayer meeting. And I distinctly heard—not with my ears, either—'Master, come back! Master!' Over and over again.

"Barry's a god to those damned things. So are the rest of us, I imagine. That's why they were too frightened by us to show themselves when we went ashore there. Ah, poor Barry. I should send him back, I suppose. It's not fair to keep him here—but damn it, I'm a man! I can't cater to a society of—Ugh!"

They sat silently for a long while. Then the American rose abruptly. "Good night, governor. I don't—*like* that story." He smiled wryly and went inside, leaving the old man to sit and stare out to sea.

Late that night the American looked out of his bedroom window uncomfortably. The ground was smoothly covered with a rather ordinary lawn near the governor's house. Farther back, there was night-shadowed jungle.

THE END.

The Moving Finger Writes,

---AND HAVING WRIT---

Do I like humor? Remember "Enchanted Week-end," "Indigestible Triton"? I don't get enough, because humor is far harder to write.

Cheerio Campbell:

You know, I seriously doubt as to whether or not a sufficient number of songs in praise will be sung of A. M. Phillips' "The Mislaid Charm." Offhand, I can think of no man alive who possesses the vocabulary to applaud it to my satisfaction. Oh, if you only had more yarns like that for Unknown!

It may, or it may not, be insulting to an author to compare his work with that of another, but not since I finished the last of the super-gay fantasies of Thorne Smith have I been so magnificently entertained, so tremendously pleased by an author or a story! In this story I think Phillips has matched Smith word for word, situation for situation, and laugh for laugh—omitting only those Smithish touches on capering females, which, much to my regret, could hardly be expected to be found in a magazine like Unknown.

Probably nine out of ten editors have and hold dearly a warped opinion that humor in fiction must take the back seat. I have had a good many of them tell me so personally. And I still think they are all wet and hope the returns on this yarn prove them wetter than I think! Humor predominates and is successful in every other entertainment field—why not fiction magazines? Can't remember offhand whether or not you have ever stated an opinion, but if you have, and you are one of the nine editors, it is my sincere hope that the "laboratory" returns on "Mislaid Charm" jolt you a good one right where you need it!

I shall always place "Mislaid Charm" in the same brackets as "Sinister Barrier," "Death's Deputy," and "Darker Than You Think."—Bob Tucker, P. O. Box 260, Bloomington, Illinois.

C'ést la guerre—and economic bans from England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. As long as the Rand gold mines hold out, we ought to have South Africa, though.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Unknown can't turn bi-monthly. At any rate, I certainly hope not. There has to be some other explanation for that missing issue. Frankly speaking, I am worrying. You see, waiting two months for my favorite magazine doesn't exactly agree with me.

Oh, well—a few comments on the stories in the February issue:

"The Mislaid Charm"—Good. Left me with an unsatisfied feeling, though. Maybe it was too short.

"Shottle Bop"—Sturgeon at his best. Delightfully wacky. But remind him for me, will you, not to get *too* wacky? His stories might stink, somewhat.

"The Crossroads"—What can I say about Hubbard that hasn't already been said? An old plot on this story. But I liked the wrinkles he gave it.

"The Ultimate Egoist"—Vera fine. Another old plot. Another fine new twist. Another good story.

"Carillon of Skulls"—Not bad. Not so terribly good. But still—not bad.

"The Professor's Hobby"—Br-r-r! Who is this man, Arthur? I don't think I've seen him in Unknown before. But let's have some more of him.

"Oscar"—Too short. So far, so good.

"Doubled and Redoubled"—Like whiskey, Malcolm Jameson improves with age. A nice, monotonous yarn.

Altogether one of the best all-around issues of Unknown so far. Keep up the good work, will you, Mr. Campbell—and ye authors, too! I almost forgot the artists. They rate as follows—

Cartier—Good as ever. The ideal illustrator for Unknown—with the exception of Virgil Finlay.

Isip—I like M. Isip fine. R. Isip—not so fine.

Schneeman—Swell. I wish he would stick to *Astounding*, though.

Kramer—Ugh! Need I say more?

I'm looking forward to the day when we'll have an Unknown illustrated entirely by Finlay and Cartier. Also to the day when I'll see a black-and-silver cover.—James Causey, Jr., 428 E. First Street, Long Beach, California.

Dear Sir:

'Twas the day after Xmas,
And all through the land,
Copies of Unknown
Were hitting the stands.

I bought a copy.

Tell me, why have you gone bi-monthly? Do you think it's fair for fans to have to wait two months for a copy of their favorite fantasy mag? Nuff said, you know what to do about it.

I have another complaint. The reader's column wasn't large enough. Well? And furthermore, you forgot to let us know what's coming in the next issue. Well?

This copy—February's—was the best since December's.

"The Mislaid Charm" ranks with "Slaves of Sleep" and the other classics. Phillips is one author I'd like more of; so is Sturgeon.

"Shottle Bop" is winning a friend of mine over to Unknown. "The Mislaid Charm" will probably do the trick.

"The Professor's Hobby" was third best—according to me. I suspected the ending when Arthur made reference to the professor's nails. It was obvious after that.

I chuckled over "The Crossroads." L. Ron Hubbard can always be depended on for a good story.

Then comes "The Ultimate Egoist," which I didn't really care for so much.

I cared for "Doubled and Redoubled" even less. Why did Jameson have to drag in witches and sorcerers? The story was all right till then.

"Carillon of Skulls," and "Oscar" don't deserve mention.

I liked the poem "Fiction." Is poetry going to be a regular in Unknown? It's O. K. by me.

And anyone who says Cartier isn't a delightfully wacky artist—well—

I can't resist a final plea. GO BACK MONTHLY.—M. Eli Harlib, 2942 West Seventeenth Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Unknown, invading new literary fields, has a habit of finding new authors, remember.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Compensating somewhat for Unknown's new bi-monthly status is the all-around excellence of the February issue. As if it weren't enough to spring Hubbard and Sturgeon on us in the same issue, you introduce a new name who can sling an adjective with the best of 'em.

Note the use of "name" in place of "author." Frankly, while not able to slander Missouri by claiming that I came from that worthy State, I have a suspicious nature. It manifested itself in the opinion that no new writer could handle a story such as "The Ultimate Egoist" so beautifully. I think it's one of the favorites wearing a red wig and a false mustache. "E. Hunter Waldo" indeed!

I said "beautifully handled," did I not? The phrase is a gross understatement. The story was one of the finest jobs of writing

I've ever seen since "Fear." Another understatement. The finest job. There, now!

Not that the theme of the story was particularly new; it wasn't. But, man, was that theme worked out magnificently! It was. Personally, I'd like to see a great deal more of this chappie. Or, rather—this "name." Quibbling is such fun, isn't it?

Sturgeon has done better; or perhaps his tale just suffers in comparison with "Waldo's." Quite good, though; Sturgeon is consistently so. Hubbard, like most really fine writers, handles drama better than humor, although there wasn't anything truly wrong with "Crossroads." The amazingly prolific and able Mr. Hubbard must be doing too much writing of late; "Crossroads" is not, certainly, up to his usual standard.

Phillips' lead novel merits its distinction as such. Amusing, cleverly done, and most satisfactory. That Dutch gnome—what's his name?—Wisken, was a real character.

Arthur can do much better work than the sort of thing he's been selling you lately. His story was O. K., with honorable mention to the ending. The other shorts were fair, with the exception of "Carillon of Skulls," which was space filler, and neither more nor less. Poem: smooth. Says nothing in a nice way.

Issue as a whole: splendid. Illustrations: say Cartier and you've exhausted the subject completely.

Suggestions: more Hubbard, more Sturgeon, more "Waldo"; more Hubbard, more Sturgeon, more "Waldo"; more Hubbard, more Sturgeon, more—

Well, you get the idea.—Joseph Gilbert, 3911 Park Street, Columbia, South Carolina.

Carollian spirit?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

If Myrna Loy had been in existence in his time, I would say that the poem on Page 102 of the February Unknown was by Lewis Carroll. While it is easy to parody meter and style, and—judging from past efforts—Sturgeon is an accomplished poetic craftsman, there is something in this bit of nonsense that is reminiscent of the very spirit of Carroll—something that would not be found in mere parody.

However, the Carrollian spirit—that of logical nonsense—while present in small quantities throughout the story "Shottle Bob," is lost at times in the general effort to fit the story to a pulp formula. Does *that* hurt, Mr. Campbell? However, nurture Mr. Sturgeon well—he may grow up to amount to something. Just noticed reason for date switch. Why bimonthly? Ye gods!—Murray L. Lesser, Glendale, Calif.

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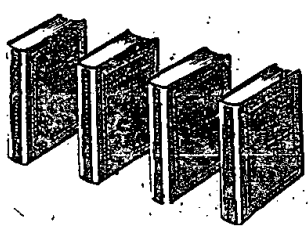

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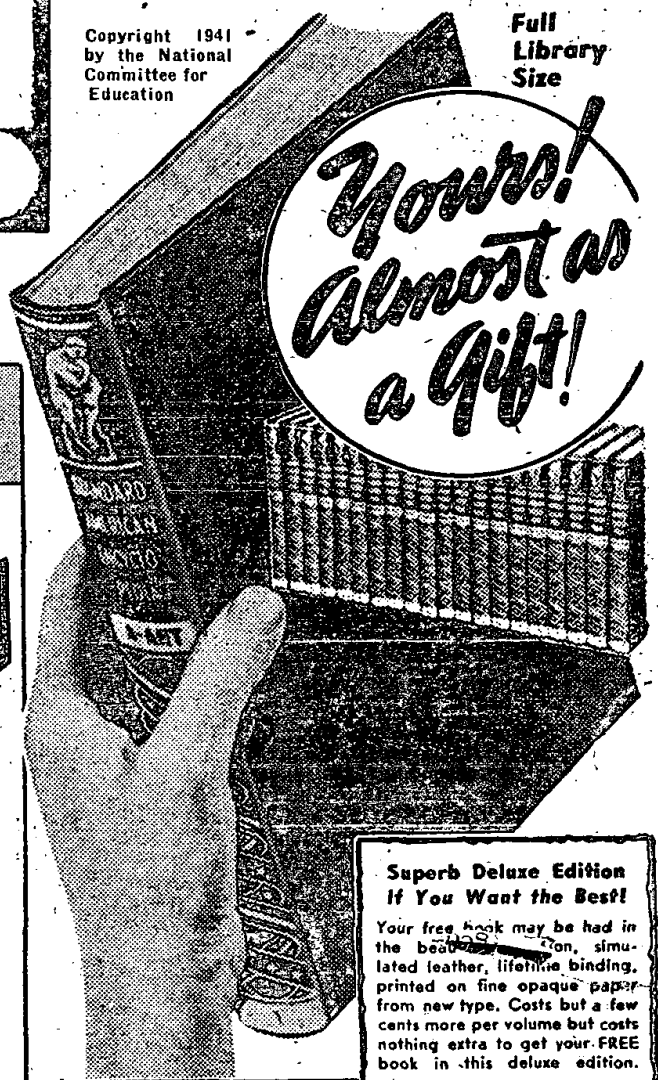

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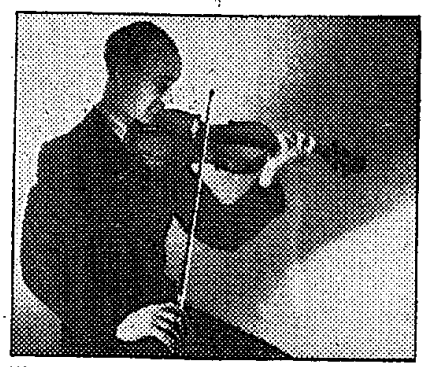

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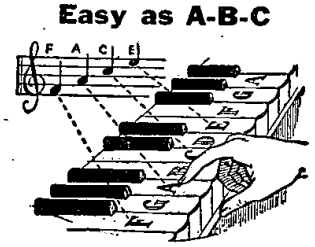

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