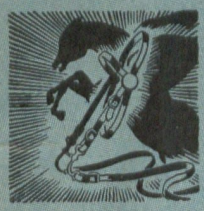
UNKNOWN Worlds

25c APR · 1943
FANTASY FICTION

APR. '43

CONJURE WIFE . . . . . by Fritz Leiber, Jr.

All women carry handbags as big as young suitcases, full of bits of this —oddments of that. Powder and rouge and lipstick, recipes and formulas. But—maybe those formulas aren't all cake and cookie recipes. Maybe not all those powders are cosmetics. A bit of magic, a little witchcraft, mixed in—graveyard dirt and perfume, formulas for Dottie's Cake and How To Steal a Soul—



THE GOLDEN BRIDLE . . . . . by Jane Rice

A tale of a bridle, a strange bridle picked up in a street in Tijuana—and of a jockey who could not lose while he used that bridle nor—give the bridle away. But more than the bridle's tale, it is a piece of beautiful writing.

NO GREATER LOVE . . . . . by Henry Kuttner

He was a man to begin with, but a rat and a louse for all of that. The thing he stole from the strange little shop was a charm, a love charm that made him immune because everyone loved him too much to harm him. Until he picked the wrong role—

THE GIFTIE GIEN . . . . . by Malcolm Jameson

Bobbie Burns asked that giftie—but Jameson suggests that it might serve a purpose other than pleasure. Instruction of a sort, yes. Yet something Hell could use for its own ends. But—wonder what your own resultant form would be?

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UNKNOWN WORLDS*

Contents for April, 1943, Vol. VI, No. 6
John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Asst. Ed.

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Every woman carries a monstrous handbag, full of odds and ends, cosmetics, little boxes and jars—and, perhaps, like Tansy's, full of the little things a conjure wife needs in her witch work!

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Illustrations by: Alfred, Kramer and Orban.

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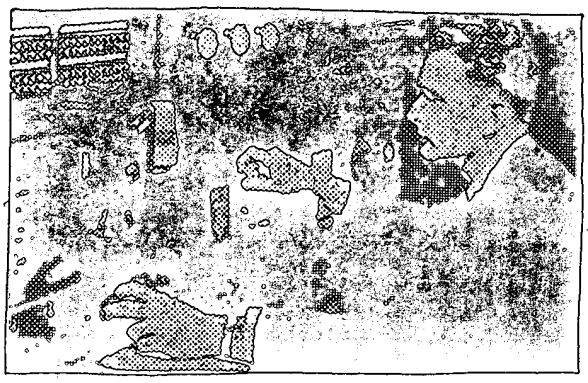

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NEW ORDER

Herr Schickelgruber's New Order reaches even into the realm of fantasy. The man most Americans most want to meet has succeeded, at least, in bringing about a change in Unknown Worlds that I don't like, you won't like, and nobody will particularly enjoy. Beginning next issue, Unknown Worlds starts taking into account the several different rationing provisions now necessary.

First, a brief review of how the mechanical end of manufacturing a magazine is worked.

The author's manuscript, after editing, is sent to the composing room, where it is set in type on Linotype machines. (The type metal is an alloy of tin, lead, bismuth and antimony. Tin's a precious metal dearer than gold.) The Linotype slugs, assembled in galleys, are printed in proofs which are read and corrected, measured out into pages, and the Linotype slugs rearranged into page form.

From that point, two processes are possible. One, the stereotype method, involves making a sort of papier-mâché matte that reproduces the type with surprising sharpness and fidelity. From the paper form, a type-metal casting can be made in a special casting machine—a cast which is, however, curved to fit the rolls of printing presses instead of being flat, as the Linotype slugs necessarily are.

By this method, the printing surface actually used on the rolls is achieved by using practically nothing but type metal—a material which can, of course, be remelted into ingots for further duty when the issue is printed.

The second method of getting the printing surface involves electrotypes. In this, the Linotype slugs, assembled into page forms, are pressed into a plate heavily coated with wax. The wax impression is dusted with finely ground iron and graphite powder to make it carry electricity, and put in a copper-plating bath. The electrolytic deposit of copper is built up till a fairly strong shell is made, when it is stripped off the wax, a layer of tinfoil pressed into it, and a mass of type-metal cast on to give it the necessary mechanical rigidity and strength. The copper itself is too soft a metal to stand the heavy wear of the presses, and is, therefore, nickel-plated to protect it. (The plating, incidentally, is not the familiar shiny nickel, but a dull, steel-gray, hard, tough layer deposited by a special type of electrolytic bath.)

Hm-m-m—so far, that has used tin, copper and nickel. The cuts for the magazine are made, necessarily, on silver-sensitized zinc plates. That makes five of the topmost critical metals.

We cannot go on using electrotypes for Unknown Worlds—and to continue the large-size page, we would have to, for we have not, and cannot get now, a stereotype machine capable of casting a plate of this size.

Every publisher has been asked to cut the paper consumption of his company by ten percent.

It would save silver and zinc if the cuts used in the magazine were smaller in area.

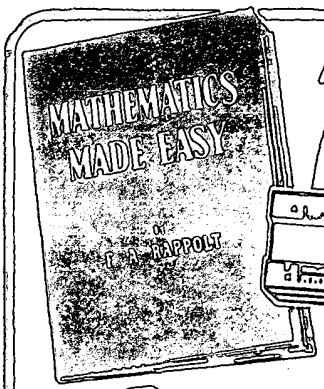
These facts add up to one answer—the smaller, standard-size magazine. And there's another to reinforce it. The issue of the magazine you now hold may hang together long enough for you to finish reading it, if you handle magazines reasonably carefully. If not, it will certainly start shedding its pages. There is only one of the tin-coated steel-wire staples necessary to hold the pages in place in the binding; there should be two.

In the small-size magazine, we will begin the use of a different type of binding—the glued fastening similar to that used on books. It won't be as good as the two-staple-and-glue method used earlier, but it will not require critical materials, and will give reasonable strength and solidity.

The contracted Unknown Worlds of the New Order will be smaller in size, but have one hundred and sixty pages. Those pages will not be quite as airy and readable as of old; we are going to use a smaller, more compactly set type, and take a nibble off each margin to increase the wordage. We haven't yet seen a made-up issue of the new size, but I believe that the wordage will be practically the same in the small size, one-hundred-sixty-page edition as in the present format.

And, while we may be limited on quantity and quality of physical materials—Lord knows, we aren't selling physical realities!

THE EDITOR.



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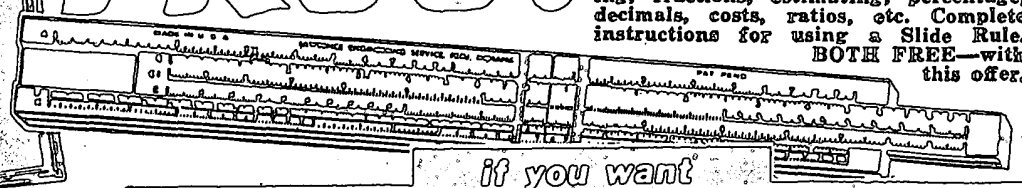

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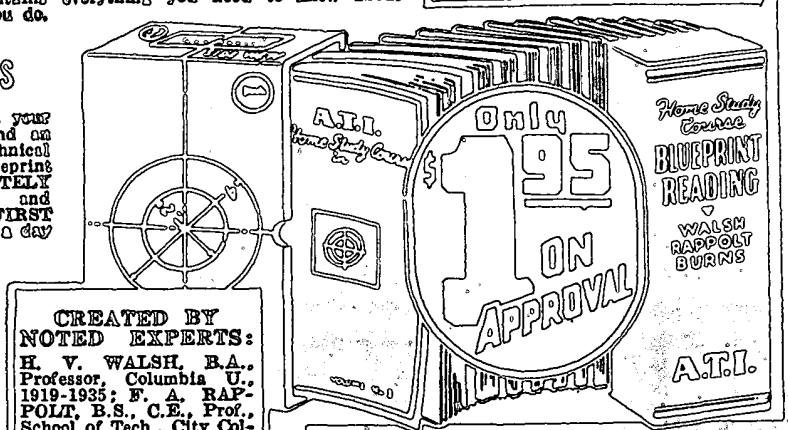

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CONJURE WIFE

By Fritz Leiber, Jr.

MAGIC and witchcraft have, down the ages, been the domain of woman. Potions and spells, charms and counter-charms. The paraphernalia of witchcraft has long since gone from our culture, though— But—what are all those odds and ends women carry in their handbags?

Illustrated by Kramer

I.

"I keep wondering if she knows about Us," said the woman with black button eyes. She played the queen of spades.

The queen of hearts trumped the queen of spades. "You can put your mind at rest," said the silver-haired woman sweetly, gathering in the trick. "She doesn't. Tansy Saylor plays a lone hand. Like most women, she thinks she's the Only One. Co-operation such as ours is rare."

"But I'm afraid of her. Oh, I know she hasn't upset the Balance, and uses only Protective Procedures. But she isn't our kind. Neither is her husband. They don't belong."

The silver-haired woman nodded primly, peering through her thick glasses at the dummy with the empty chair behind it. "I agree. The Saylors are a disgrace to the Hempnell faculty. Modern. No sense of the traditional decencies."

"Yes, and she wants to make him president of Hempnell. She wants him to dictate to our husbands. She wants to condescend to us."

"This talk gets nowhere," broke in the stout, red-haired woman gruffly. "The point is that her Protective Procedures are effective—many things would have happened to the Saylors during the last ten years if they weren't. And she hasn't made the mistake of upsetting the Balance. So what can we three do about it?"

"Oh, the Balance!" said the woman with black button eyes, throwing down her last two cards. "Sometimes I think we ought to upset it ourselves." She evaded the shocked glance of the silver-haired woman. "We've our Sounds, and our Pictures, and our Numbers, and our Cards. We could finish the Saylors in a whiff. There's such a neat trick with cards I've just learned. Here, let me show you—" She slipped a dozen shiny pasteboard oblongs out of her purse. They had the conventional backs, but their faces bore representations of a cryptic sort.

"Stop that!" The silver-haired woman stretched out fluttering hands.

"Put them away!" ordered the stout woman harshly. She glanced at the door. "Quickly!"

But the eyes of the little man who ambled

in were not inquisitive. With white beard and amiable smile, he looked almost benign, in an absent-minded sort of way.

"I don't suppose you played much bridge while I was gone," he observed with mild joviality.

The silver-haired woman's laughter trilled sweetly. "It's his little joke. He always pretends that all women are fearful gossips. Well, at least I made the contract, dear. Four hearts."

His eyes twinkled. "Very commendable." He settled himself in the empty chair. "Still I imagine the three of you managed to find time for some very dark and devious plotting—" He chuckled innocently.

Norman Saylor, professor of ethnology at Hempnell College, was not the sort of man to go snooping around in his wife's dressing room. That was partly the reason why he did it. He was sure nothing could touch the security of the relationship between him and Tansy.

The house was very quiet. Spring sunshine and balmy air were sluicing gently through the bedroom windows. It wasn't five minutes since he had put in the final staccato burst of typing on his "Negro Recruit" brochure for the War Office. It looked as if for once they would have a lazy evening to themselves.

Totem, the cat, rose from her sun-warmed spot on the neatly piled silk quilt and indulged in a titanic, disruptive-looking yawn, neatly folded her white paws under her black waistcoat, and stared solemnly at Norman. Norman copied her yawn, and felt a partial unkinking of the twelve-work-hours-a-day tension that had traced lines on his chunky face and smudged shadows under his clear, yellow-brown eyes. Such moments as this did not come often these days, but when they did come, they sure felt good.

The door of Tansy's dressing room stood invitingly open. It was a tiny room, just a big closet, with no windows. But it was more than a rack of dresses and a creamy dressing table. It was Tansy. On the neat side, but not fussy. A slight pleasant disorder. Very sane—he wondered why that particular word came to his mind, but it hit the spot. A faint perfume conjured up amiable memories.

He studied the photographs on either side of the mirror. One of Tansy and himself in modified Indian costume, from three summers back when he had been studying the Yumas. They both looked rather solemn. Another, slightly faded, of an uproarious Negro baptizing in midriver. That was from when he had held the Hazelton Fellowship and been gathering material for his "Social Patterns of the Southern Negro" and his later "Feminine Element in Superstition." Tansy had done more work than two secretaries that busy year when he was hammering out a reputation.

There was an ample array of cosmetics—Tansy had been the first of the Hempnell faculty wives to use lipstick and lacquer her nails; there had been covert criticism and talk of "setting the students a bad example," but she had stuck it out. Flanked by cold-cream jars was a photograph of himself, with a little pile of small change, dimes and quarters, in front of it.

Idly he slid out a drawer, scanned the pile of stocking rolls, pushed it in, pulled at another, which jammed, so he had to give it a sharp tug. A large cardboard box toward the back caught his eyes. He edged up the cover and took out one of the tiny glass-stoppered bottles. What sort of cosmetic would this be? Too dark for face powder. More like a geologist's soil specimen. An ingredient for a mud pack?

The dry, dark-brown granules shifted smoothly, like sand in an hourglass, as he rotated the glass cylinder. The label appeared, in Tansy's clear script. "Julia Trock, Roseland." A cosmetician? Was Roseland a part of the name, or a place? And why should the idea that it might be a place seem distasteful? His hand knocked aside the cardboard cover as he reached for a second bottle, identical with the first, except that the contents had a somewhat reddish tinge, and the label read, "Philip Lassiter, Hill." A third, contents same color as the first: "J. P. Thorndyke, Roseland." Then a handful, quickly snatched up, of three: "Emelyn Scatterday, Roseland." "Mortimer Pope, Hill." "The Rev. Bufort Ames, Roseland."

The silence in the house grew thunderous; even the sunlight seemed to sizzle and fry, as his mind rose to a sudden pitch of concentration on the puzzle. "Roseland and Hill, Roseland and Hill, Roseland and Hill," like a nursery rhyme somehow turned nasty, making the glass cylinders repugnant to his fingers. "Roseland Hill—"

Abruptly the answer came.

The two local cemeteries.

Graveyard dirt.

Soil specimens all right. Graveyard dirt from particular graves. A chief ingredient of Negro conjure magic.

With a soft thud Totem landed on the table and began to sniff inquisitively at the bottles, but sprang away as Norman plunged his hand into the drawer. He felt smaller boxes behind the big one, yanked suddenly at the whole drawer, so it fell to the floor. In one of the boxes were bent, rusty, worn bits of iron—horseshoe nails. In the other were calling-card envelopes, filled with snippings of hair, each labeled like the bottles, but some of these names he knew. And in one—fingernail clippings.

In the third drawer he drew blank. But the fourth yielded a varied harvest. Packets of small dried leaves and powdered vegetable matter—so that was what came from Tansy's herb garden along with kitchen seasonings? Vervain, vinmoin, devil's snuff. Bits of lodestone, iron filings clinging to them. Goose quills which spilled quicksilver when he shook them. Small squares of flannel, the sort that Negro conjure doctors employed for their "tricken bags" or "hands." A box of old silver coins and silver filings—strong protective magic; giving significance to the coins, all silver, in front of his photograph.

But Tansy was so sane—so healthily contemptuous of palmistry, astrology, numerology and all the other superstitious fads. A hard-headed New Englander. So well versed, from her work with him, in the psychological background of superstition and primitive magic. And yet—

He found himself thumbing through a dog-eared copy of his own "Parallelisms in Superstition and Neurosis." It looked like the one he had lost around the house—was it eight years ago? Beside a formula for conjuration was a marginal notation in Tansy's script: "Doesn't work. Substitute copper filings for brass. Try in dark of moon instead of full."

"Norman—"

Tansy was standing in the doorway, her hand stopped in the moment of drawing off the little half hat of deep-rose felt that matched her trim dress.

Never before had he had such a feeling that a human face was only an arbitrary arrangement of curved surfaces and colors. The tapering chin—an ellipsoid. The full lips—a complex arrangement of cycloids and other curves. The eyes—white spheres inscribed with gray-green circles centered with black. Without familiarity or significance. And yet, in the same instant he felt that it was desperately important that he spy out a significance. For a faint distortion of those angles and curves—a distortion so subtle as to be almost indiscernible—might signify . . . yes, why not say it? . . . insanity.

The ghost of a smile curved Tansy's lips, and familiarity flooded back into her face.

"So you've found out," she sighed. And although it seemed incredible, he thought she sighed with relief.

For a moment he stood there confused, like a district attorney caught arranging evidence. Then he began his cross-examination.

"It all started so foolishly," she was saying soon. "Just before you came to Hempnell. I felt it was tremendously important that you get the appointment and just to relieve my nerves—no other reason—I did silly things. Put mild curses on the two other applicants, to confuse their thoughts during the interviews. I got the curses from your notes. I surrounded you with a web of protective magic, charmed the sociology faculty to make them regard you favorably.

"Well, you got the job, and I forgot all about my stupid private joke.

"Then, when your first book was at the publishers—you remember, Norm, in 1930—I tried again. We were so sure it would be rejected. I was planning to tell you all about my idiotic conjures as soon as it came back, so at least we'd have a laugh. But it was accepted. And I didn't tell you.

"Then in 1931, when you had pneumonia. I didn't want to, because it was too serious this time, but you got worse and I couldn't help myself. And you got well.

"That was the real beginning. Not that I was certain—I've never been certain—but I didn't dare take chances. Careers hang on such little strings, and Hempnell can be so vindictive. You know.

"But I wasn't superstitious. No, I wasn't! At least, I didn't have what you'd call the superstitious feeling. In a twisted logical way, I was trying to be empirical. I judged everything by results, step by step.

"And of course, when I say empirical, I don't mean experimental. I didn't dare to omit any charms as a test, because I was too afraid of something going wrong. You can't be experimental about someone you love, any more than a sane sociologist would induce

fascism in his own country just to study the consequences."

He listened, his mind working like a telephone exchange during an emergency, catching a thousand hidden connections in trivial memories of his life and Tansy's. Whenever she paused, he had a question to hammer at her.

"Those mirror decorations on your dresses, and belts, and handbags—why?"

She nodded, tiredly. "Yes, that's it. To ward off evil spirits, by reflecting them. I got the idea from Tibetan devil masks. Yes, and the reason I always use hooks and eyes is—you've guessed—to catch evil spirits that try to get at me."

The room was dark by the time Tansy had finished the catalogue of her activities at Hempnell, and said, "So you see, I've never been sure. I've wanted to stop, but there's been too much at stake. It always worked—or did as soon as I made the proper corrections in the charms. I've wanted to tell you, but I've never dared. Now that you know, I'm glad."

The voice was very tired now.

Then, in the darkness he began his argument. It was the old, old argument of science against primitive ignorance, but he brought it home to her with careful persuasiveness. The argument which starts out with a demonstration that superstition is only mistaken empiricism, and ends with psychoanalysis.

"Didn't it really begin much earlier than Hempnell, Tansy?" he asked at one point. "I mean, the seeds of it?"

"No. Oh, I don't know. Perhaps. I've childhood memories of dark moments. Suspicions. Queer things people could do. Hints from I don't know where. But nothing certain. I just can't remember. I don't know."

Only once did the tired voice grow vehement.

"But I tell you I never tried to kill, or even to injure in a physical way! Never! Only to confuse or hinder people when they were working against you. It's terribly important that you understand this, Norman. Nine tenths of my magic was purely protective. To ward off evil."

He felt pettishly exasperated at this answer. What difference did it make whether or not she had tried to kill? It was all equally nonsense. And why should she harp on her efforts to protect him, as if he were some sort of incompetent? For a moment it occurred to him that, from one point of view, he *had* been very lucky in his career. He abruptly put aside this stray thought, along with his fit of impatience.

At another time she used a similar argument. "I never tried for anything really big. Like your inheriting a million dollars. Or becoming president of Hempnell overnight, even if I'd thought you wanted to. There's a law of reaction or retribution in all conjuring—I mean, I used to think there was. Like the kick of a gun. I was afraid."

After that there were no more interruptions—only the white smudge of Tansy's face in the darkness.

When he had finished his voice was tired, too.

There was a pause. Then she said, "I'll do what you want me to. I'll burn all my stuff. I'll never touch it again."

He snapped on the light, and it seemed to him that science and healthy skepticism had been created anew from the primeval dark. The hands of his watch stood at ten thirty. Then he saw that Tansy had begun to cry.

"Darling," she managed to say, "don't you see this is what I've wanted? Only I'd gotten in so deep I never dared. On your account. You had to find out and make me stop. That was the only way."

What followed was oddly anticlimactic—the ransacking of the house for all of Tansy's hidden charms. First the contents of the dressing table. He found then that he could be generous in his victory because his trust in Tansy was re-established—he did not demand to look into her locked little leather-bound diary, when she told him it contained no relevant material.

Then the rest of the house, Tansy darting from room to room, deftly recovering flannel-wrapped "hands" from the upholstery of chairs, the under sides of table tops, the interior of vases, until he marveled that he had lived in the house for more than ten years without chancing on any.

"It's rather like a treasure hunt, isn't it?" she observed with a rueful smile.

There were others outside—under front and back doorsteps, in the garage, and in the car. With every handful thrown on the roaring fire he had built in the living room, his sense of relief grew. Finally, she opened the seams of the pillows on his bed and carefully fished out two little matted shapes made of feathers bound with fine thread, so they blended with

the fluffy contents of the pillow.

"See, one's a heart, the other an anchor. That's for security," she told him. "New Orleans magic. You haven't taken a step for years without being in the range of one of my protective charms."

The feather figures puffed into flame and were gone in an instant.

"There, that's the last one of them," she said. "All gone."

"You're sure?" For a moment his voice grew hard again. "Absolutely certain you haven't overlooked any?"

"Absolutely certain. There's not one left in the house. I've gone over it in my mind a dozen times. I'm tired now, really tired. I want to go straight to bed." Suddenly she began to laugh. "Oh, but first I'll have to stitch up those pillows, or there'll be feathers all over the place."

He put his arms around her. "Everything O. K. now?"

"Yes, darling. Only one thing I want to ask you—that we don't talk about this for a few days at least. I'm really terribly ashamed. But I'm glad it's happened, remember that."

After Tansy was gone, Norman threw a fresh log on the fire, and sank back in the easy-chair, watching the restless, rhythmic play of the flames. Gradually his thoughts began to unkink. He found himself wondering—not without admiration—at Tansy's relatively cool behavior. He would never have dared to try reasoned argument on any other woman in a similar situation. But that was like Tansy. Always fair. Always willing to listen to logic. Empirical. Except that she had gotten off on a crazy sidetrack.

He reached down to stroke Totem, who did not look away from the hypnotic flames.

"Time we got to bed, old man. Must be about twelve. No—quarter-past one."

As he slipped back the watch, the fingers of his other hand went automatically to the charm at the end of the chain—more a locket than a charm—a gift from Tansy.

He gazed ruminatingly at the flattened golden heart, weighed it in his palm. It seemed perhaps a trifle heavier than its metal shell would account for. He snapped up the cover with his thumbnail. There was no regular way of getting at the space behind Tansy's photograph, so, after a moment's hesitation, he carefully edged it out with a pencil point.

Behind the photograph was a tiny packet, wrapped in the finest flannel.

Just like a woman, was his first thought—to seem to give in completely, but to hold out on something.

Perhaps she had forgotten.

Angrily he tossed the packet into the fireplace. The photograph fluttered along with it, lighted on the bed of embers, and flared before he could snatch it out. He had a glimpse of Tansy's face curling and blackening.

The packet took longer. A yellow glow crept across its surface, as the nap singed. Then a wavering four-inch flame shot up.

Simultaneously a chill went through him, though he still felt the heat from the embers. The room seemed to darken. There was a faint, mighty roaring in his ears, as of motors far underground. He had the sense of standing suddenly naked and unarmed before something menacingly alien.

Totem had turned around and was peering intently at the shadows in the far corner. With an expectorant hiss she sprang sideways and darted from the room.

He realized he was trembling. Nervous reaction, he told himself. Might have known it was overdue.

The flame died, and once again there was only the bed of embers.

Explosively, the phone began to jangle.

"Professor Saylor? I just want to tell you that you're not going to get away with what you're trying to do to me. I'm not going to be flunked out of Hempnell without a protest."

The voice spluttered with rage. It was some moment before he recognized the student and cut in.

"Now listen, Jennings, if you thought you were being treated unfairly, why didn't you present your grievances three months ago, when you got your grades?"

"Why? Because I let you pull the wool over my eyes. I didn't realize until this minute that you were behind it all."

"Be reasonable. You flunked two courses besides mine last semester."

"Yes, because you dropped dirty hints. Poisoned everyone's mind against me."

"And you mean to tell me you only realized it now?"

"Yes, I do. It just came to me in a flash as I was thinking here. I saw your whole slimy plot. Oh, you were clever all right, but let me tell you, Saylor—"

The voice ranted on. Twice his "But what

possible motive could I—" went disregarded. With a distasteful grimace he hung up.

He felt suddenly very tired. There was an unpleasant coincidence tangled up in the events of the past few minutes, if you bothered to figure it out, but a scientist ought to have a healthy disregard for coincidences.

He put the screen in front of the fire and went to bed.

II.

The red-haired woman knew immediately what had awakened her. She made no further movement, but lay there, propped on one elbow. From the opposite bed came placid snores.

Presently, although there was no further sound, her eyes were drawn to the blacker smudge of the phone. She lifted it quietly and whispered, "Expected you, dear. I was sure you'd feel it, too."

The other voice came over the wire in bursts —jerky. "How *couldn't* I feel it? Like a great gust of wind. Complete collapse of Protective Screen in her quarter. Balance gone. Oh, I told you this would happen. She's up to something. I'll go crazy until I know what."

"No need to lose your head," whispered the red-haired woman gruffly, eying the opposite bed. "She's upset the Balance, all right. But in a very peculiar way. Any upset I ever heard of came from Excessive Aggression. Unjustified Death-attempts, or sudden Career-smashing. But Tansy's done the reverse—let down her guard."

"Yes, just to hoodwink us! She's discovered a new weapon. Something bad. Why else should she take such a chance? She's planning to smash us. We've got to beat her to it!"

"Now, now, dear, no tantrums!" A third voice was coming over the wires, a sweetly reproving voice, just the sort to go with silver hair. "We mustn't do anything we'd be sorry for. We must be sure of our ground."

"Do you mean we're just to wait?" The jerky voice had grown stridently indignant. "When we know she must have a new weapon? While she gets ready to smash us?"

"I didn't say we were to wait forever." There was a chilling tingle of tartness in the sweet old voice. "I recognize the danger. I recognize also that she has upset the Balance and must take the consequences. When we are sure of our ground, we will act. A prospect which, I may say, delights me."

"And do nothing until then?"

"Yes, dear! Except to watch her—and him."

The red-haired woman smiled grimly, listening to the other two. Such chatterers! The other bed creaked as the sleeper changed position.

"In any case," she whispered, cutting in, "there should be consequences whether we act or not. With the Protective Screen down, things should begin to happen to her—and especially to him. Things which have been accumulating for a long, long, time—"

"And *how* is Tansy?" asked Mrs. Carr, with such sweet solicitude that for a moment Norman wondered if the silver-haired dean of women had even more of an inside wire on the private lives of the faculty than was generally surmised. But only for a moment. After all, sweet solicitude was the dean of women's stock-in-trade.

"We missed her at our last faculty wives' meeting," Mrs. Carr continued. "She's such a gay soul. And we *do* need gaiety these days." Cold morning sunlight glinted on her thick glasses and glowed frostily in her apple-red cheeks. She put her hand on his arm. "Hempnell *appreciates* Tansy, Professor Saylor."

Norman's "And why not?" changed to "I think that shows good judgment" as he said it. He derived sardonic amusement from recalling how five years ago Mrs. Carr was a charter member of The-Saylors-are-a-demoralizing-influence Club.

Mrs. Carr's silvery laughter trilled in the chilly air. "I must get on to my student conferences," she said.

He watched her hurry off, brisk and erect for all her near-seventy years, wondering if the sudden friendliness meant that there had been an unexpected improvement in his chances of getting the vacant chairmanship of the sociology department. Then he turned into Morton Hall.

When he had climbed to his office, the phone was ringing. It was Thompson, the public-relations man.

"A rather delicate matter, Professor Saylor." Delicate matters were Thompson's forte. "This morning one of the trustees phoned me. It seems he had just heard something—I haven't the slightest idea from where—concerning you and Mrs. Saylor. That over Christmas vacation you had attended a party given by some prominent but . . . er . . . very

rowdy theatrical people. I was wondering if—"

"—I would issue a denial? Sorry, but it wouldn't be honest."

"Oh . . . I see. Well, that's all there is to it, then." Thompson answered bravely after a moment. "I thought you'd like to know, though. The trustee was very hot under the collar. Talked my ear off about how these theatrical people were conspicuous for drunkenness and divorce."

"He was right. Nice folks. I'll introduce you to them some time."

"Oh . . . yes," replied Thompson apprehensively. "Good-by."

The buzzer sounded, terminating the eight-o'clock classes. Norman swiveled his chair away from the desk and leaned back, amusedly irritated at this latest manifestation of the Hempnell "hush-hush" policy. Not that he had made any particular attempt to conceal the Berryman party, which had been a trifle more tempestuous than he had expected. Still, he had said nothing to anyone on campus. No use in being a fool. Now, after three months it all came out anyway.

From where he sat, the roof ridge of Estrey Hall neatly bisected his office window along the diagonal. There was a medium-sized cement dragon frozen in the act of clambering down it. For the tenth time that morning he reminded himself that what had happened last night had really happened. It was not so easy. And yet, when you got down to it, Tansy's lapse into medievalism was not so very much stranger than Hempnell's Gothic architecture, with its sprinkling of gargoyles and other fabulous monsters designed to scare off evil spirits.

Saylor's nine-o'clock class in "Primitive Societies" quieted down leisurely as he strode in a few seconds ahead of the buzzer. He set a student to explaining the sib as a factor in tribal organization, then put in the next five minutes organizing his thoughts and noting late arrivals and absentees. When the explanation, supplemented with blackboard diagrams of marriage groups, had become so complicated that Bronstein, the prize student, was twitching with eagerness to take a hand, he called for comments and criticisms, and succeeded in getting a first-class argument going.

Finally the cocksure fraternity president in the second row said, "But all those ideas of social organization were based on ignorance, tradition, and superstition. Unlike modern society."

That was Norman's cue. He lit in joyously, pulverized the defender of modern society with a point-by-point comparison of fraternities and primitive "young men's houses" down to the actual details of initiation ceremonies, which he dissected with scientific relish, and then launched into a broad analysis of present-day customs as they would appear to a hypothetical ethnologist from Mars. In passing, he drew a facetious analogy between sororities and primitive seclusion of girls at puberty.

The minutes raced pleasantly by as he demonstrated instances of cultural lag in everything from table manners to systems of notation and measurement. Even the lone sleeper in the last row surprised himself by listening.

"Certainly we've made important innovations, chief among them the scientific method," he said at one point, "but the primitive groundwork is still there, dominating the pattern of our lives. We're modified anthropoid apes inhabiting night clubs and battleships. What else could you expect us to be?"

Marriage and courtship got special attention. With Bronstein grinning delightedly, he drew detailed modern parallels to marriage by purchase, marriage by capture, and symbolic marriage to a deity. He showed that trial marriage is no mere modern conception but a well-established ancient custom, successfully practiced by the Polynesians and others.

At this point he became aware of a beet-red, angry face toward the back of the room —that of Gracine Pollard, daughter of Randolph Pollard, president of Hempnell College. She glared at him outragedly, pointedly ignoring the interest taken by the neighboring students in her blushes.

Automatically it occurred to him, "Now I suppose the little neurotic will go yammering to mamma that Professor Saylor is advocating free love." He shrugged the idea aside and continued the discussion without modification. The buzzer cut it short.

But he was left feeling irritated with himself, and only half listened to the enthusiastic comments and questions of Bronstein and a couple of others.

Back at the office he found a note from Harold Gunnison, the dean of men, asking for an interview. Having the next hour free, he set out across the quadrangle for the Administration Building, Bronstein still tagging along

to expound some interesting theory of his own.

But Norman was wondering why he had let himself go. Admittedly, some of his remarks had been a trifle raw. He had long ago adjusted his classroom behavior to Hempnell standards, without losing intellectual integrity, and this ill-advised though trivial deviation bothered him.

Mrs. Carr swept by him without a word, her face slightly averted, cutting him cold. A moment later he realized the explanation. In his abstraction, he had lighted a cigarette. Moreover, Bronstein, obviously delighted at faculty infraction of a firmly established Hempnell taboo, had followed suit.

He frowned but continued to smoke. Evidently the events of the previous night had disturbed his mind more than he had realized. He ground out the butt on the steps of the Administration Building.

In the doorway to the outer office he collided with the stylishly stout form of Mrs. Gunnison.

"Lucky I had a good hold on my camera," she grumbled, as he stooped to recover her bulging handbag. "I'd hate to try to replace a lens these days." Then brushing back an untidy wisp of reddish hair from her forehead, "You look worried. How's Tansy?"

He answered briefly, sliding past her. Now there was a woman who really ought to be a witch. Sloppy, expensive clothes; bossy, snobbish, and gruff; good-humored in a beefy fashion, but capable of riding roughshod over anyone else's desires. The only person in whose presence her husband's authority seemed a trifle ridiculous.

Harold Gunnison cut short a telephone call, and motioned him to come in and shut the door.

"Norm," Gunnison began, scowling, "this is a pretty delicate matter."

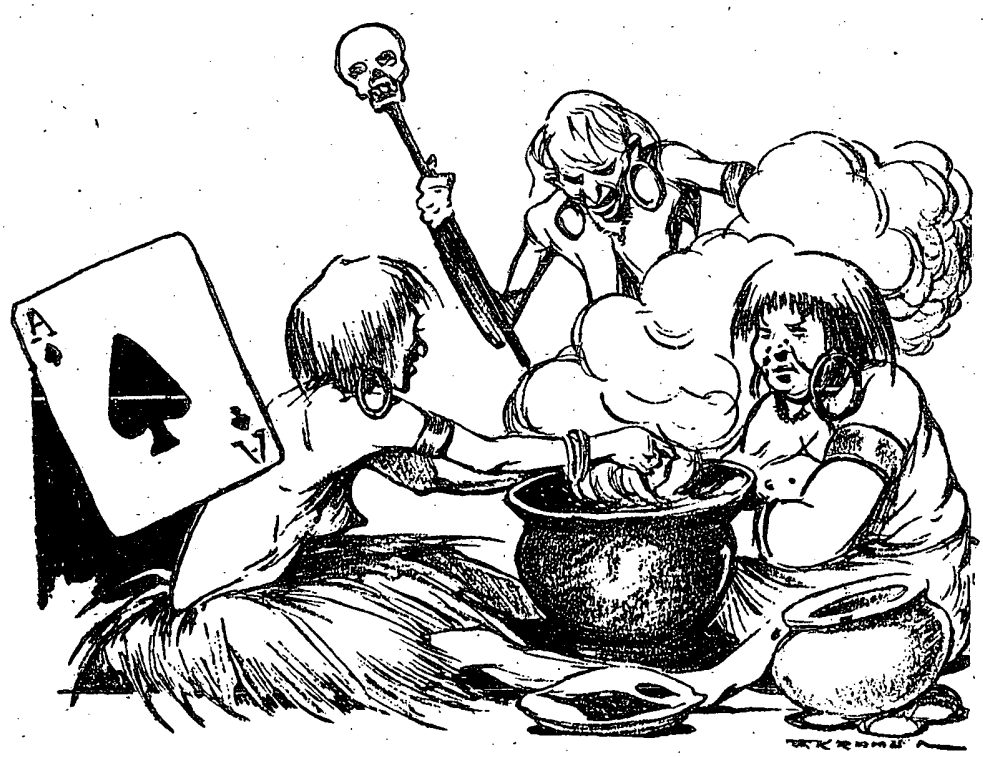
Norman became attentive. When Harold Gunnison said something was a delicate matter, unlike Thompson, he really meant it. They played golf and squash together, and got on pretty well.

He braced himself to hear an account of eccentric, indiscreet, or even criminal behavior on the part of Tansy. That suddenly seemed the obvious explanation.

"You have a girl from the Student Employment Agency working for you? A Margaret van Nice?"

Norman nodded. "A rather quiet kid. Does mimeographing."

"Well, a little while ago, she threw an hysterical fit in Mrs. Carr's office. Claimed that you had seduced her. Mrs. Carr immediately dumped the whole business in my lap."



"Well?" said Norman.

Gunnison frowned and cocked an eye at him. "Things like this sometimes really happen," he muttered.

"Sure," Norman replied. "But not this time."

"Of course. I had to ask."

"Sure. There *was* opportunity though. We worked late several nights over at Morton, editing stuff."

Gunnison reached for a folder. "On a chance, I got out her neurotic index. She ranks way up near the top. A regular bundle of complexes. We'll just have to handle it smoothly."

"I'll want to hear her accuse me," said Norman. "Soon as possible."

"Of course. I've arranged for a meeting at Mrs. Carr's office. Four o'clock this afternoon. Meantime she's seeing the college physician. That should sober her up."

"Four o'clock," repeated Norman, standing up. "You'll be there?"

"Certainly. I'm sorry about this whole business, Norm. Frankly, I think Mrs. Carr botched it. Got panicky. She's a pretty old lady."

In the outer office he stopped to glance at a small display case of items concerned with Gunnison's work in physical chemistry. The present display was of Prince Rupert drops and other high-tension oddities. It occurred to him that Hempnell was something like a Prince Rupert drop. Hit the main body with a hammer and you only jarred your hand. But flick with a fingernail the delicate filament in which the drop ended, and it would explode in your face.

Fanciful.

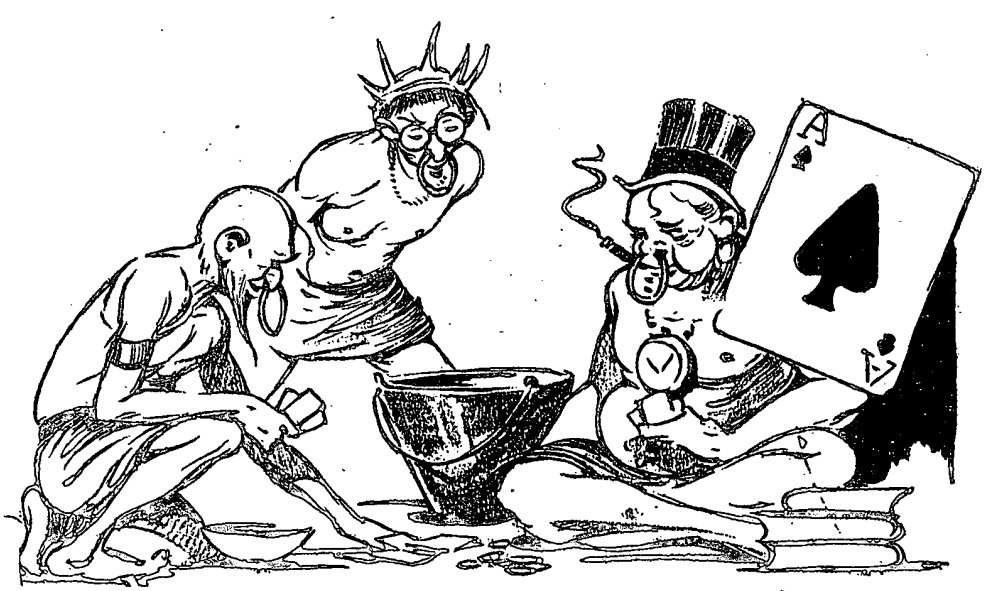
He glanced at the other objects, among them a tiny mirror, which, the legend explained, would fly to powder at the slightest scratch or sudden change in temperature.

Yet it wasn't so fanciful, when you got to thinking about it. Any highly organized, complex, somewhat artificial institution, such as a college, tends to develop dangerous weaknesses. And the same would be true of a person or a career. Flick the delicate spot in the mind of a neurotic girl, and she would explode with wild accusations. Or take a saner person, like himself. Suppose someone should be studying him secretly, looking for the vulnerable filament, finger casually poised to flick—

But that was really getting fanciful.

Coming out of their eleven-o'clock classes, Hervey Sawtelle buttonholed him.

Hervey Sawtelle resembled an unfriendly caricature of a college professor. Sometimes he carried two brief cases, and he was usually on his way to a committee meeting. Routine



worries chased themselves up and down his nervous face.

But at the moment he was in the grip of one of his petty excitements.

"Say, Norman, the most interesting thing! I was down in the stacks this morning, and I happened to pull out an old doctor's thesis —1930—by someone I never heard of—with the title 'Superstition and Neurosis.'" He produced a bound, typewritten manuscript that looked as if it had aged without ever being opened. "Almost the same as your 'Parallelisms in Superstition and Neurosis.' An odd coincidence, eh? I'm going to look it over tonight."

They were hurrying together toward the dining hall down a walk flooded with jabbering, laughing students. Norman studied Sawtelle's face covertly. Surely the fool must remember that his "Parallelisms" had been published in 1931, giving an ugly suggestion of plagiarism. But Sawtelle's nervous, toothy grin was without guile.

He had the impulse to pull Sawtelle aside and tell him that there was something odder than a coincidence involved, and that it did not reflect in any way on his own integrity of scholarship. But this seemed hardly the place.

Yet there was no denying the incident bothered him a trifle. Why, it was years since he had even thought of that stupid business of Cunningham's thesis. It had lain buried and forgotten in the past—a hidden vulnerability, waiting for the flick of the fingernail.

Asinine fancifulness! It could all be very well explained, to Sawtelle or anyone else, at a more suitable time.

Sawtelle's mind was back to routine worries. "You know, we should be having our conference on the social-science program for next year. On the other hand, I suppose we should wait until—" He paused embarrassedly.

"Until it's decided whether you or I get the chairmanship of the department?" Norman finished for him. "I don't see why. We'll be working together in any case."

"Yes, of course. I didn't mean to suggest that—"

They were joined by some other faculty members on the steps of the dining hall. The deafening clatter of trays from the student section was subdued to a faint din as they entered the faculty sanctum.

Conversation revolved among the old familiar topics, with an undercurrent of speculation as to what reorganizations and curtailments of staff the new war year might bring to Hempnell. There was some reference to the political ambitions of President Pollard—it was rumored that he might be persuaded to run for governor or senator; discreet silences here and there around the table substituted for adverse criticisms on this possibility. Sawtelle's Adam's apple twitched convulsively at a chance reference to the vacant chairmanship in sociology.

Norman managed to get a fairly interesting conversation going. He was glad that he would be busy with classes and conferences until four o'clock. He knew he could work half again as hard as someone like Sawtelle, but if he were compelled to do one quarter of the worrying that man did—

Yet the four-o'clock meeting proved to be an anticlimax. He had no sooner put his hand on the door leading to Mrs. Carr's office, when—as if that had provided the necessary stimulus—a shrill, tearful voice burst out with: "It's all a lie! I made it up."

Gunnison was sitting near the window, face a trifle averted, arms folded, looking like a slightly bored, slightly embarrassed but very stolid elephant. In a chair in the center of the room was huddled a delicate, fair-haired, but rather homely girl, tears dribbling down her cheeks and hysterical sobs racking her shoulders. Mrs. Carr was trying to calm her in a fluttery way.

"I don't know why I did it," the girl bleated pitifully. "I was in love with him, and he wouldn't even look at me. I was going to kill myself last night, and then I thought I would do this instead, to hurt him, or—"

"Now, Margaret, you must control yourself," Mrs. Carr admonished, her hands hovering over the girl's shoulders.

"Just a minute," Norman cut in, "did you say last night?"

"There, there, dear. I think you better leave, Professor Saylor." Mrs. Carr's eyes, magnified by thick glasses, looked fishlike. Her attitude was hostile. "There's obviously no need of asking questions."

"I think I should be permitted at least one," said Norman. "Just exactly at what time last night, Miss van Nice, did you get this idea?"

Gunnison registered puzzled but vague curiosity.

The tear-stained face looked up at Norman.

"It was just after one o'clock," she said. "I had been lying awake in the dark for hours, planning to kill myself. And then, in a flash the idea came to me." Suddenly she shook loose from Mrs. Carr and stood up, facing Norman. "Oh, I hate you!" she screamed. "I hate you!"

Gunnison followed him out of the office. He yawned, shook his head, and remarked, "Glad that's over."

"Never a dull moment," Norman responded, absently.

"Oh, by the way," Gunnison said, dragging a stiff white envelope out of his inside pocket, "here's a note for Mrs. Saylor. Hulda asked me to give it to you. I forgot about it before."

"I met her coming out of your office this morning," Norman said, his thoughts still elsewhere.

Somewhat later, back at Morton, Norman tried to come to grips with those thoughts, but found them remarkably slippery. The dragon on the roof ridge of Estrey Hall lured away his attention. Funny about little things like that. You never even noticed them for years, and then they suddenly popped into focus. How many people could give you one single definite fact about the architectural ornaments of buildings in which they worked? Not one in ten, probably. Why, if you'd asked him yesterday about that dragon, he wouldn't for his life have been able to tell you even if there *was* one or not.

He leaned on the window sill, looking at the lizardlike yet grotesquely anthropoid form, bathed in the yellow sunset glow, which, his wandering mind remembered, was supposed to symbolize the souls of the dead passing into and out of the underworld. Below the dragon, jutting out from under the cornice, was a sculptured head, one of a series of famous scientists and mathematicians decorating the entablature. He made out the name "Galileo," along with a brief inscription of some sort.

When he turned back to answer the phone, it suddenly seemed very dark in the office.

"Saylor? I just want to tell you that I'm going to give you until tomorrow—"

"Listen, Jennings," Norman cut in sharply, "I hung up on you last night because you kept shouting into the phone. This threatening line won't do you any good."

The voice continued where it had broken off, growing dangerously high. "—until tomorrow to withdraw your charges and have me reinstated at Hempnell. If you don't—"

"I told you not to threaten. There were no charges. You just flunked out. If you want to talk it over reasonably, come and see me."

The voice at the other end of the line broke into a screaming obscene torrent of abuse, so loud that he could still hear it very plainly as he was placing the receiver back in the cradle.

Paranoid—that was the way it sounded.

Then he suddenly sat very still.

At twenty past one last night he had burned a charm supposedly designed to ward off evil influence from him. The last of Tansy's "hands."

At about the same time Margaret van Nice had decided to accuse him of seducing her, and Marvin Jennings had decided to make him responsible for an imaginary plot.

Next morning Hervey Sawtelle, poking around in the stacks, had found—

Rubbish!

With an angry snort of laughter at his own credulity, he picked up his hat and headed for home.

III.

Tansy was in a radiant mood, prettier than she had seemed in months, younger-looking than her thirty-six years. Twice he caught her smiling to herself, when he glanced up from his supper.

He gave her the note from Mrs. Gunnison. "Mrs. Carr asked after you, too. Gushed all over me—in a ladylike way, of course. Then, later on—" He caught himself as he started to tell about the cigarette, and Mrs. Carr cutting him, and the interview in her office. No use worrying Tansy with things that might be considered bad luck. No telling what further constructions she might put upon them.

She glanced through the note and handed it back to him.

"It has the authentic Hempnell flavor, don't you think?" she observed.

He read:

DEAR TANSY: Where are you keeping yourself? I haven't seen you on campus more than once or twice this year. If you're busy with something especially interesting, why not tell us about it? Why not come to tea this Saturday, and tell me all about yourself?

HULDA.

P. S. You're supposed to bring four dozen cookies to the Parents' Day Reception the Saturday after.

"Rather confused-sounding," he said, "but I clearly perceive the keen bludgeon of Mrs. Gunnison. She looked particularly sloppy today."

Tansy laughed. "Still, we have been pretty antisocial these last weeks. I believe I'll ask them over for bridge tomorrow night. It's short notice, but they're usually free Wednesdays. And the Sawtelles."

"Do we have to? That henpecker?"

Tansy laughed. "I don't know how you would ever manage to get along without me—" She stopped short. "I'm afraid you'll have to endure Evelyn. After all, Hervey's the other important man in your department, and it's expected that you see something of each other socially. To make two tables, I'll invite the Carrs."

"Three fearful females," said Norman. "If they represent the average run of professors' wives, I was lucky to get you."

"I sometimes have similar thoughts about professors' wives' husbands," said Tansy.

Then as they smoked over the coffee, she said hesitantly, "Norm, I said I didn't want to talk about last night. But now there's something I want to tell you."

He nodded.

"I didn't tell you last night, Norm, but when we burned those . . . things, I was terribly frightened. I felt that we were ripping holes in walls that it had taken me years to build, and that now there was nothing to keep out the—"

He said nothing, sat very still.

"Oh, it's hard to explain, but ever since I began to . . . play with those things, I've been conscious of pressures from outside. Things trying to push their way in and get at us. And I've had to press them back, fight back at them with my— It's like that test of strength men sometimes make, trying to force each other's hand to the table. But that wasn't what I was starting to say.

"I went to bed feeling miserable and scared. The pressure from outside kept tightening around me, and I couldn't resist it, because we'd burned those things. And then suddenly, as I lay in the dark, about an hour after I went to bed, I got the most abrupt tremendous feeling of relief. The pressure vanished, as if I'd bobbed up to the surface after almost drowning. And I knew then . . . that I'd gotten over my craziness. That's why I'm so happy."

It was hard for Norman not to tell Tansy what he was thinking. Here was one more coincidence, but it knocked the others into a cocked hat. At about the same time as he had burned the last charm, experiencing a sensation of fear, Tansy had felt a great relief. That would teach him to build theories on coincidences!

"For I was crazy in a way, dear," she was saying. "There aren't many people who would have taken it as you did."

He said, "You weren't crazy—which is a relative term, anyway, applicable to anyone. You were just fooled by the cussedness of things."

"Cussedness?"

"Yes. The way nails sometimes insist on bending when you hammer, as if they were trying to. Or the way machinery refuses to work. Matter's funny stuff. In large aggregates, it obeys natural law, but when you get down to the individual atom or electron, it's largely a matter of chance or whim—" This conversation was not taking the direction he wanted it to, and he was thankful when Totem jumped up onto the table, creating a diversion.

It turned out to be the pleasantest evening they had spent together in ages.

But next morning he wished he had not gotten started on that "cussedness of things" notion. It stuck in his mind. He found himself puzzling over the merest trifle—in the precise position of that idiotic cement dragon. Yesterday he remembered thinking that it was exactly in the middle of the descending roof ridge. But now he saw that it was obviously two thirds of the way down, quite near the architrave topping the huge and useless Gothic gateway set between Estrey and Morton. Even a social scientist ought to have better powers of observation than that!

The jangle of the phone coincided with the nine-o'clock buzzer.

"Professor Saylor?" Thompson's voice was apologetic. "I'm sorry to bother you again, but I just got another inquiry from one of the trustees. Concerning an informal address you were supposed to have delivered at about the same time as that . . . er . . . party. The topic was 'What's Wrong With College Education?' "

"Well, what about it? Are you implying that there's nothing wrong with college education, or that the topic is taboo?"

"Oh, no, no, no. But the trustee seemed to

think that you were making a criticism of Hempnell."

"Of small colleges of the same type as Hempnell, yes. Of Hempnell, specifically, no."

"Well, he seemed to fear it might have a detrimental effect on enrollment for next year. Spoke of several friends of his with children of college age as having heard your address and being unfavorably impressed."

"Then they were supersensitive."

"He also seemed to think you had made a slighting reference to President Pollard's . . . er . . . political activities."

"I'm sorry but I have to get along to a class now."

"Very well," said Thompson. He sounded hurt.

Gracine Pollard was absent from "Primitive Societies," Norman noted with an inward grin, wondering if it had become too much for her warped sense of propriety. But even the daughters of college presidents ought to be told a few home truths now and then.

Yesterday's lecture had had a markedly stimulating effect. Several students had abruptly chosen related subjects for their term papers, and the fraternity president had decided to capitalize on his yesterday's discomfiture by writing a humorous article on the primitive significance of fraternity initiations for the Hempnell *Buffoon*. They had a very brisk session. It put Norman in a good humor which lasted until after his three-o'clock class that afternoon, when he happened to meet the Sawtelles, in front of Morton Hall.

"I had lunch today with Henrietta . . . I mean, Mrs. Pollard," Mrs. Sawtelle announced with the air of one who has just visited royalty.

"Oh say, Norman—" Hervey began, excitedly, thrusting forward his brief case.

"We had a very interesting chat," his wife continued, sweeping on as if her husband had not spoken. "We talked about you, too, Norman. It seems Gracine has been misinterpreting some of the things you've been saying in your class. She's such a sensitive girl."

"Dumb Bunny, you mean," Norman corrected mentally. He murmured, "Oh?" with some show of politeness.

"Dear Henrietta was a little puzzled as just how to handle it, though of course she's a very tolerant, cosmopolitan soul. I just mentioned it because I thought you'd want to know. After all, it is very important that no one gets any wrong impressions about the department. Don't you agree with me, Hervey?" she ended sharply.

"What, dear? Oh, yes, yes. Say, Norman, I want to tell you about that thesis I showed you yesterday. The most amazing thing! Its main arguments are almost exactly the same as those in your book! An amazing case of independent investigators arriving at the same conclusions. Why, it's like Darwin and Wallace, or—"

"You didn't tell *me* anything about this, dear," said Mrs. Sawtelle, as if he had cheated her.

"Wait a minute," said Norman.

He hated to make an explanation in Mrs. Sawtelle's presence, but it had to be done.

"Sorry, Hervey, to have to substitute a rather sordid story for an interesting case of independent investigation. It happened when I was an instructor here—1929, my first year. A graduate student named Cunningham got hold of my ideas—I was friendly with him—and incorporated them into his doctor's thesis. My work in superstition and neurosis was just a side line then, and so I didn't happen to read his thesis until after he'd gotten his degree."

Sawtelle blinked. His face resumed its usual worried expression. A look of vague disappointment had come into Mrs. Sawtelle's black button eyes, as if she would have liked to read the thesis before hearing the explanation.

"I was very angry," Norman continued, "and intended to show him up. But then I heard he'd died. There was some hint of suicide. He was an unbalanced chap. How he'd hoped to get away with such an out-and-out steal, I don't know. Anyway, I decided not to do anything about it, for his family's sake. You see, it would have supplied a strong reason for thinking he *had* committed suicide."

Mrs. Sawtelle looked incredulous.

"But, Norman," Sawtelle commented anxiously, "was that really wise? I mean to keep silent. Weren't you taking a chance? I mean with regard to your academic reputation?"

Abruptly Mrs. Sawtelle's manner changed.

"Put that thing back in the stacks, Hervey, and forget about it," she directed curtly. Then she smiled archly at Norman. "I've been forgetting that I have a surprise for you, Professor Saylor. Come down to the sound booth now, and I'll show you. It won't take a minute. Come along, Hervey."

Norman had no excuse ready, so he accompanied the Sawtelles to the rooms of the speech department at the other end of Morton, wondering how the speech department ever found any use for someone with as nasal and affected a voice as Evelyn Sawtelle, even if she did happen to be a professor's wife.

The sound booth was dim and quiet, a solid box with soundproof walls and double windows. Mrs. Sawtelle took a disk from the cabinet, put it on one of the three turntables, and adjusted a couple of dials.

From the amplifier came a strangely intermittent wailing or roaring, as of wind prying at a house. It struck a less usual chord, though, in Norman's memory.

Mrs. Sawtelle darted back and lifted the needle, hurriedly, so it grated against the disk.

"I made a mistake," she said. "That's some modernistic music or other. Hervey, switch on the light. Here's the record I wanted."

"It sounded awful, whatever it was," her husband observed.

Norman had identified his memory. It was of an Australian bull-roarer a colleague had once demonstrated for him. The curved slat of wood, whirled at the end of a cord, made exactly the same sound. The aborigines used it in their magic making.

But now his own voice was coming out of the amplifier, and he had an odd sense of jerking back in time.

"Surprised?" she questioned coyly. "It's that talk on civilian defense you gave the students last week. We had a mike spotted by the speaker's rostrum—I suppose you thought it was for amplification—and we made a sneak recording, as we call it. We cut it down here."

She indicated the heavier, cement-based turntable for making recordings.

"We can do all sorts of things down here," she babbled on. "Mix all sorts of sound. Music against voices. And—"

It was hard for Norman to appear even slightly pleased. He knew his reasons were no more sensible than those of a savage afraid someone will learn his secret name, yet all the same he disliked the idea of Evelyn Sawtelle monkeying around with his voice. Like her dully malicious, small-socketed eyes, it suggested a prying for hidden weaknesses. And then that talk about mixing sounds—somehow it did not set good with him.

What it all boiled down to was that he detested the woman.

Rather brusquely, he excused himself.

"We'll see you tonight," Evelyn called after him. It sounded like, "You won't get rid of me."

Back at the office, Norman put in a good hour's work on his notes. Then, getting up to switch on the light, his glance happened to fall on the window.

After a few moments, he jerked away and darted to the closet, to get his field glasses.

Evidently someone had a very obscure sense of humor to perpetrate such a complicated practical joke.

Intently he searched the cement at the juncture of roof ridge and clawed feet, looking for the telltale cracks. He could not spot any, but that was not easy to do in the failing yellow light.

The cement dragon now stood at the edge of the gutter, as if about to walk over to Morton along the architrave of the big gateway.

He lifted his glasses to the creature's head—blank and crude as an unfinished skull. Then on an impulse, he dropped them to the row of sculptured heads, focused on Galileo, and read the little inscription he had not been able to make out before.

"Eppur si muove."

The words Galileo was supposed to have muttered after recanting before the Inquisition his belief in the revolution of the Earth around the Sun.

"Nevertheless, it moves."

A board creaked behind him, and he spun around.

By his desk stood a young man, waxen pale, with thick red hair. His eyes stood out like milky marbles. One white, tendon-ridged hand gripped a .22 target pistol.

Norman walked toward him, bearing slightly to the right.

The skimpy barrel of the gun came up.

"Hello, Jennings," said Norman. "You've been reinstated. Your grades have been changed to straight A's."

The gun barrel slowed for an instant.

Norman lunged in.

The gun went off under his left arm, pinking the window.

The gun clunked on the floor. Jennings' skinny form went limp. As Norman sat him down on the chair, he began to sob, convulsively.

Norman lifted the phone and asked for an on-campus number. The connection was made quickly. "Gunnison?" he asked.

"Uh-huh, just caught me as I was leaving."

"Theodore Jennings' parents live right near the college, don't they? You know, the chap who flunked out last semester."

"I believe they do. What's the matter?"

"Better get them over here quick. And have them bring his doctor. He just tried to shoot me."

There was a pause. Norman visualized Gunnison's startled reaction! Then, "Right away!"

Norman put down the phone. Jennings continued to sob agonizingly. Norman looked at him with disgust.

An hour later Gunnison sat down in the same chair, and let off a sigh of relief.

"I'm sure glad they're gone," he said. "It was awfully good of you, Norman, not to insist on the police. Things like that give a college a bad name."

Norman smiled wearily. "Almost anything gives a college a bad name. But that kid was obviously crazy as a loon."

They lit up and smoked for a while in silence. Then Gunnison looked at his watch.

"I'll have to hustle. It's almost seven, and we're due at your place at eight."

But he lingered, ambling over to the window to inspect the bullet hole.

"I wonder if you'd mind not mentioning this to Tansy?" Norman asked. "I don't want to worry her."

Gunnison nodded. "Good thing if we kept it to ourselves." Then he pointed out the window. "That's one of my wife's pets," he remarked in a jocular tone.

Norman saw that his finger was trained on the cement dragon, now coldly revealed by the upward glare from the street lights.

"I mean," Gunnison went on, "she must have a dozen photographs of it. Hempnell's her specialty. I believe she's got a photograph of every architectural oddity on campus. That one's her favorite." He chuckled. "Usually it's the husband who keeps ducking down into the darkroom, but not in our family. And me a chemist, at that."

Norman's taut mind had unaccountably jumped to the thought of a bull-roarer. Abruptly he realized the analogy between the recording of a bull-roarer and the photograph of a dragon.

He clamped a lid on the fantastic questions he wanted to ask Gunnison.

"Come on!" he said. "We'd better get along!"

Gunnison started a little at the harshness of his voice.

"Can you drop me off?" asked Norman, more quietly. "My car's at home."

"Sure thing," said Gunnison.

After he had switched out the light, Norman paused for a moment, staring back at the window. The words came back.

"*Eppur si muove.*"

IV.

They had hardly cleared away the remains of a hasty supper, when there came the first clang from the front-door chimes. To Norman's relief, Tansy had accepted without questioning his rather clumsy explanation of why he had gotten home so late. There was something puzzling, though, about her serenity these last two days. She was usually much sharper, and more curious. But of course he had been careful to hide disturbing events from her, and he ought only to be glad her nerves were in such good shape.

"Dearest! It's been ages since we've seen you!" Mrs. Carr embraced Tansy in a matronly fashion. "How are you? How are you?" The question sounded peculiarly eager and incisive. Norman put it down to typical Hempnell gush. "Oh, dear, I'm afraid I've got a cinder in my eye," Mrs. Carr continued. "The wind's getting quite fierce."

"Gusty," said Professor Carr of the mathematics department, showing obvious but harmless delight at finding the right word. He was a little man with red cheeks and a white Vandyke, as innocent and absent-minded as college professors are supposed to be, who gave the impression of residing permanently in a special paradise of transcendental and transfinite numbers.

"It seems to have gone away now," said Mrs. Carr, waving aside Tansy's handkerchief and experimentally blinking her eyes, which looked unpleasantly naked and birdlike until she replaced her thick glasses. "Oh, that must be the others," she added, as the chimes sounded. "Isn't it marvelous that everyone at Hempnell is so punctual?"

As Norman started for the front door he imagined for one crazy moment that someone must be whirling a bull-roarer outside, until he realized it could only be the rising wind living up to Professor Carr's description of it.

He was confronted by Evelyn Sawtelle's angular form, wind whipping her black coat

against her legs. Her equally angular face, with its shoe-button eyes, was thrust toward his own.

"Let us in, or it'll blow us in," she said. Like most of her attempts at coy or facetious humor, it did not come off, perhaps because she made it sound so stupidly grim.

She entered, with Hervey in tow, and made for Tansy.

"My dear, how are you? Whatever have you been doing with yourself?" Again he was struck by the eager and meaningful tone of the question. For a moment he wondered whether the women had somehow gotten an inkling of Tansy's eccentricity, and the recent crisis. But Mrs. Sawtelle was so voice-conscious that she was always emphasizing things the wrong way.

There was a noisy flurry of greetings. Totem made a squeaky noise and darted out of the way of the crowd of human beings. Mrs. Carr's silvery voice rose above the rest.

"Oh, Professor Sawtelle, I want to tell you how *much* we all appreciated your talk on city planning. It was truly *significant!*" Sawtelle writhed, grinning in a flustered way.

Norman thought: "So now *he's* the favorite for the chairmanship."

Professor Carr had made a beeline for the bridge tables, and was wistfully fingering the cards.

"I've been studying the mathematics of the shuffle," he began with a bright-eyed air, as soon as Norman drifted into range. "The shuffle is supposed to make it a matter of chance what hands are dealt. But that is not true at all." He broke open a new pack of cards, and spread the deck. "The manufacturers arrange these by suits—thirteen spades, thirteen hearts, and so on. Now suppose I make a perfect shuffle—divide the pack into equal parts and interleaf the cards one by one."

He tried to demonstrate, but the cards got away from him.

"It's really not as hard as it looks," he continued amiably. "Some players can do it every time, quick as a wink. But that's not the point. Suppose I make two perfect shuffles with a new pack. Then, no matter how the cards are cut, each player will get thirteen of a suit—an event that, if you went purely by the laws of chance would only happen once in about one hundred and fifty-eight billion times as regards a *single* hand, let alone all four."

Norman nodded, and Carr smiled delightedly.

"That's only one example. What is loosely termed chance is really the resultant of several perfectly definite factors—chiefly the play of the cards on each hand, and the shuffle habits of the players." He made it sound as important as the Theory of Relativity. "Some evenings the hands are very ordinary. Other evenings they keep getting wilder and wilder—long suits, voids, and so on. Sometimes the high cards persistently run north and south. Other times, east and west. Luck? Chance? Not at all! It's the result of perfectly definite factors. Some expert players actually make use of this principle to determine the probable location of key cards."

Norman's mind went off on a tangent. Suppose you applied this principle outside bridge? Suppose that coincidences and other chance happenings weren't really as chancy as they looked? Suppose there were individuals with a special aptitude for calling the turns, making the breaks? But that was a pretty obvious idea—nothing to give a person the shiver it had given him.

"I wonder what's holding up the Gunnisons?" Professor Carr was saying. "We might start one table now. Perhaps we can get in an extra rubber," he added hopefully.

A peal from the chimes settled the question.

Gunnison looked as if he had eaten his dinner too fast, and Hulda seemed rather surly.

"We had to rush so," she muttered curtly to Norman as he held the door.

Like the other two women, she almost ignored him and concentrated her greetings on Tansy. It gave him a vaguely uneasy feeling, as when they had first come to Hempnell and faculty visits had been a nerve-racking chore. Tansy seemed at a disadvantage—somehow unprotected—in contrast to the aggressive air of purpose animating the other three.

But what of it?—he told himself. That was usual with Hempnell faculty wives. They acted as if they lay awake nights plotting how to poison the people between their husband and the president's chair.

Whereas Tansy— But that was like what Tansy had been doing. His thoughts started to gyrate confusingly, and he switched them off.

They cut for partners.

The cards seemed determined to provide an

illustration for the theory Carr had explained. The hands were uniformly commonplace—abnormally average. No long suits. Nothing but 4-4-3-2 and 4-3-3-3 distribution. Bid one; make two. Bid two; make one.

After the second round, Norman applied his private remedy for boredom—the game of "Spot the Primitive." You played it by yourself, secretly. It was just an exercise for an ethnologist's imagination. You pretended that the people around you were members of a savage race, and you tried to figure out how their personalities would manifest themselves in such an environment.

Tonight it worked almost too well.

Nothing unusual about the men. Gunnison would, of course, be a prosperous tribal chieftain; perhaps a little fatter, and tended by maidens, but with a jealous and vindictive wife waiting to pounce. Carr might figure as the basket maker of the village—a spry little old man, grinning like a monkey, weaving the basket fibers into intricate mathematical matrices. Sawtelle, of course, would be the tribal scapegoat, butt of endless painful practical jokes.

But the women!

Take Mrs. Gunnison, now his partner. Give her a brown skin. Leave the red hair, but twist some copper ornaments in it. She'd be heftier if anything, a real mountain of a woman, stronger than most of the men in the tribe, able to wield a spear or club. The same sleepy brutish eyes, but the lower lip would jut out in a more openly sullen and domineering way. It was only too easy to imagine what she'd do to the unlucky maidens her husband showed too much interest in. Or how she would pound tribal policy into his head when they retired to their hut. Or how her voice would thunder out the death chants the women sang to aid the men away at war.

Then Mrs. Sawtelle and Mrs. Carr, who had progressed to the top table along with himself and Mrs. Gunnison. Mrs. Sawtelle first. Make her skinnier. Scarify the flat cheeks with ornamental ridges. Tattoo the spine. Witch woman. Bitter as quinine bark because her husband was ineffectual. Think of her prancing before a spike-studded fetish. Think of her screeching incantations and ripping off a chicken's head—

"Norman, you're playing out of turn," said Mrs. Gunnison.

"Sorry."

And Mrs. Carr. Shrivel her a bit. Leave only a few wisps of hair on the parchment skull. Take away the glasses, and then her eyes would be gummy. She'd blink and peer short-sightedly, and leer toothlessly, and flutter her bony claws. A nice harmless old squaw, who'd gather the tribe's children around her and tell them legends. But her jaw would still be able to snap like a steel trap, and her clawlike hands would be deft at applying arrow poison, and she wouldn't really need her eyes because she'd have other ways of seeing things and even the bravest warrior would grow nervous if she looked too long in his direction.

"Those experts at the top table are awfully quiet," called Gunnison with a laugh. "They must be taking the game very seriously."

Witch women, all three of them, engaged in booting their husbands to the top of the tribal hierarchy.

From the dark doorway at the far end of the room, Totem was peering curiously, as if weighing some similar possibility.

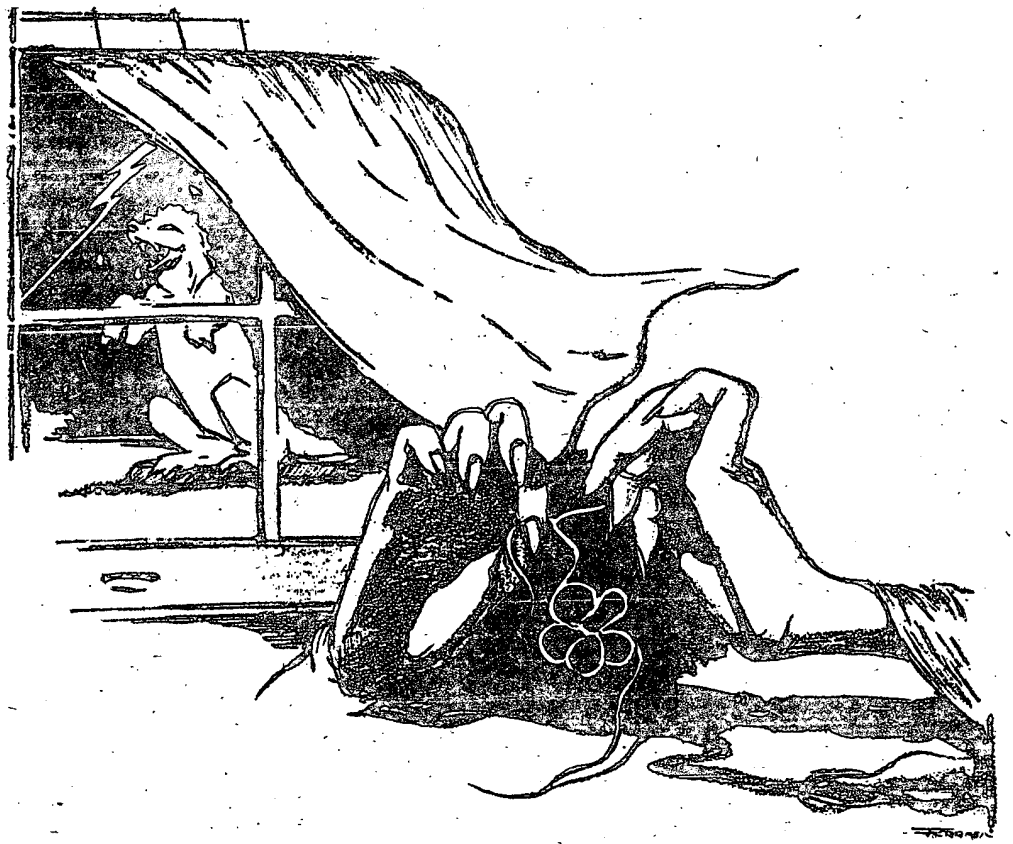
But Norman could not fit Tansy into the picture. He could visualize physical changes, like frizzing her hair, and putting some big gold rings in her ears and a painted design on her forehead. But he could not picture her as belonging to the same tribe. She persisted in his imagination as a stranger woman, a captive, eyed with suspicion and hate by the rest. Or perhaps a woman of the same tribe, but one who had done something to forfeit the trust of all the other women. A priestess who had violated taboo. A witch woman who had renounced witchcraft.

Abruptly his field of vision narrowed to the score pad. Evelyn Sawtelle was idly scribbling stick figures as Mrs. Carr deliberated over a lead. First the stick figure of a man with arms raised and three or four balls above his head, as if he were juggling. Then the stick figure of a queen, indicated by crown and skirt. Then a little tower, with battlements. Then an L-shaped thing with a stick figure hanging from it—a gallows. Finally, a truck bearing down on a man whose arms were extended toward it in fear.

Just five scribbles. But he knew that four of them were connected with a bit of unusual knowledge buried somewhere in his mind. A glance at the exposed dummy gave him the clue.

Cards.

But this bit of knowledge was from the an-



cient history of cards, when the whole deck was drenched with magic, when there was a Knight between the Jack and the Queen, when the suits were swords, batons, cups, and money, and when there were twenty-two special tarot cards in the pack, of which today only the Joker remained. Tarot cards were used for fortunetelling.

Four of the tarot cards were the Juggler, the Empress, the Tower, and the Hanged Man.

Only the fifth stick figure, that of the man and truck, did not fit in. But it gave him a peculiarly personal shudder. Death by being crushed or mangled, as in an automobile accident, was his pet phobia.

Mrs. Sawtelle scratched out the stick figures and looked up at him sullenly.

Mrs. Gunnison leaned forward, lips moving as if she might be counting trump.

Mrs. Carr smiled, and made her lead. The risen wind began to make the same intermittent roaring sound it had for a moment earlier in the evening.

Why not, he asked himself. Three witch women, using magic as Tansy had, to advance their husband's careers and their own. Making use of their husband's special knowledge to give magic a modern twist. Suspicious and worried because Tansy had given up magic; afraid she'd found a much stronger variety, and was planning to make use of it.

And Tansy—suddenly unprotected, possibly unaware of the change in their attitude toward her because, in giving up magic, she had lost her sensitivity to the supernatural, her "woman's intuition."

Why not carry it a step further? Maybe all women were the same. Guardians of mankind's ancient customs and traditions—including the practice of witchcraft. Fighting their husband's battles from behind the scenes, by sorcery. Keeping it a secret; and, on those occasions when they were discovered, conveniently explaining it as feminine susceptibility to superstitious fads.

Half of the human race still actively practicing sorcery.

Why not?

"It's your play, Norman," said Mrs. Sawtelle, sweetly.

"You look as if you had something on your mind," said Mrs. Gunnison.

"How are you getting along up there,

Norm?" her husband called. "Those women got you buffaloed?"

Buffaloed? He came back to reality with a jerk. That was just what they almost had done. And all because the human imagination was a thoroughly unreliable instrument, like a rubber ruler. Let's see, if he played his queen it might set up a king in Mrs. Gunnison's hand so she could get in and run her spades.

After that round, Tansy served refreshments, and the usual shop talk began.

"Saw Pollard today," Gunnison remarked, helping himself to a section of chocolate cake. "Told me he'd be meeting with the trustees tomorrow morning, to decide among other things on the chairmanship in sociology."

Hervey Sawtelle choked on a crumb and almost lost his coffeecup.

Norman caught Mrs. Sawtelle glaring at him vindictively. She changed her face and murmured, "How interesting." He smiled. That kind of hate he could understand. No need to confuse it with witchcraft.

He went to the kitchen to get Mrs. Carr a glass of water, and met Mrs. Gunnison coming out of the bedroom. She was slipping a leather-bound booklet into her capacious handbag. It recalled to his mind Tansy's diary. Probably an address book.

Totem slipped out from behind her, giving what sounded like a hiss as he dodged past her feet.

"I loathe the animal," said Mrs. Carr bluntly, and walked past him.

Professor Carr had made arrangements for a final rubber, men at one table, women at the other.

"A barbaric arrangement," said Tansy, winking. "You really don't think we can play bridge at all."

"On the contrary, my dear, I think you play very well," Carr replied seriously. "But I confess that at times I prefer to play with men. I can get a better idea of what's going on in their minds. Whereas women still baffle me."

"As they should, dear," added Mrs. Carr, bringing a flurry of laughter.

The cards suddenly began to run freakishly, with abnormal distribution of suits, and play took a wild turn. But Norman found it impossible to concentrate, which made Sawtelle an even more jittery partner than usual.

He kept listening to what the women were saying at the other table. His rebellious imagination persisted in reading hidden meanings into the most innocuous remarks.

"You usually hold wonderful hands, Tansy. But now you don't seem to have any," said Mrs. Carr. But suppose she was referring to the kind of hand you wrapped in flannel?

"Oh, well, unlucky in cards . . . you know." How had Mrs. Sawtelle meant to finish the remark? Lucky in love? Luck in sorcery? Idiotic notion!

"That's two psychic bids you've made in succession, Tansy. Better watch out. We'll catch up with you." What might not a psychic bid stand for in Mrs. Gunnison's vocabulary? Some kind of bluff in witchcraft? A pretense at giving up conjuring?

"I wonder," Mrs. Carr murmured sweetly to Tansy, "if you're hiding a very strong hand this time, dear, and making a trap pass?"

Rubber ruler. That was the trouble with imagination. According to a rubber ruler, an elephant would be no bigger than a mouse, a jagged line and a curve might be equally straight. He tried to think about the slam he had contracted for.

"The girls talk a good game of bridge," murmured Gunnison in an undertone.

Gunnison and Carr came out at the long end of two-thousand rubber and were still crowing pleasantly as they stood around waiting to leave.

Norman remembered a question he wanted to ask Mrs. Gunnison.

"Harold was telling me you had a number of photographs of that cement dragon or whatever it is on top of Estrey. It's right opposite my window."

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded.

"I believe I've got one with me. Took it almost a year ago."

She dug a rumpled snapshot out of her handbag.

He studied it, and experienced a kind of shiver in reverse. This didn't make sense at all. Instead of being toward the center of the roof ridge, or near the bottom, it was almost at the top. Just what was involved here? A practical joke stretching over a period of days or weeks? Or— His mind balked, like a skittish horse. Yet— *Eppur si muove.*

He turned it over. There was a confusing inscription on the back, in greasy red crayon. Mrs. Gunnison took it out of his hands, to show the others.

"The wind sounds like a lost soul," said Mrs.

Carr, hugging her coat around her as Norman opened the door.

"But a rather noisy one," her husband added with a chuckle.

When the last of them were gone, Tansy slipped her arm around his waist, and said, "I must be getting old. It wasn't nearly as much of a trial as usual. They seemed almost human."

Norman looked down at her intently. She was smiling peacefully. Totem had come out of hiding and was rubbing against her legs.

With an effort Norman nodded and said, "Yes, they did."

V.

There were shadows everywhere, and the ground under his feet was treacherous and of uncertain texture. The dreadful strident roaring, which seemed to have gone on since eternity began, shook his very bones. Yet it did not drown out the flat, nasty monotone of that other voice which kept telling him to do something—he could not be sure what except that it involved injury to himself, although he heard the voice as plainly as if someone were talking inside his head. He tried to struggle away from the direction in which the voice wanted him to go, but heavy hands jerked him back. He wanted to look up over his shoulder at something he knew would be taller than himself, but he couldn't muster the courage. There were great rushing clouds overhead making the shadows, and they would momentarily assume the form of gigantic faces brooding down on him, faces with pits of darkness for eyes, and sullen, savage lips, and great masses of hair streaming behind.

He must not do the thing the voice commanded. And yet he must. He struggled wildly. The sound rose to a rock-shattering pandemonium. The clouds became a black, ragged, all-engulfing torrent.

And then suddenly the bedroom became mixed up with the other picture, and he struggled awake.

He rubbed his face, which was thick with sleep, and tried unsuccessfully to remember what the voice had wanted him to do. He still felt the reverberations of the sound in his ears.

Gloomy daylight seeped through the shades. The clock indicated quarter to eight.

Tansy was still curled up, one arm out of the covers. A smile seemed to be tickling the corners of her lips and wrinkling her nose. He slipped out carefully. His bare foot failed to avoid a loose carpet tack. Suppressing an angry grunt, he hobbled off.

For the first time in months he botched shaving. Twice the new blade slid too sharply sideways, neatly removing tiny segments of skin. He glared irritably at the scowling face in the mirror, pulled the blade down his chin very slowly, but with a little too much pressure, and gave himself a third nick.

By the time he got down to the kitchen, the water he had put on was boiling. As he poured it into the coffeepot, the wobbly handle of the saucepan came completely loose, and his bare ankles were splattered painfully. Totem skittered away, and then slowly returned to his tin of milk. Norman cursed, and then grinned. What had he been telling Tansy about the cussedness of things? As if to prove the point with a final ridiculous example, he bit his tongue while eating coffee cake. Cussedness of things? Say rather the cussedness of the human nervous system! Faintly he was aware of a potently disturbing emotion—remnant of the dream?—like an unpleasant swimming shape glimpsed beneath weedy water.

It seemed most akin to a dull seething anger, for as he hurried toward Morton Hall, he found himself inwardly at war with the established order of things—and particularly educational institutions. The old sophomoric exasperation at the hypocrisies and compromises of civilized society welled up and poured over the dams that a mature realism had set against it. This was a great life for a man to be leading Coddling the immature minds of grown-up brats, and lucky to get one halfway promising student a year. Playing bridge with a bunch of old fogies. Catering to jittery incompetents like Hervey Sawtelle. Bowing to the thousand and one stupid rules and traditions of a second-rate college. And for what!

He knew he was being silly, but some perverse quirk kept him from pushing back this intrusion of juvenile emotions.

Ragged clouds were moving overhead, presaging rain. They reminded him of his dream. He felt the impulse to shout a childish defiance at those faces in the sky.

An army truck rolled quietly by, recalling to his mind a little picture Evelyn Sawtelle had scribbled on a bridge pad. He followed it with his eyes. When he turned back, he saw Mrs. Carr.

"You've cut yourself," she said brightly, peering closely at his face.

"Yes, I have."

"How unfortunate!"

He did not try to answer. They walked together through the gate between Morton and Estrey. He could just make out the snout of the cement dragon poked over the Estrey gutter.

"I wanted to tell you last night how distressed I was, Professor Saylor, about that matter of Margaret van Nice, only I didn't think it was the right time. I'm dreadfully sorry that you had to be called in. Such a disgusting accusation! How you must have felt!"

She seemed to misinterpret his wry grimace at this, for she went on swiftly, "Of course, I never once dreamed that *you* had done anything the least improper, but I thought there must be *something* to the girl's story. She told it in such *detail*. Really, Professor Saylor, some of the girls that come to Hempnell nowadays are *terrible*. Where they get such loathsome ideas from is quite beyond me."

"Would you like to know?"

She looked up at him blankly.

"They get them," he told her concisely, "from a society which seeks simultaneously to stimulate and inhibit one of their basic drives. They get them, in brief, from a lot of dirty-minded adults!"

"Really, Professor Saylor! Why—"

"There are a number of girls here at Hempnell who would be a lot healthier with real love affairs rather than imaginary ones. A fair proportion, of course, have already made satisfactory adjustments."

He had the satisfaction of hearing her gasp as he abruptly turned into Morton. His heart was pounding pleasantly. His lips were tight. When he reached his office he lifted the phone and asked for an on-campus number.

"Thompson? . . . Saylor. I have a couple of news items for you."

"Good, good! What are they?" Thompson replied hungrily, in the tone of one who poises a pencil.

"First, the subject for my address to the Off-campus Mothers week after next, 'Premarital Relations and the College Student.' Second, my theatrical friends—you know the ones I mean—will be playing in the city at the same time, and I shall invite them to be guests of the college."

"But—" The poised pencil had obviously been dropped like a red-hot poker.

"That's all, Thompson. Perhaps I shall have something more interesting another time. Good-by."

He felt a stinging sensation in his hand. He had been fingering a little obsidian knife he used for slitting envelopes. It had gashed his finger. Blood smeared the clear volcanic glass where once, he told himself, had been the blood of sacrifice or ritual scarification. Clumsy—The nine-o'clock buzzer cut short his musing. He ripped a bandage from his handkerchief.

As he hurried down the corridor, Bronstein fell into step with him.

"We're pulling for you this morning, Dr. Saylor," he murmured heartily.

"What do you mean?"

Bronstein's grin was a trifle knowing. "A girl who works in the president's office told us they were deciding on the sociology chairmanship. I sure hope the old buzzards show some sense for once."

Academic dignity stiffened Norman's reply. "In any case, I will be satisfied with their decision."

Bronstein felt the rebuff. "Of course, I didn't mean to—"

"Of course you didn't."

He immediately regretted his sharpness. Why the devil should he rebuke a student for failing to reverence trustees as representatives of deity? Why pretend he didn't want the chairmanship? Why conceal his contempt for half the faculty? The anger he thought he had worked out of his system surged up with redoubled violence. On a sudden irresistible impulse he tossed his lecture notes aside and started in to tell the class just what he thought of the world and Hempnell. They might as well find out young!

Fifteen minutes later he came to with a jerk in the middle of a sentence about "dirty-minded old women, in whom greed for social prestige has reached the magnitude of a perversion." He could not remember half of what he had been saying. He searched the faces of his class. They looked excited but puzzled, most of them, and a few looked shocked. Gracine Pollard was glaring. Yes! He remembered now that he had made a neat but nasty analysis of the politic motives of a certain college president who could be none other than Randolph Pollard. And somewhere he had started off on that premarital-relations business, and had been ribald about it, to say the least. And he had—

Exploded. Like a Prince Rupert drop.

He finished off with half a dozen lame generalities. He knew they must be quite inappropriate, for the looks grew more puzzled.

But the class seemed very remote. A shiver was spreading downward from the base of his skull, all because of a few words that had printed themselves in his mind.

The words were: A fingernail has flicked a psychic filament.

He shook his head, jumbling the type. The words vanished.

There were thirty minutes of class time left. He wanted to get away. He announced a surprise quiz, chalked up two questions, and left the room.

The cut finger had started to bleed again through the bandage, and there was blood on the chalk.

And dried blood on the obsidian knife. He resisted the impulse to finger it, and sat staring at the top of his desk.

It all went back to that witchcraft business, he told himself. It had shaken him much more than he had dared to admit. He had tried to put it out of his mind too quickly. And Tansy had appeared to forget it too quickly, too. A person could not shake an obsession that easily. He must thrash it out with her, again and again, or the thing would fester.

But with Tansy seeming so happy and relieved the last three days, that might be the wrong course to take, the selfish course—

His eyes started to stray toward the window, but the telephone recalled him.

"Professor Saylor? . . . I'm calling for Dr. Pollard. Could you come in and see Dr. Pollard this afternoon? . . . Four o'clock? . . . Thank you."

He leaned back with a smile. At least he had gotten the chairmanship.

It grew darker as the day progressed, the ragged clouds sweeping lower and lower. But the storm held off until almost four.

Big raindrops splattered the dusty steps as he ducked into the portico of the Administration Building. Thunder crackled and crashed, as if acres of metal sheeting were being shaken above the clouds. He turned back to watch. Lightning threw the Gothic roofs and towers into sharp relief. Again the crackle, building to a crash. He remembered he had left a window open in his office. But there was nothing that would be damaged by the wet.

Wind swooped down past the portico with a strident, pulsating roar. The unmusical voice that spoke into his ear had the same quality.

"Isn't it a pretty storm?"

Evelyn Sawtelle was smiling for once. It had a grotesque effect on her features, as if a horse had suddenly discovered how to smirk.

"You've heard the news, of course?" she went on. "About Hervey?"

Hervey popped out from behind her. He was grinning, too, but embarrassedly. He mumbled something that was lost in the storm, and extended his hand vaguely, as if he were in a receiving line.

Evelyn never took her eyes off Norman. "Isn't it wonderful?" she hissed. "Of course, we expected it, but still—"

Norman guessed. He forced himself to grasp Hervey's hand, just as the latter was withdrawing it flusteredly.

"Congratulations, old man," he said briefly.

"I'm very proud of Hervey," Evelyn announced possessively, as if he were a small boy who had won a prize for good behavior.

Her eyes followed Norman's hand. "Oh, you've cut yourself." The smirk seemed to be a permanent addition to her features. The wind wailed fiendishly. "Come, Hervey!" And she walked out into the storm as if it weren't there.

Hervey goggled at her in surprise. He mumbled something apologetic to Norman, pumped his hand up and down again, and then obediently scampered after his wife.

Norman watched them. There was something unpleasantly impressive about the way Evelyn Sawtelle marched through the sheets of rain, getting both of them drenched to no purpose except to satisfy some strange obstinacy. He could see that Hervey was trying to hurry her and not succeeding. Lightning flared viciously, but there was no reaction apparent in her angular, awkward frame. Once again he became dimly aware of an alien, explosive emotion deep within him.

And so that little poodle dog of hers, he thought, is to have the final say on the educational policy of the sociology department. Then what the devil does Pollard want to see me for? To offer his commiserations?

Almost an hour later he slammed out of Pollard's office, tense with anger, wondering why he had not handed in his resignation on the spot. To be interrogated about his actions like some kid, on the obvious instigation of busybodies like Thompson and Mrs. Carr and Gracine Pollard! To have to listen to a lot of

hogwash about his "attitudes" and "the Hempnell spirit," with veiled insinuations about his "moral code."

At least he had given somewhat better than he had taken! At least he had forced a note of confusion into that suave, oratorical voice, and made those tufted gray eyebrows pop up and down more than once!

Mrs. Gunnison was standing at the door of her husband's office. Like a big, strong slug, he told himself, noting her twisted stockings and handbag stuffed full as a grab bag, the inevitable camera dangling beside it. His exasperation shifted to her.

"Yes, I cut myself!" he told her, observing the direction of her glance. His voice was hoarse from the tirade he had delivered to Pollard.

Then he remembered something and did not stop to weigh his words. "Mrs. Gunnison, you picked up my wife's diary last night—by mistake. Will you please give it to me?"

"*You're* mistaken," she replied tolerantly.

"I saw you coming out of her bedroom with it."

Her eyes became lazy slits. "In that case you'd have mentioned it last night. You're overwrought, Norman. I understand." She nodded toward Pollard's office. "It must have been quite a disappointment."

"I'm asking you to return the diary!"

"And you'd really better look after that cut," she continued unruffled. "It doesn't look any too well bandaged, and it seems to be bleeding. Infections can be nasty things."

He turned on his heel and walked away. Her reflection confronted him, murky and dim in the glass of the outer door. She was smiling.

Outside Norman looked at his hand. Evidently he had opened the cut when he banged Pollard's desk. He drew the bandage tighter.

The storm had blown over, and yellow sunlight was flooding from under the low curtain of clouds to the west, flashing richly from the wet roofs and upper windows. Surplus rain was sprinkling from the trees. The campus was empty. A flurry of laughter from the girls' dormitories etched itself on the silence. He shrugged aside his anger, and let his senses absorb the new-washed beauty of the scene.

He prided himself on being able to enjoy the moment at hand. It seemed to him one of the chief signs of maturity.

He tried to think like a painter, identifying hues and shades, searching for the faint rose or green hidden in the shadows. There was really something to be said for Gothic architecture. Even though it was not functional, it carried the eye along pleasantly from one fanciful bit of stonework to the next. Now take those leafy finials topping the Estrey tower—

And then suddenly the sunlight was colder than ice, and the roofs of Hempnell were like the roofs of hell, and the faint laughter like the crystalline cachinations of fiends. Before he knew it, he had swerved sharply away from Morton, off the path and on to the wet grass, although he was only halfway across campus.

No need to go back to the office, he told himself shakily. Just a long climb for a few notes. They can wait until tomorrow. And why not go home a different way tonight, around Estrey? Why always take the direct route that led through the gate between Estrey and Morton? Why—

He forced himself to look up again at the open window of his office. It was empty now, as he might have expected. That other thing must have been some moving blur in his vision, and imagination had done the rest, as when a small shadow scurrying across the floor becomes a spider.

Or perhaps a shade flapping outward—

But a shadow could hardly crawl along the ledge outside the windows. A blur could hardly move so slowly or retain such a definite form.

And then the way the thing had waited, peering in, before it dropped down inside. Like . . . like a—

Of course it was all nonsense. And there really was no need whatsoever to bother about fetching those notes or closing the window. It would be just like giving in to a neurotic fear. There was a rumble of distant thunder.

—Like a very large cat, the color and texture of stone.

VI.

"—and henceforth his soul is believed to be knit up in a manner with the stone. If it breaks, it is an evil omen for him; they say that thunder has struck the stone and that he who owns it will soon die—"

No use. His eyes kept wondering over the mass of print. He laid "The Golden Bough" aside, and leaned back. From somewhere to the east, the thunder still throbbed faintly. But the familiar leather of the easy-chair imparted a sense of security and detachment.

Suppose, just as an intellectual exercise, you

tried to analyze it in terms of sorcery.

The dragon would be a clear case of sympathetic magic. Mrs. Gunnison animated it by operating on the photographs. And if you hypothesized a bull-roarer, or the recording of one, it would provide a neat magical explanation for the wind last night and the storm and wind today—both associated with Mrs. Sawtelle. And then the similar sound in his dream— He wrinkled his nose in distaste.

He could hear Tansy calling Totem from the back porch, rattling his little tin pan.

Put today's self-injurious acts in another category. The obsidian knife. The razor blade. The cranky saucepan. The carpet tack. The match that he had let burn his fingers a few minutes ago.

Perhaps the razor blade had been charmed, like the enchanted sword or ax which wounds the person who wields it. Perhaps someone had stolen the blood-smeared obsidian knife and dropped it in water, so the wound would keep flowing. That was a well-established superstition.

A dog was trotting along the sidewalk out in front. He could distinctly hear the *clop-clop* of paws.

Tansy was still calling Totem.

Perhaps a sorcerer had commanded him to destroy himself by inches—or millimeters, considering the razor blade. That would explain all the self-injurious acts at one swoop. The flat voice in the dream had ordered him to do it.

The dog had turned up the drive. His claws made a grating sound on the concrete.

The tarot-card diagrams scribbled by Mrs. Sawtelle would figure as some magical control mechanism. The stick figure of the man and the truck had grim implications if interpreted in the light of his irrational fear of automobile accidents.

It really didn't sound so much like a dog. Probably the neighbor's boy dragging home by jerks some indeterminate bulky object. The neighbor's boy devoted all his spare time to collecting old metal.

"Totem! Totem!" Followed by the sound of the back door closing.

Finally, that very trite "sense of a presence" just behind him. Taller than himself, hands poised to grab. Only whenever you looked over your shoulder, it dodged. Something like that had figured in the dream—the source, perhaps, of the flat voice. And in that case—

His patience snapped. An intellectual exercise, all right! For morons! He stubbed out his cigarette.

"Well, I've done my duty. That cat can sing for his supper." Tansy sat on the arm of the chair and put her hand on Norman's shoulder. "How are things going at college?"

He smiled up at her. He had been afraid of that question.

"Not so good," he replied lightly.

"The chairmanship?"

He nodded. "Sawtelle got it."

Tansy cursed fluently. It did him good to hear her.

"Make you want to take up conjuring again?" Hold on! He shouldn't have said that.

She looked at him closely.

"How do you mean that?" she asked.

"Just a joke."

"Are you sure? I know you've been worrying about me these last few days, ever since you found out. Wondering if I were going totally neurotic on you, and watching for the next symptoms. Now, dear, you don't have to deny it. It was the natural thing. I expected you'd be suspicious of me for a while. With your knowledge of psychiatry, it would be impossible for you to believe that anyone could shake off an obsession so quickly. And I've been so happy to get free from all that, that your suspicions haven't bothered me. I've known they would wear off."

"But, darling, I honestly haven't been suspicious," he protested. "Maybe I ought to have been, but I haven't."

Her gray-green eyes were enigmatic and serious. She said slowly, "Then what are you worrying about?"

"Nothing at all." Here was where he had to be very careful.

She shook her head. "That's not true. You are worrying. Oh, I know there are some things on your mind that you haven't told me about. It isn't that."

He looked up quickly.

She nodded. "About the chairmanship. And that some student has been threatening you. And about that Van Nice girl." She smiled briefly, as he started to protest. "Oh, I know you aren't the type who seduces love-struck and innocent mimeograph operators." She became serious again. "Those are all minor matters, things you can take in your stride. You didn't tell me about them because you were afraid I might backslide, from the desire

to protect you. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"But I have the feeling that what you're worrying about goes much deeper than that. Yesterday and today I've even felt that you wanted to turn to me for help, and somehow didn't dare."

He paused, as if thinking exactly how to phrase his answer. But he was studying her face, trying to read the exact meaning of each little familiar quirk of expressoin around the mouth and eyes. She looked very contained, but that was only a mask, he thought. Actually, in spite of everything she said, she must still be poised close to the brink of her obsession. One little push, such as a few careless words on his part— How the devil had he ever let himself get so enmeshed in his own worries and those ridiculous projections of his own cranky imagination? Here was the only thing that mattered—the mind behind this smooth brown forehead and these clear, gray-green eyes; to steer that mind away from any such ridiculous notions as those he had been indulging in, the last few days.

"To tell the truth," he said, "I *have* been worried about you. I thought it would hurt your self-confidence if I let you know. Maybe I was unwise—you seem to have sensed it, anyway—but that's what I thought. The way you feel now, of course, it can't possibly hurt you to know."

It occurred to him that it was easier to lie convincingly when you loved someone, provided the lie were for that person's sake.

She did not give in at once. "Are you sure?" she said. "I still have the feeling there's more to it."

Suddenly she smiled and yielded to the pressure of his arm. "It must be the MacKnight in me—my Scotch ancestry," she said laughing. "Awfully stubborn, you know. Monomaniacs. When we're crazy on a thing, we're completely crazy, but when we drop it, we drop it all at once. Like my great-uncle Peter. You know, the one who left the Presbyterian ministry and gave up Christianity on the very same day he proved to his satisfaction there was no God. He was seventy-two at the time."

There was a long and grumbling roll of thunder. The storm was swinging back.

"Well, I'm very glad you're only worried about me," she continued. "It's complimentary, and I like it."

She was smiling happily, but there was still something enigmatic about the eyes, something withheld. As he was congratulating himself on carrying it off successfully, it suddenly occurred to him that two could play at the game of lying. She might be holding something back herself, with the idea of reassuring him. She might be trying to protect him from her own blacker worries. Her subtlety might undercut his own. No sane reason to suspect that, and yet—

"Suppose I get us a drink," she said, "and we decide whether or not you leave Hempnell this year, and look for greener fields."

He nodded. She started around the bend in the L-shaped room for the sideboard.

"—and yet, you could live with a person and love a person for fifteen years, and not know what was behind their eyes."

There was the rattle of glassware, and the friendly sound of a full bottle set down on a table.

Then, timed to the thunder, but much, much closer, a shuddering, animal scream of anguished fear. It was cut off before Norman had sprung to his feet.

As he cleared the angle of the room, he saw Tansy going through the kitchen door. She was a little ahead of him down the back steps.

Light fanned out from the windows of the opposite house into the service yard. It revealed the sprawled body of Totem, head mashed flat against the concrete.

He heard a little sound start and stop in Tansy's throat. It might have been a gasp, or a sob, or a snarl.

The light revealed a little more than the body. He moved so that his feet covered the two prominent scuffs in the concrete just beyond the body. They might have been caused by the impact of a brick or heavy stone, perhaps the thing that had killed Totem, but there was something so suggestive about their relative position that he did not want Tansy's imagination to have a chance to work on them.

She lifted her face. She was never one to show much emotion.

"You'd better go in," he said.

"You'll—"

He nodded. "Yes."

She stopped halfway up the stairs. "That was a rotten, rotten thing for anybody to do."

"Yes. We'll try to find out who."

She left the door open. A moment later she came out and laid on the porch railing a square

of heavy cloth, covered with shed hair. Then she went in again and shut the door.

He rolled up the cat's body and stopped at the garage for the spade. He did not spend time searching for any brick or heavy stone or other missile. Nor did he examine closer the heavy footmarks he fancied he saw in the grass beyond the service yard.

Lightning began to flicker as his spade bit into the soft ground by the back fence. He kept his mind strictly on the task at hand. He worked steadily, but without undue haste. When he patted down the last spadeful of earth and started for the house, the lightning flashes were stronger, making the moments in between even darker. A wind had started up and was dragging at the leaves.

He did not hurry. What if the lightning did indistinctly show him a large dog near the house toward the front? There were several large dogs in the neighborhood. They were not savage. Totem had not been killed by a dog.

Deliberately he replaced the spade in the garage and walked back to the house. Only when he got inside and looked back through the screen did his thoughts break loose for a moment.

The lightning flash, brightest yet, showed the dog coming around the corner of the house. He had only a glimpse. A gray dog who walked stiff-legged. He quickly closed the door and shot home the bolt.

Then he remembered that the study windows were open. He must close them. Quickly.

It might rain in.

When Norman entered the living room his face was composed. Tansy was sitting in the straight chair, leaning a little forward, an intent moody expression around her eyes. Her hands were playing absently with a bit of twine.

He carefully lit a cigarette.

"Do you want that drink now?" he asked, not too casually, not too sharply.

"No, thanks. You have one." Her hands kept on knotting and unknotting the twine.

He sat down and picked up his book. From the easy-chair he could watch her unobtrusively.

And now that he had no grave to dig or other mechanical task to perform, his thoughts were not to be denied. But at least he could keep them circling in a little isolated sphere

inside his skull, without affecting either the expression of his face or the direction of his other thoughts, which were protectively focused on Tansy.

"Sorcery *is*," went the thoughts inside the sphere. "Something has been conjured down from a roof. Women are witches fighting for their men. Tansy was a witch. She was guarding you. But you made her stop."

"In that case," he replied swiftly to the thoughts inside the sphere, "why isn't Tansy aware of what's happening? It can't be denied that she has acted very relieved and happy."

"Are you sure she isn't aware or becoming aware?" answered the thoughts inside the sphere. "Besides, in losing her weapons, she has lost her sensitivity, which had probably declined in acuteness through familiarity.

Without microscope or telescope, a scientist would be no better able than a savage to see the germs of typhoid or the moons of Mars. His natural sensory equipment would even be inferior to that of the savage."

And the imprisoned thoughts buzzed violently, like bees seeking escape from a stopped-up hive.

"Norman," Tansy said abruptly, without looking up at him, "you found and burned that hand in your watch charm, didn't you?"

He thought a moment. "Yes, I did," he said lightly.

"I'd really forgotten about it. There were so many."

He turned a page, and then another. Thunder crackled loudly, and rain began to patter on the roof.

"Norman, you burned the diary, too, didn't you? You were right in doing it, of course. I held it back, because it didn't contain actual curses, only the formulas for them. So in a twisted illogical way I pretended it didn't count."

That was harder to answer. He felt as if he were playing a guessing game and Tansy was getting perilously "warm." The thoughts in the sphere buzzed triumphantly, "Mrs. Gunnison has the diary. Now she knows all of Tansy's protective charms."

But he answered, "Yes, I did burn it. I'm sorry, but I thought—"

"Of course," Tansy cut in. "You were quite right." Her fingers played more rapidly with the cord. She did not look down at it.

Lightning showed flashes of pale street and trees through the window. The patter of rain grew in volume. But through it he fancied he heard the scrunch of paws on the drive. Ridiculous—rain and wind were making too much noise.

His eyes were attracted to the pattern of knots Tansy's restless fingers were weaving. They were complicated, strong-looking knots which fell apart at a single cunning jerk, reminding him of how Tansy had studied assiduously the cat's cradles of the Indians. It also recalled to his mind how knots are used by the primitives to tie and loose the winds, to hold loved ones, to noose far-off enemies, to inhibit or free all manner of physical and physiological processes. And how the Fates weave destinies like threads. He found something very pleasing in the pattern of the knots and the rhythmic movements which produced them. They seemed to signify security. Until they fell apart.

"Norman"—the voice was preoccupied and rapid—"what was that snapshot you asked Hulda Gunnison to show you last night?"

He felt a brief flurry of panic. She was getting "very warm." This was the stage of the game where you cried out, "Hot!"

And then he heard the heavy, unyielding *clump-clump* on the boards of the front porch, seeming to move questingly along the wall. The sphere of alien thoughts began to exert an irresistible centrifugal pressure. He felt his sanity being smothered between the assaults from without and within. Very deliberately he shaved off the ash of his cigarette against the edge of the tray.

"It was of the roof of Estrey," he said casually. "Gunnison told me she'd taken a number of pictures of that sort and I wanted to see a sample."

"Some sort of creature in it, wasn't there?" Knots flickered into being and vanished with bewildering speed. It seemed to him suddenly that more than twine was being manipulated, and more than empty air tied and loosed. As if the knots were somehow creating an influence, as an electric current along a twisted wire creates a complex magnetic field.

"No," he said, and then made himself chuckle, "unless you count in a stray gargoyle or two."

Thunder ripped and crashed deafeningly. Lightning might have struck in the neighborhood. Tansy did not move a muscle in response. "That was a Lulu," he started to say. Then, as the thunder crash trailed off in rumblings and there was a second's lull in the rain, he heard the sound of something leaping heavily down from the front edge of the porch toward that part of the wall where the large low window was set.

He got to his feet and walked toward the window, as if to look out at the storm. As he passed Tansy's chair he saw that her rippling fingers were creating a strange knot resembling a flower, with seven loops for petals. She stared like a sleepwalker. Then he was at the window, shielding her.

The next lightning flash showed him what he knew he must see. It crouched, facing the window. The head was still blank and crude as an unfinished skull.

In the ensuing surge of blackness, the sphere

of alien thoughts expanded with instant swiftness, until it occupied his entire mind.

He glanced behind him. Tansy's hands were still. The strange seven-looped knot was poised between them.

Just as he was turning back, he saw the hands jerk apart and the loops whip in like a seven-fold snare—and hold.

And in that same moment of turning he saw the street brighten like day and a great ribbon of lightning split the tall elm opposite and fork into several streams which streaked across the street toward the window and the stony form upreared against it.

Then—blinding light, and a tingling electrical surge through his whole body.

But in his mind's eye was indelibly traced the incandescent track of the lightning, whose multiple streams, racing toward the upreared stony form, had converged upon it as if drawn together by a seven-fold knot.

The sphere of alien thoughts expanded beyond his skull at a dizzy rate, vanished.

His gasping, uncontrollable laughter rose above the dying reverberations of the titan thunder blast. He dragged open the window, pulled a bridge lamp up to it, jerked the cover from the lamp so its light flooded outward.

"Look, Tansy!" he called, his words mixed with the manic laughter. "Look, what those crazy students have done!" She *must* be made to think it was a joke. "Those frat men, I bet, I kidded in class. Look what they dragged down from campus and stuck in our front yard. Of all the crazy things—we'll have to call Buildings & Grounds to take it away tomorrow."

Rain splattered in his face. There was a sulphurous, metallic odor. Her hand touched his shoulder. She stared out blankly, her eyes still asleep.

It stood there, propped against the wall, solid and inert as only the inorganic can be. In some places the cement was darkened and fused.

"And of all mad coincidences," he gasped, "the lightning had to go and strike it!"

On an impulse, he reached out his hand, and touched it. At the feel of the rough, unyielding surface, still hot from the lightning flash, his laughter died, and a grim lucidity flooded his mind.

"*Eppur si muove,*" he murmured to himself, so low that even Tansy, standing beside him, might not have heard. "*Eppur si muove.*"

VII.

Next day he went around campus like a man in a daze. He had had a long and heavy sleep, but he looked as if he were stupefied by weariness. Even Harold Gunnison remarked on it.

"It's nothing," he replied. "I'm just lazy."

Gunnison smiled skeptically. "You've been working too hard. That's the temptation we're all up against. But it butchers efficiency. Better ration your hours of work. Your jobs won't go hungry if you feed them ten hours a day.

"Trustees are queer cusses," he continued with apparent irrelevance. "And Pollard's more a politician than an educator. But he brings in the money, and that's what college presidents are for."

Norman indicated that he appreciated the sympathy, but he felt as far removed from Gunnison as from the hordes of gayly dressed students who filled the walks and socialized in clusters. As if there were a wall of faintly clouded glass between. His only aim—and even that was blurred—was to prolong his present state of fatigued reaction from last night's events, and to avoid all thoughts.

Thoughts were dangerous. He felt their presence here and there in his brain, like pockets of poison, harmless as long as you left them encysted and did not prick them. One was more familiar than the others. It had been there last night. He felt vaguely thankful that he could not longer see inside of it.

Another was concerned with Tansy, and why she had seemed so cheerful and forgetful this morning.

Another—a very large one—was sunk so deeply in his mind that he could only perceive a small section of its globular surface. He knew it was connected with an unfamiliar emotion that he had sensed yesterday more than once, and he knew that it must under no circumstances be disturbed. He could feel it pulsate slowly and rhythmically, like a monster asleep in mud.

Another had to do with knots and lightning.

Another—tiny but prominent—was somehow concerned with cards.

And there were more, many more.

His situation was akin to that of the legendary hero who must travel through a long and narrow corridor, without once touching the morbidly enticing, poisoned walls.

He knew he could not avoid contact with them indefinitely, but in the meantime the thought-cysts might shrink and disappear.

The day fitted with his superficially dull and lethargic mood. Instead of the cool spell that should have followed the storm, there was a hot foretaste of summer in the air. Student absences rose sharply. Those who came to class were inattentive, and exhibited other symptoms of spring fever.

Only Bronstein seemed animated. He kept drawing Norman's other students aside by twos and threes, and whispering to them heatedly. Norman found out that he was trying to get up a petition of protest on Sawtelle's appointment. Norman asked him to stop it. Bronstein refused, but in any case he seemed to be failing in the job of arousing the other students.

Norman's lectures were languid. He contented himself with transforming his notes into accurate verbal statements with a minimum of mental effort. He watched the pencils move methodically as notes were taken, or wander off into intricate doodles. Two girls were engrossed in sketching the handsome profile of the fraternity president in the second row. He watched foreheads wrinkle as they picked up the thread of his lecture, smooth out again as they dropped it.

And all the while his own mind was wandering off on side tracks. They were too fugitive, too much like daydreams to be called thoughts.

One began when he recalled the epigram about a lecture being a process of transferring the contents of the teacher's notebook into the notebooks of the students, without allowing it to pass through the minds of either. That made him think of mimeographing.

Mimeograph, it went on. Margaret van Nice. Theodore Jennings. Gun. Windowpane. Galileo. Scroll— (Sheer away from that! Forbidden territory.)

The daydream backtracked and took a different turning. Jennings. Gunnison. Pollard. President. Emperor. Empress. Juggler. Tower. Hanged man— (Hold on! Don't go any further.)

As the long dull day wore on, the daydreams gradually assumed a uniform coloration.

Gun. Knife. Sliver. Broken glass. Nail. Tetanus.

War. Mangled bodies. Mayhem. Murder. Rope. Hangman. (Sheer off again!) Gas, Poison.

The coloration of blood and physical injury.

And ever more strongly, he felt the breath-like pulsations of the monster in the depths of his mind, dreaming nightmares of carnage from which it would soon awake and heave up out of the mud. And he powerless to stop it. It was as if a crusted-over swamp, swollen with underground water, were pushing up the seemingly healthy ground above by imperceptible degrees—nearing the point when it would burst through in one vast slimy eruption.

Starting home, Norman fell in with Mr. Carr.

"Good evening, Norman," said the old gentleman, lifting his Panama hat to mop his forehead, which merged into an extensive bald area.

"Good evening, Linthicum," said Norman. But his mind was occupied with speculating how, if a man let a thumbnail grow and then sharpened it carefully, he could cut the veins of his wrist and so bleed to death.

Mr. Carr wiped the handkerchief around his beard.

"I enjoyed the bridge thoroughly," he said. "Perhaps the four of us could have a game when the ladies are away at the faculty wives' meeting next Thursday? You and I could be partners, and use the Culbertson slam conventions." His voice became wistful. "I'm tired of always having to play the Blackwood."

Norman nodded, but he was thinking of how men have learned to swallow their tongues, and when the occasion came, die of suffocation. He tried to check himself. These were speculations appropriate only to the concentration camp. Visions of death kept rising in his mind, replacing one another. He felt the pulsations deepen, become unendurably strong. Mr. Carr nodded pleasantly and turned off. He quickened his pace, as if the walls of the poisoned passageway were contracting on the legendary hero and, unless the end were soon reached, he would have to shove out against them wildly.

From the corner of his eye he saw one of his students. She was staring at him puzzledly. He brushed past her.

He reached the boulevard. The lights were against him. He paused on the edge of the curb. A large red truck was rumbling toward the intersection at a fair rate of speed.

And then he knew just what was going to happen, and that he would be unable to stop himself.

He was going to wait until the truck was very close and then he was going to throw himself under the wheels. End of the passageway.

That was the meaning of the fifth stick figure, the tarot diagram that had departed from tradition.

Empress— Juggler— The truck was very close. Tower— The lights had started to change but the truck was not going to stop. Hanged man—

It was only when he leaned forward, tensing his leg muscles, that the small flat voice spoke into his ear, a voice that was a monotone and yet diabolically humorous, the voice of his dreams:

"Not for two weeks, at least. Not for two more weeks."

He regained his balance. The truck rushed by. He looked over his shoulder—first up, then around. No one but a small Negro boy and an elderly man, rather shabbily dressed, carrying a shopping bag. They were waiting to cross in the opposite direction. A shiver settled on his spine.

Eyes shifting warily from side to side, he crossed the street, and proceeded home. He no longer thought of death, except to fear it. As soon as he was inside, he poured himself a more than generous drink. Oddly, Tansy had set out soda and ice. He mixed the highball and gulped it down.

So he had been given two weeks? Two weeks in which to pick his life slowly apart, savor each stage of doom, before he should walk again the narrow corridor at the end of which a truck was always rumbling by.

Anger surged in him at the idea.

But perhaps that was what he was supposed to do—get angry.

He mixed himself another drink, took a gulp, then looked at it doubtfully.

Perhaps that was part of the plan, too.

Tansy came in, carrying a bundle. Her face was smiling and a little flushed. With a sigh of relief she set down the bundle and pushed aside the dark bangs from here forehead.

"*Whew*, what a sweltering day. I thought you'd be wanting a drink. Here, let me finish that one for you."

When she put down the glass there was only ice in it. "There, now we're blood brothers or something. Mix yourself another."

"That was my second," he told her.

"Oh, heck, I thought I was cheating you." She sat on the edge of the table and wagged a finger in his face. "Look, mister, you need a rest. Or some excitement. I'm not sure which. Maybe both. Now here's my plan. I make us a cold supper—sandwiches. Then, when it's dark and nobody can see us, we get Oscar out of the garage, and sinfully waste a half gram of rubber off his tires in driving to the Top of the Hill. We haven't done that for years. How about it, mister?"

He hesitated. Helped by the drink, his thoughts were veering. This was a crazy situation. Half his mind was still gripped by a sickening, panicky apprehension for his immediate personal future. The other half was coming under the spell of Tansy's gaiety.

She reached out and pinched his nose. "How about it?"

"All right," he said.

"Hey, you're supposed to act interested!" She slid off the table, started for the kitchen, then added darkly over her shoulder, "But that will come later."

She looked provocatively pretty, in her mock anger. He couldn't see any difference between now and fifteen years ago. He felt he was seeing her for the hundredth first time.

When the sandwiches came, he was reading the evening paper. The disquieting half-and-half mood persisted. He had found a local-interest item at the bottom of the fifth page.

STUDENT PRANKSTERS AT WORK AGAIN

A practical joke is worth any amount of trouble and physical exertion. At least, that is the sentiment of a group of Hempnell College students, as yet unidentified. But we are wondering about the sentiments of Professor Norman Saylor, when he looked out the window this morning and saw a stone gargoyle weighing a good three hundred pounds sitting in the middle of his lawn. It had been removed from the roof of one of the college buildings. How the students managed to detach it, lower it from the roof, and transport it to Professor Saylor's residence, is still a mystery.

Said Professor Saylor, "Thanks for the lawn ornament, boys, but I really don't want it."

When President Randolph Pollard was asked if the pranksters had been identified, he laughingly replied, "I guess our War Program of physical education for men must be providing them with reserves of excess strength and energy."

When we spoke to President Pollard he was leaving to address the Lions' Club on "The College in Wartime." (For details of his address, see page I.)

Just what you might expect. The usual repertorial inaccuracies. It wasn't a gargoyle; gargoyles are ornamental rainspouts. And the reporter had not used the lightning angle in his story. Probably thought it would sound too fishy.

Finally, the familiar touch of turning the item into an advertisement for the physical-education department. You had to admit that the Hempnell publicity office had a kind of efficiency.

Tansy swept the paper out of his hands.

"The world can wait," she said. "Here, have a bite of my sandwich."

VIII.

It was quite dark when they started for the Hill. He drove carefully, taking his time at intersections. Tansy's gaiety still did no more than hold in check the other half of his thoughts.

"I might be a witch," she said, "taking you to a hilltop rendezvous. Our own private Sabbat."

She was smiling impishly. She had changed to a light white sports dress. She looked like one of his students.

Again he felt the craziness of the situation. The line between reality and pretense was become harder to distinguish. He must keep carefully in mind that when she said things like that, she was making a courageous mockery of her previous behavior. He must on no account let her see the other half of his thoughts. Or was that what she wanted?

The lights of the town dropped behind. Half a mile out, he turned off sharply onto the road that wound up the hill. It was bumpier than he remembered from the last time—was it as much as ten years ago? And the trees were thicker, brushing the windshield.

When they emerged into the half acre of clearing on the top, the moon, two days after full, was rising redly.

Tansy pointed to it and said, "Check! I timed it perfectly. But where are the others? There always used to be two or three cars up here. And on a night like this!"

He stopped the car close to the edge. "Fashions in lovers' lanes change like anything else," he told her. "We're traveling a disused folkway."

"Always the sociologist!"

"I guess so. Maybe Mrs. Carr found out about this place. And I suppose the students range farther afield nowadays, or did until this year."

She rested her head on his shoulder. He switched off the headlights, and the moon cast soft shadows.

"We used to do this at Gorham," she murmured. "When I was taking your classes, and you were the serious young instructor. Until I found out you weren't any different from the college boys—only better. Remember?"

He nodded and took her hand. He looked down at the town, made out the campus, with its prominent floodlights designed to chase couples out of dark corners. Those garishly floodlighted Gothic buildings seemed for the moment to symbolize a whole world of barren intellectual competition and jealous traditionalism, a world toward which at the moment he felt as alien as if he were still twenty-six instead of forty-one and Tansy twenty-one instead of thirty-six.

"I wonder if that's why they hate us so?" he said, almost without thinking.

"Whatever are you talking about?" But the question sounded lazy.

"I mean the rest of the faculty, or most of them. Is it because we can do things like this?"

She laughed. "So you're actually coming alive. We don't do things like this so very often, you know."

He kept on with his idea. "It's a devilishly competitive and jealous life. The war, doing away with some of it, makes you more conscious of the rest. And competition in an institution can be nastier than any other, because it's so tight. Think so?"

"I've lived with it for years," said Tansy, simply.

"Of course, it's all very petty. But petty emotions can come to outweigh big ones. Their size is better suited to the human mind."

He looked down at Hempnell, and tried to visualize the amount of ill will and jealousy he had inevitably accumulated for himself. He felt a slight chill creeping around. He realized where this train of thought was leading. The darker half of his mind loomed up ominously.

"Here, philosopher," said Tansy, "have a slug."

She was offering him a small silver flask.

He recognized it. "I never dreamed you'd kept it all these years."

"Uh-huh. Remember when I first offered you a drink from it? You were a trifle shocked, I believe. Though you carried a flask, too."

"I took the drink."

"Uh-huh. So take this one."

It tasted like fire and spice. There were memories with it, memories of those crazy

prohibition years, and of Gorham and New England.

"Brandy?"

"Greek style. Give me some."

Before that flood of memories, the darker half of his mind receded, was washed under. He looked at Tansy's sleek hair and moon-shadowed eyes. Of course, she's a witch, he thought lightly. She's Lilith. Ishtar. He'd tell her so.

"Do you remember the time," he said, "we slid down the bank to get away from the night watchman at Gorham? There would have been a magnificent scandal if he'd caught us."

"Oh, yes, and the time—"

When they went down, the moon was an hour higher. He drove slowly. No need to imitate the sillier practices of the prohibition era. A truck chugged past him. "Two more weeks." Rot! Who'd he think he was, hearing voices? Joan of Arc?

He felt hilarious. He wanted to tell Tansy all the ridiculous things he'd been imagining the last few days, so she could laugh at them, too. It would make a swell ghost story. There was a reason he shouldn't tell her, but it was an insignificant reason—part and parcel of this cramped, warped, overcautious Hempnell life they ought to break away from more often.

So when they arrived in the living room, Tansy flopping down on the sofa, he began, "You know, Tansy, about this witch stuff. I want to tell you—"

He was caught completely off guard by whatever force—subjective or objective—hit him. When it was over, he was sitting in the easy-chair, completely sober, with the outer world once more an icy pressure on his senses, and the inner world a whirling sphere of alien thought, and the future a dark corridor two weeks long.

It was as if a very large, horny hand had been clapped roughly over his mouth, and as if another such hand had grasped him by the shoulder, shook him, and slammed him down in the leather chair.

As if?

He looked around uneasily.

Maybe there had been hands.

Apparently Tansy had not noticed anything. Her face was a white oval in the gloom. She was still humming a snatch of song. She did not ask what he had started to say.

He got up, walked unsteadily into the dining room, and poured himself a drink from the sideboard. On the way he switched on the lights.

So he couldn't tell Tansy or anyone else about it, even if he wanted to? That was why you never heard from real witchcraft victims. And why they never seemed able to escape, even if the means of escape were at hand. It wasn't weak will. They were *watched.* Like a gangster taken on a ride from an expensive night club. He must excuse himself from the loud-mouthed crowd at his table and laugh heartily, and stop to chat with friends and throw a wink at the pretty girls because right behind him are those white-scarfed, top-hatted trigger boys, hands in the pockets of their velvety dress overcoats. No use dying now. Better play along. There might be a chance.

But that was storybook stuff, movie stuff.

He nodded at himself in the glass above the sideboard.

"Meet Professor Saylor," he said. "The distinguished ethnologist and firm believer in real witchcraft—"

But the face in the glass did not look so much disgusted as frightened.

He mixed himself another drink, and one for Tansy, and took them into the living room.

"Here's to wickedness," said Tansy. "Do you realize you haven't been anywhere near drunk since Christmas?"

He grinned. That was just what the movie gangster would do, to grab a moment of forgetfulness when the Big Boy had put him on the spot. And not a bad idea.

Slowly, and at first only in a melancholy minor key, the mood of the Hill returned. They talked, played old records, told jokes that were old enough to be new again. Tansy hammered the piano, and they sang a crazy assortment of songs—folk songs, hymns, national anthems, revolution songs, blues, Brahms, Schubert—haltingly at first, later at the top of their voices.

They remembered.

And they kept on drinking.

But always, like a shimmering sphere of crystal, the alien thoughts spun in his mind. The drink made it possible for him to regard them dispassionately, without constant revulsions in the name of common sense. He began to see world-wide evidence for the operation of witchcraft.

For instance, was it not likely that all self-destructive impulses were the result of witchcraft, more or less efficiently screened off by protective magic, or not screened off at all?

Those universal impulses that were a direct contradiction to the laws of self-preservation and survival. Poe had fancifully referred them to an "Imp of the Perverse," and psychoanalysts had laboriously hypothesized a "death instinct" to account for them. How much simpler to attribute them to malign forces outside the individual, working by means as yet unanalyzed and therefore classified as supernatural.

His experiences during the past days could be divided into two distinct categories. The first included those natural misfortunes and antagonisms from which Tansy's magic had screened him. The attack on his life by Theodore Jennings should probably be placed in this category. The chances were that Jennings was actually psychopathic. He would have made his murderous attack at an earlier date, had not Tansy's protective magic kept it from getting started. As soon as the screen was down, as soon as Norman burned the last hand, the idea had suddenly burgeoned in Jennings' mind like a hothouse flower. Jennings had himself admitted it! "I didn't realize until this minute—"

Margaret van Nice's accusation, Thompson's sudden burst of interest in his extracurricular activities, and Sawtelle's chance discovery of the Cunningham thesis also probably belonged in the same category.

In the second category—active and malign witchcraft.

"A penny for your thoughts," offered Tansy, looking over the rim of her glass.

"I was thinking of the party last Christmas," he replied smoothly, "and of how Welby crawled around playing a St. Bernard, with the bearskin rug over his shoulders and the bottle of whiskey slung under his neck." He felt a childish pride in his cunning at having avoided being trapped into an admission. He simultaneously thought of Tansy as a genuine witch and as a potentially neurotic individual who had to be protected at all costs from dangerous suggestions. The liquor made his mind work by parts, and the parts had no check on each other.

His consciousness began to black out for indeterminate intervals. Things began to happen by fits and starts.

They were wailing "St. James' Infirmary."

He was thinking: "Why shouldn't the women be the witches? They're the intuitionalists, the traditionalists, the irrationalists. And like Tansy, most of them are never quite sure whether or not their witchcraft really works."

They had shoved back the carpet and were dancing to "Chloe." Sometime or other she had changed to her rose dressing gown.

He was thinking: "In the second category, put the Estrey dragon. Animated by a human or nonhuman soul conjured into it by Mrs. Gunnison and controlled through photographs. Inhibited by the Protective Screen so long as the Protective Screen existed."

They had put on a record of Ravel's "Bolero," and he was beating out the rhythm with his fist.

He was thinking: "All sculpture has a magical significance, from the Aurignacian Venus to Epstein's 'Genesis.' The underlying intention has always been to produce a manikin capable of being animated by sorcery."

He was watching Tansy as she sang "St. Louis Blues" in a hoarsely throbbing voice. It was true, just as Welby had always maintained, that she had a genuine theatrical flair. Make a good chanteuse.

He was thinking: "Tansy stopped the Estrey dragon with the knots. But she'll have a hard time doing anything like that again, because Mrs. Gunnison has her book of formulas and can figure out ways to circumvent."

They were sharing a highball that would have burned his throat if his throat had not been numb, and he seemed to be getting most of it.

He was thinking: "The tarot stick figure of the man and the truck is the key to a group of related sorceries. Cards began as instruments of magic, like sculpture. These sorceries aim at finishing me off. The bull-roarer acts as an amplifier or reinforcement. The thing standing behind me, with the flat voice and heavy hands, is a guardian, to see to it that I do not deviate from the path appointed. Bull-roaring and flat voice were associated in my dream. Narrow corridor. Two weeks more."

The strange thing was that these thoughts were not altogether unpleasant. They had a wild, black, poisonous beauty of their own, a lovely, deadly shimmer. They possessed the fascination of the impossible, the incredible. They hinted at unimaginable vistas. Even while they terrorized, they did not lose that chillingly poignant beauty. They were like the visions conjured up by some forbidden drug. They had the lure of an unknown sin and an ultimate blasphemy. He could understand the force that compelled the practitioners

of black magic to take any risk.

His drunkenness made him feel safe. It had broken his mind down into its ultimate particles, and those particles were incapable of fear because they could not be injured. Just as the iron molecules of a battleship are quite safe from the bomb which blows the battleship apart.

But now the particles were whirling crazily. Consciousness was wavering.

They were in each other's arms.

Tansy was asking eagerly, coaxingly, "All that's mine is yours? All that's yours is mine?"

The question awakened a suspicion in his mind, but he could not grasp it clearly. Something made him think that the words held a trap. But what trap? His thoughts stumbled and reeled.

She was saying—it sounded like the Bible—"and I have drunk from your cup and eaten from your table—"

Her face was a blurred oval, her eyes like misty jewels.

"Everything you have is mine? You give it to me without hindrance and of your own free choice?"

Somewhere a trap.

But the voice was irresistibly coaxing, like tickling fingers.

"All you have is mine? Just say it once, Norm, just once. For me."

Of course he loved her. Better than anything else in the world.

"Yes . . . yes . . . everything—" he heard himself saying.

And then his mind toppled and plunged down into a fathomless ocean of darkness, and silence, and peace.

IX.

Sunlight made a bright, creamy design on the drawn blind. Filtered sunlight filled the bedroom, like a coolly glowing liquid. The birds were chirruping importantly. He closed his eyes again and stretched luxuriously.

Let's see, it was about time he got started on that article for the *Journal*. And there was still some work to do on the revision of his "Textbook of Ethnology." Lots of time, but better get it out of the way. No telling when the government would want another brochure. And he ought to have a serious talk with Bronstein about his thesis. That boy had some good ideas, but he needed a balance wheel. And then his address to the Off-campus Mothers. Might as well tell them something useful—

Eyes still closed, he enjoyed to the full that most pleasant of sensations—the irresistible tug of work a man likes to do and is able to do well.

No need to get started right away, though. Today was too good a day for golf to miss. Might see what Gunnison was doing. And then he and Tansy had not made an expedition into the country this whole spring. He'd talk to her about it at breakfast. Saturday breakfast was an event. She must be getting it ready now. He felt as if a shower would make him very hungry. Must be late.

He opened an eye and focused the bedroom clock. Twelve thirty-five? Say, just when had he got to bed last night? What had he been doing?

Memory of the past few days uncoiled like a loosed spring, so swiftly that it started his heart pounding and brought him up with a jerk. Yet there was a difference. From the very first moment it all seemed incredible and unreal. He had the sensation of reading the very detailed case history of another person. His memories could not be made to fit with his present sense of well-being. What was stranger, they did not seriously disturb that sense of well-being.

He searched his mind diligently for traces of supernatural fear, of the sense of being watched and guarded, of that monstrous self-destructive impulse. He could not discover or even suggest to himself the slightest degree of such emotions. Whatever they had been, they were now part of the past, beyond the reach of everything except intellectual memory. "Spheres of alien thought!" Why, the very notion was bizarre. And yet somehow it had all happened. *Something* had happened.

His movement had automatically taken him under the shower. And now, as he soaped himself and the warm water cascaded down, he wondered if he ought not to talk it all over with Jones of psychology or a good practicing psychiatrist. The mental contortions he'd gone through in the last few days would provide material for a whole treatise! Feeling as sound as he did this morning, it was impossible for him to entertain any ideas of serious mental derangement. No, what had happened was just one of those queer, inexplicable spasms of irrationality that can seize the sanest people, perhaps because they *are* so sane—a kind of discharge of long-inhibited morbidity. Too

bad, though, that he had bothered Tansy with it. Especially when her own nervous system had been in a shaky state. Poor kid, she had been working hard to cheer him up, last night in particular. It ought to have been the other way around. Well, he would make it up to her.

He shaved leisurely and with enjoyment. The razor behaved perfectly.

As he finished dressing, a doubt struck him. Again he searched his mind, closing his eyes like a man listening for an almost inaudible sound.

Nothing. Not the faintest trace.

He was whistling as he pushed into the kitchen.

There was no sign of breakfast. Beside the sink were some unwashed glasses, empty bottles, and an ice tray filled with tepid water.

"Tansy," he called. "Tansy!"

He walked through the house, with the vague apprehension that she might have passed out before getting to bed. They'd been drinking like fish. He went out to the garage and made sure that the car was still there. Maybe she'd walked to the grocer's to get something for breakfast. Unconsciously he began to hurry as he went back into the house.

This time when he looked in the study, he noticed the upset ink bottle, and the scrap of paper just beside it on the edge of the drying black pool. The message had come within an inch of being engulfed.

It was a hurried scrawl—twice the pen point had gouged through the paper—and it broke off twice in the middle of a sentence, but it was undeniably in Tansy's handwriting.

For a moment it isn't watching me. I didn't realize it would be too strong for me. *Not two weeks not —two days!* Don't try to follow me. Only chance is to do exactly what I tell you. Take four lengths of four-inch white cord and—

His eyes traced the smear going out from the black pool and ending in the indistinct print of a hand, and involuntarily his imagination recreated the scene. She had been scribbling desperately, stealing quick glances over her shoulder. Then *it* had awakened to what she was doing and had roughly struck the pen out of her hand, and shaken her. He recalled the grip of those huge horny hands, and winced. And then . . . then she had gotten together her things, very quietly although there was little chance of him awakening, and she had

walked out of the house and down the street. And if she met anyone she knew, she had talked to them gayly, and laughed, because *it* was behind her, waiting for any false move, any attempt at escape.

So she had gone.

Where? Anywhere. Wherever the narrow corridor ended for *her,* no longer two weeks but only two days long.

In a flash of insight he understood *why.* If he hadn't been drunk last night, he would have guessed.

One of the oldest and best-established types of conjuration in the world. Transference of evils. Like the medicine man who conjures sickness into a stone, or into an enemy, or into himself—because he is better able to combat it—she had taken his curse upon herself. Shared his drink last night, shared his food. Used a thousand devices to bring them close together. It was all so obvious! He racked his brain to recover those last words she had said to him. "Everything you have is *mine?* All you have is *mine?*"

She had meant the curse.

And he had said, "Yes."

And then, without her formulas and her Protective Screen, the curse had proved too strong for her.

He wanted to run out into the street, to shout her name.

But the pool of ink had dried to glistening black flakes all around the margin. It must have been spilled hours ago—as early as last midnight even.

He beat his temple in a rage at his own impotence.

This mood did not last long. His anxiety persisted, grew stronger. But the supernatural terror rapidly died away. It could not sustain itself now that he no longer experienced it directly. Even the argument that he had lost his sensitivity only because the curse was now directed at her, did not convince him for a moment. No, there was nothing supernatural in this—no guardian except a figment of his and her neurotic nerves. What *had* happened was that he had suggested all this to her. He had forced upon her the products of his own morbid imagination. Undoubtedly he had babbled everything to her while he was drunk. And it had worked on her suggestible nature—she already believed in witchcraft—until she had got the idea of transferring his curse to herself, and had convinced herself that the transference had actually occurred. And then gone off, God knew where!

And that was bad enough.

There was a light chime from the front door. He extracted a letter from the mailbox, ripped it open. It was addressed with a soft pencil, and the graphite had smeared. But he knew the handwriting.

The message was so jerky and uneven that he was some time reading it. It began and ended in the middle of a sentence.

—and a length of gut, a bit of platinum or iridium, a piece of lodestone, a phonograph needle that has only played Scriabin's "Ninth Sonata." Then tie—

That was all. A continuation of the first message, with its bizarre formula. Had she really convinced herself that there was a guardian watching her, and that she could only communicate during the infrequent moments when its attention was elsewhere? He knew the answer. When you had an obsession you could convince yourself of anything.

He looked at the postmark. He recognized the name of a town several miles east of Hempnell. He could not think of a soul they knew there, or anything else about the town. His first impulse was to get out the car and rush over. But what could he do when he got there?

The phone was ringing. It was Evelyn Sawtelle.

"Is that you, Norman? Please ask Tansy to come to the phone. I wish to speak to her."

The question was rapped out with precision, as if its wording had been carefully planned.

"I'm sorry, but she isn't in."

Evelyn Sawtelle did not sound surprised at the answer—her second question came too quickly. "Where is she then? I must get in touch with her."

He thought. "She's out in the country," he said, "visiting some friends of ours. Is there something I can tell her?"

"No, I wish to speak to Tansy. What is your friend's number?"

"They don't have a phone!" he said angrily.

"No? Well, it's nothing of importance." She sounded oddly pleased, as if his anger had given her satisfaction. "I'll call again. I must hurry now. Hervey is so busy with his new responsibilities. Good-by."

He replaced the phone. Now, why the devil— Suddenly an explanation occurred to

him. Perhaps Tansy had been seen leaving town, and Evelyn Sawtelle had scented the possibility of some sort of scandal and had wanted to check. Perhaps Tansy had been carrying a suitcase.

He looked in Tansy's dressing room. The small suitcase was gone. Drawers were open. It looked as if she had packed in a hurry. But what about money? He examined his billfold. It was empty. Forty-odd dollars missing.

You could go a long way on forty dollars. The jerky illegibility of the message made it look as if it had been written on a train or bus.

The next few hours were highly unpleasant. He checked schedules, and found that several busses and trains passed through the town from which Tansy's letter had been sent. He drove to the stations and made guarded inquiries, with no success.

He wanted to do all the things you should do when someone disappears, but he held back. What could he say? "My wife, sir, has disappeared. She is suffering from the delusion that—" And what if she should be found and questioned in her present state of mind, examined by a doctor, before he could get to her?

No, this was something for him to handle alone. But if he did not get a line on it soon, he would have no choice. He would have to go to the police, inventing some story to cover the facts.

She had written, "Two days." If she believed that she were doomed to die in two days, might not the belief be enough? That was his worst fear.

Toward evening he drove back to the house, repressing the chimerical hope that she had returned in his absence. The special delivery carrier was just getting into his car. Norman pulled up alongside.

"Anything for Saylor?"

"Yes, sir. It's in the box."

The message was longer this time, but just as difficult to read.

At last its attention is somewhere else. If I control my emotions, it isn't so quick to notice my thoughts. But it was hard for me to post the last letter. Norman, you *must* do what I tell you. The two days end Sunday midnight. Then the Bay. You *must* follow all directions. Tie the four white cords into a granny, a reef, a cat's-paw, and a carrick bend. Tie the gut in a bowline. Then add—

He looked at the post mark. The place was two hundred miles east. Not on the railroad lines, as far as he could recall. That should narrow down the possibilities considerably.

One word from the letter was repeating itself in his mind, like a musical note struck again and again until it becomes unendurable.

Bay. Bay. Bay. Bay.

The memory came of a hot afternoon fifteen years ago. It was just before they were married. They were sitting on the edge of a ramshackle little pier. He remembered the salt smell, and the faintly fishy, dry-wood smell of the splintery old planks.

"Funny," she had said, looking down into the green water, "but I always used to think that I'd end up down there. Not that I'm afraid of it. I've always swum way out. But even when I was a little girl I'd look at the Bay—maybe green, maybe blue, maybe gray, covered with whitecaps, glittering with moonbeams, or shrouded by fog—and I'd think, 'Tansy, the Bay is going to get you, but not for years and years.' Funny, isn't it?"

And he laughed and put his arms around her tight, and the green water had gone on lapping at the piles heavy with seaweed.

He had been visiting with her family, when her parents were still alive, at their home near Bayport on the southern shore of New York Bay.

The narrow corridor suited itself to its victim's most cherished fear. It ended for her in the Bay, tomorrow midnight.

She must be heading for the Bay.

He made several calls—first bus lines, then railroad and air. It was impossible to get a reservation on the air lines, but tonight's train would get him into Jersey City an hour ahead of the bus she must be traveling, according to the deductions he made from the place and time of the postmarks.

He had ample time to pack a few things, cash a check on his way to the station—

He spread her three notes on the table—the one in pen, the two in pencil. He reread the crazy incomplete formula. He shook his head.

He frowned. Would a scientist neglect the millionth-and-one possibility? Would the commander of a trapped army disdain a stratagem just because it was not in the books? This stuff looked like gibberish. Yesterday it might have meant something to him emotionally. Today it was just nonsense. But tomorrow

night it might conceivably represent a fantastic last chance.

"Norman, you *must* do what I tell you." The scrawled words stared at him.

He went out in the kitchen and got a ball of white twine.

He rummaged in the closet for his squash racket and cut out the two center strings. That ought to do for gut.

The fireplace had not been cleaned since the stuff from Tansy's dressing table had been burned. He poked around the edges until he found a piece of lodestone.

He located the recording of Scriabin's "Ninth Sonata" and started the phonograph, putting in a new needle. He glanced at his wrist watch and paced the room restlessly. Gradually the music took hold of him. It was not pleasant music. There was something tantalizing and exasperating about it, with its droning melody and rocking figures in the base and shakes in the treble and elaborate ornamentation that writhed up and down the piano keyboard. It rasped the nerves.

He began to remember things he had heard about it. Hadn't Tansy once told him that Scriabin called his "Ninth Sonata" a "Black Mass" and had developed an antipathy to playing it? Scriabin, who had conceived a color organ and tried to translate mysticism into music, and had died of a peculiar lip infection. An innocent-faced Russian with a huge curling mustache. Critical phrases Tansy had repeated to him floated through his mind. "The poisonous 'Ninth Sonata'—the most perfidious piece of music ever conceived—" Ridiculous! How could music be anything but an abstract pattern of tones?

And yet—while listening to the thing—one could think differently.

Faster and faster it went. The lovely second theme became infected, was distorted into something raucous and discordant—a march of the damned—a dance of the damned—breaking off suddenly when it had reached an unendurable pitch. Then a repetition of the droning first theme, ending on a soft yet grating note low in the keyboard.

He removed the needle, sealed it in an envelope, and packed it along with the rest of his stuff.

On an afterthought, he tore out of the big dictionary a page carrying an illustrated list of knots.

The telephone stopped him as he was going out.

"Oh, Professor Saylor, would you mind calling Tansy to the phone?" Mrs. Carr's voice was very amicable.

He repeated what he had told Mrs. Sawtelle.

"I'm glad she's having a rest in the country," said Mrs. Carr. "You know, Professor Saylor, I don't think that Tansy's been looking so well lately. I've been a little worried. You're sure she's all right?"

"How do you mean?"

It was then the other voice broke in.

"What's the idea of checking up on me? Do you think I'm a child? I know what I'm doing!"

"Be quiet!" said Mrs. Carr. Then, in her sweet voice. "I think someone must have cut in on us. Good-by, Professor Saylor."

The line went dead.

He picked up his suitcase and walked out.

X.

The bus driver they pointed out to him had thick shoulders and sleepy, competent-looking eyes. He was standing by the wall, smoking a cigarette.

"Sure, she must have been in my bus," he told Norman after thinking a moment. "A pretty woman, on the small side, in a gray dress, with a queer-looking silver brooch like you mentioned. One suitcase. Light pigskin. I figured her out as going to see someone who was very sick, or had been in an accident, maybe."

Norman curbed his impatience. If it had not been for the hour-and-a-half delay outside Jersey City, he would have been here well ahead of the bus, instead of twenty minutes late.

He said, "I want, if possible, to get a line on where she went after she left your bus. The man at the desk can't help me."

The driver looked at Norman. But he did not say, "Whatcha wanta know for?"—for which Norman was grateful. He seemed to decide that Norman was O. K.

He said, "I can't be sure, mister, but there was a local bus going down the shore. I think she got on that."

"Would it stop at Bayport?"

The driver nodded.

"How long since it left?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Could I get to Bayport ahead of it? If I took a cab?"

"Just about. If you wanted to pay the bill

there and back—and maybe a little extra for the rubber he'd burn—I think Alec could take you." He waved in casual recognition at a man sitting in a cab just beyond the station. "Mind you, mister, I can't say for certain she got on the shore bus."

"That's all right. Thanks a lot."

In the glow of the street lamp Alec's foxy eyes were more openly curious than the bus driver's, but he did not make any comments.

"I can do it," he said cheerfully, "but we haven't any time to waste. Jump in."

The shore highway led through lonely stretches of marsh and wasteland. Occasionally Norman caught the sibilant rustle of the leagues of tall stiff seagrass, and a brakish tang from the dark inlets crossed by long low bridges. The odor of the Bay.

Indistinctly he made out factories and scattered houses.

"There's a dimout some places," Alec volunteered once. He was paying close attention to the road.

They passed three or four busses without Alec making any comment.

After a long while Aleck said, "That should be her."

A constellation of red and green taillights was vanishing over the rise ahead.

"About three miles to Bayport," he continued. "What should I do?"

"Just get to Bayport a little ahead of her, and stop at the bus station."

"O. K."

They overtook the bus and swung around it. The windows were too high for Norman to see any of the occupants. Besides, the interior lights were out.

As they drew ahead, Alec nodded confirmingly. "That's her all right."

The bus station at Bayport was also the railway depot. Vaguely Norman remembered the loosely planked platform and packed cinders on the track side. The station building was dark, but there were several cars and a lone local cab drawn up, and there were some men standing around talking in low voices, and a couple of soldiers going back to camp.

He had time to scent the salt air, with its faint and not unpleasant trace of fishiness. Then the bus pulled in.

Several passengers stepped down, looking around to spot the people waiting for them.

Tansy was the third. She was staring straight ahead. She was carrying the pigskin suitcase.

"Tansy!" he said.

She did not look at him. He noted a black stain on her right hand, and remembered the spilled ink on his study table. Odd that it should still be there.

"Tansy!" he said. "Tansy!"

She walked straight past him, so close that her sleeve brushed his.

"Tansy, what's the matter with you?"

He had turned and hurried after her. She was heading for the local cab. He was conscious of a silence, and curious unfriendly glances. It made him angry.

She did not slacken her pace. He grabbed her elbow and pulled her around. He heard a remonstratory murmur behind him, and realized that a couple of the men were closing in.

"Tansy, stop acting this way! Tansy!"

Her face looked frozen. She stared past him without a hint of recognition in her eyes.

That infuriated him. He did not pause to think. Accumulated tensions prodded him into an explosion. He grabbed both elbows and shook her. She still looked past him, completely aloof—a perfect picture of an aristocratic woman enduring brutality. If she had yelled and fought him, the men might not have interfered.

He was jerked back.

"Lay off her!"

"Who do you think you are, anyway?"

She stood there, with maddening composure. He noticed a scrap of paper flutter out of her hand. Then her eyes met his and for one terrible moment—but one moment only—he saw rise up behind her a shaggy black form twice her height, with hulking shoulders, outstretched massive hands, and dully glowing eyes.

Only a moment, though. Then she turned away. But he fancied that a great shadow followed hers. Then they swung him around and he could no longer see her.

In a queer sort of daze—for the kind of fear he had just experienced mixes badly with any other emotion—he listened to them jabber at him.

"I ought to take a crack at you," he finally heard someone say.

"All right," he replied in a flat voice. "They're holding my hands."

He heard Alec's voice. "Say, what's going

on here?" Alec sounded cautious, but not unfriendly, as if he were thinking, "The guy's my fare, but I don't know anything about him."

One of the soldiers spoke. "Where's the lady? She doesn't seem to be making any complaint."

"Yeah, where is she?"

"She got in Jake's cab and drove off," someone volunteered.

"Maybe he had a good reason for what he did," said the soldier.

Norman felt the attitude of the crowd change.

One of the men holding him retorted, "Nobody's got a right to treat a lady that way." But the other one slackened his grip and asked Norman, "How about it? Did you have a reason for doing that?"

"I did. But it's my business."

He heard a woman's voice, high-pitched. "A lot of fuss over nothing!"

Grumbling, the men let him go.

"But mind you," said the more belligerent one, "if she'd stuck around and complained, I'd 've sure taken a crack at you."

"All right," said Norman, "in that case you would have." His eyes were searching for a scrap of paper.

"Can anyone tell me the address she gave the cab driver?" he asked at random.

One or two shook their heads. The others ignored the question. Their feelings toward him had not changed enough to make them co-operative. And very likely, in the excitement, no one had heard.

Silently the little crowd drifted apart. People waited until they got out of earshot before beginning to argue about what had happened. Most of the cars drove off. The two soldiers wandered over to the benches in front of the depot, so they could sit down while they waited for their bus or train. He was alone except for Alec.

He located the scrap of paper in one of the slots between the worn planks. It had almost slipped through.

He took it over to the cab and studied it.

He heard Alec say, "Well, where do we go now?" Alec sounded dubious.

He glanced at his watch. Ten thirty-five. Not quite an hour and a half until midnight. There were a lot of things he could do, but he could not do more than a couple of them in that time. His thoughts moved sluggishly almost painfully.

He looked around at the dim buildings. The seaward halves of some of the street lamps were painted black. Up a side street there were signs of life. He looked again at the scrap of paper.

Then he made a decision.

"I think there's a hotel on the main street," he told Alec. "You can drive me there."

"Eagle Hotel" read the black-edged gold letters on the plate-glass window, behind which the narrow lobby with its half-dozen empty chairs was nakedly revealed.

He told Alec to wait, and took a room for the night. The clerk was an old man in a shiny black coat. Norman saw from the register that no one else had checked in recently. He carried his bag up to the room and immediately returned to the lobby.

"I haven't been here for ten years," he told the clerk. "I believe there is a cemetery about five blocks down the street, away from the Bay?"

The old man's sleepy eyes blinked wide open.

"Bayport Cemetery? Just three blocks, and then a block and a half to the left. But—" He made a vague questioning noise in his throat.

"Thank you," said Norman.

After a moment's thought, he paid off Alec, who took the money and with obvious relief kicked his cab into life. Norman walked down the main street, away from the Bay.

After the first block there were no more stores. In this direction, Bayport petered out quickly. Most of the houses were dark. And after he turned left there were no more street lights.

The gates of the cemetery were locked. He felt his way along the wall, behind the masking shrubbery, trying to make as little noise as possible, until he found a scrubby tree whose lowest branch could bear his weight. He got his hands on the top of the wall, scrambled up, and cautiously let himself down on the other side.

Behind the wall it was very dark. There was a rustling sound, as if he had disturbed some small animal. More by feeling than sight, he located a headstone. It was a thin one, worn, mossy toward the base, and tilted at an angle. Probably from the middle of the last century. He dug into the earth with his hand, and filled an envelope he took from his pocket.

He got back over the wall, making what

seemed a great deal of noise in the shrubbery. But the street was empty as ever.

On his way back to the hotel he looked up at the sky, located the Pole Star, and calculated the orientation of his room.

As he crossed the lobby, he felt the curious eyes of the old clerk boring into him.

His room was in darkness. Chill salt air was pouring through the open window. He locked the door, shut the window, pulled down the blind, and switched on the light—a glaring overhead which revealed the room in all its dingy severity. A cradle phone struck the sole modern note.

He took the envelope out of his pocket and weighed it in his hand. His lips curled in a peculiarly bitter smile. Then he reread the scrap of paper that had fluttered from Tansy's hand.

Add a small quantity of graveyard dirt, and wrap all in a piece of flannel, wrapping widdershins. Tell it to stop me. Tell it to bring me to you.

Graveyard dirt. That was what he had found in Tansy's dressing table. It had been the beginning of all this. Now he was fetching it himself.

He looked at his watch. Eleven twenty.

He cleared the small table and set it in the center of the room, jabbing in his penknife to mark the edge facing east. "Widdershins" meant "against the sun"—from west to east.

He placed the necessary ingredients on the table, cutting a short strip of flannel from the hem of his bathrobe, and fitted together the four sections of Tansy's note. The distasteful, bitter smile did not leave his lips.

Taken together, the significant portions of the notes read:

Take four lengths of four-inch white cord and a length of gut, a bit of platinum or iridium, a piece of lodestone, a phonograph needle that has only played Scriabin's "Ninth Sonata." Tie the four white cords into a granny, a reef, a cat's-paw, and a carrick bend. Tie the gut in a bowline. Add a small quantity of graveyard dirt, and wrap all in a piece of flannel, wrapping widdershins. Tell it to stop me. Tell it to bring me to you.

In general outline, it was similar to a hundred recipes for Negro tricken-bags he had seen or heard about. The phonograph needle, the knots, and one or two other items, were obvious "white" additions.

And it was all on the same level as the mental operations of a child or neurotic adult who religiously steps on, or avoids sidewalk cracks.

A clock outside bonged the half-hour.

Norman sat there looking at the stuff. It was hard for him to begin. It would have been different, he told himself, if he were doing it for a joke or a thrill, or if he were one of those people who dope up their minds with morbid supernaturalism—who like to play around with magic because it's medieval and aesthetic. But to tackle it in dead seriousness, to open your mind deliberately to superstition—that was to join hands with the forces pushing the world back into the dark ages, to cancel the term "science" out of the equation.

But, behind Tansy, he had seen that thing. Of course, it had been an hallucination. But when hallucinations start behaving like realities, even a scientist has to face the possibility that he may have to treat them like realities. And when hallucinations begin to threaten you and yours in a direct physical way—

He reached out for the first length of cord and tied the ends together in a granny.

When he came to the cat's-paw, he had to consult the page he had torn from the dictionary. After a couple of false starts he managed it.

But on the carrick bend he was all thumbs. It was a simple knot, but no matter how he went about it, he could not get it to look like the illustration. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Very close in the room, he told himself. "I'm still overheated from rushing about." The skin on his fingertips felt an inch thick. The ends of the cord kept eluding them. He remembered how Tansy's fingers had rippled through the knots.

Eleven forty-one. The phonograph needle started to roll off the table. He dropped the cord and laid the phonograph needle against his fountain pen, so it would not roll. Then he started again on the knot.

For a moment he thought he must have picked up the gut, the cord seemed so stiff and unresponsive. Incredible what nervousness can do to you, he told himself. His mouth was dry. He swallowed with difficulty.

Finally, by keeping his eyes on the illustration and imitating it step for step, he managed to tie a carrick bend. All the while he felt as if there were more between his fingers than a cord, as if he were manipulating against

a great inertia. Just as he finished, he felt a slight prickly chill, like the onset of fever, and the light overhead seemed to dim a trifle. Eyestrain.

The phonograph needle was rolling in the opposite direction, spinning faster and faster. He slapped his hand down on it, missed it, caught it at the edge of the table.

Just like a Ouija board, he told himself. You try to keep your fingers, poised on the planchette, perfectly motionless. As a result muscular tensions accumulate. They reach the breaking point. Seemingly without any volition on your part, the planchette begins to roll and skid about on its three little legs, traveling from letter to letter. Same thing here. Nervous and muscular tensions made it difficult for him to tie knots. Obeying a universal tendency, he projected the difficulty into the cord. And, by hand and knee pressure, he had been doing some unconscious table tipping.

Between his fingers, the phonograph needle seemed to vibrate, as if it were being pounded by infinitesimal hammers. There was a very faint sensation of electric shock. Unbidden, the torturesome, clangorous chords of the "Ninth Sonata" began to sound in his mind. Rot! One well-known symptom of extreme nervousness is a tingling in the fingers—often painfully intense. But his throat was dry and his snort of bitter contempt sounded choked.

He pinned the needle in the flannel for greater safety.

Eleven forty-seven. Reaching for the gut, his fingers felt as shaky and weak as if he just climbed a hundred-foot rope hand over hand. The stuff looked normal, but it was slimy to the touch. And for some moments he had been conscious of an acrid, almost metallic odor replacing the salt smell of the Bay. Tactual and olfactory hallucinations joining in with the visual and auditory, he told himself. He could still hear the "Ninth Sonata."

He knew a bowline backwards, and it should have been easier because the gut was not as stiff as it ought to be, but he felt there were other forces manipulating it or other mentalities trying to give orders to his fingers, so that the gut was trying to tie itself into a slipknot, a reef, a half hitch—anything but a bowline. His fingers ached, his eyes were heavy with an abnormal fatigue. He was working against a mounting inertia—a dangerous, crushing inertia. He remembered Tansy telling him that first day—"There's a law of reaction in all conjuring—like the kick of a gun—" Eleven fifty-two.

With a great effort, he canalized his mental energy, focused his attention only on the knot. His numb fingers began to move in an odd rhythm, a rhythm of the "Ninth Sonata," *piu vivo*. The bowline was tied.

The overhead light dimmed markedly, throwing the whole room into a sooty gloom. Hysterical blindness, he told himself in a despairing effort to maintain the appearances of sanity and scientific law. It was very cold now, so cold that he fancied he could see his breath. And silent, terribly silent. Against that silence he could feel and hear the rapid drumming of his heart, accelerating unendurably to the thundering, swirling rhythm of the music.

Then, in one instant of diabolic paralyzing insight, he knew that *this* was sorcery. No mere puttering about with ridiculous medieval implements, no effortless sleight of hand, but a straining, back-breaking struggle to keep control of *forces summoned*, of which the objects he manipulated were only the symbols. Outside the walls of the room, outside the walls of his skull, outside the impalpable energy-walls of his mind, he felt those forces gathering, swelling up, dreadfully expectant, waiting for him to make a false move so that they could crush him.

He could not believe it. He had to believe it.

The only question was—would he be able to stay in control?

Eleven fifty-seven. He gathered the objects together on the flannel. The needle jumped to the lodestone and clung. It shouldn't; it wasn't that magnetic. He took a pinch of graveyard dirt. Between finger and thumb, each separate particle seemed to crawl, like a tiny maggot. He sensed that something was missing. He could not remember what it was. He fumbled for the formula. A current of air was blowing the scraps of paper off the table. He sensed an eager, inward surge of the forces outside, as if they knew he was failing. He clutched at the papers, managed to pin them down. Bending close, he made out the words "platinum or iridium." He jabbed his pen against the table, broke off the whole nib, and added it to the other objects.

He stood at the side of the table away from the knife that marked the east, trying to steady his shaking hands against the edge. His teeth

were chattering. The room was utterly dark now except for the impossible bluish light that beat through the window shade.

Abruptly the strip of flannel started to curl like a strip of heated gelatine, to roll itself up from east to west, *with* the sun.

He jerked forward, got his hand inside the flannel before it closed, drew it apart—in his numb hands it seemed like metal—and rolled it against the sun, widdershins.

The silence was intensified. Even the sound of his beating heart was cut off. He knew that something was listening with a terrible intensity for his command, and that something was hoping with an even more terrible avidity that he would not be able to utter that command.

Yet somewhere a clock was booming—or was it not a clock, but the secret sound of time? Nine—ten—eleven—twelve.

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He kept on choking soundlessly. He could feel the walls giving way.

Then, in a dry, croaking voice, he managed: "Stop Tansy. Bring her here."

The walls were shaken as if they were at the center of a whirlpool. Darkness became absolute. There was an eruption of force from the table. He felt himself flung across the room.

Then the forces were gone. In all things, tension gave way to limpness. Sound and light returned. He was sprawled across the bed. On the table was a little flannel packet, no longer of any consequence.

He felt as if he had been doped, or were waking after a debauch. There was no inclination to do anything. Emotion was absent.

Outwardly everything was the same. Even his mind, with automatic rationality, could still wearily take up the thankless task of explaining his experiences on a scientific basis—weaving an elaborate web in which psychosis, hallucination, and improbable coincidences were the strands.

But inwardly something had changed, and would never change back.

Considerable time passed.

He heard steps mounting the stairs, then in the hall. They made a *squish-squish* sound, as if the shoes were soaking wet.

They stopped outside his door. There was a soft rap.

He crossed the room, turned the key in the lock—

A strand of seaweed was caught in the silver brooch. The gray suit was dark now and heavy with water, except for one spot which had started to dry and was faintly dusted with a white powder—salt. The odor of the Bay was intimate and close. There was another strand of seaweed clinging to one ankle against the wrinkled stocking.

And around the stained shoes, a little pool of water was forming.

His eyes traced the wet footprints down the hall. At the head of the stairs the old clerk was standing, one foot still on the last step. He was carrying a small pigskin suitcase.

"What's all this about?" he quavered, when he saw that Norman was looking at him. "You didn't tell me you were expecting your wife. She looks like she'd thrown herself in the Bay. We don't want anything queer happening in this hotel—anything wrong."

"It's quite all right," said Norman, prolonging the moment before he would have to look at her face. "I'm sorry I forgot to tell you. May I have the bag?"

"—only last year we had a suicide"—the old clerk did not seem to realize he was speaking his thoughts aloud—"bad for the hotel—" His voice trailed off. He looked at Norman, gathered himself together, and came hesitatingly down the hall. When he was a few steps away, he stopped, reached out and put down the suitcase, turned, and walked rapidly away.

Unwillingly, Norman raised his eyes until they were on a level with hers.

The face was pale, very pale, and without expression. The lips were tinged with blue. Wet hair was plastered against the cheeks. A thick lock crossed one eye socket, like a curtain half drawn, and curled down toward the throat, where it merged with a strand of seaweed. The dull eyes stared at him, without sign of recognition. And no hand moved up to brush the lock of hair away.

From the hem of the skirt, water was dripping.

The lips parted. The voice had the monotonous murmur of water.

"You were too late," the lips said. "You were a minute too late."

XI.

For a third time their exchange of conversation had come back to the same question. He had the maddening sensation of following a robot that was walking in a huge endless circle

and always treading on precisely the same blades of grass as it retraced its path.

With the hopeless conviction that he would not get any further this time, he asked the question again: "But how can you lack consciousness, and at the same time *know* that you lack consciousness? If your mind is blank, you cannot at the same time be aware that your mind is blank."

The hands of his watch were creeping toward three in the morning. The chill of night's lowest ebb pervaded the dingy hotel room. Tansy sat stiffly, wearing his bathrobe and big fleece-lined slippers, with a blanket over her knees and a bath towel wrapped around her head. They should have made her look childlike and perhaps even artlessly attractive. They did not. If you were to unwind the towel you would find the top of the skull sawed off and the brains removed, an empty bowl—that was the illusion Norman experienced every time he made the mistake of looking into her eyes.

The pale lips opened. "I know nothing. I only speak. They have taken away my soul. But my voice is a function of my body."

You could not even say that the voice was patiently explanatory. It was too utterly empty and colorless even for that. The words, clearly enunciated and evenly spaced, all sounded alike. They came with the regular beat of a machine.

The last thing he wanted to do was hammer questions at that stiff pitiful figure, but at all costs he must awaken some spark of feeling in the masklike face; he must find some intelligible starting point before his own mind could begin to work effectually.

"But, Tansy, if you can talk about the present situation, you must be aware of it. You're here in this room with me!"

The toweled head shook once, like that of a mechanical doll.

"Nothing is here with you but a body. 'I' is not here."

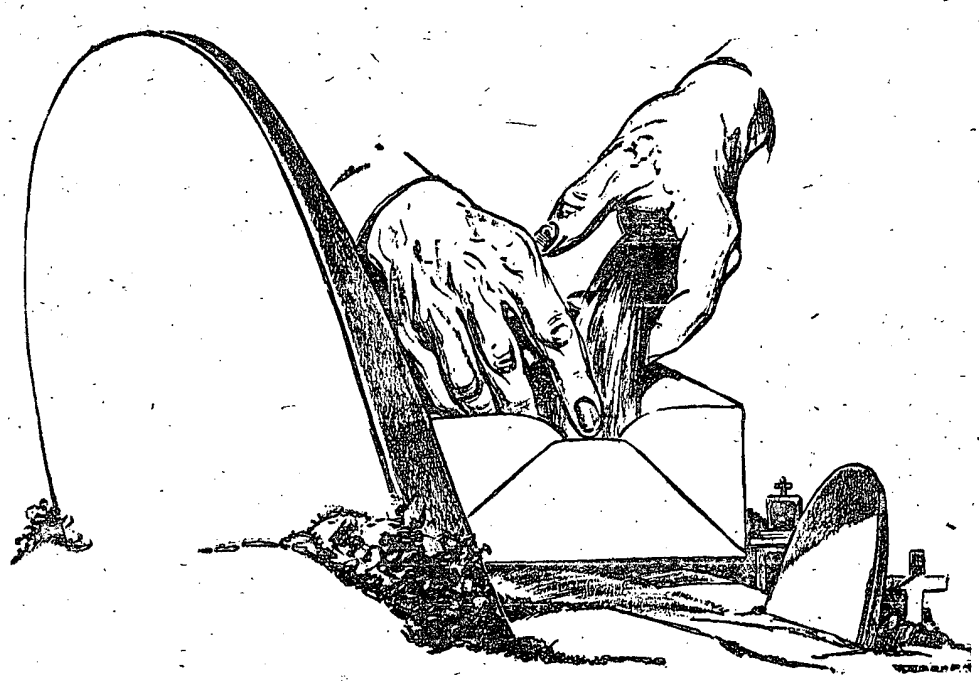
His mind automatically corrected "is" to "am" before he realized that there had been no grammatical error and shuddered at the implications of the trifling change in a tiny verb.

"You mean," he asked, "that you can see or hear nothing? That there is just a blackness?"

Again that simple mechanical headshake, which carried more absolute conviction than the most heated protestations.

"My body sees and hears perfectly. It has suffered no injury. It can function in all particulars. But there is nothing inside. There is not even a blackness."

His tired, fumbling mind jumped to the subject of behavioristic psychology and its fundamental assertion that human reactions can be explained completely and satisfactorily without once referring to consciousness—that it need not even be assumed that conscious-



ness exists. Here was the perfect proof. And yet not so perfect, for the behavior of this body lacked every one of those little mannerisms whose sum is personality. The way Tansy used to squint and twist one little finger around another when thinking through a difficult question. The familiar quirk at the corners of her mouth when she felt flattered or slyly amused. All gone. Even the quick triple headshake he knew so well, with the slight bunny-rabbit wrinkling of the little nose, had become that robot's "No."

The sensory organs still responded to stimuli. They sent nerve impulses to the hindbrain or midbrain—or cortex—where they traveled about and gave rise to efferent impulses which activated glands and muscles, including the motor organs of speech. But that was all. None of those intangible flurries we call consciousness hovered around the webwork of nervous activity in the cortex. What had imparted *style*—Tansy's style, like no one else's—to every movement and utterance of the body, was gone. There was left only a physiological organism, without sign or indication of personality. Not even a mad or an idiot soul—yes! why not use that old term now that it had an obvious specific meaning?—peered from the gray-green eyes which winked at intervals with machinelike regularity, but only to lubricate the cornea, nothing more.

He felt a grim sort of relief go through him, now that he had been able to picture it in definite terms. But the picture itself—his mind veered to the memory of a newspaper story about an old man who had kept locked in his bedroom for years the body of a young woman whom he loved and who had died of an incurable disease. He had maintained the body in a miraculous state of preservation by wax and other means they said, had talked to it every night and morning, had been convinced that he would some day reanimate it completely—until they found out and took him away, and buried it. Had that body—

"Tansy," he was asking, "when your soul went, why didn't you die?"

"Usually the soul lingers to the end, unable to escape, and vanishes or dies when the body dies," the voice answered, its words as evenly spaced as if timed to a metronome. "But He Who Walks Behind was tearing at mine. There was the weight of green water against my face. I knew it was midnight. I knew that you had failed. In that moment of despair, He Who Walks Behind was able to draw forth my soul. In the same moment Your Agent's arms were about me, lifting me toward the air. My soul was close enough to know what had happened, yet not close enough to return. Its doubled anguish was the last memory it imprinted on my brain. Your Agent and He Who Walks Behind concluded that each had obtained the thing he had been sent for, and so there was no struggle between them."

The picture created in his mind was so shockingly vivid that it seemed incredible that it could have been produced by the words of a mere physiological machine. And yet only a physiological machine could have told the story with such total restraint.

"Is there nothing that *touches* you?" he asked abruptly in a loud voice, gripped by an intolerable spasm of anguish at the emptiness of her eyes. "Haven't you a single emotion left?"

"Yes. One." This time it was not a robot's headshake but a robot's nod. For the first time there was a stir of feeling, a hint of motivation. The tip of a pallid tongue licked hungrily around the pale lips. "I want my soul."

He caught his breath. Now that he had succeeded in awakening a feeling in her, he hated it. There was something so animal about it, so like some light-sensitive marine worm blindly yet greedily wriggling toward the sunlight.

"I want my soul," the voice repeated mechanically, tearing at his emotions more than any plaintive or whining accents could have done. "At the last moment, although it could not return, my soul implanted that one emotion in me. It knew what awaited it. It knew there are things that can be done to a soul. It was very much afraid."

He ground the words out between his teeth. "Where do you think your soul is?"

"She has it. The woman with the little black eyes."

"Evelyn Sawtelle?" He was remembering a phone call.

"Yes. But it is not wise to speak of her by name."

His hand shot out for the phone. At that moment he had to do something definite, or lose control of himself completely. For too long he had sat impotently by, watching the ghostly and harrowing drama unfold. Now he had to strike out.

After a time he roused the night clerk and got the local operator.

"Yes, sir," came the singsong voice. "Hempnell 1284. You wish to make a person-to-person call to Evelyn Sawtelle—E-V-E-L-Y-N S-A-W-T-E-L-L-E, sir? . . . Will you please hang up and wait? It will take considerable time to make a connection."

"I want my soul. I want to go to that woman. I want to go to Hempnell." Now that he had touched off the blind hunger in her, it persisted. He was reminded of a phonograph needle caught in the same groove, or a mechanical toy turned on to a new track by a little push.

"We'll go there all right." It was still hard for him to control his breathing. "We'll get it back."

"But I must start for Hempnell soon. My clothes were ruined by the water. I must have the maid clean and press them."

With a slow, even movement she got to her feet and started toward the phone.

"But, Tansy," he objected involuntarily. "It's three in the morning. You can't get a maid now."

"But my clothes must be cleaned and pressed. I must start for Hempnell soon."

The words might have been those of an obstinate woman, sulky and selfish. But they had less tone that a sleepwalker's.

She kept on toward the phone. Although he did not anticipate that he would do it, he shrank out of her way, pressing close against the side of the bed.

"But even if there is a maid," he said, "she won't come at this hour."

The pallid face turned toward him incuriously. "The maid will be a woman." It was a little while before he got the implication of the words. "She will come when she hears me."

Then she was talking to the night clerk. "Is there a maid in the hotel? . . . Send her to my room. . . . Then ring her. . . . I cannot wait until morning. . . . I need her at once. . . . I cannot tell you the reason. . . . Thank you."

Norman was thinking: How can a physiological machine conceive and carry out even such a simple plan? Yet how could a conscious human being do it with such utter listlessness? Same paradox. He wondered if he ought to stop her. But an idea was growing in his mind.

There was a long wait, while he heard faintly the repeated ringing at the other end of the line. He could imagine the sleepy, surly voice that finally answered.

"Is this the maid? . . . Come at once to Room 37." He could almost catch the indignant answer. Then—"Can't you hear my voice? Don't you realize who is speaking? . . . Yes. . . . Come at once." And she replaced the phone in its cradle.

"Tansy—" he began. Then his eyes met hers, and once again he found himself asking a halting prefatory question, although he had not intended to. "You are able to hear and answer my questions?"

"I can answer questions. I have been answering questions for three hours." The lack of expression only made the irony more complete.

But—logic prompted wearily—if she can remember what has been happening these last three hours, then surely— And yet, what is memory but a track worn in the nervous system? In order to explain memory you don't need to bring in consciousness. Quit banging your head against that stone wall, you fool!—came another inward prompting. You've looked in her eyes, haven't you? Well, then, get on with it!

"Tansy, is that woman coming here because she's . . . well, the same as you were?"

"Yes. But since you are present she will not speak of it."

"But if I weren't here—or if I hid myself?"

"She might respond to questioning." The hungry subanimal expression came back, and the tip of the tongue appeared between the lips. "If I make her speak . . . if I make you believe—will we go back to Hempnell very quickly? Will you help me?"

"Yes." Of course he would. He wouldn't do anything else. But what good to say all that to a blank physiological machine beyond the reach of comfort? Besides, the maid should soon be here, and an unwholesome curiosity was eating at him.

"I'll leave the closet door just a little ajar," he said. "She probably won't notice. See?"

There were footsteps in the hall. The robot nod was his only answer.

"You wanted me, mum?" Contrary to his expectations, the voice was young, but very low. It sounded as if she had swallowed as she spoke.

"Yes. I want you to clean and press some things of mine. They're hanging on the edge of the bathtub. Go and get them."

The maid came into his line of vision, then. She would be very heavy in a few years, he thought, but she was handsome now, though puffed with sleep. She had hastily pulled on a dull-black dress, but her feet were in slippers and her hair was snarly.

"Be careful with the dress. It's wool," came Tansy's voice, sounding just as toneless as when it had been directed at him. "And I want them promptly at nine o'clock."

Norman half expected to hear an objection to this unreasonable request, but there was none. The girl walked rapidly out of the bathroom, the damp clothes hurriedly slung over one arm, as if her one object were to get away before she was spoken to again.

"Wait a moment, girl. I want to ask you a question." The voice was somewhat louder this time. That was the only change whatsoever, but it had a startling effect of command.

The girl hesitated, then swung around unwillingly, and Norman got a good look at her face. He could not see Tansy—the closet door just cut her off—but he could see the fear come to the surface of the girl's face as she turned, see the sleep-creased cheek pale.

"Yes, mum?" she managed.

There was a considerable pause. He could tell from the way the girl shrank, hugging the damp clothes tight to her body, that Tansy had lifted her eyes and was looking at her.

Finally: "You know The Easy Way to Do Things? The Ways to Get and Guard?"

Norman could have sworn that the girl gave a guilty start at that second phrase. But she only shook her head quickly, and mumbled, "No, mum. I . . . I don't know what you're talking about."

"You mean you have never learned How to Make Wishes Work? You don't conjure, or spell, or hex? You don't know the Art?"

This time the "No" was almost inaudible. The girl was trying to look away, but failing.

"I think you are lying."

You could put any construction on those toneless words. The girl twisted, hands tightly clutching her overlapping arms. He wanted to go out and stop it, but curiosity held him rigid.

The girl's resistance broke. "Please, mum. We're not supposed to tell."

"You may tell me. What Procedures do you use?"

The girl's perplexity at the new word looked real.

"I don't know anything about that, mum. I don't do much. Just spells. Like now my boy friend's gone in the army, I do things to keep him from getting shot or hurt, and I've spelled him so that he'll keep away from other women. Honest, I don't do much, mum. And it don't always work. And lots of things I can't get that way." Her words had begun to run away with her.

"Very well. Where did you learn to do this?"

"Some I learned from ma when I was a kid. And some from Mrs. Neidel—she gets spells against bullets from her grandmother who had a family in some European war before the last one. But most women won't tell you anything. And some spells I kind of figure out myself, and try different ways until they work. You won't tell on me, mum?"

"No. Look at me now. What has happened to me?"

"Honest, mum, I don't know. Please, mum, don't make me say it." The girl's terror and reluctance were so obviously genuine that Norman felt a surge of anger at Tansy. Then he remembered that the thing beyond the door was incapable of either cruelty or kindness.

"I want you to tell me."

"I don't know how to say it, mum. But you're . . . you're *dead*." Suddenly she threw herself at Tansy's feet. "Oh, please, please don't take mine! Please!"

"I would not take your soul. You would get much the best of that bargain. You may go away now."

"Oh, thank you, thank you." She hastily gathered up the scattered clothes. "I'll have them all ready for you at nine o'clock. Really I will." And she hurried out.

Only when he moved, did Norman realize that his muscles were stiff and aching from those few taut minutes of peering. The robed and toweled figure was sitting in exactly the same position as when he had last seen it, hands loosely folded, eyes still directed toward where the girl had been standing.

"If you knew all this," he asked simply, "why were you willing to stop last week when I asked you?"

"There are two sides to every woman." It might have been a mummy dispensing elder wisdom. "One is rational, like a man. The other knows. Men are artificially isolated creatures, like islands in a sea of magic, protected by their rationality and by the devices of their women. Their isolation gives them

greater forcefulness in thought and action, but the women know. Women might be able to rule the world openly, but they do not want the work or the responsibility. And men might learn to excel them in the Art. Even now there may be male sorcerers, but very few.

"Last week I suspected much that I did not tell you. But the rational side is strong in me, and I wanted to be close to you in all ways. Like many women, I had not been awakened. I was not certain. And when I destroyed my charms and guards, I became temporarily blind to sorcery. Like a person used to large doses of a drug, I was uninfluenced by small doses. Rationality was dominant. I enjoyed a few days of false security. Then rationality itself proved to me that you were the victim of sorcery. And during my journey here I learned much, partly from reexamination of my own memories, partly from what He Who Walks Behind let slip." She paused and added, with the blank innocent cunning of a child, "Shall we go back to Hempnell now?"

The phone rang. It was the night clerk, almost incoherent with some sort of agitation, babbling threateningly about police and eviction. To pacify him, Norman had to promise to come down at once.

The old man was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

"Look here, mister," he began, shaking a finger, "I want to know what's going on. Just now my Sissy came down from your room white as a sheet. She wouldn't tell me anything, but she was trembling like all get-out. Sissy's my granddaughter. I got her this job, and I'm responsible for her."

He seemed genuinely concerned.

"I know what hotels are. I've worked in 'em all my life. And I know the kind of people that come to them—sometimes men and women working together—and I know the kind of things they try to do to young girls.

"Now I'm not saying anything against you, mister. But it was mighty queer the way your wife came here. I thought when she asked me to call Sissy that she was sick or something. But if she's sick, why haven't you called a doctor? And what are you doing still up at almost four? Mrs. Thompson in the next room called to say there was talking in your room—not loud, but it scared her. I got a right to know what's going on."

Norman put on his best classroom manner and blandly dissected the old man's apprehensions until they began to look very unsubstantial. Dignity told. With a last show of grumbling, the old man let himself be convinced. As Norman started upstairs, he was shuffling back to the switchboard.

On the second flight, Norman heard a phone ringing. As he was walking down the hall, it stopped.

He opened the door. Tansy was standing by the bed, speaking into the phone. Its dull blackness, curving from mouth to ear emphasized the pallor of lips and cheek and the whiteness of the toweling.

"This is Tansy Saylor," she was saying tonelessly. "I want my soul." A pause. "Can't you hear me, Evelyn? This is Tansy Saylor. I want my soul."

He had completely forgotten the call he had put in. It had been done in a moment of crazy anger. He hadn't even any clear idea of what he had been going to say.

He stepped forward. A low wailing sound was coming from the phone. Tansy was talking against it.

"This is Tansy Saylor. I want my soul."

He was almost there. The wailing sound had swiftly risen to a squeal, but mixed with it was an intermittent windy whirring.

He reached out to take the phone. But at that instant the phone twisted like a stumpy black worm, whipped tight to the skin, and dug into chin and neck just below the ear, like a double-ended black paw. The squeal became a muffled sucking.

If you tore that away, you would tear the face with it. He knew. He dropped to his knees and ripped the cord from the wall. Violet sparks spat from the torn wire. The loose end writhed like a wounded snake, whipped around his forearm, tightened spasmodically, then relaxed.

He stood up. The phone had fallen to the floor. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it now.

Tansy was still standing in the same place. Not an atom of fear showed in her expression. With the unconcernedness of a machine, she had lifted a hand and was slowly massaging cheek and neck. From the corner of the squeezed lips a few drops of blood were trickling.

The rack, he was thinking, would be too good for that woman. Or the scourge, or the

wheel. So foully to attack a mere empty creature was an ultimate, unspeakable viciousness, like crushing a kitten under your heel. Perhaps the Boot, or the Funnel—

Swiftly the phantasmagoria of the Inquisition faded from his mind, as his first surge of anger spent itself and settled down to a steady hate.

"What did she say to you?" he asked evenly.

"She kept saying, 'Who is this? Who is this?' That was all. Then she stopped and the noise began."

"How did she sound?"

"She sounded very frightened."

"Good!" He smacked his fist against his palm. "Magic works," he said grimly. "We'll make it work better. She'll be more frightened after we begin."

"Perhaps you have already begun."

He did not understand at the time the significance of that toneless reply.

XII.

The rhythmic rattle and surge of the train had a soothing monotony. You could hear the engine puffing lustily. The wide, heat-baked, green fields swinging past the window of the compartment, drowsed in the noonday sun. The farms and cattle and horses dotting them here and there, looked equally somnolent. He would have liked to sleep, but he knew he would not be able to. And as for—She apparently never slept.

"I want to run over some things," he said. "Interrupt me if you hear anything that sounds wrong or you don't understand."

From the corner of his eye he noted the figure sitting between him and the window nod once.

It occurred to him that there was something terrible about an adaptability that could familiarize him even to—her, so that now after only a day and a half he was using her as a kind of thinking machine, asking for her memories and reactions in the same way that a man might direct a servant to put a certain record on the phonograph.

At the same time he knew that he was able to make this close contact endurable only by carefully directing his thoughts and actions—like the trick he had acquired of never quite looking at her directly. And he kept himself nerved up with the thought of what lay ahead, and his determination to regain what had been lost, and his hate. The present condition was only temporary. But if he once let himself start to think what it would mean to live a lifetime, to share bed and board, with that—blackness—coldness—vacancy.

Other people noticed the difference all right. Like those crowds they'd had to push through in New York yesterday. Somehow people always edged away, so they wouldn't have to touch her, and he had caught more than one following glance, poised between curiosity and fear. And when that other woman started to scream—lucky they had been able to lose themselves in the crowd.

The brief stopover at New York had provided him with some vitally necessary materials, though he still felt hampered by the lack of his library and notes. But he had been glad last night when it was over. The compartment seemed a haven of privacy.

What was it those other people noticed? True, if you looked closely, the heavy cosmetics only provided a grotesque and garish contrast to the underlying pallor, and powder did not wholly conceal the ugly dark bruise around the mouth. But the veil helped, and you had to look very closely—the cosmetics were practically a theatrical make-up. Was it her walk that they noticed, or the way her clothes hung—her clothes always looked a little like a scarecrow's now, though you could not put your finger on the reason. Or was it—

But that was what he must not think about.

"Magic is a practical science." He talked to the wall, as if dictating. "There is all the difference in the world between a formula in physics and a formula in magic, although they have the same name. The former describes, in terse mathematical symbols, some cause-effect relationship of wide generality. But a formula in magic is a way of getting or accomplishing something. It always takes into account the motivation or desire of the person performing the magic—be it greed, love, revenge, or what not. Whereas the experiment in physics is essentially independent of the experimenter. In short, there has been little or no "pure"—nonpractical—magic, comparable to pure science.

"This distinction between physics and magic is just an accident of history. Physics is ultimately as practical as magic—but it possesses a superstructure of theory that magic lacks. Magic could be given such a superstructure by research in pure magic and by the investigation and correlation of the magic formulas of dif-

ferent peoples and times, with a view to deriving basic formulas which could be expressed in mathematical symbols and which would have a wide application. Most persons practicing magic have been too interested in immediate results to bother about theory. But just as research in pure science has ultimately led, seemingly by accident, to results of vast practical importance, so research in pure magic might be expected to yield similar results."

He waited a moment for comment, then went on.

"The subject matter of magic is akin to that of physics, in that it deals with certain forces and materials, though these—"

"I believe it is more akin to psychology," the voice interrupted.

"How so?" He still looked at the wall.

"Because it concerns the control of other beings, the summoning of them, and the constraining of them to perform certain actions."

"Good. That is very suggestive. Fortunately, formulas may still hold good so long as their reference is clear, though we are ignorant of the precise nature of the entities to which they refer. For example, a physicist need not be able to give a visual description of an atom, even if the term visual appearance has any meaning when applied to an atom—which is doubtful. Similarly, a sorcerer need not be able to describe the appearance and nature of the entity he summons. But the point is well taken. Many seemingly impersonal forces, when broken down sufficiently, become something very much like personality. It's not too far-fetched to say that it would take a science resembling psychology to describe the behavior of a single electron, with all its whims and impulses, though electrons in the aggregate obey relatively simple laws, just as human beings do when considered as crowds. The same holds true of the basic entities of magic, and to a much greater degree.

"It is partly for this reason that magical processes are so tricky and dangerous, and why their working can be so readily impeded if the intended victim is on guard against them—as your formulas have to our knowledge been nullified since Mrs. Gunnison stole your book. That one formula I used on Sunday night worked only because it was not anticipated that *I* would be the operator. And even at that its working was greatly hindered."

His words possessed for him an incredibly strange overtone. But it was only by maintaining a dry, scholarly manner that he could keep going. He knew that at the first touch of casualness or informality, the latent morbidity of the situation would engulf him.

"There remains one all-important consideration," he went on swiftly. "Magic appears to be a science which markedly depends on its environment—that is, the situation of the world and the general conditions of the cosmos at any particular time. For example, Euclidean geometry is useful on Earth, but there are regions—and it would be easy to imagine more—in which a non-Euclidean geometry is more practical. The same is true of magic, but to a more striking degree. The basic, unstated formulas of magic appear to change with the passage of time, requiring frequent restatement—though it might conceivably be possible to discover master-formulas governing that change. It has been speculated that the laws of physics show a similar evolutionary tendency—though if they do evolve, it is at a much less rapid rate than those of magic. It is natural that the laws of magic should evolve or change more swiftly, since magic depends on a contact between the material world and another level of being—and that contact is complex and may be shifting rapidly.

"Take astrology, for example. In the course of several thousand years, the precession of the equinoxes has put the Sun into entirely different celestial houses—signs of the Zodiac—at the same times of year. A person born, say, on March 22nd, is still said to be born in Aries, though he is actually born when the Sun is in the constellation Pisces. A failure to take into consideration this evolutionary change since the formulas of astrology were first discovered, has rendered the formulas obsolete and invalidated them for—"

"It is my belief," the voice broke in, like a phonograph suddenly starting, "that astrology has always been largely invalid. That it is one of the many pretended sciences which have been confused with true magic and used as a kind of window dressing. Such is my belief."

"I presume that may be the case, and it would help to explain why magic itself has been outwardly discredited as a science—which is the point I'm getting at.

"Suppose the basic formulas of physics—such as Newton's three laws of motion—had changed several times in the last few thousand years. The discovery of any physical laws at any time would have been vastly more difficult. The same experiments would give different

results in different ages. But that is the case with magic, and explains why magic has been periodically discredited and has become repugnant to the rational mind. It's like what old Carr was saying about the run of the cards at bridge. After a few shuffles of a multitude of cosmic factors, the laws of magic change. A sharp eye can spot the changes, but continual experimentation, of the trial-and-error sort, is necessary to keep the crude practical formulas of magic in anything like working order, especially since the basic formulas and the master-formulas have never been discovered.

"Take a concrete example—the formula I used Sunday night. It shows signs of recent revision. For instance, what did the original, unrevised formula have in place of the phonograph needle?"

"A willow whistle of a certain shape, which had been blown only once," the voice told him.

"And the platinum or iridium?"

"The original formula mentioned silver, but a heavier metal serves better. Lead, however, proved altogether ineffective. I tried it once. It was apparently too unlike silver in other respects."

"Precisely. Trial-and-error experimentation. I have a modern substitute for the flannel wrapping which may prove more effective. Moreover, in the absence of thorough investigation, we cannot be sure that all the ingredients of a magic formula are essential in making it work. A comparison of the magic formulas of different countries and peoples would be helpful in this respect. It would show which ingredients are common to all formulas and therefore presumably essential, and which are not essential. I have in mind a method for making such a comparison."

There was a discreet knock at the door. Norman spoke a few words, and the figure drew down its veil and turned toward the window, as if staring stolidly at the passing fields. Then he opened the door.

It was lunch, as long in coming as breakfast had been. And there was a new face—coffee-colored instead of ebony. Evidently the first waiter, who had shown growing nervousness in his previous trips to the compartment, had decided to sacrifice the tip and send someone else.

With a mixture of curiosity and impatience, Norman waited for the reactions of the newcomer. He almost felt able to predict them. First a very quick inquisitive glance past him at the seated figure—Norman guessed they had become the major mystery of the train. Then a longer, sideways glance while setting up the folding table, ending with the eyes getting very wide; he could almost feel the coffee-colored flesh crawl. Only hurried, almost unwilling glances after that, with a growing uneasiness manifested in clumsy handling of the dishes and glassware. Then a too-pleasant smile and a hasty departure.

Only once Norman interfered—to place the knives and forks so they lay at right angles to their usual position.

The meal was a very simple one, almost ascetic. He did not look across the table as he ate. There was something worse than animal greediness about that methodical feeding. After the meal he put the left-overs into a small cardboard box, covered them with a napkin he had used to wipe all the dishes clean, and placed the box in his suitcase beside an envelope containing clippings from his own fingernails. The sight of the clean breakfast dishes had been one of the things which had helped to disturb the first waiter, but Norman was determined to adhere strictly to a complete set of taboos. They were an odd assortment, gleaned from his memories of Negro, Polynesian, and Indian practices. Of course, there might be no protection gained by observing taboos. But then again there might be. So he collected food fragments, saw to it that no knives or other sharp instruments pointed toward them, had them sleep with their heads nearest the engine and their destination, and enforced a number of other minor regulations. Eating in private satisfied still another taboo, but there was more than one reason for that.

He glanced at his watch. Only half an hour until Hempnell. He had not realized they were quite so close. There was the faint sense of an almost physical resistance from that region, as if the air were thickening. And his mind was tossing with a multitude of problems yet to be considered.

Deliberately turning his back, he said, "According to the myths, souls may be imprisoned in all sorts of ways—in boxes, in knots, in animals, in stones. Have you any ideas on this subject?"

As he feared, this particular question brought the usual irrelevant response. The answering words had the same dull persistence.

"I want my soul."

His hands, clasped behind his back, tightened. This was why he had avoided the question until now. Yet he had to know more, if that were possible.

"But where exactly should we look for it?"

"I want my soul."

"Yes." It was hard for him to control his voice. "But how, precisely, might it be hidden? It will help if I know."

There was a rather long pause. Then, "The environment of the soul is the human brain. If it is free, it immediately seeks such an environment. It may be said that soul and body are two separate creatures, living together in a symbiotic relationship so intimate and tight that they normally seem to be only one creature. The closeness of this contact appears to have increased with the centuries. Indeed, when the body it is occupying dies, the soul is usually unable to escape and appears to die, too, or to migrate to another level of being—I have no clear knowledge of that matter. But by supernatural means the soul may sometimes be divorced from the body it is occupying. Then, if it is prevented from re-entering its own body, it is irresistibly drawn to another, whether or not that other body possesses a soul. And so the captive soul is usually imprisoned in the brain of its captor, unable either to escape from or to control that brain, in immediate contact with the soul of the captor and forced to view and feel, in complete intimacy, the workings of that soul. Therein lies perhaps its chief torment."

Beads of sweat prickled his scalp and forehead.

His voice did not shake, but it was unnaturally heavy and sibilant as he asked, "What is Evelyn Sawtelle like?"

The answer sounded as if it were being read verbatim from the summary of a political dossier.

"She is dominated by a desire for social prestige. She spends most of her time in unsuccessfully attempting to be snobbish. She has romantic ideas about herself, but since they are too high-flown to find satisfaction, she is prim and moralistic, with rigid standards of conduct. She believes she was cheated in her husband, and is always apprehensive that he will lose what ground she has gained for him. Being unsure of herself, she is given to acts of maliciousness and sudden cruelty. At present she is very frightened and constantly on guard. That is why she had her magic all ready when she received the telephone call."

"I can't wait until tomorrow," he told himself. "I must begin with her this very afternoon."

Aloud, he asked, "Mrs. Gunnison—what do you think of her?"

"She is a woman of abundant vigor and appetites. She is a good housewife and hostess, but those activities hardly take the edge off her energies. She should have been mistress of a feudal domain. She is a born tyrant, and grows fat on it. Her appetites, many of them incapable of open satisfaction in our present society, nevertheless find devious outlets. Servant girls of the Gunnisons have told stories, but not often and then guardedly, for she is ruthless against those who oppose her or threaten her security."

"And Mrs. Carr? That is, if she comes in this category."

"Little can be said of her. She is conventional, an indulgent ruler of her husband, and enjoys being thought sweet and saintly. But I am uncertain of her deeper motivations."

"It may be then, that she is not hostile?" He was remembering the telephone call from Mrs. Carr just before he left for the East, when she had seemed to be trying to check on the activities of Evelyn Sawtelle.

"It may be. Yet at times I have been aware of her looking at me long and strangely."

There was a knock. It was the porter come for the bags.

"Be in Hempnell in five minutes, sir. Shall I brush you in the corridor?"

But Norman tipped him and declined the service. He also told him they would carry their own bags. The porter smiled jerkily and backed out.

Norman crossed to the forward window. There was only the gravel wall of a gully, and, above it, dark trees flashing indistinctly past. But almost immediately the gravel wall gave way to a wide panorama, as the tracks swung around and down the hillside.

There was more woodland than field in the valley. The trees seemed to encroach on the town, dwarfing it. From this particular point it looked quite tiny. But the college buildings stood out with a cold distinctness. He fancied he could make out the window of his office.

Those cold gray towers and darker roofs were like an intrusion from some other, older world, and his heart began to pound, as if he had suddenly sighted the fortress of the enemy.

XIII.

Norman looked briefly across the campus before he went into Morton. The thing that startled him most was something he had not expected—the air of normality. True, he had not looked forward—at least consciously—to any outwardly demoniac manifestations, any physical stench of evil. But this feeling of wholesomeness—the little swarms of students trooping back to the dormitories or over to the campus soda fountain, the file of girls in white bound for a tennis lesson, the friendly smiles and nods, the way his own steps fell so easily and gratefully into the old familiar paths—almost for a moment he wondered if everything else were not some crazy dream. It came to him almost with a shock that things were outwardly as normal as they had ever been, that only with respect to himself had they changed.

"Don't fool yourself," the voice inside told him. "Some of those laughing girls are already infected. Their very respectable mammas have given them delicate hints. Don't be too sure you know what they're thinking while they sip their cokes or chatter about their boy friends."

But there was much to be done this afternoon, and he had no right to waste a second. He turned into Morton and quickly mounted the stairs.

His capacity for surprise was not yet exhausted, however, as he realized when he saw a group of students emerging from the classroom at the other end of the third-floor corridor, after having waited the usual ten minutes for him to appear. That was right—he had classes, and committee meetings, and appointments. He slipped around the bend in the corridor before he was noticed.

Taking suitable precautions, he entered his office. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed, but he was careful in his movements and on the alert for unfamiliar objects. He did not put his hand into any drawer without closely inspecting it first.

One letter in the little pile of accumulated mail was important. It was from Pollard's office, requesting him to appear before a meeting of the trustees later this week. He smiled with grim satisfaction. His career was still skidding downhill. Hempnell still had its fangs.

He methodically removed certain sections

from his files, stuffed his brief case full and made a package of the remainder.

Then he took from his pocket a small hard object, and looked at it reflectively.

It was made of lucite, and its shape was that of an egg. Sealed inside the thick, transparent shell were tiny bits of metal and fiber. It was the chief trophy of his stay in New York. His friend in industrial chemistry had been very mystified. But here it was.

Placed in the Sawtelle home, it ought to constitute the terminal of a kind of circuit and clear the way for the operations he intended to begin tonight, for the recovery of that which Evelyn Sawtelle had taken and was holding captive.

It remained to place it.

After a last glance around, during which he noted that the Estrey dragon had not been restored to whatever was its original position on the roof, he started downstairs.

Outside he met Mrs. Gunnison.

This was something he had not anticipated with sufficient vividness. He was acutely conscious of the way his arms were encumbered by the bulky notes. For a moment he did not seem able to see her clearly.

"Lucky I found you," she began immediately. "Harold's been trying every which way to get in touch with you. Where have you been?"

Suddenly she registered on him as her old, blunt, sloppy self. With a sense of mingled relief and frustration, he realized that the warfare in which he was engaged was a strictly undercover affair, and that outwardly all relationships were the same as ever. He found himself explaining how Tansy and he, weekending with friends out in the country, had gotten a touch of food poisoning, and how his message to Hempnell must have gone astray. This explanation was intended merely for general consumption. Routine excuses were still necessary, and this one had the added advantage of providing a reason for Tansy's appearance, if anyone should see her, and it would enable him to plead a recurrence of the attack as an excuse for neglecting his academic duties.

He did not expect Mrs. Gunnison to believe it, but he ought to tell it to her just to be consistent.

She accepted the story without comment, offered her sympathies, and went on to say, "But be sure and get in touch with Harold. I believe it has to do with that meeting of the trustees you've been asked to attend. You know, Harold thinks a great deal of you. Good-by."

Odd, but at the last moment he fancied he caught a note of genuine friendliness, a strange little look, as if she was appealing to him to do something. Could he possibly be wrong in his estimation of her?

But there was work to do. Off campus, he hurried down a quiet side street to where his car was parked. With hardly a sidewise glance at the motionless figure in the front seat, he stepped in and drove to Sawtelle's.

The house was bigger than they needed, and the front lawn was very formal. But the grass was yellow in patches, and the soldierlike rows of flowers looked neglected.

"Wait here," he said. "Don't get out of the car under any circumstances."

To his surprise, Hervey met him at the door. There were circles under Hervey's always-worried eyes, and his fidgetiness was more than usually apparent.

"I'm so glad you've come," he said, pulling Norman inside. "I don't know what I'm going to do with all these departmental responsibilities on my shoulders! Classes having to be dismissed. Stop-gap instructors to be obtained. And the deadline on next year's catalogue tomorrow! Here, come into my study." And he pushed Norman through a huge living room, expensively but stiffly furnished, into a dingy, book-lined cubbyhole with one small window.

"I'm almost going out of my mind," he said. "I haven't dared stir out of the house since Evelyn was attacked Sunday night."

"What!"

"Haven't you heard?" He stopped and looked at Norman in surprise. Even here he had been trying to pace up and down, although there was not room enough. "Why, it was in the papers. Though I wondered why you didn't come over or call up. I kept trying to get you at your home and the office, but no one could locate you. Evelyn's been in bed since Sunday, and she gets hysterical if I even speak of going out of the house. Just now she's asleep, thank heavens."

It was borne in on Norman that Sawtelle was not even aware that he had been out of town. Hastily he related his trumped-up excuse. He wanted to get back to what had happened Sunday night. There was an idea forming at the back of his mind, but it was still nebulous. For the moment he neglected

the real purpose of his visit.

"Just my luck!" Sawtelle exclaimed tragically when Norman had finished. "The whole department falling apart the very first week I'm in charge of it. And young Stackpoole laid up with the 'flu'!"

"We'll manage," said Norman. "Sit down and tell me about Evelyn."

Unwillingly, Sawtelle cleared a space so he could perch on the cluttered desk. He groaned audibly when his eyes chanced to light on papers concerned with urgent business.

"It happened about four o'clock Sunday morning," he began, still aimlessly fiddling with the papers. "I was awakened by a terrible scream. Evelyn's bed was empty. It was pitch dark out in the hall. But I could hear some sort of struggle going on downstairs. A bumping and threshing around—"

Suddenly he jerked up his head. "What was that? I thought I heard footsteps out in the front hall." Before Norman could say anything he went on, "Oh, it's just my nerves. They've been acting up ever since.

"Well, I picked up something—a vase—and went downstairs. About that time the sounds stopped. I switched on the lights and went through all the rooms. In the sewing room I found Evelyn stretched unconscious on the floor with some ghastly bruises beginning to show around her neck and mouth. Beside her lay the phone—we have it there because Evelyn has so many occasions to use it. I nearly went frantic. I called a doctor and the police."

Norman knew now what must have happened.

"When Evelyn regained consciousness, she was able to tell us about it, although she was terribly shaken up. It seems the phone had rung. She went downstairs in the dark without waking me. Just as she was picking up the phone, a man jumped out of the corner and attacked her. She fought him off—oh, it drives me mad to think of it!—but he overpowered her and choked her unconscious."

Norman listened with grim satisfaction.

"Thank heavens I came downstairs when I did! That must have been what frightened him off. The doctor found that, except for bruises, there weren't any other injuries. Even the doctor was shocked at those bruises, though. He said he had never seen any quite like them.

"The police think that after the man got in the house he called Central and asked them to ring this phone—pretending he thought the bell was out of order or something—in order to lure someone downstairs. They were puzzled as to how he got inside, though, for all the windows and doors were shut fast. Probably I forgot to lock the front door when we went to bed—one of my pieces of unforgivable carelessness!

"The police think that he was a vicious burglar, but I believe he must have been a madman besides. Because there was a silver plate on the floor, and two of our silver forks jammed together strangely, and other odds and ends. And he must have been playing the phonograph in the sewing room, because it was open and the turntable was going and on the floor was one of Evelyn's speech records, smashed to bits."

Yes, the picture was all very clear now. What Norman had forgotten to take into consideration was the ever-present possibility of reaction, if magic miscarried—"like the kick of a gun," or, better like the breech of a gun blowing up. When he had severed the wire at Bayport, the thwarted Agency of Death had instantly struck back at the sender. And afterward Evelyn Sawtelle had invented the obvious story.

One thing bothered him. If the police should trace that phone call in an effort to prove their own theory, they would find it had been placed by Norman Saylor, at Bayport. But at the worst that would only convict him of a peculiar lie. For the present he would say nothing about it.

"It's all my fault," Sawtelle was repeating mournfully. Norman remembered that Sawtelle always assumed that he was guilty whenever anything hurt or merely upset Evelyn. "I should have awakened! *I* should have been the one to go down to the phone. When I think of that delicate creature feeling her way through the dark, and lurking just ahead of her that— Oh, and the department! I tell you I'm going out of my mind. Poor Evelyn has been in such a pitifully frightened state ever since, you wouldn't believe it!"

"Good," thought Norman. "If she's really frightened, she may be easier to deal with." The idea of pity never occurred to him. Moreover, if what he had been told about the lodgment of captive souls were true, then Tansy's soul had suffered equally with that of Evelyn Sawtelle here in this very house on Sunday night.

"I tell you, I haven't slept a wink," Sawtelle was saying. "If Mrs. Gunnison hadn't been

kind enough to spend a couple of hours with her yesterday morning, I don't know how I'd have managed. Even then she was too frightened to let me stir. . . . My God! . . . Evelyn!"

But it was really impossible to identify the agonized scream, except that it had come from the upper part of the house. Crying out, "I knew I heard footsteps! He's come back!" Sawtelle ran full tilt out of the study. Norman was just behind him, suddenly conscious of a very different fear. It was confirmed by a glance through the living-room window at his empty car.

He beat Sawtelle up the stairs and was the first to reach the bedroom door. He stopped. Sawtelle, almost gibbering with anxiety and guilt, ran into him.

It was not at all what Norman expected.

The pink silk coverlet clutched around her, Evelyn Sawtelle had retreated to the side of the bed nearest the wall. Her teeth were chattering, and her face was a dirty white.

Beside the bed stood Tansy. For a moment Norman felt a great, sudden hope. Then he saw her eyes, and the hope shot away with sickening swiftness. She was not wearing the veil. In that heavy make-up, with those rouged cheeks and thickly carmined lips, she looked like some indecently daubed statue, impossibly grotesque against that background of ridiculously feminine pink silk hangings. But a hungry statue.

Sawtelle scrambled past him, shouting, "What's happened? What's happened?" He saw Tansy. "I didn't know you were here. When did you come in?" Then, "You frightened her!"

The statue spoke, and its quiet accents hushed him.

"Oh, no, I didn't frighten her. Did I, Evelyn?"

Evelyn Sawtelle was staring at Tansy in abject, wide-eyed terror, and her jaw was still shaking. But when she spoke, it was to say, "No, Tansy didn't . . . frighten me. We were talking together . . . and then . . . I . . . I thought I heard a noise."

"Just a noise, dear?" Sawtelle said, somewhat taken aback.

"Yes . . . like footsteps . . . very quiet footsteps in the hall." She did not take her eyes off Tansy, who nodded once when she had finished.

Norman accompanied Sawtelle on a futile search of the top floor. When they came back, Evelyn was alone.

"Tansy's gone out to the car," she told Norman weakly. "I'm sure I just imagined those footsteps."

But her eyes were still full of fear when he left her, with Sawtelle fussing about straightening the coverlet and shaking out the pillows.

As he went down the stairs he became aware of a hard object in his pocket, and he remembered the lucite egg. He had not placed it. But, as things stood now, he must first know more.

Tansy was sitting in the car, staring ahead. He could see that the body was still dominated by its one emotion. He did have to ask a question.

"She does not have my soul," were the words. "I questioned her at length. As a final and certain test I embraced her. That was when she screamed. She is very much afraid of the dead."

"What did she tell you?"

"She said that someone came and took my soul from her. Someone who did not trust her very much. Someone who desired my soul, to keep as a hostage and for other reasons. Mrs. Gunnison."

And he had seen it and not known. The knuckles of his hands were white on the steering wheel. That puzzling look of appeal that Mrs. Gunnison had given him. For an instant Tansy had managed to look out of her eyes. And he had not known it.

XIV.

Professor Carr finished his inspection of the first of the five sheets.

"Yes," he said, "these are undoubtedly equations in symbolic logic."

Norman had been pretty sure they were, but he was glad to hear a mathematician say so. The hurried reference he had made to *Principia Mathematica* had not altogether satisfied him.

"The capitals stand for classes of entities, the lower case letter for relationships," he said helpfully.

"Ah . . . yes—" Professor Carr's voice became a trifle diffident, and he rubbed his chin beneath the white Vandyke. "But what do they . . . refer to . . . if I may ask?"

"You could perform operations on the equations, couldn't you, without knowing the references of the individual symbols?" Norman countered.

"Most certainly. And the results would be

valid—always providing that the original references had been made correctly."

"Then here's my problem," Norman went on hastily. "There are seventeen equations on that first sheet. As they stand, they are not consistent with each other. Now I'm wondering if one simple, underlying equation doesn't appear in each of the seventeen, jumbled up with a lot of nonessential terms and meaningless procedures. Each of the other sheets presents a similar problem."

"Hm-m-m—" Professor Carr began to finger a pencil, and his eyes started to go back to the intriguing sheet, but he checked the movement. "I must confess I'm rather curious about those references," he said, and added innocently, "I wasn't aware that there had been attempts to apply symbolic logic to sociology."

Norman was prepared for this. "I'll be frank with you, Linthicum," he said. "I have a pretty wild, off-trail theory, and I've promised myself I won't discuss it until I have a better idea of whether or not there's anything to it."

Carr's face broke into a reminiscent smile. "I think I understand your sentiments," he said. "I can still recall the disastrous consequences of my announcement that I had trisected the angle.

"Of course, I was only in high school at the time," he added hastily.

"Though I'm still convinced that I gave my teacher a bad half-hour," he finished with a touch of pride.

When he next spoke, there was a sly twinkle in his eyes. "Nevertheless, I'm very much piqued by those symbols. As it stands, they might refer . . . hm-m-m . . . to anything."

"I'm sorry," said Norman. "I know I'm asking a lot of you."

"Not at all. Not at all." Twiddling the pencil Carr glanced again at the sheet. Something seemed to catch his eyes. "Hm-m-m . . . this is very interesting," he said. "I hadn't noticed this before." And his pencil began to fly about the sheet, deftly striking out terms, neatly inscribing new equations. The single vertical furrow between his gray eyebrows deepened. In a moment he was wholly absorbed.

With an unbreathed sigh of relief, Norman leaned back. He felt dog-tired, and his eyes hurt. Those five sheets represented twenty hours of uninterrupted work. Tuesday night, Wednesday morning, part of Wednesday afternoon. Even at that he couldn't have done it without Tansy to take notes from his dictation. He trusted the accuracy of her mindless neurons more than those of a conscious person.

The agile old fingers had half filled a fresh sheet of paper with derived equations. Their swift, orderly movements did not disturb but rather intensified the quiet almost monastic, mathematical atmosphere of the small office.

If Mrs. Gunnison had not shown herself to be so resourceful, he was thinking, he might have managed without using symbolic logic and Carr. But she was no Evelyn Sawtelle, to strike out viciously and then collapse. No, her competence and coolness under fire were of quite a different sort. She had become very elusive, and he had even been balked in the simple job of secretly planting a certain object in her home. And even if he had managed, he was doubtful whether he would have succeeded with the rest of the plan. Something of a decidedly stronger sort was necessary. Something new. Something basic.

Carr shoved a paper toward him, and immediately started working on the next sheet.

"You've found the underlying equation?"

Carr seemed almost annoyed at the interruption. "Surely . . . of course." His pencil was once more darting about.

"Sorry to be making all this work for you," said Norman, wondering just what was the meaning of the brief ultimate equation. He could not tell without his code.

Carr spared him a glance. "Not at all. I'm enjoying it. I always did have a knack for these things, though it's not exactly my field." And then he was busy again.

The afternoon shadows deepened. Norman switched on the overhead light, and Carr thanked him with a quick, preoccupied nod. The pencil flew. Three more sheets had been shoved across to Norman, and Carr was finishing the last one, when the door opened.

"Linthicum!" came the sweet voice, with hardly a trace of reproachfulness. "Whatever's keeping you? I've waited downstairs fifteen minutes."

"I'm sorry, dear," said the old man, looking at his watch and his wife. "But I had become so absorbed—"

She saw Norman. "Oh, I didn't know you had a visitor," she said. "*Whatever* will Professor Saylor *think!* I'm afraid that I've given him the impression that I tyrannize over you."

And she accompanied the words with such a quaint smile that Norman found himself echoing Carr's "Not at all."

"Professor Saylor looks *dead* tired," she said, peering at Norman anxiously. "I hope you haven't been wearing him out, Linthicum."

"Oh, no, my dear, I've been doing all the work," her husband told her.

She walked around the desk and looked over his shoulder. "What is it?" she asked, pleasantly.

"I don't know," he said. He straightened up and, winking at Norman, went on, "I believe that, behind these symbols, Professor Saylor is revolutionizing the science of sociology. But it's a great secret. And in any case I haven't the slightest idea of what the symbols refer to. I'm just being a comptometer."

With a polite, by-your-leave nod toward Norman, Mrs. Carr picked up one of the sheets and studied it through her thick glasses. But when she saw the massed rows of symbols, she put it down.

"Mathematics is not my forte," she explained. "I was *such* a poor scholar."

"Nonsense, Flora," said Carr. "Whenever we go to the market, you're much quicker at totaling the bill than I am. And I try to beat you, too."

"But that's such a *little* thing," cooed Mrs. Carr delightedly.

"I'll only be a moment more," said her husband, returning to his calculations.

Mrs. Carr spoke across to Norman in a half-whisper. "Oh, Professor Saylor, *would* you be so kind as to convey a message to Tansy? I want to invite her for bridge tomorrow night—that's Thursday—with Hulda Gunnison and Evelyn Sawtelle. Linthicum has a *meeting*."

"I'll be glad to," said Norman quickly. "But I'm afraid she might not be up to it." And he explained about the food poisoning.

"How too, too *terrible!*" observed Mrs. Carr. "Couldn't I come over and help her?"

"Thank you," Norman lied, "but we have someone staying with her."

"How *wise*," said Mrs. Carr, and it sounded as if she really meant it.

Carr put down his pencil. "There," he said, "I'm done."

With further expressions of thanks, Norman gathered up the sheets.

"Really no trouble at all," Carr assured him. "You gave me a very exciting afternoon." He added wistfully. "I must confess that you've aroused my curiosity."

"Linthicum dotes on anything mathematical, especially when it's like a puzzle," Mrs. Carr told him. "Why, once," she continued, with a kind of roguish indulgence, "he made all sorts of tabulations on *horse races*."

"Er . . . yes . . . but only as a concrete example of the calculus of probabilities," Mr. Carr interposed quickly. But his smile was equally indulgent.

Her hand was on his shoulder, and he had reached up his own to cover hers. Frail, yet somehow hearty, withered, yet somehow fresh, they seemed like the perfect aged couple.

"I promise you," Norman told Carr, "that if I revolutionize the science of sociology, you'll be the first to hear of it."

As soon as he was home, Norman got out the code. "*W*" was the identifying letter at the top of the first sheet. He thought he remembered what that meant, but he looked it up just to be sure.

"*W*— To conjure out the soul."

Yes, that was it. He turned to the supplementary sheet covered with Carr's calculations, and carefully decoded the final equation. "*C*—Notched strip of copper." He nodded. "*T*—Twirl sunwise." He frowned. He would have expected them to cancel out. Good thing he'd gotten a mathematician's help in simplifying the seventeen equations, each representing a different people's formula for conjuring out the soul—Arabian, Zulu, Polynesian, American Negro, American Indian, and so on; the most recent formulas available, and ones that had known actual use.

"*A*— Deadly amanita." Bother! He'd been certain that one would cancel out. It would be a bit of time and trouble getting a deathcup mushroom. And there was another even more difficult item. Well, he could manage without that formula, if he had to. He took up two other sheets—"*V*— To control the soul of another," "*Z*— To cause the dwellers in a house to sleep"—and set to work on one of them. In a few minutes he had assured himself that the ingredients presented no special difficulties, save that *Z* required a Hand of Glory to be used as well as the graveyard dirt to be thrown onto the roof of the house in which sleep was to be enforced. But he ought to have little difficulty in filching a suitable severed hand from the anatomy lab. Now he was getting somewhere. With *Z* he could place the charm in the Gunnison house tomorrow night, and with *V* activate it.

Conscious of a sudden reaction of weariness, he pushed back his chair. For the first time since he had come into the house, he looked

at her. She sat in the rocking chair, face turned toward the drawn curtains. When she had started rocking, he did not know. But the muscles of her body automatically continued the rhythmical movement, once it had begun.

With the suddenness of a blow, longing for Tansy struck him. Her intonations, her gestures, her mannerisms, her funny fancies—all the little things that go to make a person real, and human, and loved—he wanted them all instantly; and the presence of this dead-alive imitation, this poor husk of Tansy, only made the longing less bearable. And what sort of a man was he, to be puttering around with occult formulas, while all the while he— "There are things that can be done to a soul," she had said. "Servant girls of the Gunnisons have told stories—" He ought to go up there and take by force what was his!

The reaction was immediate. How could you take by force what was without form or material being? How could you use open force against someone who had your dearest possession as a hostage?

No, these repugnant occult formulas were his only hope, and he had gotten his usual punishment for making the mistake of looking at her. Deliberately he moved to the other side of the table, so his back was to the rocking chair.

But he was restless, his muscles itching with fatigue poisons, and for the moment, he could not get back to the work. All sorts of questions were plaguing his mind.

Suddenly Norman spoke. "Why do you suppose everything has become violent and deadly so abruptly?"

"What I believe they call the Balance was upset," was the answer. There was no interruption in the steady rocking.

"How was that?" He started to look over the back of his chair, but checked himself in time.

"It happened when I ceased to practice magic." The rocking was a grating monotony.

"But why should that lead to violence?"

"It upset the Balance."

"Yes, but how can that explain the abruptness of the shift from relatively trivial attacks to a deadly maliciousness?"

The rocking had stopped. There was no answer. But, as he told himself, he knew the answer already. This women's warfare was very much like trench warfare or a battle between fortified lines—a state of siege. Just as thick, reinforced concrete or armor plating nullified the shells, so countercharms and protective procedures rendered relatively futile the most violent onslaughts. But once the armor and concrete were gone, and you were out in a kind of no man's land—

Then, too, fear of the savage counterattacks that could be launched from such highly fortified positions, was a potent factor in discouraging direct assaults. The natural thing would be to sit pat, snipe away, and only attack if the enemy exposed himself recklessly. Besides, there were probably all sorts of unsuspected hostages and secret agreements, all putting a damper on violence.

This idea also seemed to explain why Tansy's apparently pacific action had upset the Balance. What would any country think if in the midst of a war, its enemy scuttled all his battleships and dismantled all his aircraft, apparently laying himself wide open to attack? For the realistic mind, there could only be one likely answer. Namely, that the enemy had discovered a weapon far more potent than battleships or aircraft, and was planning to ask for a peace that would turn out to be a trap. The only thing would be to strike instantly and hard, before the secret weapon could be brought into play.

"I think—" he started to say.

Then something—perhaps a faint *whishing* in the air or a slight creaking of the floor under the heavy carpet, or some less tangible sensation—caused him to glance around.

With a writhing jerk sideways, he managed —just managed—to get his head out of the path of that descending metal flail, which was all he saw at first. With a shocking *swish* it crashed downward against the heavy back of the chair, and there its force was broken. But his shoulder, which took only the end of the blow, went numb.

Clawing at the chair arm with his good hand, he threw himself forward against the table and whirled around.

He recoiled from the sight as from another blow, throwing back his good hand to save himself from overbalancing.

She was poised in the center of the room, having sprung back catlike after the first blow failed. Almost stiff-legged, but with the weight forward. In stocking feet—the slippers that might have made a noise were laid by the rocking chair. In her hand was the steel poker, stealthily lifted from the stand by the fireplace,

so as not to make the slightest warning rattle.

There was life in her face now. But it was life that champed the teeth and drooled, life that pinched and flared the nostrils with every breath, life that switched hair from the eyes with quick, angry flirts, life that glared redly and steadily. And there was more than that.

With a low snarl she lifted the poker and struck, not at him, but at the chandelier overhead. Yet, even as pitch darkness flooded the tightly curtained room, he realized what that more-than-animal life was.

There was no one conclusive reason, but from a multitude of almost indefinable impressions—too many to be realized separately—he knew with chilling certainty that the bestial spirit animating Tansy's body, the crude and unfinished soul conjured into her body—possessing her body as it used to be said demons possessed the bodies of the insane—was the same soul that had animated the stone creature that had crept from the roof.

And then the darkness was complete.

There was a rush of soft footsteps. He ducked to one side. Nevertheless, the *swish* came perilously close. There was a sound as if she had dived or rolled across the table after he eluded the headlong rush—he could hear the slur of papers skidding and the faint crackle as some drifted to the floor. Then silence, except for the rapid *snuff-snuff* of animal breathing.

He crouched on the carpet, trying not to move a muscle, straining his ears to catch the direction of that breathing. Abominable, he thought, how inefficient the human auditory system is at localizing a sound. First it came from one direction, then another—although he could not hear the slightest rustle of intervening movement—until he began to lose his sense of orientation in the room. He tried to remember his exact movements in springing away from the table. As he had hit the carpet, he had spun around. But how far? Was he facing toward or away from the wall? In his zeal to avoid the possibility of anyone spying on Tansy, he had blacked out this room and the bedroom, and the blackout was effective. No discernible atom of light filtered through from the night outside. He was somewhere on what was beginning to seem an endless expanse of carpet.

And somewhere else on that expanse, it was. Could it see and hear more than he? Could it discern form in retinal patterns that were only blackness to Tansy's human soul? What was it waiting for? Now even the rapid breathing was no longer audible—it possessed cunning.

This might be the darkness of some jungle floor, roofed by yards of matted creepers. Civilization is a thing of light. When light goes, civilization is snuffed out. He was rapidly being reduced to *its* level. Perhaps it had counted on that when it smashed the lights. This might be the inner chamber of some primeval cave, and he some cloudy-minded primitive huddled in abject terror of his mate, into whose beloved form a demon had been conjured up by the witch woman—the brawny, fat witch woman with the sullen lip and brutish eyes, and copper ornaments twisted in matted red hair. Should he grope for his ax and seek to smash the demon from her skull where it was hiding? Or should he seek out the witch woman and throttle her until she called off her demon? But how could he constrain his wife meanwhile? If the tribe found her, they would slay her instantly—it was the law. And even now the demon in her was seeking to slay him.

With thoughts almost as murky and confused as those of that ghostly primitive forerunner, he sought to grapple with the problem, until he suddenly realized what it was waiting for.

Already his muscles were aching. He was getting twinges of pain from his shoulder, as the numbness went out of it. Soon he would make an involuntary movement. And in that instant it would be upon him.

Cautiously he stretched out his hand. Slowly—very slowly—he swung it around until it touched a small table and located the large book he had remembered was there. Clamping thumb and fingers around the book where it projected from the table edge, he lifted it and drew it to him. His muscles began to shake a little from the effort to maintain absolute quiet.

With a slow movement he launched the book toward the center of the room, so that it hit the carpet a few feet from him. The sound drew the instant response he had hoped for. Waiting a second, he dove forward, seeking to pin it to the floor. But its cunning was greater than he had guessed. His arms closed on a heavy cushion that it had hurled toward the book, and only luck saved him as the poker thudded against the carpet close by his head.

Clutching out blindly, his hands closed on the cold metal. There was a moment of strain-

ing as it sought to break his grip. Then he was sprawling backward, and the footsteps were retreating toward the rear of the house.

He followed it to the kitchen. A drawer, jerked out too far, fell to the floor, and he heard the chilling clatter and scrape of cutlery.

But there was enough light in the kitchen to show him its silhouette. He lunged at the upraised hand holding the long knife, caught the wrist. Then it threw itself against him, and they dropped to the floor.

He felt her warm body against his, the touch of it an instant check to violence. He dared not harm it, and yet viciousness animated it to the last limits of its strength. For a moment he felt the coldness of the flat of the knife against his cheek, then he had forced the weapon away. He doubled up his legs to protect himself from its knees. It surged convulsively down upon him and he felt jaws clamp the arm with which he held away the knife. Teeth sawed sideways, trying to penetrate the fabric of his coat. Cloth ripped as he sought with his free hand to drag her body away from him. Then he found her hair and forced back the head so the teeth lost their grip. It dropped the knife and clawed with both hands at his face. He seized the fingers seeking his eyes and nostrils; it snarled and spat at him. Steadily he forced down the arms, twisting them behind it, and with a sudden effort got to his knees. Strangled sounds of impotent fury came from its throat.

Only too keenly aware of how close his muscles were to the trembling weakness of fatigue, he shifted his grip so that with one hand he held the straining wrists. With the other he groped sideways, jerked open the lower door of the cabinet, and found a length of cord.

XV.

"It's pretty serious this time, Norm," said Harold Gunnison. "A couple of trustees really want your scalp."

Norman drew his chair closer, as if the discussion were the real reason for his visit to Gunnison's office this morning.

Gunnison went on, "I think they're planning to rake up that Margaret van Nice business, and start yelping that where there's smoke there must be fire. And they may try to use Theodore Jennings against you. Claim that his 'nervous breakdown' was aggravated by unfairness and undue severity on your part, et cetera."

Norman nodded. Mrs. Gunnison ought to be here soon. The maid had told him over the phone that she had just left for her husband's office.

"Of course, those two matters aren't enough in themselves." Gunnison looked unusually heavy-eyed and grave. "But they have a bad taste, and they can be used as entering wedges. The real danger will come from a restrained but concerted attack on your conduct of classes, your public utterances, and perhaps even trivial details of your social life, followed by talk about the need for retrenchment where it is expeditious—you know what I mean." He paused. "What really bothers me is that Pollard's cooled toward you. I told him just what I thought of Sawtelle's appointment, but he said the trustees had overruled him. He's a good man, but he's a politician." And Gunnison shrugged, as if it were common knowledge that the distinction between politicians and scientists went back to the Ice Age.

Norman roused himself. "I'm afraid I insulted him last week. We had a long talk and I blew up."

Gunnison shook his head. "That would explain it. He can absorb insults. I've always said he was a good *politician*. If he sides against you, it will be because he feels it necessary or at least expeditious . . . I hate that word . . . on the grounds of public opinion. You know his way of running the college. Every couple of years he throws someone to the wolves."

Norman hardly heard him. He was thinking of Tansy as he had left her—the trussed-up body, the lolling jaw, the hoarse heavy breathing from the whiskey he had finally made it guzzle. He was taking a long chance, but he dared not give it an opportunity to carry off or destroy the body it had usurped. At one time last night he had almost decided to call in a doctor and perhaps have Tansy placed in a sanitarium. But if he did that he would be unable to protect her and might lose forever his chance to restore her rightful self. For similar reasons there was no friend he could call on for help. Now that his efforts to exorcise the thing by sorcery had failed, he had to strike quickly at the source of the usurping agency. But it was not pleasant to think of such headlines as: "PROFESSOR'S WIFE A TORTURE VICTIM. FOUND TRUSSED IN CLOSET BY MATE."

"It's really serious, Norm," Gunnison was repeating. "My wife thinks so, and she's smart

about these things. She knows people."

His wife! Obediently, Norman nodded.

"Hard luck it had to come to a head now," Gunnison continued, "when you've been having more than your share of troubles, with sickness and what-not." Norman could see that Gunnison was looking with a faint shade of inquisitiveness at the strip of surgical tape close to the corner of his left eye and the other one just below his nostrils. But he attempted no explanation.

the truth. It would be like trying to take his troubles into the law courts, and he could imagine—with the sharp, almost hallucinatory vividness of extreme fatigue—what that would be like. Imagine, even if the thing were exorcised out of her body, putting Tansy in the witness box. "You say, Mrs. Saylor, that your soul was stolen from your body?" "Yes." "You know that to be a fact?" "Yes." "You are conscious of it?" "No, I am not conscious." "How, then—" Bang of the judge's

Gunnison shifted about and resettled himself in his chair. "Norm," he said, "I've got the feeling that something's gone wrong. You can weather this blow all right—you're one of our two-three best men—but I've got the feeling that something's gone wrong all the way down the line."

The offer his words conveyed was obvious enough, and Norman knew it was made in good faith. But only for a moment did he consider telling Gunnison even a fraction of

gavel. "If this tittering does not cease immediately, I will clear the court!" Or Mrs. Gunnison called to the witness box and he himself bursting out with an impassioned plea to the jury. "Gentlemen, look at her eyes! Watch them closely, I implore you. My wife's soul is there, if you would only see it!" Then the judge, harshly, "Remove the man Saylor!"

But even such a trial was an impossibility in this day and age. And his method for righting the wrong that had been done must neces-

sarily be as far outside the law as sorcery is outside the domain of recognized science.

"What's the matter, Norm?" he heard Gunnison ask. The genuine sympathy of the voice tugged at him confusedly. Groggy with sudden sleepiness, he tried to rally himself to answer.

Mrs. Gunnison walked in.

"Hello," she said. "I'm glad you two finally got together." Almost patronizingly she looked him over. "I don't think you've slept for the last two nights," she announced brusquely. "And what's happened to your face? Did that cat of yours finally scratch it?"

Gunnison laughed, as he usually did, at his wife's frankness. "What a woman! Loves dogs. Hates cats. But she's right about your needing sleep, Norm."

The sight of her and the sound of her voice stung him into an icy wakefulness. She looked as if she had been sleeping ten hours a night for some time. An expensive green suit set off her red hair and gave her a kind of buxom middle-aged beauty. Her slip showed and the coat was buttoned in a disorderly way, but now it conveyed to Norman the effect of the privileged carelessness of some all-powerful ruler who is above ordinary standards of neatness. For once she was not carrying the usual bulging purse.

He did not trust himself to look into her eyes.

His hand stole from his pocket to the crevice at the back of the chair. He pushed the lucite egg out of sight. Then he stood up.

"Don't go yet, Norm," Gunnison told him. "There's a lot we should talk about."

"Yes, why don't you stay?" Mrs. Gunnison seconded.

"Sorry," said Norman. "I'll come around this afternoon if you can spare the time. Or tomorrow morning, at the latest."

"Be sure and do that," said Gunnison seriously. "The trustees are meeting tomorrow afternoon."

Mrs. Gunnison sat down in the chair he had vacated.

"My regards to Tansy," she said. "I'll be seeing her tonight at the Carr's—that is, if she's recovered sufficiently."

And to know that Tansy's soul was listening to the thoughts behind those words, in complete intimacy— He walked out rapidly and shut the door behind him.

While his hand was still on the knob, he saw Mrs. Gunnison's green purse lying on the table and, beyond it, the display case of items in physical chemistry. In that one long moment he smashed the plan he had been contemplating and built a new one.

There was one girl in the outer office—a student employee. He went up to her desk.

"Miss Miller," he said, "would you be so kind as to get me the grade sheets on the following people?" And he rattled off half a dozen student names.

"The sheets are in the Recorder's Office, Professor Saylor," she said, a little doubtfully.

"I know. But you tell them I sent you. Dr. Gunnison and I want to look them over."

Obediently she took down the names.

As the door closed behind her he pulled out the top drawer of her desk and found the key for the display case where he knew he would find it, on the bunch with the rest.

A few minutes later Mrs. Gunnison came out. She did not see him at first, because he was standing to one side of the door.

"I thought I heard you go out," she said sharply. Then, in her usual blunt manner, "Are you waiting for me to leave, so you can talk to Harold alone?"

He did not answer. He glanced at her nose, frowning a little.

She picked up her purse. "There's really no point in your trying to make a secret of it," she said. "I know as much about your troubles here as he does—in fact, considerably more. And, to be honest, they're pretty bad." Her voice had begun to assume the arrogance of the victor. She smiled at him.

He continued to look at her nose.

"And you needn't pretend you're not worried," she went on, her voice reacting irritably to his silence. "Because I know you are. And tomorrow Pollard will ask for your resignation. What are you staring at?"

"Nothing," he answered, hastily averting his glance.

"You saw a smudge on my nose!"

"Oh, no. No."

With an incredulous sniff, she took out her mirror, glanced at it puzzledly for a moment, then with a shrug held it up for a detailed inspection of her face.

Now was the moment, if only he could gauge it right. He was taut with expectation, cold with a feeling that the threads of destiny had come into his hands. The second hand of the wall clock seemed to stand still.

He dared not wait longer. In a soft yet

straining voice he uttered the words, "Break glass. Shatter soul. Scatter glass. Come soul."

With a swift crackling, not very loud, yet with a tinkle to it, the mirror in Mrs. Gunnison's hand puffed into a little cloud of iridescent dust.

Instantly he felt a weight add itself to his mind, a tangible darkness press down upon his thoughts. And his mind seemed to grasp instinctively at the darkness and hold it there.

The gasp of astonishment or fear that issued from Mrs. Gunnison's lips was cut short. What seemed a loose, stupid look flowed slowly over her face, but that was only because her face lost all expression whatsoever.

He stepped up to her and took her arm.

"Come with me," he said. "It's your best chance."

Docilely she followed him into the hall. Near the stairs they met Miss Miller, returning with a handful of large cards.

"I'm very sorry to have put you to the trouble," he told her. "But it turned out that we didn't need them. You had better return them to the Recorder's Office."

The girl nodded with a polite but somewhat wry smile. Professors!

As Norman escorted Mrs. Gunnison out of the Administration Building, the darkness pressing upon his thoughts parted—as black storm clouds might part at sunset, letting through a narrow beam of crimson light. So, through the painfully bright slit in the darkness lying against his thoughts, there poured a flood of impotent red rage, of obscene anger. In a moment this cleared, and an intelligible thought appeared.

This thought, as the rage preceding it, was so intolerably *like* Mrs. Gunnison, such an intense concentration of what he had known only in diluted form, that his mind almost lost its hold on the dark entity pressing against it. For a moment his thoughts quailed at the touch of naked personality. He stared ahead, and his steps wandered like those of a drunken man. But only for a moment.

"How did you do it?" was the thought.

His own thoughts rallied, and, before he realized it, had answered:

"It was the Prince Rupert mirror from the display case. The warmth of your fingers shattered it. I held it lightly in folds of my kerchief while transferring it to your pocketbook. When the mirror breaks and the reflection is shattered, the soul is temporarily caught outside. At such times it is vulnerable."

All this, without the machinery of speech to delay it, flashed in an instant. He must be more cautious from now on.

"Where are you taking my body?"

"To our house."

"What do you want?"

"My wife's soul."

There was a long pause. The slit in the darkness closed, then opened again.

"You cannot take it. I hold it, as you hold my soul. But my soul hides it from you. And my soul holds it."

"I cannot take it. But I can hold your soul until you return my wife's soul to her body."

"What if I refuse?"

"Your husband is a realist. He will not believe what your body tells him. He will consult the best alienists. He will be very much grieved. But in the end he will commit your body to an asylum."

He could sense defeat and submission—and a kind of panic, too—in the texture of the answering thought. But defeat and submission were not yet admitted directly.

"You will not be able to hold my soul. You hate it. It fills you with abhorrence. Your mind will not be able to endure it."

Then, in immediate substantiation of this statement, there came through the slit a nasty trickle growing swiftly to a spate. His chief detestations were quickly spied out and rasped upon. He began to hurry his steps, so that the mindless hulk beside him breathed hard.

"There was Ann," came the thoughts, not in words but in the complete fullness of memory. "Ann came to work for me eight years ago. A frail-looking little blonde, but able to get through a hard day's work for all that. She was very submissive, and a prey to fear. Do you know that it is possible to rule people through fear alone, without an atom of direct force? A sharp word, a stern look— It's the implications that do it, not what's said directly. Gradually I gathered about myself all the grim prestige that father, teacher, and preacher had had for Ann. I could make her cry by looking at her in a certain way. I could make her writhe with fright just by standing outside the door of her bedroom. I could make her hold hot dishes without a whimper while serving us at dinner, and make her wait while I talked to Harold. I've looked at her hands afterward—"

Similarly he lived through the stories of Clara and Milly, Mary and Ermengarde. He could not shut his own mind from hers, nor could he close the slit, though it was within his power to widen it. Like some foul medusa, or some pulpy carnivorous plant, her soul infolded and clung to his, until it seemed almost that his was the prisoner. Not symbiosis, but parasitism.

"And there was Trudie. Trudie worshiped me. She was a big girl, slow and a little stupid. She had come from a farm. She used to spend hours on my clothes. I encouraged her in various ways, until everything about me became sacred to Trudie. She lived for my little signs of favor. In the end she would do anything for me, which was very amusing, because she was very easily embarrassed and never lost her painfully acute sense of shame—"

But now he was at the door of his house, and the unclean trickle of thoughts ceased, and the slit narrowed to the tiniest watchful crack.

He shepherded Mrs. Gunnison to the door of Tansy's dressing room. He pointed at the form huddled on the blanket he had thrown across the floor. It lay as he had left it, eyes closed, jaw lolling, breathing heavily.

"Take away what you have conjured into it," he commanded.

There was a pause. A black spider crawled off Tansy's skirt and scuttled across the blanket. Even as there came the thought, "That is it," he lunged out and cracked it under his heel as it escaped onto the flooring. He was aware of a half-cloaked comment, "Its soul sought the nearest body. Now faithful King will go on no more errands for me. I will have to find another dog."

"Return what you have taken," he commanded.

This time there was a longer pause. The slit closed entirely.

The bound figure stirred, as if seeking to roll over. The lips moved. The slack jaw tightened. Conscious only of the black weight against his mind, and of a sensory awareness so acute that he believed he could hear the very beating of the heart in Tansy's body, he stooped and cut the lashings, removed the carefully arranged paddings from wrists and ankles.

The head rolled restlessly from side to side. The lips seemed to be saying, "Norman . . . Norman—" The eyelids fluttered and he felt a shiver go over the body. And then, in one sudden glorious flood, like some flower blooming miraculously in an instant, expression surged into the face, the limp hands caught at his shoulders, and from the wide-open eyes a lucid, sane, fearless human soul peered up at his.

Not for one instant after that wonderful relief could his mind hold the repellent darkness pressing against it. And the swift lifting of that darkness was a relief almost equal to the first.

With one venomous, beaten glance, Mrs. Gunnison turned away. He could hear her footsteps trail off, the front door open and shut. Then his arms were around Tansy and his lips were against hers.

XVI.

Urgently she pushed him away from her eager lips.

"We daren't be happy, Norm," she said. "We daren't be happy for one single moment."

A disturbed and apprehensive look clouded the longing in her eyes, as if she had become conscious of a great wall shutting out the sunlight. When she answered his unspoken question, it was almost in a whisper, as if even to mention the name might be dangerous.

"Mrs. Carr—"

Her hands tightened on his arms, conveying to him in a physical way the immediacy of their danger.

"Norman, I'm frightened. I'm terribly frightened. For both of us. My soul has learned so much. Things are different from what I thought. And they're much worse."

He took hold of her shoulders, straightened her up. "You're safe," he told her, and there was a scowling strength in his face and his voice. "I've gotten you back, and I'm going to hold you. I've powers you don't know about yet. They can never touch you again."

"Oh, Norman," she began, dropping her eyes, conflicting emotions evident in her expression, "I know how brave and clever you've been. Only I know the risks you've run, the sacrifices you've made for me—wrenching your whole life away from rationality in the bare space of a week, enduring of your own free will the beastliness of that woman's naked thoughts which I was able to endure only because I was forced to. And you have beaten Evelyn Sawtelle and Mrs. Gunnison fairly and at their own game. But Mrs. Carr—" Her hands transmitted her trembling to him. "Oh, Norman, she only *let* you beat them. She wanted to give them a fright, and she preferred

to let you do it for her. That's always her way. But now she'll take a hand herself."

"I think you're exaggerating," he said slowly. "What you've gone through was enough to finish you a dozen times. But . . . we'll talk about it. First I'll get a drink."

And yet, he began to think, Tansy is not the sort to exaggerate. The fact that she's gone through so much and come out so magnificently, is itself a proof that she would not give way to unnecessary fears. He would have to watch himself. His physical weakness, coupled with repugnance for what he had done, was liable to bias his judgment and make him believe anything that promised peace and rest. He rubbed his eyes and blinked them, shaking his head. Relief was making him relax too much. He downed a stiff drink, and poured himself another. Better go easy with that, though. Up to a point it would help, but then it would be worse than nothing at all.

Mrs. Carr, eh? He hadn't paid much attention to her. He'd even wondered if she were concerned at all. Still, that might only mean exceptional cunning. And yet she seemed such a silly old goat. But that might be pretense. Tansy had been in a position to learn a lot.

When he got back to the bedroom, Tansy had changed from her torn and creased dress into one of white wool, which he had always liked very much, but which she had not worn for some time. He remembered she had told him that it had shrunk and become too small for her. But now he sensed intuitively that, in the joy of her return, she took a naïve pride in her youthful body and wanted to show it to best advantage.

"It's like coming into a new house," she told him, with a quick little smile that momentarily cut across her apprehensive look. "Or rather like coming home after you've been away for a long time. You're very happy, but everything is a little strange. It takes you a while to get used to it."

Now that she mentioned it, he realized that there was a kind of uncertainty about her movements, gestures, and expressions, like a person convalescent after a long sickness and just now able to get up and about.

She had combed out her hair so that it fell to her shoulders, and she was still in her bare feet, giving her a diminutive and girlish appearance that he found very attractive. He felt a growing impatience with the possible dangers threatening him, although he knew such an attitude to be unwise. He'd smash anyone who tried to harm her or keep them apart!

She barely sipped her drink, and then put it aside.

"Back of everything, is Mrs. Carr," she began abruptly. "It was she who brought Mrs. Gunnison and Evelyn Sawtelle together, and that one act speaks volumes. Women are invariably secretive about their magic. They work alone. A little knowledge is passed from the elder to the younger ones, especially from mother to daughter, but even that is done grudgingly and with suspicions. This is the only case Mrs. Gunnison knew of—I learned most of this from watching her soul—in which three women actually co-operated. It is an event of revolutionary importance, betokening Heaven knows what for the future. Even now I have only an inkling of Mrs. Carr's ambitions, but they involve vast augmentation of her present powers. For almost three quarters of a century she has been weaving her plans. Her real age is closer to eighty than seventy."

Tansy's voice was rapid, and she had grown pale again. Norman was listening intently.

"She seems an innocent and rather foolish old lady, strait-laced yet ineffectual—but that's only part of a disguise, along with her cooing voice and simpering manners. She's the cleverest actress imaginable. Underneath she's hard as nails—cold where Mrs. Gunnison would be hot, ascetic where Mrs. Gunnison would be a slave to appetites. But she has her own deeply hidden hungers, nevertheless. She is a great admirer of Puritan Massachusetts. Sometimes I have the queerest feeling that she is planning, by some unimaginable means, to re-establish that witch-ridden, so-called theocratic community in this present day and age.

"She rules the other two by fear. In a way they are little more than her apprentices. You know something of Mrs. Gunnison, so you will understand what it means when I say that I have seen Mrs. Gunnison's thoughts go weak with terror because she was afraid that she had slightly offended Mrs. Carr."

Norman finished his drink. His mind was slipping away from this new menace, fumbling at it instead of grasping it firmly. He must whip his mind awake! Tansy pushed her drink over toward him.

"And Mrs. Gunnison's fear is justified, for Mrs. Carr has powers so deadly that she has

never had to use them except as a threat. Her eyes are the worst. Those thick glasses of hers —she possesses that most feared of supernatural weapons, against which half the protective charms in recorded magic are intended. That weapon whose name is so well known throughout the whole world that it has become a laughingstock of skeptics. The evil eye. With it, she can blight and wither. With it, she can seize control of another's soul at a single glance.

"So far she has held back, because she wanted the other two punished for certain trifling disobediences and put into a position where they would have to beg her help. But now she will act quickly. She recognizes in you and your work a danger to herself." Tansy's voice had become so breathlessly rapid that Norman realized she must be talking against time. "Besides that, she has another motive buried in the darkness of her mind. I do not know what it is, but sometimes I have caught her studying my every movement and expression with the strangest avidity—"

Suddenly she broke off and her face went white.

"—I can feel her now . . . I can feel her seeking me out . . . she is breaking through—No!" Tansy screamed. "No, you can't *make* me do it! . . . *I won't!* . . . *I won't!*" Before he knew it, she was on her knees, clinging to him, clutching at his hands. "Don't let her *touch* me, Norman," she was babbling like a terrified child. "Don't let her come *near* me."

"I won't," he said.

"—oh . . . but you can't stop her. . . . She's coming *here*, she says, in her own body—that's how much she cares for your powers! She's going to take me away. . . . I can't tell you what she's going to make me do—it's too *repulsive*."

"If she comes here, I'll stop her," he said in a flat voice.

Her babbling ceased. Slowly she lifted her white, frightened face until it looked up at his.

"You mean—"

He nodded. "I've still got a few cartridges for the revolver." His face was set.

"Norman, I can't let you do it . . . except—"

"—that I am in as much danger as you are."

"Yes."

A semblance of control came back into Tansy's face.

"You might be able to do it," she said softly. "She wouldn't be expecting physical violence. But you would have to be very *quick*. If you hesitated for the tiniest *instant*, if you gave her the slightest opportunity to fix you with her eyes, you would be lost. She would seize control. You know the cobra that spits venom at its victim's eyes—it's like that."

Dully he tried to remember what you did when you committed a murder. There was the alibi—what would that be? And disposal of the body—the furnace, or he could steal some carboys of acid from the chem lab. What acid? And would it be wise to steal it? And then there was motive. That would be his strong point. The courts would not recognize his true motive.

He started. Tansy was shaking him insistently.

"Hurry, Norman. She's very close."

As if in some sticky nightmare of fear and rage and hate, he made his preparations. The curtains drawn. The door barely unlatched, so she could push her way in. Himself in the dark corner of the living room. She would make a good target, outlined against that oblong of daylight.

Suddenly Tansy slipped into his arms. Her body molded itself to his. Her moist lips found his own. Almost brutally he returned the kiss. He heard her whisper breathlessly, "Only be *quick*, darling. Don't let her *look* at you." And then she had retreated to the bedroom doorway.

There were steps hurrying up the walk. His emotions contracted to one tight knot. He was conscious of the cold metal in his hand.

The door was pushed inward. A thin form in gray silk was silhouetted there. Indistinctly he could make out beyond the sight of the gun, the faded face, the thick glasses. His finger tightened on the trigger.

But the thick glasses were turned in his direction. And the silver-haired head gave a little shake.

A dull, almost stupid look came over his face. His jaw sagged.

"Quick, Norman. *Quick!*"

The gray figure in the doorway did not move. The gun wavered, then swung suddenly around until it pointed at Tansy.

"*Norman!*"

XVII.

The small restless breezes of night stirred the leaves of the venerable oak standing like some burly guardian beside the narrow house of the Carrs. Through the overlapping shadows softly gleamed the white of the walls—

such a spotless, pristine white that neighbors laughingly vowed the old lady herself came out after everyone had gone to sleep and washed them down with a long-handled mop. Everywhere was the impression of neatly tended, wholesome age. It even had an odor—like some old chest which a clipper captain had used to bring back elegant spices from his voyages in the China Trade.

The house faced the campus. The girls could see it, going to classes, and it reminded them of afternoons they had spent there, sitting in straight-backed chairs, all on their best behavior, while a wood fire burned merrily on the shining brass andirons in the white fireplace. Mrs. Carr was such a strait-laced innocent old dear! But her innocence was all to the good—it was no trouble at all to pull the wool over her eyes. And she did tell the quaintest stories with the most screamingly funny, completely unconscious points. And she did serve the nicest gingerbread with her cinnamon tea.

A light came on in the hall, casting a pattern of gentle illumination through the New England fanlight onto the scrollwork of the porch. The six-paneled white door below the fanlight opened.

"I'm going, Flora," Mr. Carr called. "Your bridge partners are a bit tardy, aren't they?"

"They'll be here soon." The silvery voice floated down the hall. "Good-by, Linthicum."

He closed the door. Too bad he had to miss the bridge. But the paper they were going to hear on the Theory of Primes would undoubtedly be interesting, and one couldn't have everything. His footsteps sounded on the pebbly walk with its edging of tiny white flowers, like old lace. Then they reached the concrete and slowly died away.

Somewhere at the rear of the house a car drew up. There was the sound of something being lifted, then heavy, plodding footsteps. A door at the back of the house opened, and for a moment against the oblong of light a man could be seen carrying in a smaller figure whose position suggested the presence of certain restraints. Then that door closed, too, and for a while longer there was silence, while the breezes played with the oak leaves.

With thriftless waste of rubber, a luxurious black automobile jerked to a stop in front. Mrs. Gunnison stepped out.

"Hurry up, Evelyn," she said. "You've made us late again. You know how she hates that."

"I'm coming as fast as I can," replied her companion plaintively, emerging from the car.

As soon as the six-paneled door swung open, the faded, spicy odor became more apparent.

"You're late, dears," came the silvery, laughing voice. "But I'll forgive you this once, because I've a surprise for you. Come with me."

They followed the frail figure in rustling, faintly hissing silk into the living room. Just beyond the bridge table, with its embroidered cover and two cut-glass dishes of sweets, stood Norman Saylor. In the mingled lamplight and firelight, his face was expressionless.

"Since Tansy is unable to come," said Mrs. Carr, "he's agreed to make a fourth. Isn't that a nice surprise? And isn't it very nice of Professor Saylor?"

Mrs. Gunnison seemed to be gathering her courage. "I'm not altogether sure that I like the arrangement," she said finally.

"Since when did it matter whether you liked something or not?" came the answer, sharp as a whiplash. Mrs. Carr was standing very straight. "Sit down, all of you!"

When they had taken their places around the bridge table, Mrs. Carr ran through a deck, flipping out certain cards. When she spoke her voice was as sweet and silvery as ever.

"Here are you two, my dears," she said, placing the queens of diamonds and clubs side by side. "And here is Professor Saylor." She added the king of hearts to the group. "And here am I." She placed the queen of spades so that it overlapped all three. "Off here to the side is the queen of hearts—Tansy Saylor. Now what I intend to do is this." She moved the queen of hearts so that it exactly covered the queen of spades. "You don't understand? Well, it isn't what it looks like, and neither of you is especially bright. You'll understand in a moment. Professor Saylor and I have just had an ever so interesting talk," she went on. "All about his work. Haven't we, Professor Saylor?" He nodded. "He's made some of the most fascinating discoveries. It seems that there are laws governing the things that we women have been puttering with. Men are so clever in some ways, don't you think?

"He's been good enough to tell all those laws to me. You'd never dream how much easier and safer it makes everything—and more efficient. Efficiency is so very important these days. Why, already Professor Saylor has made something for me—I won't tell you what it is,

but there's one for each of you and one for someone else. They aren't presents, because I'll keep them all. And if one of you should do something naughty, they'll make it ever so easy for me to whisk part of you away—you know what part.

"And now something is going to happen that will enable Professor Saylor and I to work together very closely in the future—how closely you could never imagine. You're to help. That's why you're here. Open the dining-room door, Norman."

It was an old-fashioned sliding door, gleaming white. Slowly he pushed it aside.

"There," said Mrs. Carr. "My second surprise. I'm full of surprises tonight."

The body was lashed to a chair. From over the gag, the eyes of Tansy Saylor glared at them with impotent hate and a trapped fear.

Evelyn Sawtelle half rose, stifling a scream.

"You needn't get hysterics, Evelyn," said Mrs. Carr sharply. "It's got a soul in it now."

Evelyn Sawtelle sank back, lips trembling.

Mrs. Gunnison's face had grown pale, but she set her jaw firmly and put her elbows on the table. "I don't like it," she said. "It's too open—too risky."

"I am able to take chances I wouldn't have taken a week ago, dear," Mrs. Carr said sweetly. "In this matter your aid and Evelyn's is essential to me. Of course, you're perfectly welcome not to help, if you don't want to. Only I do hope you understand the consequences."

Mrs. Gunnison dropped her eyes. "All right," she said. "But let's be quick about it."

"I am a very old woman," began Mrs. Carr, with tantalizing slowness, "and I am very fond of life. It has been a little dispiriting for me to think that mine is drawing to a close. And, for reasons I think you understand, I have something more to fear in death than most persons.

"But now it seems that I am once more going to experience all those things that an old woman looks upon as forever lost. The unusual circumstances of the last two weeks have helped a great deal, in preparing the ground. Professor Saylor has helped a little. And you, my dears, are going to help, too. You see, it's necessary to build up a certain kind of tension, and only people with the right background can do that, and it takes at least four of them. Professor Saylor—he has such a brilliant mind!—tells me that it's very much like building up electrical tension, so that a spark will be able to jump a gap. Only in this case the gap will be from where I am sitting to, there"—and she pointed at the bound figure. "And there will be two sparks. And then, when it's over, the queen of hearts will exactly cover the queen of spades. Also, the queen of spades will exactly cover the queen of hearts. But it's the things you can't see that are always the most important, don't you think?"

"You can't do it!" said Mrs. Gunnison. "You won't be able to keep the truth hidden!"

"You think not? On the contrary, I won't have to make an effort. Let me ask you what will happen if old Mrs. Carr claims that she is young Tansy Saylor. I think you know very well what would happen to that dear, sweet, innocent old lady. There are times when the laws and beliefs of a skeptical society can be so very convenient.

"You can begin with the fire, Norman. I'll tell the others exactly what they are to do."

He tossed a handful of powder on the fire. It flared up greenly, and a pungent, cloying aroma filled the room.

There was a stirring at the heart of the world and a movement of soundless currents in the black void. Upon the dark side of the planet, a million women moved restlessly in their sleep, and a few woke trembling with unnamed fears. Upon the light side, a million more grew nervous, and unaccustomed daydreams chased unpleasantly through their minds; some made mistakes at their work and had to add again a column of figures or tie a broken thread or readjust the intricate mechanism of a fuse or detonators; and a few found strange suspicion growing mushroomlike among their thoughts. A certain ponderous point began to work closer and closer to the end of the massive surface supporting it, not unlike a top slowly wobbling toward the edge of a table, and certain creatures who were nearby saw what was happening and skittered away terrified through the blackness. Then, at the very edge, it paused. The irregularity went out of its movement, and it rode steady and true once more. The currents ceased to trouble the void, and the Balance was restored.

Norman Saylor opened the windows at top and bottom so the breeze might fan out the remnants of pungent vapor. Then he cut the lashings of the bound figure and loosened the gag from its mouth. In a little while, she

rose, and without a word they started from the room.

All this while, none of the others had spoken. The figure in the gray silk dress sat with head bowed, shoulders hunched dejectedly, frail hands dropped limply at her side.

In the doorway, the woman whom Norman Saylor had loosed turned back.

"I have only one more thing to say to you. All that I told you earlier this evening was completely true—including that matter of the devices he has made for each one of you and which I will keep close by me. All completely true—with one very big exception—"

Mrs. Gunnison looked up. Evelyn Sawtelle half turned in her chair. The third figure did not move.

"The soul of Mrs. Carr was not transferred to the body of Tansy Saylor this evening. That happened much earlier—when Mrs. Carr had the easier task of exorcising a lowly bestial spirit from that body and then herself occupying the empty brain, leaving the captive soul of Tansy Saylor trapped in her own aged body —and doomed to be murdered by her own husband in accord with Mrs. Carr's well-laid plan. For Mrs. Carr knew that Tansy Saylor would only have one panic-stricken thought—to run home to her husband. And Mrs. Carr was very sure that she could persuade Norman Saylor to kill the body housing the soul of his wife, under the impression that he was killing Mrs. Carr. And that would have been the end of Tansy Saylor's soul, since the soul dies or vanishes with the body it inhabits.

"You knew, Mrs. Gunnison, that Mrs. Carr had taken Tansy Saylor's soul from you, just as you had taken it from Evelyn Sawtelle, and for similar reasons. But you dared not reveal that fact to Norman Saylor because you would have lost your one bargaining point. This evening you half suspected that something was different from what it seemed, but you did not dare to make a stand.

"And now as a result of what we have done this evening with your help, the soul of Mrs. Carr is once more in the body of Mrs. Carr, and the soul of Tansy Saylor is in the body of Tansy Saylor. That is all. And now, good night."

The six-paneled door closed behind them. The pebbly path crunched under their feet.

"How did you know?" was Tansy's first question. "When I stood there in the doorway, blinking through those awful spectacles, gasping after the way I'd hurried with only the blind thought of finding you—how did you know?"

"Partly," he said reflectively, "because she gave herself away toward the end. She began to emphasize words in that exaggerated way of hers. But that wouldn't have been enough in itself. She was too good an actress. She must have been studying your mannerisms for years. And after seeing how well you played her part tonight, with hardly any preparation, I wonder that I ever did see through her."

"Then how did you?"

"It was partly the way you hurried up the walk—it didn't sound like Mrs. Carr. And partly something about the way you held yourself. But mainly it was that headshake you gave—that quick triple headshake, I couldn't fail to recognize it. And after that, I realized all the other things."

"Do you think," said Tansy softly, "that after this you'll never begin to wonder if I am really I?"

"I suppose I will," he said seriously. "But I believe I'll always be able to conquer my doubts."

And Tansy laughed.

But he was not yet over being serious. "I think that tonight we were a lot closer to a much bigger danger than even we ever guessed," he said. He had not yet surrendered to the reaction that gripped Tansy. "There's more behind this matter of the Balance than we may realize. There's a lot we'll do with this, but we'll want to go slowly and test every step of the way."

There were footsteps, then a friendly greeting from the shadows ahead.

"Hello, you two," called Mr. Gunnison. "Bridge game over? I thought I'd walk back with Linthicum and then drive home with Hulda. Say, Norman, Pollard dropped in to speak to me after the paper had been read. He's had a sudden change of heart on that matter we were talking about. From what he says, the trustees may even cancel their meeting."

"It was a very interesting paper," Mr. Carr informed them, "and I had the satisfaction of asking the speaker a very tricky question. But I'm sorry I missed the bridge. Oh, well, I don't suppose I'll ever notice any difference."

"And the funny thing is," Tansy told Norman after they had walked on, "is that he really *won't*."

THE END.

THE GOLDEN BRIDLE

By Jane Rice

THE golden bridle was the answer to the golden dream of every jockey—it meant a winner in every race. But its golden touch had something, too, of the Midas touch—

Illustrated by Alfred

Say, that is mighty white. I do not mind if I do, though I remembers the day when I would not of touched beer with a ten-foot pole. Weight. Jockeys has got to watch their weight like it is tombstones they is putting on instead of pounds.

Well, here's luck, mister. May all your double parlays give the bookies fits.

What's that? Yeah, sure I am a jockey. Was. There is not no point in giving you the old three and five. You look like a right guy. Why should I kid you? I have not been up on a horse for four years. Six months cold for a jock is a wide turn, but four years—say, four years is—what the devil, I am washed up cleaner than a choirboy's ears.

And this is not my fault. That is what gives me the burn. It is not my fault. When Lady Luck smiles in the racing game she has got a grin so broad you can count her back fillings, but, when she quits smiling, brother, she just quits and you might as well go wrap your head in a sweat blanket and forget it.

You know, you is going along good, not winning no Champagne Stakes nor nothing like that, but hitting the percentages and going along O. K., see, when all of a sudden you finds that things begin to happen. And they keeps right on happening and you can spit in the wind all you want to and chew four-leaf clovers and take a horseshoe to bed with you and it does not have no effect. Things just keeps right on happening until after a while the trainers puts the double O on you and you can not even get a leg up on a spavined brood mare and everybody takes to calling you "Jinx."

That is me, mister. Jinx Jackson.

Oh, I am not beefing none. I manages, what with one thing and another. But believe me, buddy, it is enough to give you the yelping wipes when you stands there by the fence with the sun beating down on you, and the crowd milling around excitedlike, and the bugles blowing, and the flags waving, and the horses walking past—nervous—and the colors up with their pants skintight and their shirts bellying out like silk balloons, and then they are wheeling the barrier in, and you look at the track and it is smooth and sweet and fast

as a filly with bees in her ears, and everything gets still except the popcorn peddlers, and there is that awful minute when you is waiting and the shirt sticks to your back and you gets that old, familiar, tight feeling on the inside of your thighs, and your tongue is like a sponge bit between your teeth, and then that cry—like a rising wind—"THEY'RE OFF!"

That is when it hits you. Right here. As if somebody has yanked your stomach out and let it go *wham* back at you, like a pair of suspenders.

That—and when you see a snipe getting hisself boxed on a inside turn, or bearing out in the run through the stretch, or—aw, nuts with it. It gets you, that is all. It gets you.

Once you has got the feel of horses in your blood you is a goner. A gone goner. It is there, brother, and there is not no use fighting it. You cannot no more keep away from a paddock than you can stop blinking your eyes.

Jimmie Winkie used to say, "You can shake grief and sorrow, you can bury remorse—but you can't never lose the feel o' a horse."

Jimmie Winkie. Yeah, Wee Willie. That is the same.

Good! Man, he had the magic touch. Why, he could add twenty lengths to anything on four legs. Easy. Jimmie was tops. Why, I has seen him come from behind the hard way and spot them a extra advantage by pulling out and still win and there was not no photo finishes, neither. When he won, mister, he won.

He was a funny guy, he was. Had a kind of puckery face and big ears. Walked springy, like a banty rooster. Used to use a special bridle when he was up. Superstitious? It is not superstition exactly. It is just a kind of a feeling you get about certain things. Lots of us jocks are thataway. I know I would of had a hissy—four years ago—if I had of mislaid a old wore-out crop I always carried. Moe Prentice had a buckeye he would not of parted with for nobody. Jackie Watson had some sort of a medal on a silver chain. Cry Baby Noolan would not no more of thought of riding with his cap anyway but hind side to than he would of thought of riding without any clothes on. In fact, if he would of had to make a choice, I reckon he would of rode in his skin before he would of changed his cap proper. And, like I said, Jimmie has this here special bridle, though there is not much special about it except that it is goldish-looking if you hold it in the right light. But seems he takes a fancy to it and from the way he acts you would of thought it is made from the tanned hide of a Derby winner. But it is not no such thing, of course. It is just a bridle like any racing bridle only, like I said, it is goldish-looking in a unnoticeable manner.

He gets it one year when we is finishing up the circuit down in Tijuana. This is before he hits his stride. When he is going along, like me, not snaffling no tall money nor nothing but knocking off his percentages. He is plain Jimmie Winkie then. The newspapers has not tagged that there Wee Willie on to him yet and he is not endorsing no leather jackets, nor saying as how he likes Puffie Wuffies because they is superroasted and rolled on hoops.

Well, as I was saying, we is down in Tijuana and it is nighttime and we is walking down one of them crooked streets which is about as thick in Tijuana as saddle sores is in a riding academy. We is walking along with our hands in our pockets and not much else, being as how we has inadvertently got mixed up in a game knowed as faro, the same which is like being on the wrong end of a loco bronc, and which we would not of got into if Jimmie had not of wanted to increase a five-dollar bill into a ten-dollar bill so as to buy a real nice present for Ditsy. Anyhow, like I said, we is walking along minding our own business when there is—

Ditsy? Oh, Ditsy was Jimmie's sister. Name was Dorothy, but Jimmie called her Ditsy. He was crazy about her. Seemed like he had raised her since she was knee high to a feed box. Guess they had some muddy tracks, them two, and what with their not having nobody but theirselves and her being crippled, why, one way and another, he set a lot of store by her.

Anyway, we is walking along, Jimmie and me, and I am thinking about what we is going to eat for breakfast the next day, and lunch, and supper, and Jimmie is thinking about how is he going to buy Ditsy something when we hear a rumpus going on around a corner up ahead. It increases graduallike and when we gets to the corner we meets it, head-on you might say.

There is about a dozen people who is all personal acquaintances of John Barleycorn, and they is pestering a woman who looks like she is on her way to a masquerade at a insane asylum. She has got on a sheet all draped and wrapped every which way and her feet

is laced up in sandals and there is a wreath on her hair, only now it is setting cockeyed on account of as how these here people has been chasing her, and she is carrying a bridle. In fact, if I had of spent my money on John Barleycorn instead of faro, I probably would of joined in on the side of these here people who is laughing theirselves sick and grabbing at this here sheet and having a big time, for which I cannot blame them any as this woman is sure a curious sight.

While I am thinking what a curious sight she is, Jimmie busts up the party. He does this with very little fuss, hitting merely one guy who goes down like a sack of wet oats and the rest takes to their heels as I am doubling up my fists preparing to wade in.

"Now, sister," Jimmie says, rubbing his knuckles tenderlike, "if I was you I would vamoose. Tijuana is no place for a lady without as how she has got company to see that she gets where she has started out for."

Well, this woman straightens her wreath and breaks out in some kind of a foreign language which sounds like nothing I ever heard unless it is "Chopsticks" played on a piano which is out of tune and is minus some of the keys.

"Look, sister," Jimmie says, "vamoose while the vamoosing is favorable."

The woman makes some motions and spouts some more of this here talk and there is just one word I get and that is "grease." She says this over and over, "Grease, grease," meanwhile gesturing for all she is able.

"Grease?" Jimmie says, puzzled, and she nods violently and shakes the bridle she is carrying and does a act like she is putting it on a horse and then flaps her arms like she is flying.

"Grease," she says.

I begins to get uneasy. "Say," I says to Jimmie, sotto voice, "let's us get out of here—this gal has got bats in her belfry."

"I think she has lost a horse," Jimmie says slow.

"Horse!" I says. "How is she going to straddle a horse in that getup? She has lost her mind. Let's us get out of here. Loonies is not no picnic."

Jimmie does not pay no attention to me. He takes the bridle away from her—gentle—so as not to scare her and *he* does a act like *he* is putting it on a horse. "Horse?" he says.

This looney looks at him a minute, then her face kind of brightenslike. She points to the bridle Jimmie is holding and says, "Hippos."

"She has got the D. T.'s," I cheeps. "She is talking about a hippopotamus what flies or I will eat that there bridle. Come on," I says, "this is not no place for—" But I do not get no further because there is a faint whinny and this here woman shrieks joyfully and—without so much as a kiss-my-foot—lams in the direction of this here nickering which, judging from the sound, is a block or so to our rear—though we has not seen no sign of no horse when we is walking by thataway.

We stands there gawking after this dame while she disappears in the night and Jimmie, suddenlike, yells, "Hey, here is your bridle," and starts after her and me after Jimmie, because I has not got no wish to see Jimmie sucked in on something that is not kosher, and it is plain that there is something here that does not meet the eye right off.

I dope it that this here dame is a kind of a lead rein for some guys which is laying low in a alley or some place figuring to roll whoever she ropes in, and it is a unpleasant statistic that persons is often beat up severe when it is discovered they has not got no wherewith to make such a business profitable.

When we gets down the street a ways I catches up to Jimmie and stops him and I says, "Has you taken leave of your senses? This here is one of them cul-de-sacs or I am a ring-tailed—" But I do not say baboon, which I had intended, because somewhere I hears a noise like a lot of pigeons taking off—like they has been shooed—and from way up, like on a roof, I hears this woman laughing and it dwindles away and, then, it is quiet and a little white feather drifts down and lands in the gutter. It is all very weird and I do not like it.

"I would of swore a horse nickered down here a minute ago," Jimmie says.

"Shut up," I says, "and let's us get out of here before we is knifed in the back."

So we does and that is how Jimmie come by the bridle.

Well, say, I do not mind if I do. There is this about beer. You do not have to worry none the next morning about tying your shoes. Ever try sticking a hot knife in it? Many's the time I has seen my old man heat the poker until it is as red as the old Scratch hisself and then plunge it into the pail. That was when you could get all you wanted for a dime with boiled ham and cheese and bologna throwed into boot and, like as not, a slice of liver for the cat.

Here's bumps, mister. And may you never tear up your ducats without looking twice.

Where was I? Oh, yeah, Tijuana. Well, here we is without a buffalo between us. Broke as a skillet of scrambled eggs and up in the fifth the next day, the same which dawns bright and early and finds me and Jimmie nearly splitting a girth trying to trade that there bridle for a plate of buckwheat cakes, but everybody gives us the zero gaze until I begins to wonder if we is coming down with smallpox. So we hunts up a dopester by the name of Stew Hatcher and he stakes us to a meal after which we hangs around until he has got up his sheet and then we rides out to the track with him and his girl. We asks Stew, just kidding, who he is picking in the fifth and Stew says it is not us and he is not kidding. For his money, he says, it is High Jinks, Admirella and Sky Eagle. One, two, three.

I am up on Black Boy and Jimmie he is up on Peajacket, so we thumbs our noses at Stew and gives him the buzz and says as how we is pleased to have met this girl he is with—which is a lie because she is very snooty—and we goes on in.

We gets into our colors and sets around with the fellows dishing out a lot of bull about what we done in Tijuana and Jimmie gives me the wink and says he has got hold of a nifty bridle he is willing to take a loss on. And he gets this here bridle out of his locker and says if anybody will give him a fin for it they can have it, though they will be rooking him on the deal.

Boy, does he get the laugh. Moe says he will give him a fin for it if Jimmie will throw in Peajacket and shine his boots for a week, too. And Cry Baby Noolan says if it is such a hot bridle why don't he bridle Peajacket with it. And everybody starts gaffing Jimmie and I acts real indignant and I says what is it worth to them if he *does* bridle Peajacket with it, them being such sports. Jimmie, seeing the lay of the land, plays up to me and says, "No," and everybody chimes in giving him the merry ha-ha and when there is three bucks up he will not do it, why, then Jimmie says O. K., he will do it, see.

Does a holler go up when they catches on to how they has been taken! But Jimmie says a bet is a bet and he is game enough to live up to his end of the bargain if they is. "Of course, if they *isn't*—" he says, inferring that anybody who reneges is a horse's patoot, so, naturally, nobody reneges, though there is some grousing.

I used to say to Jimmie, I would say, "Jimmie, remember the day at Tijuana when we nicked Moe and them for three bucks?" And Jimmie, he would say, "Yeah," and kind of draw in his breath like he was thinking about it—hard. Remembering how Peajacket upset the bookies' apple cart.

You see, Stew Hatcher is wrong. It is Peajacket, High Jinks and Admirella. One, two, three. And the owner of Peajacket—I forget his name, big loose-mouthed chap with a face like a side of beef—is fair to be hobbled because he has not bet on his own entry on account of as how it is a cinch to lose. It is a two-year-old he has picked up for seven and a quarter at a public sale and he is just feeling him out and damn if Jimmie does not bring in a win.

Me? Oh, I comes in with the tailbearers. I could of got in a lame fourth, but I am so whooper-jawed watching Jimmie go down the stretch like a lighted fuse that I lets this here Black Boy I am up on bear out—he was death on bearing out—and, of course, that puts the quietus on us. There is not no percentage in whipping a horse over for fourth place. A horse has got sense enough to know when you is making a fool out of him.

No, I do not guess you will recollect Peajacket. He turns out to be a foozle, after all. He is entered a couple of more times, Saratoga, I thinks, and Empire City—Syl Patton up—but he does not do nothing but pick up a coupla pounds of mud.

But he sure is not no foozle that afternoon at Tijuana.

There is not no barrier. You just keeps back of the line as best you can. That is one way to lose a race before the gun. I has seen them do it on purpose. You know, too tight a rein, get your horse skittered, make him break three or four times, and, when the gun goes, hold him back just long enough to let him see that he is a cooked potato. Nine times out of ten you can whip him raw and he will run, but he will not run fast enough. But *your* nose is clean. The trainer cannot say as how *you* did not try.

Say, am I boring you with this? If I am—okke doke, any time you has had a sufficiency, say so.

Well, as I was saying, there is not no barrier. Outside of a little tail flicking and head tossing, Black Boy is as calm as a Jersey cow. High Jinks breaks once and Sky Eagle and some of the field prances around a bit, but Peajacket

he acts like he has been fed hopped oats. In fact, there is some talk of it later on, but they cannot never prove nothing. Anyway, this here Peajacket is taking on for a fare-you-well with Jimmie trying to gentle him down and the starter getting mad and a jock, name of Happy Slauderwasser—that is a moniker for you, nice guy though—who is next to Peajacket swearing something fierce. Finally, Jimmie gets this here Peajacket backed in and he is lathered up like a ad for saddle soap, and the gun goes, and out of the tail of my eye as me and Black Boy takes off I sees Peajacket rearing up and I thinks, "Oh, Lordy," because it is a rule last one in has to pitch a buck in the kitty. And it is plain to see, in a field of fifteen, Jimmie is slated to be the last one in and then we will only have a buck apiece instead of a buck fifty.

I settles down and starts easing over to the inside track hoping for a pocket. High Jinks is up ahead and he is not anywheres near let out yet. There is three or four horses in between, then Admirella nosing up, Sky Eagle alongside, doing like me, playing a wait, and Jimmie and the rest of the field bunched in behind.

I am not thinking about Jimmie no more, though. I am concentrating on them three or four babies cutting off my view of High Jinks. I am not worried about them none, but when there is a opening I wants to be there instead of Sky Eagle. So I am concentrating, like I said, and I hear this horse coming. You do

not actually hear them as much as you *feel* them. It is a mixture of both. It is like you got an alarm system inside of you and all of a sudden it is ringing like who popped Mollie and you know with a kind of a . . . of a . . . a kind of a awareness that you got heavy competition.

I remembers wondering who it could be. There is High Jinks and Admirella in plain sight. Sky Eagle and me practically pat-a-caking at each other, some of the field ahead, but they is giving by now and, so far as I know, what is left in tow is not capable of doing nothing but horse apples.

I do not take my mind off this here opening, though. It is getting ripe, I can see that, and I am bound I am going to be there when it is due before it closes in and strings out.

Then, I catches a glimpse of this here horse on the off side of Sky Eagle. A kind of consciousness it is of this here third horse and I am sort of cheered when I see it is not bothering none about no openings, nor no inside track, nor nothing like that. And, while I am being cheered and thinking what a smart guy I am, this here third horse pounds ahead past Sky Eagle, a shoulder, half a length, a length, and that opening I been hovering over swings wide as a barn door and Sky Eagle is through it because I am yawping at Jimmie Winkie with his ears skinned back crouched high on Peajacket, and if I had not of knowed better I would of swore he was scared green, and while I am yawping, Black Boy bears out so, as I said, that puts the quietus on us.

There has been better races run and bigger ones has been won by darker horses, but, offhand, I cannot call any to mind that I got such a thrill out of. I do not know whether it is because I am so cocksure Jimmie is bringing up the rear, or because Moe Prentice—he is up on High Jinks—is took down a peg or two, or maybe because there is a certain something about the way that there horse runs with his nostrils red and wide, and his tail streaming out behind him like it has been starched, and his hoofs beating music out of that there track like a crazy drummer, and Jimmie pasted to him close as a surcingle and with a kind of a look about him like night wind sounds, if you know what I mean. A kind of a queer, wild, blowy look. But most of all I guess it is the horse.

Jimmie says it is the horse and he ought to of knowed being as how he was up on him. Jimmie says it is also a great surprise to him that Peajacket wins, but, naturally, he does not say this out—but just to me—as it is not a good policy to let on that you are surprised when you bring in a winner.

How does it feel to bring in a winner? Brother, you can have the greatest symphony that was ever wrote; I will take the thunder of a winner's hoofs coming down the straightaway. That is something, brother. That is really *some*thing. It is like a . . . like a . . . well, like I said, a kind of a awareness. Like you was conscious of the noise and the feel all at the same minute. Take that there Peajacket. I got it right away. The noise and the feel together, I mean. Like there was two horses running. One on top the other.

We bums a ride back after the seventh and gets out on the main drag and flips a coin to see whether we eats or buys Ditsy something. It comes out buying Ditsy something so we goes to one of these here shops that has a window full of everything from jewelry to tablecloths and we picks out a powder box that plays a tune when the lid is lifted off. A thin, tinkly, sort of *plink, plink* tune, but pretty. Reminds you of the way ladies used to rustle when they walked, if you know what I mean.

While the guy is wrapping it up, Jimmie goes over and picks up a vase which is setting on a shelf with a lot of other vases. This here vase he picks up is blue and has a lot of well-built dames on it holding garlands of flowers. Jimmie kind of whistles.

"Look at this here," he says.

I agrees it is nice, but points out that we has got exactly twenty-nine cents between us and the price is marked clear two fifty.

"This is a strange coincidence," he says, more to hisself than me, and I says it is not no coincidence it is a vase and if he is thinking about switching over, why, there is a vase on the shelf above which is better-looking on account of as how it has a scene painted on it and the price is twenty-five cents cheaper.

This guy comes up about this time and washes his hands in the air and asks if we are interested in a vase.

"No," I says.

"Yes," Jimmie says. "Who is this here middle dame on this here vase?"

"They represent the Muses," this guy says. "A marvelous buy for the money."

"This here middle dame is a Muse?" asks Jimmie.

"They are all Muses," this guy says, "god-

desses of the arts and poetry and science. A very artistic vase. Only two fifty."

"Did any of them have a horse?" Jimmie asks.

"Horse?"

"Horse."

"I could not say. It is a very handsome vase, howinever, and I will make you a special price of two twenty-five, if you are interested."

"Where can I find out if any of them had a horse?"

"I could not say, unless it is the library. Two dollars even I will make it. Below that I cannot go."

"Very well," I chimes in, being tired of Jimmie ribbing this here guy about a horse, "we will take it in place of the powder box."

With that this guy freezes over like the outside of a mint julep and he says chillylike, "I have just remembered that this vase has been put aside for another party."

And I says, "That is very odd being as how you were so all fired set on us having it at reduced cost."

"Herman," this guys says.

And another guy with a neck like a Percheron, shoulders his way through a curtain in the back and stands there like as if he is itching for somebody to say "When." So we takes our package and we leaves.

I am in favor of hunting up a crap game and shooting our twenty-nine cents and Jimmie says that is a splendid idea and for me to do so and he will meet me at the pool parlor in a hour. I asks where is he going? And he says the library. And as he has never been inside a library in his life to my certain knowledge, I figure he is telling me in a nice way to mind my own business. Which I does. And in a hour I has run the twenty-nine cents into eight bits and a Masonic emblem.

I meets Jimmie like he said and I can see right away he is exceptional thoughtful. We go to a place called La Cucuracha where the second cup of coffee is free and you gets gravy with your potatoes, although Jimmie seems to have lost his appetite. He keeps transferring his food from one side of his plate to the other until I outs and asks him pointblank what is ailing him.

"Did you ever hear tell of a horse called Pegasus?" he says by way of answer.

"No," I says. "Who sired him?"

"He is out of Medusa by Neptune," says Jimmie.

"I never heard of them, neither," I says shoveling in a mouthful of potatoes and gravy. "What has this here Peg-whoit got to do with you?"

"I am not certain for sure," he says, "but I has got a idea."

"Which is?"

"Could be he got blowed off his course," Jimmie says, "or got scared by another gadfly or some such, landed in Tijuana and this here Muse comes after him and—"

"Look," I says, "one of us has got a screw loose and it is not me. Begin over and repeat slow and there is apple pie with the dinner and if you do not want it I will eat your piece, if it is all the same to you. Now what was you saying?"

He shoves his plate back. "I am going to break the track record tomorrow," he says, and there is something about the way he says it, some quality in his voice that makes me sit up and take notice all of a sudden.

A kind of creepy sensation comes over me and I am reminded of when I am a kid and the grandfather's clock in the hall would strike during the night. It would go *bong—bong—bong* real slow and soft, but filling the house, howinever, and making the air vibrate. I would lie there and think, "It is just the grandfather's clock in the hall," but that did not make no difference. My feet would get cold and my eyes near bug out of my head, and I would not have no swallow and I would lie there thinking, "It is just the grandfather's clock in the hall."

I gives Jimmie one of them searching looks you read about, but it does not tell me nothing except that he is a mite tightened-uplike and is letting some fifty cents worth of food go to waste.

"Thanks for the tip," I says. "Who you planning on being up on? Man-o'-War?"

"Ditsy has always wanted a grand piano," he says, "since she was not bigger'n a bootjack." And he says, "I will get her the best one money can buy."

It is obvious that he tightened up more than I think because there is not enough space in that two-room flat in Cleveland to hold both Ditsy and a grand piano at the same time.

"That will be dandy," I says, "but I am afraid there will not be no grand piano in it. Them things cost folding money."

"Folding money," he repeats and the words sounds like a three-inch sirloin the way he says

them—thick and red and juicy. "You know what I am going to have," he says, "I am going to have a pair of handmade boots—them that laces at the ankle—and I am going to have a suit with buttonholes under the buttons on the sleeves. Not just thread sewed to look like buttonholes—*real* buttonholes I am going to have under the buttons and a yellow chamois bag."

"A yellow chamois bag under the buttons," I says and, recalling to mind a chap named Joe Hankins who fought a bunch of Comanches all one night in a psycopathic ward at a hospital in Louisville, I continues to smile pleasantly while I eases my chair back.

"Yeah," Jimmie says, "lined with flannel so as the bridle will not get scratched up none."

"Sure," I agrees, "flannel."

"Saratoga," says Jimmie, "Havre de Grace, Narragansett, Hialeah, Aqueduct."

"Hawthorne, Churchill Downs, Empire City, Belmont Park, Thistledown," I chimes in nodding like a Chinese laundryman who has lost your wash. I holds my breath and gets to my feet praying that I will be able to ease him out quiet.

"Through?" Jimmie says, cool as a cucumber. "What say we see if we can get a game of pool on the cuff?"

The next day he breaks the track record.

I has thought about it a great deal since then and do you know what I figure? I figure it like this. I figure that Jimmie had got on to a secret. There is a secret to doing everything. Like tight-rope walking, or shooting par golf consistent, or whizzing a ball over a tennis net so as it falls just so and dribbles off before it can be got up off the ground. There is a secret to juggling plates and a secret to pole vaulting higher than anybody else. The plates and the pole and the rope and the golf clubs and tennis racquet is all the same. What I mean is you could take half a dozen plates and throw them up in the air and they would land behind the eight ball. But take these here same identical plates and give them to a juggler and he will make them perform without so much as mussing his tie. Why? Because he knows the secret.

Well, then, why can it not be the same way with horses? I am not saying you can take a plow horse and make him win a race any more than that there juggler can juggle plates made out of pig iron. But I am saying, if you know the secret, you can take a *race horse* and make him win a race. And, like I said, I has thought about it a lot and I figure there *is* a secret and Jimmie has got on to it. I figure the secret comes to him in a flash like when you know, in a sort of a burst of knowing, that the dealer has aces back to back. Because from that day on he never rides a loser. Except one. I will get around to that in a second.

Saratoga and Hialeah and Havre de Grace and all of them is not no pipe dream. And neither is Ditsy's grand piano, though it is not in no two-room flat. It is in a living room as big as from here to there. One of them two-storied jobs that goes all the way up to the roof. One of them studio living rooms. And done real classy with drapes and hand-carved furniture and lamps with rose silk on the underneath parts of their shades, and them black-and-white, pen-and-ink-looking pictures on the walls, and a rug that feels like it will arch in the midde and pur if you rub it, it is that soft.

Of course, it does not happen pronto. It starts out gradual with Jimmie's name in the papers—"Keep your eye on So-and-So up on So-and-So"—and then it takes a up curve with the sports writers pegging him with this here Wee Willie and first thing you know he is appearing regular Sundays in the rotogravure, him and Ditsy, holding a horseshoe or a shamrock or this here bridle or such as that, and persons are talking about the "Winkle Technique" and children is eating their weight in cereal because Wee Willie Winkie says as how it has got Vitamin Q and for six box tops or reasonable facsimiles thereof the cereal people will send you a handsome, autographed photograph of Wee Willie on Martinique or Little John or Fireflow or some such as them. And his stock is going up like a fever chart. And he is in the bucks. But I mean *in*, brother.

It changes him some. I do not mean he goes around putting out like he has hung the moon and painted the blue sky; if anything, he quietens down and kind of draws into hisself like. In fact, when he is congratulated on his ability, which he is every time he turns around, he acts like it is making him sick to his stomach. And when the write-ups come out about how modest he is and shy and retiring and how he always tries to give the credit for a win to the horse, why then he acts like he is even sicker and getting no better fast.

Naturally, while most of the publicity is along the lines of sweetness and light, there is some of it as squeezes out a few lemons. Like them that says as how Winkie rides a horse

walleyed, and them as hints it is mighty peculiar he does not never lose and a pity, furthermore, because the odds on a horse what is toting Winkie is something to behold in a new all-time low.

Then there is the follow-up gang that always seems to heel to a celeb. Whether he gets to be a celeb by riding horses or eating goldfish or drinking thirty buckets of beer does not make no noticeable difference—they follows. It gets so Jimmie cannot go nowheres without getting the press took out of his pants and he is lucky if the pants is not also took out with the press.

People sends him alligators from Florida and salmon from Alaska. He gets lariats made out of tail hair plaited, and high-heeled boots with tooling. He gets silver spurs, and leather jackets, and saddles, and gloves, and sombreros. He gets blankets and pipes and racks for this and holders for that. He gets a sheep dog, a pair of love birds, a coon cat, a baby leopard, a bearskin rug with the teeth still in it, a stuffed owl, a collection of butterflies, and some twisty horns off a mountain goat all set and glued on a wooden thing to hang on the wall. He gets socks by the gross, handkerchiefs by carloads and one dame even sends him a box of pink silk underwear with his initials stitched in fancy in orchid embroidery.

To give you the idea, one day he appears in the papers cutting a piece out of one of them round coffee cakes and the next day there is nineteen round coffee cakes delivered to his address and he does not *like* round coffee cakes nor no kind of coffee cakes, but is cutting this here piece to please the press photographer who wants a homey touch.

But for everybody what is giving him something there is two wanting him to give *them* something. Jimmie used to say he got so he could tell right off who was a givee and who was a gimme. Not that he does not appreciate what is give him, even if he does not keep it, and not that he does not hand out to the gimmes—it is just that he does not want nothing off of nobody and does not want nobody to want nothing off of him.

But when you gets in the major brackets that is not the way things is. So, like I said, it changes him some. Some way, he reminds me of a kid what has eat a quarter's worth of jelly beans all one flavor.

It changes Ditsy, too. Her hair is not loose-like and fluffy no more. It is on the order of a cocker spaniel's, only precise, and her ears has got earbobs in them, and instead of wearing print housedresses she is all diked out in them dresses which is not referred to as dresses, but as "creations." She has got a new wheelchair which is streamlined and has more chrome on it than a limousine, and some bird with a Vandyke and a accent you can spread like marmalade is giving her some kind of underwater massage for her legs, so she should be very happy. She is not, though.

She puts on like she is happy and anybody what does not know her would say, "My, she is happy," and they would be ninety-nine and forty-four hundreds percent wrong because she is not happy by no means. She fools Jimmie because Jimmie is so anxious for her to be happy that, when she keeps saying she is happy, he believes she is happy and it does not occur to him that when you are happy you does not go around saying, "My, I am happy," like you was learning a lesson in memorizing.

When a woman is happy she sings and brushes her hair a lot and says stuff like, "I declare, it is four o'clock *already*, can you beat that?" and she looks smily even when she is not actually smiling. So it is obvious Ditsy is not happy because she is not doing none of them things. When she smiles it is more or less of a lip movement going on under her nose and not having nothing to do with the rest of her face, and she does not sing spontaneous, though when she is in that two-room flat the landlady has had to request her several times to pipe down. And, instead of saying, "I declare it is four o'clock *already*," she just says, "It is four o'clock," like you would say, "The dodo is now become extinct," or, "I see where there in a population of ninety-two in East Gleep, Nevada."

So, as I said, it changes Ditsy, too. And it is pathetic to watch them two, him and her, working so hard at being happy and pretending that life is a bowl of cherries when it is plain life is a onion poultice.

Some time passes and I am here, there, and yonder and word gets around that Jimmie Winkie is hitting the paint which occasions me to be surprised because Jimmie Winkie is never one to hit the paint even in a mild manner. So I am not paying any attention to these here remarks and I am once or twice very near smacking persons in the puss who say that it is a fact that Ditsy is turned into a red-hot momma.

What's that? Oh, that. Well, it seems that this here underwater massage is the stuff and she is able to get around some—not good, understand, but some.

What! Her! Say, listen here, bub—well, all right, no offense taken, but she is not that kind. O. K. O. K. Let it ride. Sure I will have another beer, only do not make no more remarks like that, see. O. K. O. K.

Maybe I do not make myself clear. I mean she has gone in for double-jointed cigarette holders and red fingernails and them long-haired guys what paints a picture of somebody so as they have one eye here and one here and clockwork springs for the top of their head and maybe a spare tire for one hand and a fiddle for the other with a bunch of carrots sprouting out of it.

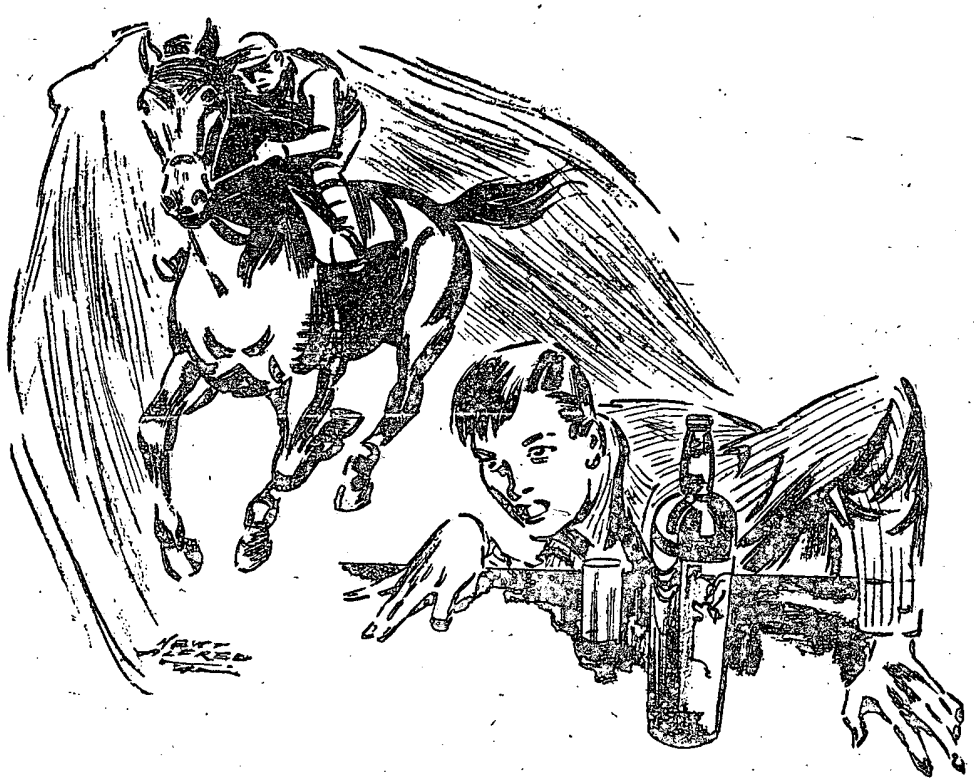
Anyway, that is what I am hearing and—here's bumps, brother. You know I set and watched a glass of beer bubble from the bottom one night and it bubbled for three hours and a half 'fore it got flat. That was when Ditsy—But I will get around to that quick enough. Now and again I still catches myself trying *not* to think about it. And it has been a long time. A long time.

What was I saying? Oh, yeah, Jimmie hitting the paint. He *is* all right because I am setting in a place in Cleveland—having just got off the train—and some fellow comes in and I does not pay no attention until I see he is walking like a banty rooster which is seasick. And I yells, "Jimmie!" And he looks up and focuses on me and I see it is true he is hitting the paint and, if his present condition is a fair example, he is hitting it with a capital H.

I am not one to stick my nose in other people's business. I am one who says other people's business is their own business and no business of mine, having found that a nose stuck in other people's business usually gets itself pinned up so as it does not look like a nose for quite a while after.

But this is different. First, it is Jimmie Winkie. Second, he is running a race the next day I have seen by the papers. Third, it will not put no shine on his shoes if somebody says, "Oh, look, is that not Wee Winkie and is he not skizzled?"

To make a long story short, I gets him out of there. I thinks about checking into a hotel, but there is those somebodies again, so there is not nothing to do but get a cab and take



him home. The same which I does.

When I first sees Ditsy I also thinks it is true that she has turned into a red-hot momma. She has done something to her mouth so it looks like it has been swatted by a ripe plum, and she is wearing one of them "creations" that does not leave but very little to the imagination, and she is walking with two silver-headed canes, and her fingernails looks like they has been dipped in calves' liver while it is still in the calf.

She is quite a sight for sore eyes until you remembers it is Ditsy and, then your collar gets too tight and you say, "Hello, Ditsy," and she does not say nothing. She just looks at Jimmie until you thinks she does not know who it is and, then, she looks at me and her eyes is the color of a horse's flanks after a workout —dark and wet and velvety—and she says, "Bring him in, Jacks," and, some way, her voice sounds like it is bleeding. And, all at once, you know that underneath all this cover-up she has put on is the same old Ditsy. Worn finer, and kind of tired, but Ditsy.

She knows what to do, too. She does not put him to bed. She has me set him up in the bathroom with his head over the basin and she feeds him soapy water and as fast as one glass full comes up down goes another. And when he says he cannot do it no more, she wheedles him into doing it until his insides is as clean as a old maid's conscience, and his head is woozy but not boozy. Also, I am under the impression this is not the first time them two has underwent this here same procedure.

Soapy water? Best thing on earth. Makes you feel like you has been hollowed out and whittled thin, but it does not leave nothing in you that you would want to wake up with the next morning. Of course, it is not exactly a pleasant treatment while it is going on, but, after it is done, although you could not fight no mess of apes, you could give them a run for their money, if such become necessary.

After some time, Jimmie says in a washed-out voice, "O. K., go ahead. Tell me I am a louse."

Ditsy does not say nothing and I does not say nothing, neither, being busy examining my cuticles.

"I know I am a louse," he continues. "Go on. Get it over with. Go on, tell me I am a louse."

So I says, "You are a louse, period," and I leaves off examining my cuticles and takes up examining Jimmie like he is a rare specimen of garbage that has got in among us while we are occupied elsewhere.

"I was not asking *you*," Jimmie says, and he looks at Ditsy and Ditsy looks at him and Ditsy does not say nothing.

"I beg your pardon," I says, "I thought you was addressing the general public of which there are several that says you has lost hold of your senses."

"Shut up," Jimmie says. "SHUT UP. I did not ask you to butt in, did I? Why do you not go back where you come from?"

"Sure," I says, "I will be delighted. But when you is handing out your interviews tomorrow do not give the credit for the win to the horse—give it to Ditsy, here. *If* you win."

"What do you mean 'if'?" Jimmie says. "It is in the bag." He laughs. "Literal," he says. "You and Ditsy need not worry none."

"I am not worrying," Ditsy says toneless-like. "It does not matter either way. Nothing does not matter. Any more."

The way she tags that "any more" on to it is horrible to listen to. It has a dead, flat, hopeless sound and I keep thinking, if I look down, I will see it laying there on the bath mat spread out on its back with its eyes rolled up.

It gets Jimmie, too, because it is clear that if Ditsy had batted him on the bean with a lead sock he would not be more took back.

"What do you mean?" he says. "What do you mean?" like that, see, with a up on the end.

"I mean it is no good," Ditsy says. "I cannot stand it. You are not Jimmie Winkie any more. You are somebody else. Somebody else I do not know. Somebody else who I do not want to know. I hope you do lose tomorrow," she says and her words bump into each other and bunch up, like the field in a steeplechase taking the first hedge. "I hope you lose tomorrow," she says, "and the next day, and the next and the next and next and next, and we can go back to that two-room flat and eat beef stew and take turns washing the dishes and put toothpicks in the windows to keep them from rattling, and play pinochle and watch the car lights come over the Freeway and, maybe, have a pint of ice cream for a treat and . . . and . . . be . . . happy"—and her voice breaks in the middle and she puts her face in her hands and starts crying.

It is a awful experience to see a girl cry. It makes you feel like all your joints has swelled

and your ears and feet belong to a two-humped camel.

Jimmie says, "You want me to *lose?*" like he is suffering from hallucinations.

Ditsy keeps on crying.

I gives her my handkerchief and wonders if I ought to pat at her or something.

"I cannot lose," Jimmie says.

"Look," I says, "I think I has had sufficient. I am going."

"I cannot lose," Jimmie says, "and, if I do, they will not call me Wee Willie no more. Guys like Moe Prentice will give me the laugh. I got to keep on winning. I cannot stop now."

"You has not *got* to do nothing but die," I says, "and if what guys like Moe Prentice says means more to you than Ditsy, here, I would go on off and die if I was you."

"What about your grand piano?" Jimmie says to Ditsy.

"I hate it," Ditsy says through her fingers. "I would like a c-c-canary b-b-bird."

"But I cannot lose," Jimmie says, shaking his fist. "I cannot—unless—" And he quits shaking his fist and uncloses it and looks at it like he expects to find it has varicose veins. And he looks at Ditsy setting there on the floor.

"You mean what you said?" he says.

Ditsy makes a kind of soft *oooooo*ing noise like a stable hound what has been stepped on.

"O. K.," Jimmie says. "O. K." He gets up and sort of wavers a minute and then he goes out and Ditsy keeps on crying and I clears my throat once or twice and wishes she is a horse so as I could gentle her and then Jimmie comes back in and he is carting this here bridle.

"From me to you," he says, plunking it on the floor. And there is a long pause and then he adds, "Temporarily."

Ditsy looks at the bridle, hiccuping slightly like a baby what has been having colic.

"I do not get it," she says, hiccuping again.

Jimmie indicates the bridle. "Remember the time," he says, "that we was in the Home and you found a four-leaf clover in a book what belonged to Miss Watson? I had a toothache, so you snitched the four-leaf clover to put in my shoe so as it would go away—the toothache I mean. Only you said it was 'temporarily' because it was somebody else's four-leaf clover and might have repre . . . repercussions being as how it does not actually belong to me. So I did—put it in my shoe I mean—and I got a blind abcess and it was—well, you know how it was."

"I still do not get it," Ditsy says looking at the bridle like she is expecting it to turn into a four-leaf clover.

"It is like this," Jimmie says. "That there"—he points to the bridle—"is the same as the four-leaf clover. Maybe you got a toothache now, but, if I lose, it might turn out to be a blind abcess. So it is only temporary. I am not giving it to you. I am only letting you keep it for me."

"I *still* do not get it," Ditsy says, blowing her nose in my handkerchief.

"I do," I says. "He is saying you thinks you wants a canary bird when what you really wants is a grand piano, which you have already got."

"You stay out of this," Jimmie says.

"Lay off Jacks," Ditsy says to Jimmie. "He is all right."

"Jacks is a old lady," Jimmie says to Ditsy.

"I am going," I says. Which I does.

No. No more beer. I am not half through with this one. I do not like to crowd them. And, speaking of crowding, that is what I think happens to Jimmie.

Lose? I reckon he does. He does not even get away from the post.

What I mean about crowding, I figure this here horse Jimmie is up on gets crowded quick. There is some crows slow, some easy, some quick. Jimmie happens to be up on Beeknight and, the way I figure, I figure Beeknight crowds quick. You know how it is, out of the barrier, everybody trying for a inside track, some pushing maybe, though this is not noticeable unless you is up. Now them that crowds slow gets out and tries, and them that crowds easy falls in, but them that crowds quick rears up and starts doing the Highland fling. There is not many. But there is some. And, like I said, the way I figure, Beeknight is one of the some.

After it is all over, there is plenty who say there is something fishy because Beeknight is never one to crowd slow, easy, *or* quick. Jimmie has been up on Beeknight before and Beeknight has always came in home free. In fact, before this here episode I am getting ready to tell you about, Beeknight is being touted for the Jockey Gold Cup, so there is plenty who say the atmosphere smells highly of cod.

Jimmie pull him? You mean on account of Ditsy saying what she said? Maybe. I thought about that angle, but I am almost sure for

certain that is not the case. I seen him right after it is over and, if he is putting on a show, I am a snub-tailed bloodhound.

No, I figure horses like I figure human beings. They is subject to change. This here Beeknight might of slept restless, he might of been overtrained, he might of been scary, he might of had gas, he might of sensed Jimmie was not in no mood. Them things affects a horse. So I say there is nothing off-color, but that this here Beeknight has underwent a change and happens to crowd quick.

It is like this, see. I avoided Jimmie like he has got the plague and this is reciprocated on his part. I see he is jittery and keyed up, but this is no mud on my boots, so I leave him be. Not that he is left be, because there is many who do not think he has got the plague. It is very sickening to watch.

I wonder if Ditsy is in the stands, but I do not wonder long as somebody asks him if his sister is in the stands and he says, "No, she is home." And somebody says, "Don't she like horse races?" And he says, "No." And somebody says, "Well, that is odd. Your own sister." And he says, "How would you like to go bag your ears," which shows that he is keyed up to a considerable degree.

He is up in the first, again in the third, and again in the fourth. I am not up at all until the next day. In fact, I am only there because I cannot stay away, so I goes out and hangs over the veranda rail to watch the first.

It is a swell day. One of them high, blue ones. There is music coming out of the announcing system and people is walking around and everything is kind of stirred up like—like it is before the start. It is a fast track and pretty to look at and Happy Slauderwasser comes out and says, "Move over," and we both hangs over the veranda rail and just look at how everything looks, if you know what I mean.

Then the horses is mincing past, Jimmie about as big as a good-sized pea, and then the barrier is in, and it is Beeknight in No. 6, and everything gets quiet with a little murmur running through it like a breeze with a lid on it, and you can hear the popcorn peddlers real plain, and then there is that swelling cry, "THEY'RE OFF!" But it chokes in the middle and there is a surge for the fence and the stands rise up and cranes their necks and Happy says, "My God!" and I near falls over the veranda rail because Beeknight is pawing the air and kicking and acting in general like

he is a prize exhibition at a rodeo and for all them shenanigans he does not go nowheres. It is like he is trying to kick his way through a wall or something. Jimmie is stuck closer than a plaster, but not for long. Beeknight gives a lunge and Jimmie goes over, and a sort of a soft, gusty sound goes up from the crowd like a thousand breaths has been let out at once.

By the time Jimmie has hit the ground, they is taking Beeknight out and do you know that confounded horse is as calm as a June morning? Jimmie gets out under his own power.

Yeah. You see it coming, kick loose and roll with the fall and it does not no more than scrape off the top fuzz.

It seems like a hour at least has gone past, but it cannot be no more than a handful of seconds because it is all clear when the field moves into the stretch.

Happy and me look at each other.

Happy says, "Wow."

I says, "It looks like somebody is going to get a bird."

"Yeah," Happy says, "a Bronx one."

"No," I says, "a yellow one with feathers what sings," and I go on down to stand on the edge of the crowd what is surrounding Jimmie and listen to what is being said.

What is being said is all the same color and cut equal. Howinever, I am positive that Jimmie did not do no pull. He is white as death and keeps shaking his head like there is lead shot in it and he is listening to it rattle. He keeps saying, "I cannot understand it, I cannot understand it," over and over. No, he did not do no pull. Spencer Tracy cannot act that good and Jimmie Winkie is not no Spencer Tracy.

I mosey on off and am popping my knuckles and thinking when it comes over the announcing system that Winkie is not hurt none and will be up in the third as scheduled.

But this does not take place, as before the third, Gus Wever comes up to me and he is pale and his Adam's apple is riding up and down on his collar and he says, "Jacks, I got something for you to do."

"Shoot," I says.

"I want you should break the news to Winkie."

"What news?" I says. "They is not going to disqualify him for falling off a horse, I hopes."

"No," Gus says. "Word has just came that his sister has met with a accident."

I says, "Ditsy," or I tries to, but it sticks in my throat and, some way, I finds I am grabbing hold of Gus and there is guys endeavoring to pull us apart thinking we is having a altercation.

"Leave go," Gus says, shrugging them off—he is a big guy—"I am asking Jacks, peaceful, if he will tell Winkie his sister has met with a fatal accident. He is a friend of Winkie and if your sister is dead, it is better it comes from a friend. That is all I am asking. I, myself, cannot do it."

So I does it.

When we gets there everything is confusion. There is people everywhere and a important-acting guy is asking the maid questions, only this does not do no good as she is setting in a chair having hysterics. And there is other men down on their knees examining the floor and blowing powder on the doorknobs and there is a doctor putting his stuff away in a little black bag.

And there is Ditsy.

It does not look like Ditsy. It does not look human even. It is just a smashed-in, crumpled-up thing what is wearing Ditsy's clothes, and it has blood all over.

It reminds me of the way Tod Beemis looks when he is drug out and laid on a shutter after he is caught in a stall with a crazy stallion. Kind of . . . kind of . . . trampled-looking. It makes me feel kind of numblike, like maybe I has got a scream in me that has froze solid before it can get out.

The important-acting guy, by now, has saw us and advances forward.

"The maid, here," he says, "says she left Miss Winkie setting by the window and holding a bridle in her lap. Mooning over it kind of, she says. She goes downstairs, the maid does, and she has not no more'n got good and down when she hears a racket and she runs back up fast as she can and it is like this. We has not touched nothing. This," he, says pointing to a scruffed-looking place on the rug, "I guess is where she fell down and got up again, and this"—pointing to a spot where the plaster has been gouged out of the wall—"this here is where whoever done it must of swung and missed—and, from the evidence, whoever must of done it was strong as a horse. And this here is the bridle she was holding, which looks as if it was tore out of her hands and—" He pauses and squints at Jimmie. "Hey," he

says, "you do not look like no coroner, who are you?"

"He is her brother," I says, and my voice seems to come from some far-off place and does not seem to belong to me at all.

"Oh," the man says embarrassed. "I am sorry, buddy. I did not know about you being related to the deceased. I am mighty sorry."

Jimmie does not answer. He is looking at the bridle like it is Lazarus arose from the dead and it is plain he is going to keel over.

He puts out his hand, as if he is in a trance, and takes the bridle from the man.

"It is all right," I says, "it is his bridle. Leave him have it. I will take him out of here." Which I do as they bring in a wicker basket and set it down by this thing on the floor around which they draws a white chalk mark before . . . before they—

Guess I must be coming down with a cold. Yeah. Sure I will have another one. Just to wet my whistle. I seems to be kind of dried up like. Talking too much, I guess. There is times, though, when you has got to get it out of your system—the cold, I mean. Yeah. Well, here's to nothing, mister. If you got nothing, you got nothing to lose and, even if you does, it stands to advantage.

What did who win after what? Oh, Winkie. He does not win no more. And does not lose no more. Because he does not ride no more. No, I mean no more. Never. You see, he . . . he bumped hisself off. I took it for granted you knew.

Yeah. Yeah. It was one of them things. After Ditsy—why, he kind of went haywire. I tried talking to him. Thought if he got to riding again it would take his mind off what it was brooding on. No, no, they never did catch whoever done it. I wish they *had* of. If I could of got just within reaching distance—

No, Jimmie would not pay no attention to me. He would just set there staring straight ahead and sometimes he would look at me like he could see clean through my backbone and out the other side.

"Do not bother none, Jacks," he would say. "You do not understand. It was my fault. I should of knowed."

And I would say, "Do not be like that. Them . . . them kind of accidents is figured out statistical. You could not of knowed in a million years."

"I was wrong. I was the one who had the blind abcess. Not Ditsy," he would say. Morose, see. Only I thought he would snap out of it, eventual. But he does not. When he snaps, he snaps the other way.

I remember the night that he done it. I set up with him until midnight talking up Parvalu, which Colonel Crandall wanted him to ride in the Bay Shore. I says, "Look here, Jimmie, if you will just get out and mix around some, you will be O. K." And I says, "Do not forget what you always said: 'You can shake grief or sorrow, you can bury remorse—but you can't never lose the feel o' a horse.'"

"Yeah," he says, and he looks at me for the first time like he really sees me. "Yeah," he says, straightening up, "you can shake grief or sorrow, you can bury remorse . . . bury remorse—"

"But you can't never lose the feel o' a horse," I finishes for him.

"Yeah," he says—slow. "Yeah, that is it."

So I goes home brightened up, thinking I has at last got him squared around and the next morning—it is in the papers.

They was two thoroughbreds, them two was. Yessir, two thoroughbreds that, some way, got boxed on a inside turn.

What's that? Bridle? Oh, that. I had it buried with Jimmie. He had made a will leaving everything he possessed to me. Can you beat it? That is the kind of guy he was. Yeah. Oh, I could of kept it if I had of had a mind to, but bridles is cheap and he had set such a store by that one that it did not seem right to keep it. Besides, I could not ever of used it and kept my mind on what I was doing. He . . . he hung hisself with it, see. He was out of his head with grief, that is all. He did not think. Jimmie was not no coward to take the easy way out. I know that. But I could not of had it around me just the same. So I buried it with him. Holding the reins in his hand. I think he would of liked it if he could of knowed.

Well, bottoms up. I got to be going.

Thanks, brother, and the same to you. It has been a pleasure. No, I do not reckon you will be seeing me in no papers, unless it is the funny papers. Did I not tell you? Horses has got a habit of slowing down when I am up on them. Like they has got a dead weight swinging on the bridle holding them back. They calls me Jinx. Yeah. Jinx Jackson.

Well, so long, buddy.

THE END.

THE GIFTIE GIEN

By Malcolm Jameson

HOW do others see you—what queer distortions would a bootblack, to whom a man is a pair of dusty shoes, or a barber, to whom he is a head, mostly bald, with a fringe that needs cutting, see of a man—

Illustrated by Kramer

It was five o'clock. The girls were getting ready to go home and the city salesmen were beginning to come trooping in. Mr. J. C. Chisholm, sales manager of the Pinnacle Office & Household Appliance Corp., folded his pudgy hands across his ample middle and sat back in his chair to watch the daily ritual going on beyond the clear-glass partition that separated his office from the salesmen's room. A bland smile was on his pink face and a stranger might have said that he appeared to be beaming with satisfaction and good will. At any rate, the smile was there, and, as a matter of fact, Mr. Chisholm was quite satisfied with himself. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind—and the incoming orders up to that hour were added proof of it—that he was the best little old sales manager POHAC had ever had. Consequently, he viewed the activities beyond the partition with the utmost amiability.

Miss Maizie Delmar, his secretary, sat beside him, her notebook on her knee and her pencil poised in anticipation of any weighty utterance he might see fit to make. Not that she expected to take any notes for the next ten minutes, for she knew her boss quite as well as he thought he knew everybody else. This was the "psychic hour," as she caustically referred to it when outside the smothering confines of POHAC's. It amused Mr. Chisholm to display his keen powers of observation and his uncanny judgment of people. So she waited with a hard, set face for his first prediction. She knew that he would look at her from time to time to get her reaction, but she was ready for that. She had a little frozen smile and a gleam to put into her tired eyes that she could flash on and off like a light, but she reserved those until they were demanded.

"Har-rum," he observed, "Miss Carrick has now finished dabbing her nose. In exactly forty-three seconds she will fold her typewriter under and slam the lid. Then she will go to the window and look at the sky. It is cloudy, so she will put on her galoshes and take an umbrella."

He started his stop watch. Miss Delmar sighed inaudibly and waited. Of course he was right. Miss Carrick was an elderly and

sour spinster and decidedly "set in her ways." She was as predictable as sunset and the tides.

"Forty-four seconds," he announced, triumphantly, snapping off the watch at the bang of the desk top. "Don't tell me. I know these people like a book. Nobody can slip anything over old J. C."

Miss Trevelyan was the next subject for prophecy. She had a well-established routine that was almost as rigid as that of Miss Carrick, though she was of a different type. Miss Trevelyan was a baby-doll beauty of the Betty Boop variety and with the voice to match. At the moment she was regarding herself anxiously in a ridiculously small compact mirror, tilting her head this way and that with quick birdlike jerks so as to better scrutinize nose, cheeks, eyes and ears. After that, as J. C. gleefully foretold, would come the powdering, the lip-sticking, the eyebrow-brushing—in the order named—and eventually an elaborate tucking-in of imaginary wisps of vagrant hair. J. C. didn't miss a bet.

Then three salesmen came in. Jake Sarrat, the big, jovial ace of the wholesale district, slapped the other two on the back, hurled his brief case and kit into a desk drawer, made a brief phone call, and then went out. Old Mr. Firrel wore his usual somber, tired look, and walked slowly to the bare table they had let him use. He unbent his lanky and stooped six feet of skin and bones and began dragging copious sheafs of notes from his brief case. Those he glanced at briefly and began tearing up, one by one. The third, a saturnine little fellow who appeared to be perpetually angry, marched straight to his desk and began scribbling furiously on a pad of report blanks. He was Ellis Hardy, Chisholm's pet.

"Jake," said Mr. Chisholm, confidently, "is working up a big case and wants to surprise me with it. Watch his smoke before the week is over. Ellis has just brought in a big one—stick around, we may pour a drink before we call it a day. As for Old Dismal, he's quitting. The poor dope!"

He twirled his chair around to face a mahogany cabinet. He opened the door of it, took out a bottle and glass, and poured himself a stiff slug of rye. He tossed it off with a grunt and swiveled back.

"That guy is not a salesman and never will be," he snorted contemptuously. "Look at him! He looks like a tramp and as mournful as a pallbearer. When I talk to him about dolling himself up he says he hasn't the dough; when I tell him to cheer up and wear a smile, he croaks about his stomach ulcers. What do I care how hard he works if he never brings the bacon in? Why, if that poor drip ever took a look at himself in the mirror, he'd go hang himself."

Maizie gripped her pencil harder and quoted softly:

> "Ah, wad some power the giftie gie us
> To see oursels as ithers see us—"

"That's right," exclaimed Mr. Chisholm. "You get it. Take me. I'm always on the lookout for that. If I didn't watch myself, I might turn stout. But no, I'm wise. I don't wait for people to tell me—I go to the gym three times a week and have a good workout. The rubber says there's not a spare ounce on me. There's no crime in being big—people respect a big man, don't you think?"

"They do get out of their way," admitted Maizie, flashing her stock smile, and batting here eyelids appreciatively. After all, he paid her forty a week and she had a paralyzed mother to support.

"Exactly," he continued, gratified, "and that's only appearance I'm talking about. The big thing is personal relations. Look how often somebody takes me for an easy-mark and tries to slip something over. I fool 'em, don't I? That's because I keep studying myself. I say to myself, say I, 'Look here, J. C., this bird thinks he's smart; now show him you're smarter.' Good system, eh? That's what comes of taking an objective view of yourself. That's why I keep all those psychology books around. You have no idea—"

"It must be grand to be so masterful, to be able to hold down such a big position . . . and . . . and all that," she said, hoping the blush it cost her wouldn't be noticed.

But there was a diversion at hand. Ellis Hardy was approaching and she knew without being told what was about to happen. In line of duty she listened in—with the connivance of Miss Perkins, the PBX operator—on salesmen's telephone conversations. In fact, she was the modest source of much of Mr. Chisholm's omniscience.

Hardy came in without the ceremony of knocking, and promptly sat down on top of Chisholm's desk. He threw down a sheaf of filled-out orders. A certified check running to five figures was clipped to the top.

"Got 'em," announced Hardy with a self-satisfied smirk. "Eight SXV units, motor-

driven, complete with accessories and a year's supply. That's for the head office. I sold 'em four more for the branches."

"Attaboy!" responded Chisholm, doing another rightabout-face. This time he set out three glasses with the bottle. "Moore & Fentress, eh? I told you they would be push-overs. Don't ever say I don't give you the breaks—that was like getting money from home."

"Uh-huh," admitted Hardy, with a reluctant grin. "Of course that sap Firrel—"

"Never mind Firrel," snapped Chisholm, "I'll handle him. The money's the thing."

"Oh, sure," said Hardy, "as soon as my check comes through—"

"Drink up," said Chisholm, waving a deprecating hand. There was no need of Maizie knowing *too* much—she was discreet and loyal and all that, but still—

Firrel was at the door, standing hesitantly as if unwilling to interrupt the conference going on, but fidgeting as if anxious to be on his way.

"Scram, Ellis," said Chisholm, seeing the gaunt old man. "Let me hear what this egg's wail is."

Hardy grinned his sour grin and stepped out, giving Mr. Firrel but the curtest nod in passing. Firrel came in, and not being invited to sit, stood awkwardly before the desk. Maizie felt sorry for the man. He was so earnest, so sincere, such a hard worker—yet he had been with them more than a month and the few commissions he had received could hardly have done more than pay his carfare. It was pathetic.

"Well?" asked Chisholm, hard and cross, as if annoyed at the intrusion.

"I'm quitting," said Firrel. "That's all."

"Suit yourself," said Chisholm, indifferently. "I never begged a man to work for me and I can't see myself starting now. Check out with Miss Delmar. Give her your kit and turn over the list of prospects you have been working on—not that I think they are any good. It's the rule, you know."

"You can go to hell," said Mr. Firrel, very quietly. Maizie noticed that his knuckles were white and his hands tense. "I called in to see Mr. Fentress this afternoon. He told me to. That was a week ago. He said that they had to await the authorization of their Board of Directors before signing an order. I found out what had happened."

"So what?" roared Chisholm savagely. "Do you think we could keep open if we ran on a sometime, if and when basis? Alibis are all you ever have . . . at the end of the quarter . . . when they take the inventory . . . when Mr. Goofus gets back from the West Coast. We want business *now*. That's why I sent Hardy when they called up this morning and wanted to know why our man hadn't been around. *He* doesn't stall and make alibis for himself. He gets 'em on the dotted line. I couldn't let you muff a big order like this one."

Chisholm waved the order under his nose, then laid it face down so the amount on the check would not show.

"Of course," the sales manager went on, in that I-lean-over-backward-being-a-good-fellow manner he assumed at times, "if you really feel that you have anything coming to you for what preliminary work you did, I'm sure I can make Hardy see it that way. He'll cut you in. That's a promise. Would a twenty, say, help out?"

He pulled out his wallet and opened it. Maizie took one glance at the smoldering hatred and contempt in the weary eyes of the man before the desk and then hastily dropped her own to the notebook on her knee. If only someone would sock the porcine jowl of her detested employer!

"You heard me," said Firrel with a cold distinctness that cut. "You can go to hell."

He turned abruptly and walked out. A moment later the outer door slammed.

"Never mind trying to piece out his torn prospect cards, Maizie," said POHAC's eminently successful sales manager. "We have a file of his daily reports. Hardy can work just as well from those."

"Yes, sir," said Maizie. Her rent was overdue, and the doctor had said—

She swept out of the office and down the hall to the washroom. Her nails were biting into her palms and her eyes were brimming.

"Oh, the louse," she moaned over and over again, "the louse, the dirty, dirty louse! If I were only a man—"

Then those lines of Burns came to mind again:

"O, wad some power the giftie gie us—"

"That would do," she cried fervently. "Hang himself! If he only saw himself as I see him, he'd be lucky if he *could* hang himself.

Seven o'clock came. Mr. Chisholm took one final snort before putting on his hat and turning out the lights. He must be in fine form when he met Mr. Lonigan. Lonigan was an important buyer and he was coming in on the *Rocket* at seven thirty. The evening was already planned. He was to meet the buyer, take him to dinner, then meet the McKittricks in the lobby of the Palace Theater. Mr. McKittrick was the president of POHAC and had six box seats for the show. With him would be Mrs. McKittrick, Mrs. Chisholm, and a certain very personable young woman whom the company employed from time to time to fill in on just such occasions. It promised to be a gay evening, and as soon as he had a chance to whisper to the big boss about the order he had topped the day off with, even McKittrick would concede that he had the best sales manager ever.

Chisholm jabbed the elevator button, whistling merrily as he stood back to watch the oscillations of the telltale above the door.

"Nice night, Jerry," he said cheerily to the elevator man.

"A very nice night, sir," agreed Jerry. But he never took his eyes off the column of blinking ruby lights before his nose. Mr. Chisholm was to be the most mistrusted when he was in a benign mood. It was usually the come-on for some probing and tricky questions. Like, "I saw Mr. Naylor get in your car awhile ago. What a card! He's higher'n a kite tonight. *Ha, ha.*" *Any* response to a remark of that sort was sure to mean trouble for somebody.

Chisholm was in an expansive mood and strode along as if he owned the earth. He felt fine. It did not matter that ten of his men had quit that week, and not all of them had been as restrained as old man Firrel in their

good-bys. What did he care for the weak sisters? An ad in tomorrow's papers would fill up the anteroom with forty more. If they clicked—weeks from now—so much the better; if not, how could he lose? POHAC's sales department was strictly a straight commission outfit.

He turned through the park. It was not only a short cut but pleasanter walking, except for the beggars One met him and whined for a cup of coffee, but Chisholm growled at him and stalked on by. Farther on he came to a place where the path passed through some heavy shrubbery. There were deep shadows there and he hesitated a moment. He would have felt better if a policeman were in sight. Then he reminded himself of what puny creatures most of the panhandlers were and of his own brawn. He walked on.

A man was coming toward him. Just as he supposed, the man was another beggar. He asked for a dime. Chisholm realized it was dark where he was and thought perhaps a dime was cheap insurance against an argument. He stopped and groped in his change pocket for the coin. At that moment something happened. The beggar suddenly grasped his right arm, while another man stepped out of the bushes and grabbed his left. At the same instant someone from the rear locked an arm about his throat and lifted. He was off his feet and choking—skilled hands were exploring his pockets—he kicked and squirmed only to feel the viselike grip on his neck tighten maddeningly. There was an inward *plop* and something cracked just under his skull with a sharp detonation and a blinding flare of light. Mr. Chisholm had been brutally mugged. Mr. Chisholm was quite dead.

Two hours and a quarter later a group of four were still waiting impatiently in the foyer of the Palace. An angry man from St. Louis sat in the back of a cafeteria eating his supper. He had not been met at the station as promised; neither the office phone, nor McKittrick's or Chisholm's home phones had answered. Not that he minded missing Chisholm particularly—he had always thought him a phony—but he did like the McKittricks. The party at the theater were equally angry, though they showed it less.

"Well," remarked Mrs. McKittrick acidly to her husband in a moment when the others were occupied, "how much longer are you going to wait for that stuffed-shirt of a head salesman of yours?"

"One minute—no more," said McKittrick, glaring at his watch. "If it's any comfort to you, he's being canned as of coming Monday. The office turnover since he's been in charge is something scandalous."

In the other corner of the foyer the smartly gowned creature brought along for the delectation of Mr. Lonigan was growing restive also. She turned to Mrs. Chisholm.

"Whatever could have happened to your husband?" she asked sweetly.

"Drunk, I suppose," answered Mrs. Chisholm calmly. "I hope so. I hear this is a good show and I want to enjoy it, even if we have missed half the first act. My husband, you know, fancies himself as a dramatic critic. He is quite unbearable, I assure you."

"Oh, really?" said the fair young thing. It was best to be noncommittal, she thought, though she had been secretly wondering for some time how long Mrs. Chisholm No. 3 was going to stick it out. No other Mrs. Chisholm had ever finished out the first year, despite the Chisholm legend of what a "way" he had with the gals.

"Let's go on in," said Mr. McKittrick, pocketing his watch.

It was about then that the park police stumbled across the defunct sales manager's broken form. It was already a long time after Mr. Chisholm had temporarily forgotten all about Hardy and Firrel and Maizie and Lonigan and the theater party. For in some places a matter of a couple of hours or so seems longer. It was that way where Mr. Chisholm was.

First, there was all that tiresome marching. Chisholm found himself on a vast gray plain under a dull leaden sky, marching, marching, marching. It was odd that it tired him so, for it was effortless and timeless and the distances, though interminable, seemed meaningless. It must have been the monotony of it. And then, also, he found those marching with him strangely disturbing. Some were healthy-looking men like himself, except that most of them were gashed or mangled in some way, as if hurled through plate glass or smashed by bombs. Others were haggard and pallid, as if coming from sickbeds. But it was the soldiers that got him most. He had forgotten about the war. It had touched him but slightly, though his impressions of it had been irritating,

but not in a flesh and blood way The silly business of priorities, price controls and sales taxes had annoyed him exceedingly, and the outrageous income-tax boosts had infuriated him. Now he was getting another slant on the conflict, for hordes—armies—of soldiers were marching along with him. They were of every kind—Russians, Japs, Tommies, Nazis, even American bluejackets and soldiers—and mingled with them were miserable-looking civilians of every race. A pair of wretched-looking Polish Jews walking near him had obviously been hanged but a short time before. Chisholm edged away from them in horrified disgust.

He was beginning to tumble to the fact that he was dead, and was getting restive with the monotonous tramping across the plain. He had never been a devout man, or even a philosophical one, so he had little idea of what to expect, except that certain childhood memories or notions kept intruding themselves upon his consciousness. Wasn't there some sort of trial coming to him? Not that the prospect worried him much. At least, not very much. For he had always dealt justly with people according to his lights, he insisted to himself. He couldn't help it if there were venal people, or weaklings, or would-be tough eggs that had to be pushed around. Nobody could be expected to get through life without handling such types in the most appropriate way. But where, or where, was the judge that would pass judgment?

After a time the crowd grew thinner. At length the shade of Chisholm noted that he was virtually alone and treading a narrow path that led upward over a shadowy hill. There was no one ahead of him or alongside, but following him at a distance was a considerable multitude of other shades of his own kind. He supposed that shortly after his own unfortunate encounter with the thugs a catastrophe of some sort had developed locally. He could not resist the malicious half hope that it might have been a theater fire. Somehow it irked him that his latest wife should still be alive and fattening on his property while he was tramping these gray wilds. Nor would it have upset him to know that McKittrick had been caught in the same disaster. McKittrick, in his estimation, was a pompous ass whom he would have shown up if he could have lived just a little longer. As far as that went, he could also have viewed with equanimity the decease of the girl that was brought

along for Lonigan. He hadn't forgotten the smart of her recent rebuff of him, the little cat!

With such thoughts in mind, he topped the rise and saw a wall with a gate in it before him. The gate was open, so he went on in. He halfway expected to be stopped, or at least greeted by an angel, but things were just the same inside the gate as out—except that there was a voice. The voice cried out in the manner of a train announcer, deep and booming.

"The prototype of Jerome Chester Chisholm!"

Just that. That was all.

Then a demon materialized directly in front of the shade of Chisholm.

"This way, Jerome," he said very politely. He was not bad-looking—for a demon—though he was unmistakably one, having the expected stock properties: a reddish, glistening skin, stubby horns, and shiny jet-black eyes.

"'J. C.' is what people call me," corrected Chisholm. He had never dealt with a demon before, but since the demon appeared to be friendly he thought he might as well respond with a gesture of his own.

"Better stick to Jerome," advised the demon. "I'll admit it's not pretty, but it's safe. When you start being known by what people *call* you—well!"

Mr. Chisholm sniffed. The demon's words had the faint odor of a dirty crack. He was beginning not to like the demon. Also the import of the unseen aërial announcement was puzzling him. What did it mean by calling him the "prototype" of himself? It didn't make sense.

The demon was skittering along ahead, paying very little attention to Chisholm, who was following along meekly enough. Presently a large building loomed ahead. As they approached Chisholm could see that it was an auditorium of some kind. He could also see that the mob of shades were close behind and that they had no guiding demon with them. Evidently they were following blindly in his own tracks.

The demon turned into the door of the building and led the way up to its stage. It was an auditorium. By the time they had reached the platform, the crowd of ghosts behind were crowding into the place. They soon filled it from wall to wall.

"You must have been a pretty popular fellow," remarked the demon, looking them over, "or the reverse. Notorious, you know."

Chisholm didn't know. He had a reputation, he knew, as a go-getter and a good fellow, but it was a modest one—restricted to his customers, his salesmen, and people he met casually. He hardly expected this turn-out. Moreover, he couldn't recognize anybody in the hall. As he looked them over he was struck with one singularity of the crowd. Many of them bore a family resemblance to him, some rather close, others fantastically distorted. The majority looked like three-dimensional, animated caricatures of him. One especially obnoxious one kept trying to climb up onto the stage. He was far fatter than Chisholm himself had ever been or could ever have been even if he had skipped the gym workouts.

The demon observed the look of profound distaste on Chisholm's face, but only grinned a little and picked up a gavel. He rapped sharply on the table.

"Come to order, please," he said. "The convention is assembled."

There was a momentary hush, and then pandemonium broke out. It was a very disorderly crowd and an opinionated one, from the jeers that were hurled up at the stage. It was hard to pick out what they were saying, but the trend of it seemed to be that practically everyone there wanted to preside or was full of hot ideas that demanded immediate and full expression. The demon was unperturbed. He was an old hand. At intervals he would bang with the gavel. At last he got a tiny bit of silence.

"Fellow heels," he commenced, unblushingly, then paused to see what uproar would follow. There was none. His insult had quieted the tumult like oil on ruffled waters. He cleared his throat and went on.

"We are gathered here to form the ghost of Jerome Chester Chisholm, deceased, erstwhile sales manager of the Pinnacle Office & Household Appliance Corp. We have all eternity, to be sure, but why waste it? Coalesce, please, as rapidly as possible. For purposes of comparison, your prototype is standing here beside me. Take it or leave it. That's your affair."

There were howls of "Chuck him out," "chiseler," "heel," "stuffed shirt," and many, many less elegant epithets. Then an ominous silence descended. The demon quietly pointed to a spot on the stage and the procession started. One by one the specters mounted the stage, marched to the spot and stood on it.

Succeeding ones came on, each melting imperceptibly into the one that had been there before. Gradually the resultant figure took on more definite shape and looked far more solid than any single shade in the hall. For many of them were so tenuous as to be hardly visible.

"Would you mind, sir," asked Mr. Chisholm, not knowing any better way to address a demon, "telling me what this is all about? And after this monkey business is over, when do I get my trial?"

"Trial?" The demon laughed. "In one sense you have had your trial. This is the result. In another sense, this is your trial. In either case, the verdict is already found and the sentence fixed."

"I don't get you," said Mr. Chisholm. "Who are all these . . . er . . . spooks? And what have they got to do with me? They look like a flock of comic Valentines."

"They have plenty to do with you. They *are* you."

"Me! You're crazy. I'm me." He struck himself on the chest.

"No. You are only one aspect of you," corrected the demon. "You are a ghost now, and nothing more. Ghosts are intangible, immaterial things—made of dream stuff, as your poets say. What you call you is your own estimate of you. These creatures flocking up onto the stage are other people's estimates of you. *You*—the you that we recognize—is the composite of them all. Stick around. You are going to learn something."

Chisholm turned his gaze back at the oncoming file of shades. They were ghastly cartoons of himself, and malicious ones at that. Many of them were unintelligible.

"Hey," he said, "what's that thing coming up—that slender wisp of smoke with the lumpy feet? If that is a conception of me, the guy that thought it up has gone surrealistic."

The demon looked.

"Oh, that. Yes, it's weak. It is offered by a fellow named Percy Hilyer. He roomed with you at school and has almost forgotten you. He does remember that you were lean and lanky then and used to swipe his socks and wear holes in them."

"That's a hell of a thing to hold against a guy," complained Chisholm.

The demon shrugged.

"That is the way reputations are made. How

do you like this one?"

"This one" was the rambunctious shade who had tried to take charge of the meeting at the outset. He was egregiously repulsive.

"That," announced the demon blandly, "is the contribution of one Maizie Delmar. Judging from its robustness and solidity, she knew you recently and well."

Chisholm's jaw had dropped and his eyes bulged. The thing was incredible. Not Maizie's. Maizie was regular; dumb, maybe, but they got along.

"I take it Maizie was the tactful sort," remarked the demon with a sly drawl, noting the amazement on Chisholm's loose face. Then, "Here comes one that might suit you better."

It was a fat, squally baby, drooling and flapping its pudgy arms.

"One of your mother's contributions. Her favorite of many. You might admire some, but they are all on the helpless side—not at all in keeping with your hardboiled idea of the way to do things."

Chisholm stood aghast and watched the endless procession. On they came, one vile caricature after another. Nobody seemed to have forgotten him. He expected the specter furnished by Firrel to be bad. It was. Malice was not its creator, but sheer contempt. Chisholm had to turn his face when it clambered up onto the stage. The office girls' offering differed little from Maizie's except in intensity. The one held by Hardy was a cruel surprise. He had done so much for Hardy. But he had forgotten how he had made Hardy pay through the nose for favors.

The greatest shocks were to follow. He steeled himself for whatever opinions those first two wives held, but the current one had done a devastating job of analysis. Even the demon whistled. Interspersed between the major blows were minor ones, and not always shadowy. Bootblacks, waiters, taxi drivers—on almost every casual contact he had left a mark. Out of the lot there was only one that was glowingly heroic. He could not refrain from asking the demon about it. The demon bent his insight onto the wraith and pronounced:

"A girl you met once—a pick-up. You kissed her on the Drive that night, and then lost her phone number, you lucky dog."

"Lucky?"

"Yes. She never had a chance to know you better."

Mr. Chisholm was glum. It wasn't right to be pilloried that way. They simply couldn't do that to him. To hell with what all those people thought. Who were they, anyhow? A lot of nitwit salesmen and office help, golddiggers and climbers! He knew he was all right. He had got along. They were jealous and envious, that's what. He nudged the demon.

"Hey," he called, "this is a democracy, ain't it? If these soreheads have a vote, so do I. Don't *I* come in?"

"Sure, sure. It ought to help a lot, too. All these figures are weighted, you have noticed, by degree of intimacy and one thing or another. Since you have probably thought more about yourself than anybody else has, even if you've been wrong most of the time, your opinion counts."

Chisholm looked down at himself confidently, and then his confidence began to ooze. His own personality, it appeared, even when viewed from his own standpoint, was more nebulous than he thought. He had never taken himself apart with the critical fury employed by such persons as Maizie, his wives and some others. It looked as if the almost-finished monstrosity standing in the center of the stage was going to be the image handed down to posterity.

"It's not fair," he wailed. "What do all those yapping people really know about me—motives, and all that? I never did anything I didn't think was right, I never—"

"Neither did Nero," said the demon calmly, "nor Torquemada, nor your estimable contemporary, Hitler. Nevertheless, we cannot take an Ego at its own valuation. Not where others are involved."

Chisholm took a shuddering look at the hideous thing that was the summation of all his world thought of him. It was intolerable. That, then, was the verdict the demon had spoken of.

"Your sentence," said the demon, as if he knew the thought, "is to contemplate it from now on. It is all yours—your life's work. At least it's definite, if that is any consolation."

"I can't, I can't," moaned Mr. Chisholm.

"Don't make things worse," warned the demon.

The composite spook had just turned a bright, lemon yellow.

THE END.

BOOK REVIEW

OUT OF SPACE AND TIME, by Clark Ashton Smith. (Sauk City), Arkham House, 1942; xii+370 pp.; $3.

Great fantasy deserves the permanence of covers; and all fantasy followers must feel deeply indebted to August Derleth for running the risks which commercial publishers are so reluctant to incur.

Arkham House! That very name, to the initiate, calls up visions of unmentionable horror from outer space, of unspeakable gibbering shapes in subterranean vaults, of the abominable "Necronomicon" of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred.

And the works that bear the Arkham imprint have not been unworthy of the connotations of that great name: first "Someone in the Dark," a collection of Derleth's best pulp work, then "The Outsider and Others," the monumental omnibus volume of H. P. Lovecraft, and now this selection from the works of Clark Ashton Smith.

It is a surprise to the fantasy devotee to learn how many pursuits Smith has practiced. According to Derleth's introduction, he has been "a journalist, a fruit picker and packer, a woodchopper, a typist, a cement mixer, a gardener, a hard-rock miner, mucker and windlasser." He is known to a small circle as an exotic painter and sculptor, and his poetry has received the praise of William Rose Benét.

But he is probably most widely known as the outstanding disciple of H. P. Lovecraft, a disciple, in fact, who was not without his influence in turn upon the master.

Lovecraft is indubitably the most influential figure in American fantasy since Poe. (It was pleasing to observe in a recent *Saturday Review* that Stephen Vincent Benét is a Lovecraft fan.) He created an entire mythology and cosmogony so coherently, so cogently that references to Cthulhu and Yuggoth are now more readily understood by many than allusions to Greek mythology.

Smith has taken over this mythology, adding to it, embroidering on it until it is hard to say what is Smith and what is Lovecraft. (His sculptures, too, bear such titles as "Cthulhu" and "The Outsider.") Smith himself created "The Book of Eibon," which rivals the "Necronomicon," and the histories of the demon-ridden French country of Averoigne and of Zothique, the last continent on earth.

The Lovecraft influence is perhaps fading now, with the rise of the newer school of fantasy exemplified by de Camp or Sturgeon or Rice; but the best of the Lovecraft school remains incomparable for the creation of the dire extremities of horror. And Smith, because he is a poet and a craftsman, has produced by far the best work in the Lovecraft tradition.

How much Smith himself has added to the field of fantasy is more difficult to estimate. In most of his work the echoes of Lovecraft and Dunsany drown out his own voice. Possibly two features, aside from the sometimes self-conscious, sometimes macabrely evocative poetic prose, are distinctively Smith.

One, which is odd in a man experienced in so many workaday fields, is the absoluteness of his fantasy. Lovecraft wove his mythos into our everyday life until we were haunted by the suspicion that the world was a dark and uncertain place. Smith rather transports us to dark and uncertain worlds and relates their appalling histories. These are wonderful and horrible; but they happened long ago or are to happen long hence—they do not bring you up against the choking realization that it is darker than you think.

The other, Smith's most important contribution, is a guignol irony—a gentle skill in telling that which is so inhumanly fabulous as to be neither horrible nor farcical, but balances on the razor edge between the shudder and the titter. Read "The Monster of the Prophecy," my own favorite Smith story, or "The Testament of Athammaus," and try to analyze your reaction.

The corpse of a strychnine victim wears on its face a sardonic smile. That smile is as exact an expression as any of the sensations evoked by these unique Smith grotesques.

There is much else in this volume, almost four hundred pages of magnificent fantasy reading. There are three stories of Averoigne. There is the novelette, "The City of the Singing Flame," which is something akin to science-fiction, but transfigured by Smith's extraordinary visual imagination. There are stories of Zothique, including the nightmarish "The Dark Eidolon," and of Hyperborea, including possibly the most popular of Smith's works,

"The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan." There is the interplanetary horror of "The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis," which gave me my first authentic shudder in some time, and there are two exquisitely melancholy prose poems never printed in popular magazines.

The jacket, as is meet and fitting, is designed by Hannes Bok. Which is only one more reason why no self-respecting fantasy collector can afford to pass up this admirable volume.

ANTHONY BOUCHER.

THE MIDNIGHT READER, edited and with an introduction by Philip van Doren Stern. 564 pp. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1942. $2.75.

Subtitled "Great Stories of Haunting and Horror," this is the latest addition to the long list of weird collections that have already appeared. Like all such anthologies, it may be judged from two viewpoints: that of the average reader, whose excursions into the bizarre are relatively few, and that of those who go in for fantastic fiction more thoroughly. To the former, it rates a classification of "excellent," but to the latter, including regular readers of Unknown Worlds, it cannot be as unreservedly recommended.

Mr. Stern's criterion in the selection of material—"the capacity to induce physical reaction in the reader"—is an excellent one, and the fifteen stories used show that he has adhered to it: every one is superb. Moreover, the average person can see at a glance that the roster of authors is impressive. And can more be asked for? Indeed, yes.

There are a number of tales which the regular fantasy reader has encountered several times elsewhere. "The Telltale Heart," "The Turn of the Screw," "The Willows," "The Mark of the Beast," "The Upper Berth"—all these are unquestioned masterpieces. But they are already universally available. Likewise, other anthologies have duplicated W. F. Harvey's "August Heat," Edith Wharton's "Afterward" and Alexander Woollcott's "Full Fathom Five," as well as "The Familiar," by J. S. Le Fanu and Charlotte Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper." Inclusion of the latter two is perhaps justified, as they seem not to have gained the recognition they deserve; however, from the viewpoint of the follower of fantasy, this cannot be said of the remainder.

Thus, while I have no quarrel with the quality of "The Midnight Reader," I could wish it did not rely so greatly upon the commonplace when such a wealth of good—even great—tales never before collected might be readily substituted. H. P. Lovecraft, the modern master; the practically unknown, yet almost as great William Hope Hodgson; the versatile E. F. Benson—these authors have never been adequately represented. And much classic material lies untouched amid the work of H. R. Wakefield, A. Merritt, Robert W. Chambers; M. P. Shiel, and others. But the editor either is not familiar with it, or shies away from its relative obscurity. It would be pleasant if a new anthology presented more of the less familiar.

Nevertheless, some of the stories of Mr. Stern's anthology are of the lesser-known variety, and prove refreshing. These are "Couching at the Door," by D. K. Broster, which adds a new creature to weird literature's gamut of imagined horrors; Louis Adamic's "Milvale Apparition," whose foundation of fact adds greatly to its realism; and "The Beckoning Fair One," which will awaken interest in the comparatively unknown English author, Oliver Onions. "Tarnhelm" is Sir Hugh Walpole's clever variation on what Anthony Boucher has called the *therianthropy* theme, and M. R. James displays his usual dexterity in "The Mezzotint."

The introduction to the work, which combines historical and critical matter, is interesting and informative, and most readers will side pretty generally with Mr. Stern's opinion. I feel myself that he strikes a truthful medium, although I do not agree with his tendency to look back upon the golden age of the ghost story as 1898-1911. If this is a period of perfection, it is perfection of a phase rather than a type; today there are as many, albeit differently slanted, ghost stories as in 1898. The statement that prefaced Fritz Leiber's "Smoke Ghost" covers the situation nicely, I think: "The ghosts of yesteryear were white-swathed spirits haunting echoing corridors. The ghosts of today—may be of a different kind, things of grime and the stale, dead air of a city's smoke—"

If you're not up on your classic weird tales, you'll probably enjoy rereading them; but if they're still fresh in your memory, you can safely count on only half a dozen new ones if you buy "The Midnight Reader."

LANGLEY SEARLES.

NO GREATER LOVE

By Henry Kuttner

HE was a thief, but worse, he was basically plain, completely selfish. But he stole the Love Charm, the charm that protected him against any who came near him. Save that he forgot one small fact of entomology—

Illustrated by Orban

Mr. Denworth was troubled with pixies, a circumstance scarcely mitigated by the fact that it was his own fault. Certainly he was unwise to indulge in shoplifting in this particular store. The shingle over the door should have warned him, for it said, "By Royal Appointment—H. R. H. Oberon." An unusual name, Oberon—and the customers of the Pixy Shop were quite as odd. Denworth discovered that somewhat later.

He was a thin, dark, saturnine man in his forties, handsome in the manner of a Toledo blade, and with a depth of reserve that covered a vile temper which could not brook opposition. Some years before, he had married a plump, helplessly pretty widow who had proved surprisingly shrewd—so much so that Denworth found himself disappointed in his plan to retire on Agatha Denworth's ample fortune. In this case, love accepted turned to hate; but both parties deftly hid their real feelings in a so-called civilized fashion. Denworth, his hopes baffled, raised a cryptic eyebrow and took sadistic pleasure in making his wife uncomfortable, while Agatha grimly held on to her money and wept only in private. Her tears were not for Denworth, but for the fragile bubble she had mistaken for a reality.

The man thought of her as a spider, avid to devour her mate, but the truth was somewhat different. Humiliation and pride stiffened Agatha's backbone for the first time in her life; she was willing to be hated, but not despised. After a few months of marriage, it became uncomfortably evident that Denworth had looked on the lady with emotionless contempt, seeing in her only a suitable tool-ready-made for his skilled hand. But Denworth, of course, was an intellectual snob—

Agatha, to save her own face, had advanced him a sufficient sum to buy a partnership in the Columbus Insurance Co., but Denworth held little stock—not enough to give him a controlling vote, of course. He didn't like half loaves, but he realized the wisdom of the truism. So at forty-four Edgar Denworth was married to a wife he hated, worked disinterestedly at a nominal job with Columbus, and was passionately in love with Myra Valentine, the socialite actress who rivaled the Hollywood

brilliant stars in glamorous publicity.

Myra just laughed.

For months the fires had been building up within Denworth's soul. His face, with its high Indian cheekbones and the pallid blue eyes, was completely expressionless as he walked along Sycamore Avenue that afternoon, dressed with careful casualness in well-fitting tweeds. Fourth Street, his usual route from the office to the Blue Boar Bar, was being torn up, so, on this eventful day, Denworth detoured into shady, tree-lined Sycamore Avenue, with its rows of small shops and its tall apartment buildings. He was feeling none too good.

There was reason. At the office, his conservative partners had outvoted him on a point of business development. Myra Valentine had been in to alter the beneficiary of her policy, and had treated Denworth with humiliating coldness. Finally, his account at the bank was overdrawn, and he had had to ask Agatha for money. True, she had written a check without a word, but—*damn her!*

There was no escape. Agatha's death would alter nothing, except for the worse, since Denworth would inherit little of value. He knew the contents of his wife's will. And a divorce—no! That would mean separating from the safeguard of Agatha's money. In a pinch, she always wrote a check; and there had been many pinches for Edgar Denworth lately. His investments were too reckless to be profitable.

It was unpleasant to feel balked at every step. Denworth took it as a personal insult when the cloudy sky suddenly fulfilled its promise and let loose with a driving shower. Thin lips clamped, he dived for the nearest shelter—an awning above the entrance of a small shop where, he saw at a glance, *objets d'arte* were sold. At least that was Denworth's impression, after a hurried glance at the many-paned window.

He lit a cigarette and looked for a cab. No luck. The street was almost deserted, and Denworth, fuming, looked around, his attention caught by the dripping, wind-rocked green shingle above the shop's door. It was shield-shaped, bearing a crown of odd design, painted in gilt, and under the crown was the legend: "By Royal Appointment—H. R. H. Oberon."

Curious!

Denworth glanced into the window, which, at first glance, seemed to contain an assortment of costume jewelry, of exceptionally exotic design. A small cardboard sign bore the following cryptic legend:

NOTHING FOR SALE

Denworth's eye dwelt on the hieroglyphics, which didn't seem to mean anything in particular. Behind the sign was a twisted gadget of gold, either a large ring or a small bracelet, which was sufficiently unusual to make the man pause thoughtfully. Myra Valentine would like such a gift, Denworth knew. On impulse he pushed open the door and entered the shop.

It was small, clean, and well lighted—a basement which had been renovated. Denworth stood on a tiny metal-railed landing, from which steps led down to the shop itself. Briefly he had an impression of sudden, furtive movement, as if someone had hastily whisked out of sight behind a counter; but, when he looked again, the place was empty save for a pallid, ordinary-looking man who glanced up at Denworth in a startled fashion. He resembled no one in particular—a more colorless type Denworth had never seen. There was a flat, white face, a snub nose sprinkled with freckles, thinning mouse-brown hair, and a rather weak chin.

"Oh," said the man disappointedly. "I thought you were a customer."

Denworth nodded. Then the import of the words struck him, and he scowled with surprised annoyance. His voice was sharp.

"Do I look like a panhandler?"

The man put down the long-handled broom he had been using and smiled. "Why, no, sir. I didn't imply that, I hope. It's just that I . . . um . . . I know all my customers by sound. I mean sight," he added, rather hastily.

Denworth came down into the store, glancing around. A spider web floated against his cheek, and he brushed it away irritably.

"That sign in your window," he said after a moment's inexplicable hesitancy. "What d'you mean—nothing for sale?"

"Well, it's an odd situation," the pale man murmured. "My name's Smith—Wayland Smith—and I more or less inherited this busi-

ness. Somebody has to make these . . . um . . . gadgets."

"Costume jewelry?"

"That's it," said Wayland Smith, too quickly. "Custom-made."

"Well, there's one I want to buy," Denworth grunted. "That gold ring in the window. Or is it a bracelet?"

"The Dowser Ring?" Smith inquired. "I'm awfully sorry, but that's reserved." He fingered his broom nervously.

Denworth scowled. "Dowser Ring? I've heard of Dowsers—they find water, or gold, or something like that. But I don't see—"

"Have to call it something, don't I?" asked Smith, betraying a slight irritation. He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder. Denworth had an odd impression that he whispered something so softly that it was inaudible.

The man was trying to get rid of him. That seemed plain enough. Denworth didn't like it, especially today. His vanity was already suffering contusions. For a mere shopkeeper to snub him— Denworth clamped his thin lips together.

"Then I'll buy something else," he said. "Every item in the store can't be reserved."

In the back, a thin voice was whispering. Denworth had the remarkable impression that he heard it with his skin. It was a thin, crawly, nasty little voice, and Denworth liked it not at all. He looked sharply at the curtains at the rear. They swayed slightly.

"In a minute," Smith said to the air, and turned back to Denworth. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm awfully busy just now. I've got to finish a custom job for a customer who's in a hurry. This." He gestured toward a brassy-looking charm bracelet that lay alone on a small red-topped table.

Denworth ignored the hint. He came forward and looked down at the bracelet. "Looks finished to me," he commented.

"It needs . . . um . . . another charm," Smith said.

Denworth moved along the aisle, staring at the various pieces of costume jewelry. A number of them—lockets, clips, brooches—bore inscriptions, none in English. One flat bronze pin said cryptically, "*Yatch,*" and had a *crux ansata* under the word.

"Unusual," Denworth said patronizingly.

Smith blinked. "My clients are pixilated," he proffered. "Naturally . . . of course."

"Well, I want to buy something. And don't tell me your prices are high. I can guess that."

"I'm very sorry indeed," the other said firmly, "but I simply can't sell you anything. All my stock is reserved."

Denworth breathed deeply through his nose. "Then I'll order a custom job. You'll make a bracelet—or a ring? A duplicate of that one in the window?"

"I'm sorry . . . no."

"Ever heard of the Federal trade commission? What you're doing is illegal—giving special preference to certain customers—"

There was a renewed outbreak of whispering from the back. Smith jumped, said, "Excuse me," and hurried toward the curtains. He thrust his head through and muttered brief syllables.

The brassy-looking charm bracelet was at Denworth's elbow. It is a regrettable fact that the temptation, coupled with his irritation at being balked, led the man to indulge in what was technically shoplifting. In a word, he swiped the bracelet.

It was the work of a moment. As the gadget dropped tinkling into his pocket, Denworth turned and headed for the stairway. Smith apparently hadn't noticed the theft. His back was still toward the store.

Denworth hesitated, smiled sourly, and let himself out. The rain had stopped. Drops, clear and glistening in pale sunlight, hung in a row from the shingle that said, "By Royal Appointment—H. R. H. Oberon." A sparrow was investigating a puddle nearby.

It would be pleasant to record that Denworth was already regretting his hasty act. Unfortunately he was not. He felt only a triumphant exhilaration at having outwitted the stubborn shopkeeper. He headed for the Blue Boar Bar, anxious to order a buttered rum.

The sparrow cocked its head and eyed Denworth with beady inquisitiveness. Abruptly it launched itself into the air, with a fluttering of feathers, and zoomed toward the man's face. Instinctively Denworth ducked. The sparrow came to rest on his shoulder and began to rub its head affectionately against its unwilling host's cheek.

Denworth reacted in the normal manner. Small, agile things are usually more perturbing than large ones; one can, perhaps, view a charging great Dane with equanimity, but having a sparrow nestling against your neck makes you feel clumsy and helpless. A peck in the eye is singularly difficult to evade. Den-

worth made a hoarse, inarticulate noise and clawed at his shoulder.

The sparrow flung itself madly away, but returned, chirping interestedly. To add to Denworth's confusion, a small white dog appeared from nowhere and began to leap up at him, wagging a friendly tail. Since people were watching, Denworth didn't kick the dog. Instead, he ducked into the Blue Boar, which luckily was close. The door shut out both sparrow and animal.

It did not shut out—something!—that percolated invisibly through the glass, whispering irritably to itself. Denworth didn't hear it. He was hovering over the bar, demanding rum. It was a cold day, and he sipped the hot liquor gratefully.

Several men were arguing noisily at the bar, and Denworth, glancing at them, picked up his glass and headed for a booth. There, he took out the charm bracelet and examined it. It seemed to be made of brass, with twisted figures attached to it at intervals. There was a knot of wire, a severed human head, an arrow, and other more ambiguous ornaments.

Denworth slipped it over his wrist. Simultaneously a low, sibilant voice said, "Damn! By the primal Nid, this is a singularly lousy trick to play on one."

"Eh?" Denworth asked automatically. The voice repeated, "Damn! I can't use the True Seven spell. Oberon's Rune ought to do it, though."

Denworth narrowed his eyes and looked around. Then he thoughtfully peered under the table. Finally he beckoned to the waiter.

"Sir?"

"Er . . . another rum." One didn't ask a waiter where disembodied voices were coming from. In any case it was probably a radio.

"Thricket thracket throcket omnibandum," said the rather horrid little whisper. "In nomine . . . damn again. It won't work. Listen, mister, that's my bracelet you're wearing."

Denworth didn't say anything. His lips narrowed; otherwise he made no sign. There was a faint thump, as of a tiny fist pounding the table top.

"Did you hear me?"

"Voice of my conscience—ridiculous!" Denworth muttered, and drank rum. There was a microcosmic snort.

"Always this trouble, always! Humans are more skeptical than kobolds. No wonder Oberon gave Bottom ass' ears. All humans—" There was a faint growl, like the pur of a cat. "Listen," the whisper resumed. "Wayland Smith was making that bracelet for me. I'd already paid him. Had to filch three wallets to get the money, too. You're a thief, sir."

The paradox of this statement was too much for Denworth. He said something about stolen money, caught himself, and looked around sharply. No one had noticed.

"But it's our right to steal," the voice said. "We're amoral. Our ancestors never ate the fruit of knowledge, like yours did. All pixies steal."

"Pixies," Denworth said under his breath.

"Turzee the Brawler's my name. Damn good specimen of pixy, too. Now will you give me back my bracelet?"

"I'm hearing things."

"You'll hear a lot more, if you're not careful," the wee whisper threatened. "Father Nodens, if I could just get you Under the Hill for a night. You'd go mad. I've seen it happen."

Denworth chewed his lip. The voice was too horribly logical for a delusion. Also—

The waiter returned, bearing a full dozen glasses of hot buttered rum. He placed these before the startled Denworth, who asked natural questions.

"It's all right, sir," the man said, beaming. "It's on me. I'd like to stand you to these drinks, if you don't mind. I like you."

He retreated before Denworth could frame a retort. The whisper broke out again, shrill with fury.

"See? The bracelet works, all right. No wonder I couldn't put a spell on you, loathsome human. Not even Oberon's Rune. I can't bear to hurt you."

Denworth decided he had better get out of here. The nasty, whispering voice was extraordinarily disturbing. Something in its pitch, perhaps. It didn't quite remind Denworth of a snake's hiss, nor the crackle of flames, but the short hairs on his nape were tingling.

But, as he rose, the curtains of the booth were drawn together by unseen hands. Denworth instinctively shrank back. The whisper said, "There. Now we can talk privately. No, don't try to get out. There's lots of liquor . . . if you like this milk-and-water stuff. It isn't like the old days. I remember the great festival we had the night Eve was evicted. There were great times Under the Hill then."

Denworth said, very softly, "Are you—alive?" He was shivering.

"Yes," the voice responded. "More alive than you. We don't have to depend on procreation to maintain our life sparks. With us, it's imperishable—as a rule. You see, human, I'm a pixy."

"You're a pixy," Denworth repeated. "I'm . . . I'm drunk. Must be. Or I wouldn't be sitting here talking to myself."

"You're talking to me, Turzee the Brawler," the voice said, reasonably enough. "Naturally you're skeptical. But I can convince you of my reality easily enough. Just take that bracelet off for a minute . . . huh?"

Some indefinable instinct warned Denworth not to obey. As he fumbled at his wrist, a surcharged tensity seemed to grow in the air around him. He could sense a couching hostility, avid and waiting. The latent nastiness of the bodiless whisper abruptly increased.

"Take it off," it said.

But Denworth, instead, gulped a rum and leaned back, picking up another in case of emergency. "I've heard of things like this," he muttered. "Sure. In stories. Funny little shops—"

"Stories get around. Legends have their beginnings. Now take the bracelet off, like a good fellow."

"Why?"

"Because I can't hurt you while you're wearing it," the voice said surprisingly. "Oh, damn! There I go again. Of all the charms in Smith's place, why did you have to take the Love sigil?"

"Love sigil?" Hot rum is more potent than cold. The fumes were mounting to Denworth's brain. Already he was beginning to feel less skepticism. And, after all, the disembodied voice was talking sensibly enough, except for certain ambiguities.

"Let's get this straight," Denworth said, after a pause. "I've got a feeling I'm in danger. Suppose you tell me what this bracelet is. What's a Love sigil?"

There was a tiny sigh. "Oh, well. It compels love. While you wear it, everybody loves you. They can't help it. If you didn't have it on, I could let loose a few spells that would—"

Denworth felt rather glad that the sentence was not finished. Struck by a sudden thought, he rose to peer over the back of the booth. Perhaps Wayland Smith had followed him, and was indulging in ventriloquism. That seemed possible. A great deal more possible than the tangible, though invisible, existence of Turzee the Brawler.

But the adjacent booth was empty.

"Look," said Turzee persuasively. "What good is the sigil to you? I need it. I'm so much disliked! And I'm to be the chief figure at a certain ritual . . . um . . . ceremony, where the sigil's needed. So be a good fellow, won't you? I'll tell you where a pot of gold's buried."

"Gold? How much?"

"Well, not *very* much," the Brawler amplified. "More than an ounce, though. But it's pure gold," he added enticingly.

Denworth drank more rum, remembering something Turzee had just said. "I could use this sigil of yours. It might come in handy. You say it makes people love you?"

"Why do you think the waiter gave you all those drinks? The sigil's sure-fire. It's got an Eros arrow, a love knot, a St. Valentine's head, a *yogham*—"

"And you can't hurt me while I'm wearing it."

The whisper grew shrill with indignation. "Damn squared! How can I? That blasted sigil makes me love you."

"Then I'd better not take it off," Denworth said wisely. "I don't know much about pixies, but I don't like the sound of your voice."

"I love yours," Turzee hissed, apparently between clenched teeth. "Wish I didn't. I'd make you sweat!"

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the waiter, bearing bottles of champagne—vintage—and *goldwasser*. "On the house," he explained.

"You see?" Turzee whispered.

As the waiter retreated, the large, bland face of a barfly appeared between the curtains. Denworth recognized the chap as one who had been at the bar, arguing passionately. Now the plump countenance was aglow with affectionate happiness.

"You're my pal," the man said, placing a heavy hand on Denworth's shoulder. "Don't let anybody tell you different. You're a gennelman. I can tell a gennel . . . gen— You're my pal, see?"

"Name of Nodens!" the Brawler cried furiously. "Get out of here, foul human! Ixandar vestrum goblanheim!"

The fat man's eyes widened. He made a hoarse choking noise and clutched at his collar. With a shock of horrified surprise, Denworth saw smoke rising from a crimson welt on the smooth forehead. There was an odor of burning skin.

"Get out!" Turzee shrieked shrilly. The barfly obeyed, stumbling back and out of sight. The expression on his face made Denworth feel vaguely sick. He pushed aside the champagne bucket, trying to keep his lips from trembling.

Against his will, he was convinced.

"What did you do?" he asked, very softly.

"Threw a spell at him," Turzee said. "I'd do the same to you, only—"

"Only you can't. Not while the sigil compels your love. I *see!*" Denworth's blue eyes were shallow and thoughtful.

Turzee said, "Oberon can render the sigil useless. Want me to call on him?"

"I don't think you will. Smith said the bracelet wasn't finished. It needed one more charm. Am I right in thinking that it—"

"You're crazy."

Denworth ignored the interruption. "Wait a bit. Let me work this out. A man—or a pixy—holding this sigil would be pretty omnipotent. It doesn't seem logical that an ordinary pixy would be given that power. Unless there was some loophole . . . yeah. I get it. Smith was going to put a charm on the sigil that would make it vulnerable to Oberon's spells, eh? Is that the answer?"

Significant silence was the response. Denworth nodded, satisfied. He was beginning to feel a warm, pleasant glow.

"So I'm safe, even from Oberon. I wonder, now, just how powerful the sigil is?"

"It compels the love of all living things," Turzee said. "But how long do you think you can keep it? We won't stand for such a thing. No human has ever taken a charm from Wayland Smith's shop. And he has charms far more wondrous than this. Like his Protean Locket—"

Denworth got up, his face, with its high Indian cheekbones, impassive. But a light was glowing behind the blue pallor of his eyes. With a purposeful movement he thrust aside the curtain and went out of the booth.

Myra Valentine. *Myra Valentine!*

The name throbbed within his brain.

Myra Valentine.

Capricious, lovely, disinterested Myra. Basking in her glamour, smiling coolly—patronizingly!—at Denworth.

If Turzee followed him out of the bar, Denworth did not know it. Everything else was swallowed up in the glowing realization of what this new, unbelievable power would mean to Myra Valentine.

"Don't be foolish, Edgar," she had said once. "What makes you think I could love you?"

Denworth hadn't liked that. His ego had winced at the stab. He wanted Myra, to wear her like a carnation in his lapel. And Myra, perhaps, sensed that. Denworth had an uneasy feeling that she considered him a second-rater.

Well—now he had the Love sigil.

Now he would have Myra Valentine.

Myra Valentine! The syllables pounded in time with his footsteps. Street lights were coming on, playing tricks with his shadow. A full moon was rising against a garish, starry backdrop of purple. Denworth did not feel the cold; the rum had warmed him. It was the rum, perhaps, that made it so easy now for him to accept the sigil as something real and powerful.

Power. Myra Valentine. The Love sigil.

He must be logical, even though his logic was based on one wild improbability—which was true. Suppose he won Myra. There were disadvantages. His position with the Colum-

bus Insurance Co. was nominal, and a scandal might endanger it seriously. Moreover, there was his wife. Agatha—

Why—good Lord! The sigil would work on her, too.

Denworth's smile was singularly cruel.

He was impatient now, and hailed a taxi. The beginnings of a scheme were unwinding in his mind. Myra—she would be the summation. There were other matters to take care of first.

A warning thought stabbed coldly through him. There was danger in magic. Sorcery was a two-edged weapon. One had to hold it very carefully by the hilt, taking care to avoid the blade. The reason was plain to see; use of magic meant the creation of new conditions, against which different safeguards from the familiar ones were necessary. As a man grew older, he instinctively developed defenses, learned how to avoid dangers. Because those dangers had become well known. Life was a tunnel, with pits dug for the feet of the unwary. Most men learned to use a flashlight.

But magic gave a different sort of light. Ultraviolet, perhaps—black light for black magic, it might be. Denworth grinned at the conceit. Yes—he would have to walk warily. New defenses would have to be erected, old ones altered or made stronger. Goety had its logic, which was not always based on human psychology. But, in this case, the element of magic applied to human beings— It should not be too difficult.

The Denworths owned—or, rather, Agatha owned—a good-sized, comfortable, rather old-fashioned house in the suburbs. The butler admitted Denworth, an unaccustomed smile on his fishlike face. As he took the other's topcoat, his hands brushed the garment almost caressingly.

"Good evening, sir. I hope you are well."

"Yeah. Where's Mrs. Denworth?"

"In the library, sir. May I get you something—a drink, perhaps? It's a cold night. Shall I build a fire—"

"No."

"You must watch your health, sir. I couldn't bear to have anything happen to you."

Denworth gulped and escaped to the library. The sigil might prove an embarrassing possession at times. He was reminded of Browning's Last Duchess, with her unpleasant lack of discrimination. She loved all things—"She liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere." The hell with that.

A point to be remembered, a discomfort against which to be on guard.

Agatha was sitting under a lamp, knitting. She was quite pretty, soft, pink, and gave an illusory appearance of helplessness.

Slowly she turned her head. Denworth saw something in the brown eyes that had not been there for years.

"Edgar—" she said.

He bent and kissed her. "Hello, dear."

The salutation startled her. "Why did you do that?"

Denworth didn't answer. He found a chair opposite Agatha and lit a cigarette. His eyes were narrowed as he watched the blue smoke filter upward.

Agatha put down her knitting. Her face was troubled.

"Edgar."

"Yes?"

"I—" She bit her lips. "I'd like to talk to you."

"All right."

"Then . . . first, though, are you comfortable? May I get you anything?"

Denworth hid a savage smile under his hand. "Thanks, no. It feels good to relax."

"You work too hard, dear. Sometimes I feel that I'm . . . I'm not good for you. Are . . . you happy?"

"Reasonably."

"That isn't true. I don't know why I'm talking like this. When you came in just now, I felt—" Agatha didn't finish. She was crying.

Denworth said, "You . . . uh . . . you don't trust me. That's one trouble, of course."

"Trust you?" It was a new thought. By the power of the sigil, Agatha could love Denworth, but trust was another matter.

How strong was the sigil's power? There was one way to find out.

"Your will, I mean," Denworth said. "Leaving your money to distant relatives. After all, I'm your husband. Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Then prove it. Make me the beneficiary of your will."

For a moment he thought he had failed. But he had put the condition as a test of Agatha's love for him. She could not refuse.

"I'll do that tonight, Edgar."

"Tomorrow will do," Denworth said, sighing. "So—you love me, eh?"

"I thought I didn't. But it's something I can't help."

"I wonder if you love me enough to die for me," Denworth almost whispered. Whether or not Agatha heard he didn't know. He got up abruptly and went into the living room, where he mixed himself a stiff drink.

"What a swine you are, Edgar Denworth," a soft voice said.

"I— *Eh?* Who's that?" The man turned, spilling droplets from his glass. Nothing was visible, of course.

I've brought a friend. Your majesty!"

"Yes, Turzee," said a new voice, low and deadly cold. "As you say, this is not fit. Men have changed since Adam. This one is—not good."

"Your spells should remedy that," the Brawler suggested. "A nonexistent being can't be either good or bad. Leave the bracelet, though, please. I want it."

"Yes, Turzee," Oberon whispered. And there was silence.

"Your friend Turzee. Turzee the Brawler. The pixy whose bracelet you stole, foul monster. If you didn't have the sigil on, I'd have you Under the Hill in two shakes."

"I've got it on, though," Denworth pointed out. "So you can get back to hell and stay there."

"It's true I can't harm you," Turzee said. "I love you too much for that. And black shame it is that an honest pixy should be compelled to love a verminous louse like you. But

Something, terrible and unseen, hummed in the emptiness of the air. Denworth felt horribly uneasy. He backed away, licking his lips.

"It is useless, Turzee," Oberon broke the stillness. "There is no flaw in the sigil. I love this man myself. I cannot harm him. Can Wayland Smith not add the silver link by teleportation?"

"He can't," Turzee growled softly. "I asked him. And without the silver link, the bracelet's charm is unbreakable."

Denworth took a deep breath. His palms were sweaty. If Turzee's voice had been horrid, that of Oberon was utterly shocking. And yet there was no good reason for that phenomenon. Probably it was that nasty whisper —the feeling that it had been used so much for unthinkable syllables that it had acquired a subtle venom that almost dripped from it. It was a whisper not intended for any human language.

There was still liquor in the glass, and Denworth finished it with two gulps. He looked around.

"Still here?"

"Yes," Oberon said. "Turzee, if you get him Under the Hill, call me immediately. I should enjoy myself."

"Not much chance, your majesty," the Brawler said despondently. "He's too smart to take off the sigil, and while he wears it . . . *you* know."

"He'll come a cropper," Oberon prophesied, dropping into unexpected colloquialism. "He'll take the bracelet off to bathe, or something of the sort. Why not sick mixed pixies on the malapert wretch? That might work. It would get on his nerves, at least."

"I shall, your majesty," Turzee said. "I have your leave?"

"By all means. Try bribing the worm, too. Good-by."

There was a swish of displaced air. Denworth blinked.

"Oberon's gone?"

"He's gone. That's not a bad idea, bribing you. Suppose I promise you vast rewards and immunity if you return the sigil?"

"Could I trust you?"

"If I swore by cold iron, you could. How about it?"

"No. A bird in the hand— I'll just keep the bracelet. I'll feel safer."

"Loathsome rat of a man!" Turzee hissed. "You try my patience. You forget that I have certain powers—"

"Which you can't use on me," Denworth pointed out blandly.

The Brawler sizzled furiously. "*Ah-h!* Do you know what I'd like to do to you? That!" A chair beside Denworth horrifyingly became semiliquescent, and melted in blobs into the carpet. "And this!" Turzee added as the butler opened the door to peer into the room.

"Mr. Denworth—"

He got no further. The wretched man was hurled violently forward on his face. He seemed to be indulging in contortions, as though a mad Swedish masseur was working on him. An astounded face was briefly visible; then the butler lay motionless, his limbs twisted into what seemed to be inextricable knots.

"That," Turzee said. "See?"

Denworth moistened his lips and hurried to his butler's rescue. The latter made no sound until he was untangled.

"Eh?"

"S-s-s-sir," the man finished, with a supreme effort. "I'm sorry, sir. I . . . I must have had a seizure. I fear I am ill."

"It's all right," Denworth said. "You'd better go and lie down. What did you want?"

"I forget. Oh . . . yes. Mrs. Denworth wishes to speak to you in the library."

Denworth hastily left, since the butler was beginning to eye him with affection. There was no sign of Turzee the Brawler. Perhaps he had given up—

Not likely. He seemed to be a stubborn sort of pixy. Denworth shrugged and entered the library, where Agatha looked up with a wistful smile.

"I've just phoned my attorney, Edgar," she said. "He'll be here within the hour. I'm going to change my will and make you the beneficiary."

"Oh." Denworth felt uncomfortable. Simon Henderson's steely eyes always disturbed him. The old lawyer had a way of looking at people as though he saw into them. He might ask questions—

"I'm sorry I can't wait, Agatha. I've a business engagement downtown. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Take care of yourself, dear."

Denworth nodded and half turned. Agatha said, "Would you mind very much if—"

She rose, went to him, and kissed him. Denworth could scarcely repress a smile as he went out, donning his topcoat in the hall. The sigil's power was remarkable. He wondered if it were cumulative.

In his taxi, he remembered that there was no need to fear Simon Henderson. The bracelet's charm would affect the attorney as it affected all other living things. But—oh, well —there was no point in staying home when the Cabanavista was putting on a new floor show tonight.

Perhaps because he was a little afraid, he felt the need for extroversion. The impinging

of magic upon routine is basically disturbing. It opens vistas. Routine habits of thought are even more disrupted when pixies are involved. Pixies were—unexpected.

Seated at a ringside table, Denworth looked blankly at semistripped and shapely wenches and brooded over the situation. It seemed well in hand. He had been ushered, with all signs of affection, to the best seat in the house, much to the astonishment of the head waiter, who hurried over to see what was up. He came, as it were, to scoff, and remained to worship. His attentions were cut short only by the arrival of a blond socialite named Mary Bushwalter, whom Denworth knew slightly. Mary took the seat opposite the man and glared all other contenders into oblivion.

She was a charming, fluffy-brained woman who had always snooted Denworth, and he took pleasure now in her obvious adoration. From all around the big room stares were leveled at the man, magnetically attracted by the Love-sigil. He ordered drinks, and was not surprised to receive champagne, on the house.

"I like you, Mr. Denworth," Mary Bushwalter said, batting her eyes significantly. "I fear you've been hiding your light under a bushel. Do you know that you're very handsome?"

"Oh, no," Denworth murmured absently. "Distinguished, perhaps. Still—"

"You're beautiful," Mary insisted. "I like you—very much." Over the rim of the glass she eyed him with shocking significance.

Denworth, however, was not interested in the Bushwalter. He was brooding over the ensorcelled bracelet and the possible scope of his powers. As yet he had not put the talisman to a really severe test. Nor could he, until Agatha had changed her will.

"I wonder," he said suddenly, "if you'd lend me a thousand dollars. I'm short of money just now. Can you—"

"I'll write a check," said Mary, who was notoriously stingy. "Don't bother to pay it back." She fumbled in her handbag.

Denworth expelled a deep breath. Hell—he didn't need Mary's money, especially as there were certainly strings on it. The Bushwalter was a demanding wench. He had merely wished to test the sigil's power; the result was eminently satisfying.

"I was kidding," he smiled. "I don't need the dough, Mary."

"Take it anyway. I have lots."

"So have I," said Denworth, not troubling to use the future tense. "Forget it. Have another drink."

At that precise moment Mary Bushwalter's hair turned into a writhing nest of snakes.

"That," said Turzee the Brawler's all-too-familiar whisper, "is what I'd like to do to you, you lovable little blob of unmentionable filth. See?"

Denworth turned a pallid yellow, but kept his nerve. Mary had not yet realized what had happened. Perhaps she merely thought her carefully arranged coiffure had come undone, and was uncoiling. She put up a swift hand, touched the horror, and opened her mouth to a silently screaming square. A serpent head flipped down her forehead and peered intently into her wide eyes. Mary closed eyes and mouth and slid noiselessly under the table. The cloth swallowed her. No sound emerged save for a faint hissing.

Luckily the Cabanavista was badly lighted, on the familiar principle that a clear view of your friends' faces is apt to rip asunder the glorious glow of illusion that liquor provides. The principle is sound; reality should not intrude into dreams. In this case the result was lucky for Denworth, though only briefly.

It presently became distressingly clear that Turzee had not arrived alone. He had taken Oberon's advice about calling in aid.

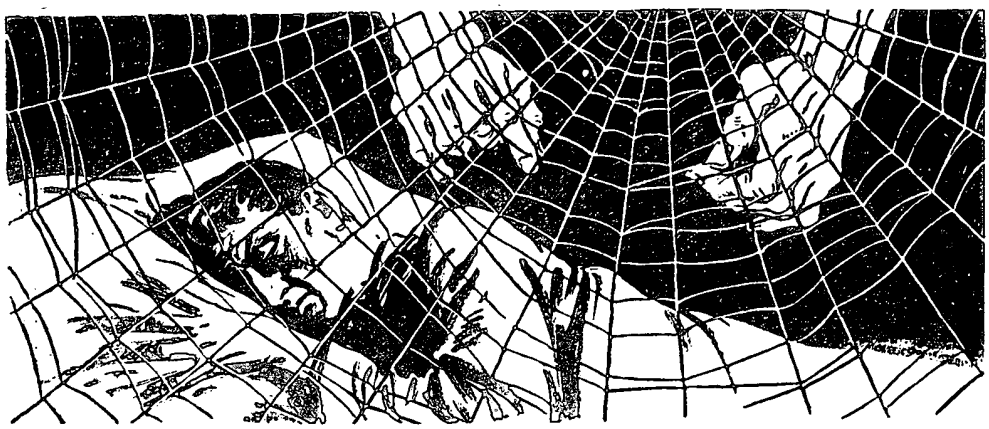
The Cabanavista, in fact, was lousy with pixies.

They were invisible, of course, a situation to which many of the night club's customers owe their continued sanity. Turzee apparently had culled his assistants from the very dregs of pixydom, creatures of low and demented impulses, whose idea of a good time involved such matters as donning tablecloths and flapping weirdly about the room, like amorphous harpies. The cloth before Denworth was snatched off abruptly, rising up into a bunched, ghostly figure hovering in the air before him.

Someone shrieked.

Denworth calmly drank more champagne. A faint chattering was heard, and Turzee's vicious whisper announced, "I'd fling that stuff in your face if you weren't wearing the sigil. By Nid and Kronos, I'll show you what I'd like to do to you. At 'em, lads!"

A chorus of piping whistles answered him. Men and women were rising from their tables, shouting questions. Waiters scurried to and fro, casting helpless glances at the head waiter,



a sleek, handsome creature whose life had heretofore been untroubled. Basically he was not fitted for an encounter with pixies. His idea of quelling the incipient riot was to leap on the orchestra's dais, flap his hands, and tell a false and lying story to the microphone standing before him.

"It's all right, folks," he chattered. "This is part of the show—"

"Sue you!" a furious voice bellowed from under an overturned table. Several pairs of legs were visible sticking out, and wine bottles hung in empty air, pouring their contents upon the wildly flourishing limbs. Two tablecloths flapped in slow circles around the scene. At nearby tables people were staring with fascinated eyes.

But the head waiter's soothing voice had its effect. Gradually everyone turned to watch the man on the dais. Despite the ghostly, avian tablecloths, it seemed possible that trouble might be averted.

Then the microphone began to rock. Almost imperceptibly it tilted to the left. The head waiter swayed after it. Back it moved, this time to the right.

And back once more. With slowly increasing arcs the pixilated microphone rocked to and fro. The harassed announcer swayed in time to it, rather resembling, in his actions, a hypnotized cobra. The effect of his speech was totally nullified by his inexplicable behavior.

When the microphone levitated itself into the air, the head waiter tilted back his head, gave a few inarticulate cries, and made helpless, despondent motions. He had given up. The damn place was haunted, and there was nothing more he could do about it. He'd done his best. It obviously wasn't good enough. Especially since the microphone, with a jerk, detached itself from its cord and began to pursue the head waiter into the disintegrating orchestra, the component parts of which fled off in all directions like an expanding universe.

Few noticed the scene on the dais. There was trouble enough among the tables. Only one remained in place; the others were overturned or rolling about wildly, amid crashing glass and tinkling service. The dim lighting added immeasurably to the effect. Since the rampaging pixies were invisible, it was natural that several customers should blame their troubles upon the humans nearest them, and as a result a few interesting fights started. Inevitably others were sucked in—

Denworth glanced under the table. Mary Bushwalter's hair had returned to its normal state, though the woman was still unconscious. For the rest, a tablecloth flapped past Denworth, and a malicious little voice whispered, "Hope you like it, rat."

Denworth sighed and rose, delicately wiping his lips with his napkin. He made his way to the door, avoiding struggling knots of bodies, and, since the hat-check girl was missing, found his own hat and topcoat. That done, he went out and called a taxi. The sirens of police cars were screaming. But the tumult from within the Cabanavista had mysteriously lessened in volume.

Denworth gave his home address. He was tired—magic is more wearing than one might think. Rolling through the quiet streets, he relaxed on the cushions and lit a cigarette.

"Turzee?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," the pixy's rather horrid little whisper came. "You can't lose me. See?"

"Are you alone?"

"For the nonce. But with the snap of my

fingers I can summon plenty of friends. Want me to do it?"

"Why bother?" Denworth asked reasonably. "I'm not a fool. You were trying to annoy me by that affair in the Cabanavista. It didn't work, you see."

"Bah!"

"Since you can't do anything to me directly, you're trying to work indirectly. Only you forget one thing. Nobody in the world means a damn to me."

"What a louse," Turzee said. "To think I'm doomed to love a skunk like you!"

Denworth grinned. "Get Wayland Smith to make you another bracelet. Ever think of that?"

"He can't," the Brawler explained. "One sigil a year is the law. I can't wait. Our festival's coming up too soon. How about lending me the sigil till it's over? I'll give it back afterward."

Denworth didn't trouble to reply. There was silence in the taxicab, till Turzee broke it.

"Do you like to be bad?" he inquired, apparently in all sincerity.

Denworth laughed. "Relative values . . . good Lord! I wonder what your I. Q. would be, Turzee."

"Three hundred on Tuesdays and Thursdays," the pixy said moodily. "Sixty-three on Fridays. Naturally. You think you're pretty smart, don't you?"

"Maybe. I'm not a fool, anyway."

"So you think. There's a balance. The human world isn't supposed to touch others. The logic of Earth is fitted to the pattern. When other things impinge—"

"Well?"

"Each of the worlds has its pattern. *They* arranged that, in the beginning, and *They* set up a law of compensation. What you call the Fates, or the Norns. Those are only symbols for a rule of logic that's only applied when the worlds touch. The equation for Earth is too complex for any but *Them* to visualize. When a monkey wrench is thrown into the machinery, compensation sets in. It's set in already. You branched off from your life pattern when you stole the sigil, Denworth. You stepped out of the road. Ever since, you've been heading back toward the road, though you don't know it. The law of compensation is taking you back to—"

"To what?" Denworth asked, very softly.

"I don't know," Turzee said. "But it will be quite horrible to you. The fate you most wish to avoid."

"Under the Hill? What does that mean?"

Silence, heavy and somehow terrible. The taxi stopped. Denworth got out and reached for his wallet.

"On me," said the cabman, with a look that spoke volumes. "Any time you want to go anywhere, phone for 107. It won't cost you nothing."

As Denworth let himself into the house, a formless dark shadow of worry paced him. So far, he knew, he had seen only the least part of the strange cosmos that the key of magic opened. Beyond might lie—anything.

He had glimpsed merely that part of magic that impinged on himself, in his own world, and that had been altered to conform to human and terrestrial logic. It was like hearing the words of a lunatic, and knowing that black hell lay hidden within the man's veiled mind.

Under the Hill. What horror did that symbol imply? "The fate you most wish to avoid." What was it?

"Going Under the Hill," Denworth said to himself, after a hesitant pause. "Naturally. Well—I'll be careful. Turzee?"

The pixy didn't answer. There were voices from the library. Denworth went in, to find Agatha listening impassively to the arguments of Simon Henderson, her attorney.

"Hello, dear," the woman said, rising to kiss Denworth. "I'm so glad you're back."

Henderson stared with astonished eyes at the scene of marital affection. He was a sour-faced, withered, gaunt figure of incredibly rigid honesty, and Denworth had never liked him.

So he returned Agatha's kiss and nodded at the attorney. "Glad to see you, Henderson. Am I intruding?"

"Of course not," his wife answered swiftly. "Sit down. We're all finished, aren't we, Simon?"

The old man grunted. "The new will's made and witnessed, if that's what you mean. But I think you're insane."

Agatha smiled. "Legally insane?"

Henderson snorted. "Of course not! I merely am implying that you're unwise in leaving everything to . . . to Mr. Denworth."

"That's enough," Agatha said.

But the lawyer turned to glare at Denworth. "Have you been applying any sort of pressure to her? If you have . . . if you have—" He

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stopped, face contorting, and passed his hand before his eyes. "I . . . I— May I have a glass of water? Something—"

Denworth poured brandy, and Henderson gulped it.

"Thanks. I was dizzy for a moment— What was I saying?"

"That I'd been applying pressure to Agatha."

Henderson took a deep breath. "Maybe you have. Maybe you have. But that's all right. A man needs money. Agatha, you're doing the right thing."

She stared, amazed by the lawyer's sudden volte-face. "I thought—"

"You thought I didn't like Edgar," Henderson said, rather irritably. "Well, you're wrong. He's the sort of boy I'd like to have for a son. I think a good deal of Edgar."

Denworth choked, and covered up by pouring himself a drink. He flashed an appreciative glance at the sigil. It even worked on Henderson! That meant it could do anything.

A faint rustle brought him up sharply. Was Turzee here? It was impossible to say, but, just now, Denworth did not care for more pixie trouble. He smiled at Agatha.

"I've a headache. Mind if I say good night, dear?"

"Darling! I'll bring you some aspirin."

"Thanks, no. All I need is sleep."

"Well—" Agatha said doubtfully.

Henderson was looking concerned. "You must take care of your health, my boy. Great care! You don't know how much you mean to a great many people. Somehow I find myself looking on you as a son."

"Thanks. Night, pop," Denworth said flippantly, and went out, throwing a kiss to Agatha. He could afford gestures now, he thought, as he climbed the stairs.

The butler was nowhere in evidence. Denworth wondered if the man, after his experience with Turzee, had given notice. Probably not. The sigil would bind him securely.

Denworth undressed slowly and slipped into pajamas, puffing a cigarette meanwhile. There was a board meeting at the Columbus Insurance Co. tomorrow. Denworth had plans involving that meeting. Myra Valentine could wait—even if she married tonight, that would be no obstacle. The power of the sigil recognized no other bonds.

As Denworth dropped off to sleep, a familiar tune was humming in his mind—a song he had heard once, years ago. How did it go? Oh, yes—

Love, your magic spell is everywhere—

Denworth smiled and went to sleep.

His dreams were singularly unpleasant. Someone, vast and unseen, was doing something cryptic and terrible, weaving a web, knotting a thread here, tightening a strand there; and the worst of it was that the entity paid no attention whatsoever to Denworth. It was as though Denworth existed merely as an expression in a complicated equation. He had lost all sense of self. An overpowering terror lurked at the back of his mind, pushing against a dam that threatened to break. The sigil, upon his wrist, burned like molten metal.

From somewhere Turzee's whisper said, "Let me take him Under the Hill."

The vast thing worked on unheeding.

"Break the charm of the sigil."

The work went on.

"Change the equation. Let me do as I will with him."

The entity did not hear.

"Destroy the sigil. You have the power."

The slow weaving continued.

"Under the Hill they wait. Let him dance with us. Let him know us. Let him see our beauty."

But Turzee was not answered. His thin whisper died into silence. That great, formless thing, invisible and yet somehow strangely sensed, worked on, following an impelling urge alien to Denworth. Then the dam that held back fear broke, and the man awoke, gasping and sweating—

He took a sleeping tablet and rather uneasily composed himself again, but there were no more dreams. In the morning he woke refreshed, and after a cold shower was ready to develop his plan further. He did that at breakfast.

Agatha, he saw, was looking unusually well. Her clear skin was flushed, and a smile played about the corners of her mouth. She had ordered a mixed grill for breakfast, which was one of Denworth's favorites.

They sat in the sun porch, and warm yellow light drifted through the windows, borne by the sharp, pleasant air of early spring. The feel of the wind was like that of water at dawn, during a hot summer; a sensuous, electric caress that ran pleasantly along Denworth's skin. He felt very good this morning. Why

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not? At last he was on the brink of achieving all that he had desired, all that he ever wanted. Nor would it have the dullness of a gift dumped in his lap. There would be the thrill of conflict.

And yet he was invulnerable. So might Achilles have felt—battling, as he thought, without danger to himself. The parallel was a good one, even to the disastrous implications, for Denworth remembered his dream and what Turzee had said in the taxicab. He would have to be careful. Yet he felt confident now, tuned to the highest pitch. He stretched lazily, enjoying the movement of his muscles flowing under his hide.

"How did you sleep, dear?" Agatha asked.

"Well enough." A shadow fell over the man. He pushed it away, and forked up a bit of broiled kidney. His blue eyes had suddenly turned cold and stony.

As he ate, he thought, casting quick glances at Agatha. The sigil maintained its power. The woman showed it; adoration was plain in every look and movement. The love the amulet compelled was unreasoning and selfless. Selfless? Was it, then, stronger than the vital element of self-preservation?

A thought came to Denworth; was it necessary to have Agatha die? Money was his for the asking. Agatha would give him a divorce if he desired that—

He asked her. Her eyes filled, but after a while she nodded. "Yes, Edgar. If it would make you happy. Do . . . is that what you want?"

"No. Of course not, dear," he said, and fell silent, considering. Life with Agatha, under these altered relations, might not be too unpleasant. Yet the face of Myra Valentine rose up, shattering his unformed good intentions.

She would become his mistress. The sigil would take care of that. But it would not be enough. Denworth wanted Myra more as a symbol than a reality, though he did not realize it. Possession of her would compensate for certain deficiencies of his own. As Turzee had remarked, Denworth was a louse.

This was the more evident when he decided to keep to his plan of eliminating Agatha permanently. It was not necessary now. But he remembered the chafing impotence that had been his in the past, the sullen, bitter hatred he had felt for Agatha after he had first realized that she was not a malleable fool; and it seemed necessary, for the sake of his own ego, that Agatha should die.

He looked at her, finding a secret pleasure in her willing, almost supplicatory adoration. But the intellectual satisfaction of mental sadism was somewhat too fine for Denworth. Concrete realities were more desirable.

She must die.

And so he arranged it, with rather horrible callousness, playing delicately on the woman's helpless emotion. She loved him. That he knew. She would die for him—

Agatha cried at first, but a pitiable bravery sustained her in the end. Yes, she knew Edgar wasn't happy with her. It was her fault. Only yesterday had she realized—

Couldn't they go on—differently?

No.

She loved him. She would do anything for him. Couldn't they make a second try—

No. He loved Myra Valentine.

But—

"You said you loved me enough to die for me. Prove it. Kill yourself. So that it will seem an accident. Die for me. If you love me. If you love me."

On his wrist the sigil shone brilliantly in the morning sunlight.

Die for me. If you love me.

And Agatha, pressing her damp handkerchief to her mouth, nodded. Her eyes looked after Denworth as he left the room. She knew she would not see him again.

Denworth knew that, too, but he did not turn. He was too busy wondering if the final test would be successful.

In the meantime he fortified himself with a drink, hailed a taxi, and went downtown to his office. On the way he passed Wayland Smith's shop and hastily averted his gaze. A new thought came to him; something Turzee had said. Smith possessed a great many charms—

The thought was forgotten, but it would recur later. Denworth presently reached his office, where he waited for the signal that would summon him to the board meeting. When it came, he rose, taking a deep breath. This would be important.

He sat silent at first, the recipient of a surprising number of handshakes and inquiries as to his health. Oddly friendly glances were sent his way. But business proceeded as usual.

Until, under the head of new business, Denworth brought up the point of policy that had been settled yesterday. Everyone listened.

Denworth said that he felt the idea was too conservative. He mentioned another plan. It was out of order, he knew, but under the circumstances he thought it would be all right to speak. He made a motion.

Six men seconded it as one.

When it came to a vote, the new policy was passed without a dissenting voice, canceling the previous decision. Denworth grinned and settled back, satisfied. They loved him so much they couldn't refuse him anything.

He turned to the man at his left. "Joe, I want a raise. And a better position. I wonder if you'd mention it?"

"Damn right I will! I should have done it before. You deserve a great deal, Ed."

The members didn't vote him in as chairman of the board—that just wasn't possible—but they quadrupled his salary and gave him a position about two steps below that of the president. Applause signified approval.

As the meeting broke up, Denworth pushed his way through a crowd of congratulations, refusing a score of invitations, and returned to his office. He did no work there. Instead, he lifted his feet to the desk top, smoked cigarette after cigarette, and nodded from time to time. All was going well—very well indeed. So far.

He phoned Myra Valentine. Her maid said that she was out. This was an obvious lie, for Myra never rose before noon. The sigil, then, didn't work over the telephone.

Denworth said, "Tell her I'll be over this afternoon," and hung up, smiling thinly. Myra would be easy prey, once she was within the bracelet's sphere of influence, whatever it might be. Range of vision, perhaps? It didn't matter.

He wondered what Agatha was doing. Had she— Well, he would soon know. In the meantime, he could stand a drink.

"Don't go," a familiar whisper said. "I'll cause trouble if you do. I have lots of friends, you know. And Oberon's given me carte blanche."

Denworth relaxed behind his desk. "All right," he said. "What's the proposition now?"

"I'm getting damn tired of making propositions," the Brawler announced. "I love you, and I'd like to take you Under the Hill. Paradox, isn't it? You don't take—friends—Under the Hill."

"Just what's there?" Denworth asked, yielding to curiosity.

"To our eyes, it's lovely," Turzee said, "but we are in no sense human. People have a mistaken idea about pixies. Figures of fun—so is Punch, but he's pretty nasty, too."

"I know," Denworth agreed. He had al-

ways felt that way about the crook-nosed, stiffly gesticulating puppet. "What do you look like? How big are you?"

"As large, perhaps," Turzee said, "as the last joint of your little finger. To your eyes we would be quite lovely. Only you can't see us."

"There've been artists' conceptions of pixies."

"You could paint one yourself, if I described myself," the Brawler said. "We're small, delicate, fragile, with a high basal metabolism, no digestive tract, no—"

"Eh?"

"We're solid all through. Like a potato. You may find that difficult to understand—you think anthropomorphically. Why am I telling you all this?"

"Because of the sigil?" Denworth suggested.

"I suppose so. Listen, won't you be reasonable and take the bracelet back to Smith? I've spoken to him, and he'll give you a lot of puckerel charms in exchange."

"What are those?"

"Petty stuff. But they'd be important to you. A bottomless purse, X-ray glasses, a character scanner. How about it?"

"No," said Denworth, "because they wouldn't protect me against enemies. The sigil does. Nothing can harm me as long as I wear it."

"By the seven dimensions of hell!" Turzee shrilled. "You try my patience! And too far! I'd like to—"

"What?"

"Do this!" the pixy cried hoarsely, as the door opened to admit Denworth's secretary. The secretary's body seemed to collapse, as though all the bones had been removed from it. A shapeless, horrible bag, it sank down, gasping and staring. And then it melted away and was gone, clothes and all.

Denworth looked sick. He shut his eyes tightly, chewing his lip.

"Miss Bennett?" he asked gently.

There was no answer, except for Turzee's low snigger.

"Miss—"

"That's what I'd like to do to you," said the pixy with relish. "I can do a lot more horrible things than that, too. You'll learn!"

Denworth had recovered his equilibrium. "It's no use," he said, putting his palms flat against the desk and staring into space. "It's—pretty bad, but Miss Bennett was nothing

to me. I don't care if she's dead; if she's suffered. It doesn't touch me. I'm impregnable, and I'm going to stay that way."

"You're a swine."

"You're a fool," Denworth retorted. "After all, you killed the girl."

"It was moral for me to do so," Turzee said. "I have no human sense of values. Sauce for the goose isn't sauce for the gander. I can ethically kill the girl, but it's immoral of you to remain unmoved."

"Amoral."

"Casuistry. Smart-Aleck stuff. And I'll do worse," Turzee promised. "You'll come crawling to me on your knees before you're through."

"Who do you love?" Denworth inquired, grinning crookedly.

"Y-y-you!" Turzee screamed, almost speechless with fury, and there was a swirl of displaced air. Apparently the pixy had vanished

Denworth considered. He was surprisingly untouched by Miss Bennett's disappearance. Perhaps because it had been so complete. Death usually involves remnants, inartistic reminders of what may have been rather badly composed in the first place. Corpses are degenerate, but they have an emotional appeal through association and contrast.

Denworth shook his head. No emotion, he decided, must touch him henceforward. It shouldn't be too difficult. Always egocentric, he ruthlessly determined that the power of the Love sigil would work unreciprocated.

But Myra—

He telephoned his own house. Agatha was not there. No, the butler did not know where she had gone. Was there anything he must do? Mr. Denworth wasn't feeling ill? He must take care of himself—

Denworth smiled sourly and cradled the receiver. He'd have a drink, and then call on Myra, before she had a chance to dress and escape.

It worked out that way. Myra, red-haired, arrogant, and lovely, came in to glare at her maid, who had let Denworth into the apartment against orders. Her voice was throaty, perhaps a little sharp now.

"What's the idea—"

"Hello, Myra," Denworth said, smiling. As always, his throat went dry at sight of the girl. Her sheer sensuous beauty was overwhelming. It struck out almost tangibly.

"Listen, Ed Denworth," Myra snapped, swinging to face him with a swirl of turquoise velvet. "I've told you—"

She stopped.

"You've told me?"

Myra's lips were parted as she stared at the man. Something leaped into view in the dark depths of her eyes.

"I've—"

"Beat it," Denworth said to the maid, and as the woman went out, he extended his arms. Myra came into their circle without question.

Several hours later, they spent the cocktail hour in a roof garden overlooking the city. A warm, pleasant relaxation filled Denworth. His glance was possessive as he watched Myra sipping her drink. So was hers.

"Another?"

"Haven't you had enough, darling? Your health—"

"I heal quick," Denworth said flippantly. "By the way, did I tell you I've a better position?" He went into detail. "After I . . . um . . . get my divorce, we can be married immediately."

"It'll take a year," Myra said. "I can't wait that long. But we'll be married, yes. Only you've got to give up your job. I don't want you to work. I've lots of money."

"No," Denworth said firmly. "That won't work out. I'm on my way up—in fact, I've just started. I've no intention of retiring just yet."

"But I love you. I don't want you to work. I want to take care of you."

"Amazon. I'm not exactly a drone, Myra. I have plans—"

She laughed affectionately. Denworth felt a slight irritation. Myra's love seemed unpleasantly maternal. Well, a firm hand was necessary, before any difficulties could develop.

And yet, curiously enough, Denworth got nowhere. Myra had firmly fixed in her mind the idea that her lover was a child, to be watched and guarded against harm. Denworth was reminded of Agatha. His wife, too, had wanted to usurp his natural domination.

It might have been only the instinct of survival working within Myra. Perhaps she sensed that if she once capitulated and gave Denworth the upper hand, she'd be lost. Denworth would not be an easy master.

She was lovely, though, breathtakingly so, with long sleek lines that flowed with consummate grace. It was difficult to think clearly

in Myra's intoxicating presence. Her dark eyes were pools in which a man's senses could be drowned.

So nothing was done, till a telephone call summoned Denworth from the girl's side.

He felt a small, jerky leap within his chest as he lifted the receiver.

"Denworth speaking. Well?"

"This is Chief of Police Fennel. I'd like to see you."

"Of course. Anything wrong?"

"An accident. Your wife—"

Denworth's tone did not match the expression on his face. "Agatha? She's not hurt!"

"No," Fennel said, after a pause. "We'll talk about that later. I phoned your office, and they said this was one of your hangouts. Suppose I come up now?"

"No, I'll meet you somewhere. My office?"

"All right."

Denworth looked thoughtful as he made his way back to the table. Trouble was in the offing. He sensed it. Had Turzee been up to his tricks? Well—he fingered the sigil affectionately—he was safe, at least.

Myra was not at the table. After an inconclusive conversation with the waiter, Denworth paid his bill and left. Why had Myra run out? Surely the spell of the bracelet had not worn off!

Denworth was still brooding when he reached his office to face Chief of Police Fennel, a small, gray, harsh-faced man with singularly piercing black eyes. Fennel didn't offer to shake hands. He jabbed his cigar in the direction of a chair, perched on the desk's edge, and glanced around.

"We're alone. Good. Now, Mr. Denworth, let's talk."

"Surely." Denworth sat down, lighting a cigarette. His face was impassive, but his blue eyes were wary. "You say there was an accident?"

"Your wife almost jumped off the top of the Carnes Building."

Denworth sat back with a jerk. Almost! What had stopped her?

He didn't ask that question, of course. Instead, he said, "I don't understand. Agatha—I don't believe it."

Fennel chewed his cigar. "I've been talking to Simon Henderson, your wife's lawyer. Simon's an old friend of mine. He told me a few things—"

Denworth didn't show the sudden fear that shot through him. Damn Henderson!

"He was worried. It seems your wife changed her will last night, and Simon took the precaution of calling on her this morning. He saw her coming out of the house. She didn't notice him. She took a taxi, and he followed. She wandered around town aimlessly. Once she almost stumbled under a truck. Finally she went up to the roof of the Carnes Building and climbed on the parapet. Then she fainted."

Denworth blinked. "But—"

"Simon talked to her, after she recovered. Your wife was pretty hysterical. She seemed to feel that she should kill herself for your sake. Only she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Mrs. Denworth has a strong religious conviction against suicide."

"I . . . see," Denworth said softly. So that was it. The power of the sigil was strong, but there were stronger things. At least, it had not worked on Agatha. Yet her death was not really necessary. She could easily be induced to give her money to Denworth. Agatha had no burning desire for wealth, and giving it up would not conflict with any deeply rooted emotions of her own.

So the plan must be changed. Fair enough. The immediate danger was Fennel. For he seemed unaffected by the sigil.

"I'll see that my wife is taken to a physician," Denworth said.

Fennel grunted. "Have you ever studied hypnotism, by any chance? No? Well—" He didn't look convinced.

"What are you driving at?" Denworth asked, leaning back in his chair. "Trying to create a mystery? My wife hasn't felt well lately. She's been despondent. People commit suicide sometimes."

"The curious thing," Fennel said, "is that both Simon and Mrs. Denworth seemed rather impossibly attached to you. I've heard rumors about you around town, and I know the boys at your club. You're not a likable man. Also, Simon has always disliked you—till now."

"Oh?"

"I'm not superstitious. I came up here because Simon was worried, and didn't know why. He seems torn between two desires. He thinks a great deal of both you and your wife, and for some reason those emotions are diametrically opposed. No, I'm not superstitious, Denworth, but since I saw you, I've decided that you're a damned dangerous man."

"Indeed?" Denworth said silkily, his eyebrows lifted. "Do you wish to arrest me?"

"No."

"You couldn't, could you? Don't you . . . ah . . . rather look on me as a son?"

"Yes," Fennel said, not a muscle of his face changing. "Oddly enough, that's true. It's why I'm worried. Why I suspect that something's very wrong indeed. My emotions are pretty stable. I've gone off balance now, and I don't like it."

"You wouldn't do anything to harm me, though," Denworth said confidently.

He was due for a surprise. Fennel shifted his cigar and shook his head solemnly.

"Abraham loved Isaac," he said, a sudden fanaticism glowing in his deep-set eyes. "Remember? 'And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.' There are stronger things than love, Mr. Denworth. Duty, for example. I—rather worship the law."

The two men's glances locked in silent battle. Denworth said, "Are you threatening me?"

"I have no sympathy for criminals. You, I think, are either a criminal, or potentially one. I suspect hypnotism. I don't know, of course. My point is that you'd better think twice before—" He didn't finish.

"There's no point in prolonging this interview," Denworth grunted, rising. The chief of police stood up also, relighting his cigar. From under shaggy brows he slanted a keen glance at the other.

"As you like. I'm merely serving warning. If you're innocent, you won't be insulted. If you've been up to skulduggery, stop it. Because the law has no emotions."

"Juries have."

Fennel's lips clamped together. "That's true. If you try any more of your damned hypnotism, I hope you'll succeed in committing a murder. Because then I'll be justified in shooting you through the heart."

"Get out!" Denworth said, white dents showing on his nostrils. He leaned forward, gripping the edge of the desk hard.

Fennel opened the door. "I'm going. Remember, though, I'll be keeping my eye on you. And don't depend on hypnotism to see you through."

"Get out!"

"I could not love thee, dear, so much—" Fennel said, with a crooked grin, and went out. The door swung shut behind him.

Denworth dropped into his chair, pressing his teeth together till his temples ached. He glared at the sigil, feeling an impulse to tear

it off. But he repressed his fury. No use making a bad job worse. Its power was limited; fair enough. A jack plane will not smooth metal, but it has its own purpose. Denworth had simply overestimated the sigil's capabilities.

Agatha had not committed suicide, because her religion forbade it. Simon Henderson had spoken, though guardedly, to Fennel, because of his deep affection for Agatha. And Fennel himself—

The law was his justification, his idol, his *raison d'etre*. He would sacrifice Isaac for his god. Denworth shivered uncomfortably. Fennel was too fanatical for his taste. He really feared the quiet, gray little man, sensing in him a remorseless enemy.

"Each man kills the thing he loves—" The quotation did not cheer Denworth.

Well, he still had the sigil. And he would have to walk warily, for a while at least. Abruptly he felt a violent longing for Myra Valentine, for the drug her nearness provided. He went angrily to the door and swung it wide. There was no sign of Fennel.

Myra had given him a key. It took him ten minutes to go by taxicab to her apartment, and a long twenty seconds for the elevator to reach the tenth floor. And there was an eternity as the key turned in the lock.

The maid would be out, he remembered; Myra had said that this was her afternoon off. He went into the apartment. The living room was empty.

"Myra!" he called.

Then, in a corner, something stirred. With a sense of abysmal shock Denworth saw that Myra had been crouching on the floor, on hands and knees. She stood up, with a slow, timeless motion. Shadows veiled her face. She did not speak.

And, behind Denworth, something tittered shrilly. The low whisper of Turzee said:

"So there is nothing you love, Denworth? Nothing?"

"Myra," the man snapped, his voice harsh with fear. "*Myra!*"

"We cannot harm you, Denworth. But we have taken her Under the Hill."

Denworth reached the girl in a stride, his fingers clamping cruelly on her arm. He dragged her into the light from the window. She made no resistance, following him uncomplainingly.

The red glow of sunset fell on her face. In

the horrible silence the eager, satiated sniggering of Turzee fell like the goblin laughter of a brooklet.

It was Myra's eyes, mostly, that—

It was the look in her eyes.

It was the memory, in her eyes, of what she had seen.

And Turzee tittered. "Under the Hill. She has been Under the Hill. She has seen the splendors there. She has seen the hall where we toasted Eve on the night of wrath. Tell your lover what you have seen, Myra Valentine."

Myra's lips parted. She began to speak, softly and distinctly. Denworth said, "Don't!"

She stopped, but he could still look into her eyes. Something quite horrible had happened to Myra.

The red sunlight flashed on the Love sigil. Myra saw it. She walked straight toward Denworth, her arms extended.

And that was unsupportable. Denworth felt that he knew something of the horror that had touched Eve, the ultimate blasphemy. There are changes too subtle and illogical to be more than sensed; Myra had suffered such a change.

Denworth stumbled back. Myra followed. The Love sigil drew her.

Turzee, invisible above them, tittered maliciously.

Denworth whirled and raced to the door. It stuck, and, as he wrenched at the knob, Myra's arms slipped about his neck. The touch of her struck flame to the smoldering tinder of madness. He cried out inarticulately as he whirled, and—and—

She was dead. Blood rilled from her red hair, staining it darkly, fingering out toward the heavy bronze ash tray on the carpet. She was dead.

"And will you give me the sigil now?" Turzee whispered.

Denworth opened the door and slipped out into the hall. His brain seemed bathed in icy flames. Yet it affected him like liquor; he did not show it outwardly. He went down in the elevator with scarcely a glance at the operator; he asked the doorman to call him a taxi.

"Where to, pal? This is on me."

"Anywhere. Anywhere. Just drive around a bit."

He leaned back, closing his eyes. Turzee, at least, was gone, or seemed to be. Myra—

He turned his mind from the thought. There were more important matters at hand. He was in immediate danger. It was necessary to leave town. At least, the sigil would help him there—help him to find friends.

He had failed. The power of the bracelet had not been enough. If only he had possessed a few additional talismans—

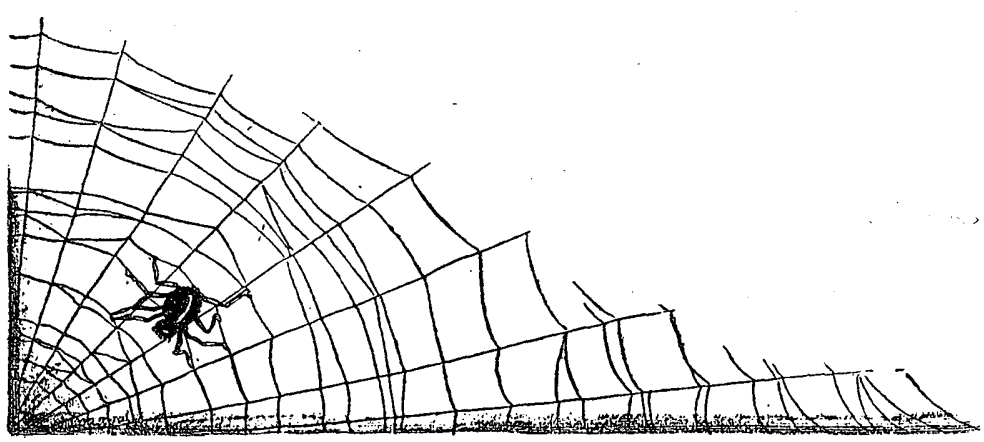
Wayland Smith!

He leaned forward. "Drive up Sycamore. The eight hundred block."

"O. K., pal."

Wayland Smith, of course. Why hadn't he thought of it before? Smith made charms—Turzee had said so. A bottomless purse—what were the others? Denworth couldn't remember. It didn't matter. There were certainly a number of powerful charms in the pixy shop, and if Denworth could get his hands on even a few of them, his troubles would be over.

The current catastrophe might be a blessing very much is disguise. Even Myra— She had begun to show the possessiveness that Denworth hated so much. She would have grown



worse. No, life with her wouldn't have been completely happy.

The face of Fennel flashed into his mind, together with a picture of the weapon that had killed Myra. Fingerprints. Legal evidence. The elevator operator, the doorman—they had seen Denworth enter and leave the apartment building.

Fennel—

The taxi stopped. As Denworth got out, he glanced up at the swinging shutter that said, "H. R. H. Oberon." Then he was hurrying across the sidewalk in the gathering dusk, pushing open the door, descending the stairs—

Wayland Smith had not yet turned on the lights. The interior of the shop was dim, and Denworth could see only the white oval of the man's face. He turned hurriedly and vanished through curtains at the rear of the room.

Denworth was at his heels, grinning unpleasantly. He caromed off a table, knocking it over. Tiny metal objects clinked on the floor. He pushed through the draperies.

This was Smith's workroom, apparently. What looked like a jeweler's bench was set up against the wall. There was an army cot, mussy and unmade, and a table covered with dirty dishes. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling; dust rills were everywhere. Smith might keep his shop clean, but he wasted no time in this room.

Light came through three large, frosted-glass windows. Smith was hurrying toward a door at the rear. Denworth's hand closed on the man's shoulder and jerked him around. The flat, pale, freckled face was frightened.

"What's your hurry, Smith?" Denworth asked.

"I . . . I—"

"Maybe I've come to give you your bracelet back."

Smith licked his lips. "I know why you've come. I've been watching. Turzee said—"

"What?"

"He said the chief of police would settle your hash, but I wasn't so sure."

Denworth whistled soundlessly. "Turzee got Fennel after me? Is that what you mean? But—good Lord!—that's crazy!"

Smith fingered his chin. "He used the Telepath Buckle. Implanted suspicions in Fennel's mind. But I knew it wouldn't work."

"It did work," Denworth growled. "So that's how Fennel got on the trail."

"Not exactly." Smith cast a furtive glance at the curtains. "Your wife's attorney called Fennel, but he was pretty skeptical. Turzee got rid of his skepticism through the Buckle. Naturally Fennel doesn't know what it's all about, but in his mind it's boiled down to a hunch. He's the kind of man who acts on hunches."

Denworth nodded. "I see. And I also see that you're talking to gain time. Why?"

"I—*Turzee!*"

There was no answer. Denworth smiled.

"All right. Another reason for me to hurry. I want some charms, Smith. Good, powerful charms. I want one to protect me from danger. I want one that'll change my appearance. One to provide me with money—all I need. And a deadly, undetectable weapon."

"I won't." Smith's weak chin tried to jut.

"You will. Because you love me. Eh?"

The other looked ready to cry. "Denworth, please! I can't! I'm in a position of trust. I simply—"

"First, protection." Denworth ignored Smith's pleas. "What's over here?" He went to the workbench, holding the shopkeeper firmly by the arm. "This? What is it?"

"A chameleon bead. It enables you to change color."

"No good," Denworth said. "What's this?" He picked up a ring in which three blue pearls were set. Smith's face changed.

"Nothing—"

"Don't lie. What power has it got?"

"It . . . it's the Protean Ring. You get three wishes a day."

"Three wishes!"

"Specialized ones, I mean. You can change your shape while you wear it."

Denworth slipped the ring on his finger. "You just wish? Aloud?"

"Aloud or mentally. It doesn't matter." Smith chewed his lower lip. "Please don't take it! It's promised to Titania—"

Denworth said, "I want to be a . . . a lion."

It worked. He no longer stood upright. His head was at the level of Smith's middle. Screwing his head around, he took in a muscular, tawny body, finished off by a sinuous, tufted tail.

Smith ran toward the door. With a bound Denworth headed him off. He roared softly.

"Change me back," he thought, and instantly was his former self. The ring was still on his finger. Two of the blue pearls had turned coal black.

"That's two wishes," he nodded. "I still have one, eh?"

Smith was shaking. "Yes. Till midnight. Then you have three more. The pearls will turn blue again. Denworth, don't ask me for anything else. I mustn't. I mustn't. I'll—"

"Next, something to protect me against enemies," Denworth said, unheeding. "What have you in stock?"

"No—"

The bracelet gleamed in the dying light. "Doesn't the sigil work? Doesn't it compel your love?"

"Yes. Of course it works!" Smith said, with a flash of pride. "My charms always work. But please don't ask me for anything more!"

"He won't," a familiar whisper said ominously. "Or, at least, it won't do him any good. Sorry I'm late, Wayland. I had to use the Buckle to guide Fennel here."

"Turzee!" Smith gasped. "Quick! Throw me into catalepsis!"

"O. K. I'll wake you up when the shooting's over," the pixy agreed.

Denworth took a step forward, too late. Smith had gone stiff as a board. He fell over with a crash, eyes fixed and glaring, body rigid.

Turzee tittered. "All right, wise guy," he whispered. "I warned you. Serves you right, too! Now I'm going back Under the Hill, before you can figure out a way to use the sigil on me."

There was a swish of displaced air. Denworth stood staring at space. Then he glanced down at the motionless, corpselike figure of Wayland Smith.

Well—

He smiled crookedly. Turzee had come just a bit too late. In the shop were tables strewn with charms; Denworth could fill his pockets with them, escape, and discover their use later. He might return, in altered form, and interview Smith again. He might—

Vistas opened before him. He had not failed, after all.

He stepped through the curtains, eying the shadowy bulk of the show tables, and then dived back in a hurry. The front door was opening. Thumping footsteps sounded. Denworth, eyes narrowed, peered through the draperies.

Fennel!

Enough light filtered in to make the chief of police recognizable. Fennel had a gun in

his hand, and two bulky figures followed him.

"This is the place," Fennel said softly. "The cab driver remembered driving Denworth here. Lucky I had a hunch to drop in at Miss Valentine's apartment."

Hunch! Denworth cursed silently. Turzee, with his Telepathic Buckle, was responsible for that—hunch! Now—

Silently he went to the back door. It was locked. He raced to Smith's body and searched his pockets for keys.

There were none.

The footsteps were louder. Fennel's voice said, "You in there, Denworth? If you are, come out with your hands up."

"Like hell," Denworth whispered. His gaze flicked to the Protean Ring, with its two black and one blue pearls. One wish was left. He looked around the dark room. A shape in which he could hide, a certain disguise to evade the forthcoming search—

The curtains shook. "Spider," Denworth thought, and was conscious of the abrupt metamorphosis. He was tiny. Vast shadows loomed above him.

He raced for cover. It wouldn't do to be stepped on. But a spider was tiny, could hide in a crack till midnight, when he could use the magic ring again.

His multiple legs flew. His faceted eyes gave him a curiously enlarged range of vision. Somehow he was conscious that both the Protean Ring and the Love sigil remained with him, invisible, but with their inherent powers unharmed by his physical change.

The shadows took him. He found a cavernous crack and scuttled into it, waiting. He was safe now from the only danger that could threaten him, the danger of being crushed under foot. Even in this altered shape and size, he had no enemies—he was safe.

In the darkness something stirred. It hesitated, and then moved swiftly toward Denworth. He went cold with sudden terror as he recognized it.

Recognized—her.

The female spider is larger and faster than the male, and she has a distressing habit that was well known to Denworth. As the spider raced toward him, mandibles gaping, he realized with sickening certainty what drew her so irresistibly to the mating which she alone would survive.

The Love sigil had power over all living things.

THE END.

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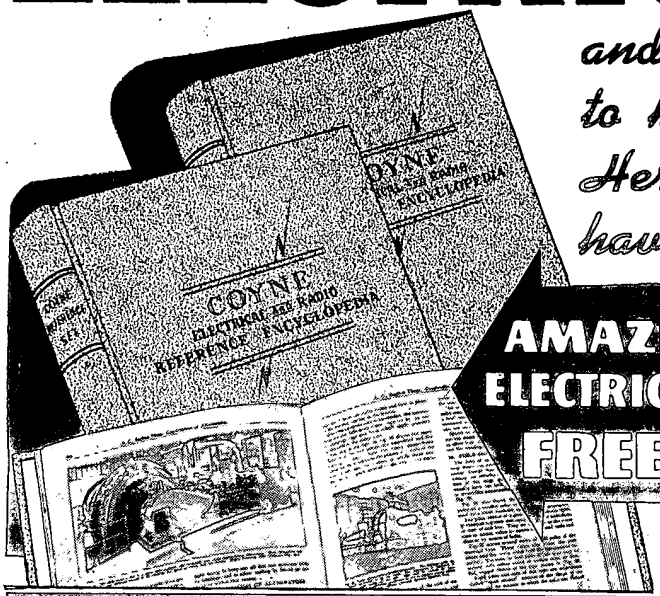

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