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READER No. 11

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also stories by

**Nelson Bond**  
**Ray Bradbury**

**T. S. Stripling**

AND OTHERS



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—D.A.W.



**AVON**  
**FANTASY READER**

**No. 11**

Edited by  
**DONALD A. WOLLHEIM**

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*Stories by*

<b>NELSON BOND</b>	•	<b>SEABURY GUINN</b>
<b>T. S. STRIBLING</b>	•	<b>FRANK OWEN</b>
<b>RAY BRADBURY</b>	•	<b>FRANCIS FLAGG</b>
<b>JOHN MICHEL and ROBERT LOWNDES</b>		

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# Glamour

by Seabury Quinn

*Let us be honest about it, is not love something of a witchcraft? And has not each sex its own particular brand of witchery, so that man and woman may join hands in marriage and be contented with each other even though the outside world, the world beyond the boundaries of the tight band of love mirage, sees them as without exceptionalism, without glamour? This is basically the theme of Seabury Quinn's strange tale of a witch in modern days, a witch whose charms are no less potent than those of her fearsome ancestors of Colonial days and yet whose spell is perhaps more to be desired than feared.*



THE WIND tramped round and round the fieldstone walls of the clubhouse, muttering and moaning; seemingly it maundered threats and wailed pleas alternately. Rain sweated on the recessed windows, glazing them with black opacity until the mullioned panes gave back distorted mirrorings of the gunroom, vague and indistinct as oil paintings smeared with a rag before they had a chance to dry. In the eight-foot fireplace beech and pine logs piled in alternating layers upon the hammered iron firedogs blazed a roaring holocaust and washed the freestone floor and adz-cut oaken beams of the ceiling with ruddy light. From the radio a bass voice bellowed lustily:

"Then all of my days I'll sing the praise of brown October ale . . ."

Harrigan felt like a cat in a strange alley. Newly come to Washington as a member of the scientific staff of the Good Roads Bureau, he had permitted himself to be talked into joining the Izaak Walton Gun and Rod Club, being assured he would find some kindred spirits there. "None o' your dam' lily-fingered pen-pushers an' desk-hoppers there," Jack Bellamy had told him. "They're men like you an' me, son. Two-fisted, hairy-chested sportsmen, capable o' handlin' liquor or an argument like gentlemen. Lawyers, bankers, doctors, scientists; not a Gov'ment clerk in a carload of 'em."

Used to outdoor life and with some experience with both rod and gun, Harrigan had risen eagerly to the bait, but already he began to have his doubts. The station wagon from the club had met him at Vienna Junction, depositing him on the clubhouse porch a little after five. Bellamy, whom he had expected to meet him, had not shown up; there was no one there he knew, and the members gathered in small cliques at dinner and in the gunroom afterward. No one but the white-jacketed colored waiter seemed

aware of his existence, and he only when an upraised finger signaled orders for a fresh mug of old musty.

"New feller here?" The booming challenge at his elbow startled him. "Didn't remember seein' you before. My name's Crumpacker, Judge Lucius Q. Crumpacker. What's yours? Mind if I sit by you?"

The big man dropped into the vacant hickory chair between Harrigan and the fire-warmed hearth and beckoned to the waiter. "Double Scotch and soda, Jake," he ordered. "You know my brand—and no ice, remember. When I want ice-water with a little whisky in it I'll tell you."

He lit a cigar which seemed almost half a yard in length, blew a series of quick, angry smoke rings like the pompoms of exploding shrapnel, and turned again to Harrigan, bushy eyebrows working up and down like agitated caterpillars.

"Had a dev'lish mean experience this evenin'," he confided in a voice that sounded somehow like an angry mastiff's growl. "Ordered off an old hag's land. 'Pon my word, I was. We ought to run the old hadrian out o' the county. She has no business here, ought to be in the poorhouse, or jail. Devilish old virago." He worried at the end of his cigar until it flattened and unraveled like a frayed-out rope, then flung the ruin in the fire and lit another stogie. "Umph. Land wasn't posted, either."

"But I thought all that was taken care of," ventured Harrigan as the silence lengthened. "I was told the club had made arrangements with the local land owners to let us shoot on their land for a stipulated yearly fee and a guarantee to reimburse them for any damages they might sustain."

"Right. Quite right. There is such an arrangement, and by its terms the yokels have a right to post their land whenever they get tired of takin' money from us, but that old scold down by Gunpowder Creek refuses either to post her land or sign a contract with us. She's got nothing but a weed-patch and a flock o' moultin' hens. You could ride a regiment o' cavalry across her place, and all you'd trample would be goldenrod and ragweed, but the old she-devil won't let one of us set foot across her line. She's the last one of a family that settled here in 1635, and though there's nothing but the cellar and chimneys of the old mansion left she still puts on the high and mighty air with us and treats us like a lot o' trespassers and interlopers.

"Her place adjoins the Spellman farm. Spellman's glad enough to collect from us for the shootin'-rights, I'd flushed up a covey his side of the line. Must have been a dozen birds in it. I knocked down four of 'em and saw 'em take covert in the next field. That would be her briar-patch.

"Maybe I had no business trespassin', for after all we've no agreement with her, but she'd not posted signs, either. So Xerxes—that's my wire-haired setter—and I just kept on goin'. We'd walked two-three hundred yards across her mangy patch o' crab-grass when Xerxes started actin' queerly. First he'd run around in circles, as if he had the scent o' something; then he'd come lopin' back to me with his tail down, and look up in my face with that peculiar questionin' way dogs have, and when I'd tell him to go smell 'em out he'd run off for a little distance, then start circlin' back again.

"Then he did a thing no well-trained bird dog ever does, gave tongue and rushed at something. Sir, you could have knocked me over with a stalk o' rye-staw. There he was, the best bird dog in seven counties, actin' like a damned coon dog. I followed him and found him belly-down before a patch o' briar bushes, barkin' and whinin' and growlin', as if he didn't quite know whether he was more frightened or angry.

"I poked my gun into the bushes, for I thought perhaps he'd run a skunk to cover, though usually a polecat won't give ground for man or devil. Well, sir, what d'ye think I saw?" He paused rhetorically and drew a deep draft from the bubbling amber liquid in his glass; then, as Harrigan raised politely questioning brows:

"A cat, sir. A dam' old mangy green-eyed tabby-cat crouchin' in the heart o' those blackberry vines and lookin' poisoned darts and daggers at my dog. I hate cats like the Devil hates Scriptures—thievin', slinkin', skulkin' bird-killers! So I pushed the vines away still farther and bent down to get a better aim at it. I was goin' to let the beast have both barrels, but—believe it or doubt me, sir, it faded out o' sight!"

"Cats are wonderfully agile," Harrigan agreed as Judge Crumpacker looked at him, obviously awaiting comment.

"This one wasn't," Crumpacker exploded. "This beast didn't slink away. It vanished. One second it was there, lookin' at us like a basilisk, and next moment there was nothin' there, but——"

Again he paused to take refreshment from his now half-empty glass, and: "But just as that dam' feline disappeared we heard a rustlin' in the patch o' briars to our left, and there, lookin' twice as poisonous as any cat, was old Lucinda Lafferty."

"Lucinda Lafferty?" echoed Harrigan. "You mean——"

"Precisely, sir. She's the old hag who owns that patch o' worthless land. I don't believe that she has half a dozen teeth in both her jaws, but she was fairly grindin' those she had when we turned round and saw her, and if her eyes weren't flashin' fire I never saw the light o' hell in human optics. And I've been on the bench for thirty years, passin' sentence on the most desperate criminals ever brought to justice."

"So she threatened you with suit for trespass?"

"Not she. She knew she'd never have a chance before a court or jury in this county. The country folk don't bear with *her* kind round here. She cursed me."

"She swore at you?"

Judge Crumpacker was stout, gray-haired and ruddy-faced. In his red-suede waistcoat and tan flannel shirt, with corduroy trousers thrust into high-topped boots, he looked the perfect picture of a Georgian innkeeper from a Jeffery Farnol novel, or, perhaps, a Regency three-bottle man. Harrigan had a momentary, slightly comic mental picture of a slattern farmshrew pouring billingsgate upon him. But the other's answer swept the vision away.

"I said exactly what I meant, She cursed me. Aimed a skinny finger at me and called down maledictions on my head. It may be that her lack of

teeth prevented her articulatin' clearly, but it seemed as if she interjected words in heathen gibberish between the English as she cursed me.

"Xerxes was absolutely terrified. I've had that dog for five years, raised and trained him from a pup, and I never saw him lower his tail for anything before, not even when he ran across a rattlesnake or bobcat, but today his spirit seemed to fail him utterly, and he whined and put his tail between his legs and shrank against me like a mongrel cur. I tell you, sir, it almost made me believe what they say about that devilish old hadrian—the way she looked at us, the threats she made, the uncouth jargon that she spewed at us—Jake!" He crooked his finger to the attendant. "Another of the same, and see you put some whisky in it this time. What say? What do they say about her?" he turned back to Harrigan. "Why, damme, sir, they say that she's a witch!"

Harrigan had difficulty keeping a straight face. Abetted by the potent Scotch, galled by the memory of his wounded *amour-propre*, the dignified old gentleman was working himself into a towering passion. "A witch?" Harrigan repeated. "How's that, sir?"

"A witch," Judge Crumpacker reiterated. "Precisely, sir; a witch. Judge Petterson dismissed a case against her only last term of court when a neighbor sued her on a charge of malicious mischief, alleging that she'd caused his pigs to die by overlooking them. The pigs were dead, there was no doubt about that. Apparently a herd of forty fine swine were dead of poison, but the veterinary who examined them could find no trace of any known hogbane, and they couldn't prove that old Lucinda had access to the pens. Indeed, the testimony was that she had never been upon her neighbor's land, but merely stood out in the road before his house and called a ban down on the swine for rooting in her garden several days before. There's no doubt about her malice, but the statutes of this state ignore the possibility of witchcraft, so she had to be discharged. There's not a Negro in the county who will pass her place at night, and most of the white folks prefer going around the other way after dark. If she'd lived two hundred years ago she'd have been hanged long before this, or sold as a slave in Barbados or Jamaica."

Absent-mindedly he reached for his glass, found none, and raised a querulous complaint:

"Jake, confound you, where's my drink?"

"Scuse me, Jedge y'honor, suh," the servitor appeared around the corner of the bar, his face a study in embarrassment and latent fear, "Ah didn't mean ter be slow erbout fetchin' yuh yo' licker, but Joseph jest now called me to de kennels, suh, an' tole me ter tell yuh—what Ah means, suh, is——"

"Yes?" The red in Judge Crumpacker's ruddy cheeks grew almost magenta. "What the devil are you drivin' at?"

"Jedge, y'honor, suh, hit's erbout yo' dawg, suh, please; he's done gone an'——"

"What's he done? I saw him locked up in the kennel myself, and saw that he had food and water. He's not hungry, and he never goes out forag-



ing. Don't tell me that he's gotten loose and stolen something from the kitchen——"

"Oh, no, suh. He ain't stole nothin', Jedge y'honor, suh. He's daid!"

"What?" The question snapped as sharply as a whip. "How?"

"Pizened, Jedge y'honor, suh." The Negro swallowed hard and nodded solemnly. His eyes appeared to be all whites. "Ah heerd as how yuh an' him wuz on ole Mis' Lucindy's place this evenin'——"

"Come on—out o' my way!" the judge burst in, and, Harrigan and Jake behind him, stamped out to the long shed behind the clubhouse where members' dogs were quartered.

Jake had not been guilty of an overstatement. The pointer, a big, rangy dog, lay on its side, legs stiff, lips curled back and foam-flecked, eyes bulging almost from their sockets. Its sides and stomach were distended till the skin was stretched like drum-parchment about them.

"I left him less than half an hour ago," Crumpacker almost sobbed. "He was well and healthy then, just finishing his dinner. Poor old Xerxes—poor old pal!"

"He might have picked up something in the fields this afternoon," soothed Harrigan. "Dogs often——"

"Not this one, sir," Crumpacker thundered. "I've had my eye on him all day. He's eaten nothing but the food I gave him, and I brought that up with me—*ba!*"

"What is it, sir?" asked Harrigan, but even as he asked he knew the answer. There was a feeling of malaise about him, a sort of prickling of the short hairs on his neck, and a chilly, eery feeling, as of horripilation, on his forearms.

"That infernal old Lucinda Lafferty—that devilish old witch. This is her doing! She killed my poor dog just as she killed her neighbor's swine, by witchcraft. She got away with it that time; Petterson dismissed the case against her, but this time she has me to deal with. I'll track her down and brand her for the foul sorceress she is or die in the attempt. By Gad, I will sir!"

It might have been a foraging crow disturbed in his foray in the clubhouse kitchen yard, or routed by their voices from the shelter he had taken in the kennel shed. Whatever it was, there came a sudden flapping of strong wings against the shadows, and a hoarse, derisive croak of laughter as something took flight from the overhanging roof into the soot-black darkness of the rain-drenched night.

Morning came with bright, cool air and sunlight sparkling on wet trees and grass. Harrigan was among the first at breakfast, but early as he was he found Judge Crumpacker finishing his ham and eggs as he came in the breakfast room. Apparently the judge had not had a good night, for his face was lined and puffy and there was a sort of gray, unhealthy pallor underneath his ruddiness. The contrast reminded Harrigan of rouge smeared on a corpse. The old man's eyes were swollen, too. If he had been a woman Harrigan would have thought he had been crying.

"Mornin'," rumbled Crumpacker, nodding as he looked up from his

plate. "Ready to go with me?" He filled a tumbler a third full of whisky from the bottle at his elbow, and drained it at a gulp. "I want somebody with me when I have a showdown with that old hag." His hand was just a thought unsteady as he replenished his glass. Some of the whisky slopped across the rim and settled in a little puddle on the polished table.

Harrigan was on the point of refusing. He had come up here to shoot, not listen to the maunderings of a bibulous old gaffer. Then, abruptly, "Yes, sir, of course," he returned. The choleric old judge had worked himself into a state of sustained, choking anger, he was roweled by a spur of rage and hate, and in the last three minutes he had drunk enough neat liquor to fuddle anyone. It would be inviting murder to permit him to accost a poor old woman by himself in this condition.

They walked along the surfaced road until they reached the Spellman farm, then cut across a wide brown field set with long rows of corn-shocks like the tepees of an Indian encampment, and jeweled with plump golden pumpkins.

"Ought to be some rabbits here," the judge remarked. "Little devils like to hang around the shocks—here, Xerxes, smell 'em out, boy—oh!" The exclamation was almost a wail, the mourning of a man for his old hunting comrade, and the look that followed it was grim and hard and merciless as a bared knife.

The rail fence separating Spellman's farm from the next land was ruinous, overgrown with creepers, fallen almost away in some places. The field beyond was a fitting complement. Turf which had not felt a plow in twenty years gave way to bramble patches, and these in turn were choked by rank growths of ragweed, goldenrod and burdock. Devil's-pitchfork bushes grew waist high, and the barbed seed-stalks clung to their trousers like a swarm of parasites as they pushed through them.

Beyond the orchard lot of gnarled and dying apple trees they found the owner's shack, a single-story, two-room structure of unpainted clapboards stained a leprous gray by long exposure to the weather. The door sagged drunkenly on rusted, broken hinges; several of the window-lights were broken and the holes were stuffed with wadded burlap sacking. The two planks of the stoop were warped until their edges curled up like old boot-soles, and water from the rain of last night gathered in their concavities. The kitchen yard was littered with tin cans, discarded, broken pots and dishes, scraps of rag, a rotting mattress and a broken, rust-eaten bed spring. Stark as a skeleton of the dead past, two ivy-smothered, moss-grown chimneys reared their broken tops from crumbling foundations and a cellar overgrown with sumac, all that remained of the once-noble mansion whither Washington and Jefferson had come as guests and General Lee and Stonewall Jackson had been entertained. Fire, neglect and ruthless time had laid it in the dust as low as Nineveh and Tyre. The bloodless hand of utter, abject poverty lay on everything, and yet there was a brooding, threatening quality of silence there. Almost, it seemed to Harrigan, the place was waiting. . . . What it waited for he had no idea, but that it was something violent, tragic and abrupt he was sure.

Crumpacker strode through the rubble littering the yard and beat upon the weather-blasted door with his gun-butt. The rotting panels sagged and shivered at the impact, and a hollow, vibrant booming echoed through the empty shack. Otherwise there was no answer.

"By Gad, I'll stand here hammerin' till the old crone comes, or knock her devilish door in!" Crumpacker declared, but Harrigan broke in with a relieved laugh.

"No use, Judge; can't you see the door's closed with a hasp and padlock, and the lock's been fastened on the outside? Whoever lives here has gone out and locked the door behind—good Lord!"

Around the rusted, tangled wire of the hen-coop had come a great dog, almost large as a mastiff, but heavy-furred, like a collie or shepherd. Obviously, half a dozen breeds or more combined to make its lineage; just as obviously it combined the worst features of each. Mange had eaten at its pelt until it showed bald patches of blue hide between the matted, flea-infested hair; its tail was stubby as a terrier's; its paws were disproportionately large and armed with long, cruel, curving claws which might almost have been a bear's; its eyes were small and deeply pitted in its wide face, rheumy with distemper, and its mouth combined the wideness of the bulldog's with the heavy-toothed long jaw of the Alaskan husky. It made no sound, but stood there snarling silently, black lips curled back in a ferocious grin, long, yellowed fangs exposed, and a look of absolutely devilish malevolence in its sunken eyes.

"Ha?" Crumpacker turned at Harrigan's ejaculation. "Hers, of course. Like mistress like dog, eh what?" He brought his gun up slowly, cradling the barrels in the crook of his left arm as he snapped back the hammers with his right thumb. "Maybe she loves the lousy beast. I hope so. Let's see how she'll like seein' it dead——"

The brute glared at him balefully, and showed no sign of fear as he raised the gun to take deliberate aim, but Harrigan jumped forward. "No, Judge, no!" he shouted. "Your quarrel is with her, not with this poor brute. It hadn't anything to do with Xerxes' death——"

Crumpacker's jaw set truculently. For the first time Harrigan saw all the latent, vengeful cruelty which the usually jovial ruddy countenance concealed. These were the features of a "hanging judge," a man who found a grim pleasure in sentencing other men to die.

"Her quarrel was with me, not my dog," he answered harshly. "I'm goin' to blow that ugly beast to hell. Stand aside, sir."

The roar of both barrels discharged in quick succession was like the below of a field gun, and Harrigan fell stumbling back, shocked, blinded, all but deafened by the blaze of fire and detonation of the discharge, but in the instant Judge Crumpacker fired he had thrust his hand out, driving up the shotgun muzzle and sending the charge through the overhanging branches of a sassafras tree. As the shot went whistling and crashing through the brilliant red and green leaves, the big dog turned and trotted around the corner of the house, moving, for all its size, with cat-like quietness.

Crumpacker glared at Harrigan. Bitter, rageful hatred smoldered in his

eyes, making the brown pupils glow like tarnished garnets. "Damme, sir, men have been shot for less impertinence!" he burst out. Then, seeming to cool as suddenly as he had blazed, "Never mind; perhaps you're right, lad. My quarrel's with the old woman, not her dog. I reckon anger made me childish for a moment." He shook his heavy shoulders in disgust. "Come on, let's leave this filthy hole."

They recrossed Spellman's well-kept land and came out on the highroad just as a small roadster swung around the bend.

"Good morning, Judge; good morning, sir," the driver called as he brought his car to a halt. "Give you a lift back to the club?"

"Yes, thank you, we'd appreciate it, Doctor," Crumpacker answered as he introduced Harrigan.

Dr. Clancy was a man in early middle life, somewhere between forty-five and fifty, Harrigan surmised, smooth-skinned, clean-shaven, with a youthfulness and vigor which denied the nests of little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and the streak of white that ran with startling contrast through his smoothly brushed black hair. His eyes were blue and kind and very knowing—"true Irish eyes" thought Harrigan—but there was an indefinable something about him which was puzzling. Men without women—priests, explorers, sailors, some soldiers—bear the mark of their denial stamped on them. Dr. Clancy seemed to have it. He would have seemed more properly attired in a Roman collar and black cassock vest, rather than the corduroys and flannel shirt he wore. The little satchel on the seat beside him seemed more like a small suitcase than a medicine kit, too, but . . .

He broke his idle speculations off, for Judge Crumpacker had been pouring out the story of his grievances to Dr. Clancy, not omitting his suspicions of witchcraft, and Dr. Clancy was not laughing. "Because the law does not admit a thing is no reason for denying its existence," he was saying. "Lee DeForest was threatened with prosecution for fraud when he introduced the ionic current detector for radio, and there are many people who remember when the Patent Office refused to consider applications for heavier-than-air flying-machines, just as it rejects claims for perpetual motion devices today. The Lafferty family's history is not good. The founder of the local branch was prosecuted twice for cruelty to his Negroes, and finally deported from the colony on a charge of trafficking with Satan. An ancestress of theirs was burned as a witch in England in the reign of James I. Miss Lucinda was a noted beauty in her day, but though she had three romances none of them was ever consummated. All three engagements were broken, and all three lovers died shortly after their estrangement—each in exactly the manner she had foretold."

Harrigan laughed. "You think that she's a witch, too? Perhaps the cat the Judge saw yesterday was really Miss Lucinda—" The seriousness of the other's face halted him.

"The Lord forbid that I make any accusations of that kind lightly," Dr. Clancy answered, "but if we admit for the sake of argument that she has the power of witchcraft she might have been the cat, or even the strange mongrel that you saw today."

"Lycanthropy?" laughed Harrigan incredulously. "You mean you really think that there are people who can change to bestial form at will—in the Twentieth Century?"

Dr. Clancy drew his brows down in a thoughtful frown. "No, I wouldn't quite say that," he returned. "It might be due to what the mediæval churchmen called glamour, the power to mislead the beholder. The line between witchcraft and magic, and that between magic and the prestidigitator's mumbo-jumbo, is far from sharply drawn. Every mythology tells of fairy gifts—chests of jewels or money which the recipient gloats over at night, and finds nothing but withered leaves or worthless stones next morning. That's silly, childish superstition, you say. Perhaps. But what about the Indian jugglers' rope trick? Hundreds of credible witnesses testify to having seen a rope thrown up into the air and apparently hanging there on nothing, but so securely fastened that a man could climb it. Yet on one or two occasions when motion pictures have been surreptitiously taken of the trick, the films showed nothing happening——"

"I get it," Harrigan broke in. "Fakery. Mass, or at least multiple, hypnotism."

Dr. Clancy nodded assent. "Whichever you prefer to call it. Magic, mesmerism, hypnotism. Terminology varies with the times, but facts remain the same. These things were understood in the East long before Mesmer introduced his theory of animal magnetism. Probably much longer than we suspect in the West, too. However, that's unimportant, really. The fact is that if it's possible for a Hindoo fakir to make people think they see a rope suspended from infinity it's quite as possible for someone in the West to make a person think he's looking at a cat when none is there, or at a dog when he is really looking at a woman. You know how Sir Walter Scott puts it:

"It had much of glamour might  
To make a lady seem a knight."

"Glamour—or hypnotism, if you prefer a modern scientific term—might quite as easily make an ugly old woman appear to be a dog or cat."

"But d'ye think Judge Crumpacker's dog could have been hypnotized into thinking that he saw a witch-cat?" Harrigan persisted.

"Or made to die, apparently from poison, through the power of suggestion?" added Crumpacker.

"I don't *think* anything," responded Dr. Clancy. "I'm only guessing, and taking the most charitable view. I'd rather think that old Lucinda Lafferty possesses hypnotic power and uses it to gratify her malice—for she is a malicious, vindictive old woman, according to all accounts—than believe she's entered into a pact with the Devil and signed away her soul."

He brought the car to a stop by the clubhouse porch in a long skid and leaped out with his little satchel.

"See you in a little while," he called across his shoulder. "Give me time to take a shower and get some breakfast."

The western sky was burnished rose-gold and blush-pink, smoke rose in

tall straight geysers from the chimneys, and the windows of the sparsely scattered houses reflected the last rays of sunset. Blue haze hung in the valleys, softening the burning reds and golds of autumn leaves, but on the rounded backs of the mountains the trees were blatant, flaunting flame-hued oranges and garnets.

Harrigan drew a deep lungful of the limpid evening air, glanced at his wristwatch, and set out along the highway toward the clubhouse. His afternoon had been successful. He had managed to avoid Judge Crumpacker and, on his own, had ranged the fields clear to the river, bagging four fat rabbits and half a dozen quail. Now he was pleasantly tired, wolf-hungry and completely lost. How far he'd come he had no accurate idea; he knew only vaguely which direction to take for the club. The soft blue dusk of evening crept across the sky, the moon showed a thin crescent, and a few bright stars began to twinkle.

"The Lafferty farm must be about here," he told himself as he trudged past a hedge of clipped hornbeam. "Too bad it's posted. I could cut across the meadow to the Spellman place and—hullo?" He started with an exclamation of dismay as a great raindrop struck him in the face.

He glanced up wonderingly at the sky. Five minutes earlier it had been dead calm and crystal clear, but now it was black as an inverted kettle, and the rain fell with a frantic fury, while a sudden wind whined like an animal in pain. He bent his head against the buffeting blast and stinging drops, turned up the collar of his shooting-coat and plodded on. "If I can make the Spellman place before I'm soaked through," he began, then, in spite of his discomfort, stopped stock-still in amazement. Through the waving branches of the birch-tree hedge a light shone with a steady invitation.

"It can't be old Miss Lucinda's shack," he reasoned. "That lies too low to be seen from the road. H'm; seems to me that would be just about the point the ruined mansion stands, but—pshaw! I'm confused by the storm. I've never been this far along the highway. Of course, there's a house there."

He swung along the surfaced roadway, found a gate pierced in the hedge and started up the avenue of honey locusts, chuckling at his luck. "Eddie, my boy, don't look a gift-house in the door," he advised. "If the Devil offers shelter on a night like this you'd better thank him kindly and accept it. Perhaps there isn't really any Devil. It's a dead sure thing pneumonia's no myth."

The house was larger than he'd thought, and older. Of red brick, built in Georgian style, it had tall windows, a deep, roofless porch with fluted white balustrade, and a cobweb fanlight above its wide front door. Through the transom shone a cheery glow of welcome, lamplight filtered through the curtained windows, mocking at the stormy blackness outside. This was no farmhouse, but the home of "quality" he realized as he drew the silver knocker back and struck a loud alarum on the door.

Shuffling footsteps sounded as he repeated his summons; the white-enamelled door swung back and an aged Negro smiled at him from amiable near-sighted eyes through the pebbles of a pair of gold-bowed spectacles. He wore a black dress coat with broad bright silver buttons, a tucked and frill-

edged linen shirt, and an antique black silk stock bound round his neck.

"Good evenin', suh," he greeted. "We's jes settin' down ter dinnah, an' Mis' Lafferty's supremely proud an' happy to receive yuh."

Harrigan started. This cordial greeting, as if he were expected . . . "Mis' Lafferty . . .?" A sudden gust of wind shattered the canopy of branches hanging by the porch and drove a chilling downpour on his neck. "Thank you," he answered, and stepped across the threshold.

Candles set in mirrored sconces stained the shadows of the wide hall with faint orange glows which faded out along the polished floor, but as he crossed the corridor behind the dusky major-domo, Harrigan had glimpses of old waxed mahogany, carpets from Shiraz and Hamadan, blurred portraits in deep gilded frames and the upward graceful sweep of a wide balustraded staircase.

She rose to greet him as he stepped into the dining-room, and as definitely as if he had been listening to its rhythm, he felt his heart skip a beat. Between them stretched the long polished mahogany table with its sparkling crystal and bright-gleaming silver under the soft light of candelabra, but the opulence of Georgian silver and the blurred mulberry tones of old china were forgotten as he saw her. Tall, slender, exquisite she was in a dinner dress of blue brocade lamé with silver shoulder straps, with lovely, slightly slanting, brooding eyes, and lips that slashed across the pearl-pale whiteness of her face like spilled fresh blood. Her hair was so pale that he could not tell if it were white or silver-blond, and she wore it swept up from the temples and the neck with waves of little curls massed high upon her head. A wide bracelet of white gold or platinum set with emeralds and rubies circled her left arm above the elbow; a string of matched pearls hung about her throat, and the creamy skin beneath was almost the exact color of the pearls.

"I—I'm sorry to intrude," he began huskily, unable to take his gaze from the vision outlined by the candle glow, "but I was overtaken by the storm, and——"

"Oh, I'm glad you came!" she interrupted with a soft, enticing laugh. "It's lonesome here, especially when it rains. You're from the club? Harrigan, I think Elijah said your name is? I'm Lucinda Lafferty."

He blinked at her in utter, stark amazement. "I beg your pardon, did I understand your name is——"

Her laugh, deep-pitched, a little husky, began in a soft chuckle that ended in a gay, infectious peal. "I know what you're thinking—that poor old woman down the road. Yes, we have the same name, and she's everlastingly receiving my mail. Only the other day she came here, almost burning up with rage, and threatened dreadful things—said she'd put a curse on me unless I either moved away or changed my name. She's really quite harmless, poor old creature, but they say she has an evil reputation. The country people, white as well as colored, firmly believe she's a witch. Imagine that in this century!"

Served by the velvet-footed old butler, they ate clear golden consommé spiced with a dash of lemon juice and Angostura bitters, bass fried to sad-

dle-brown in country butter, roast wild duck gamed to perfection and served with stewed green celery tops and mint-quince jelly, and spoon bread yellow as the sweet butter which melted on it.

Lucinda barely touched her glass, but Harrigan showed due appreciation for the vintage burgundy with which the butler kept his crystal goblet filled, and as he ate and drank his admiration for his hostess grew.

After dinner they sat in the drawing-room before the fire, and while she poured coffee from a Georgian silver pot in eggshell Sevres cups and brandy from a cobwebbed bottle into bubble-thin inhalers he looked at her as Abelard might first have looked at Héloïse or Aucassin at Nicolette.

She was a brilliant conversationalist, seeming to divine his thought before he put it into words, and following his verbal lead as a skilled dancer responds to her partner's lightest touch. She knew and loved the things he knew and loved—the bookstalls by the Seine, the pastry cooks' stands on the Ile de France, sunrise over the Grand Canyon, the flower market by St. Paul's in London, twilight on Fifth Avenue with lights beginning to appear in a soft veil of dusk.

But more than her quick sympathetic understanding and the wit and culture that her talk displayed, more than the beauty of her slim exquisite figure with its long and tapering arms and legs, flat back, firm, pointed breasts, and head set gracefully upon a round full throat; more, even, than the beauty of her exquisite pale-ivory face with its vivid scarlet mouth and long moss-agate eyes, he found her voice compelling. It was deep-pitched, velvety, with that peculiar throaty quality one sometimes hears in southern countries, and its husky, bell-like timbre seemed to strike vibrations from the very keynote of his being. When, discussing poetry, she took down a slim vellum volume and read from a Persian songster dead for a long thousand years:

“O my beloved,  
O thou pearl among women,  
If all other women in the world  
Were gathered in one corner of the East  
And thou alone in the dim West,  
I should surely come to thee,  
Even wert thou hidden  
In the deepest forest  
Or on the highest mountain top,  
O my beloved,”

he felt tears of something close akin to adoration welling in his eyes.

The storm had stopped and the silver boat of the moon's crescent rode a sky-turf tremulous with clouds when he left her. Her face was like jasmine blossom in the argent light as she bade him goodnight on the porch. “May I see you again soon, please?” he besought as she laid her rosy-tipped, small hand in his. “Tomorrow—in the morning?”

“Not in the morning, Edward”—they had come to first names already—she denied. “Tomorrow night, if there's a moon, you may come to me,



but I'm a different person in the day—I mean I like to lie abed till late," she added as he stared at her in bewilderment.

Acting on impulse, he raised her hand to his lips, and when she accepted the homage as if she had been used to it since infancy, he felt absurdly happy . . . grateful for her understanding acquiescence.

Rain dripped from the locust trees that hemmed the avenue which led down to the highway; great drops fell splashing from the wayside branches as he walked along the road, but before he'd gone a hundred yards he found himself treading in dust.

"Great Scott, I'll have to kick the door down to get in!" he exclaimed as he looked at his wrist-watch. "Half-past one. It didn't seem as if I'd been with Lucinda more than an hour." Suddenly he was hungry, famished. Despite the hearty dinner he had eaten he was as ravenous as though he'd tasted nothing since breakfast.

The clubhouse was ablaze with lights, and in the gunroom were gathered knots of members, talking in the hushed tones people use in church or at a funeral. "What's up?" he asked. "Somebody ill?"

"Not now," Dr. Clancy answered soberly. "It's Judge Crumpacker. He's dead."

"Dead? Good heavens——"

"I don't believe that heaven had a part in this," replied Clancy. "He died in frightful agony, sweating blood like a hemophiliac."

"Sweating blood? What caused it?"

Clancy's gaze was level and uncompromising as a pointed bayonet. "You remember hearing of his encounter with Lucinda Lafferty yesterday? Did he tell you that she cursed him?"

"Yes, but he wasn't specific, merely said——"

"I went to him when Mr. Marsten heard him groaning in his room," broke in the other.

"He was sinking fast, but trying to say something. I bent over him and heard him whisper, 'She said I'd die this way; my joints would stiffen and my eyes go blind, and I'd die in bloody sweat.' His knees and elbows were as stiff as if he had been frozen when I found him, and every toe and finger was as rigid as if it were cast iron. When I held a light before his eyes he couldn't tell the difference."

All night he dreamed of her. Sometimes she put soft hands against his cheeks; when she spoke to him the vibrant bell-tones of her voice thrilled through him till they struck responsive echoes from the smallest cell and fiber of his being. Once she leant above him and kissed him, and at the contact of her satin lips with his, he felt his very spirit melt in him with longing and desire.

Troubled and unrested, he rose early and, despite her refusal to see him till the evening, set out for her house. This was a new experience for him. In all his thirty years he had met no woman with whom he would care to link his life; now, as he walked across the frost-jeweled fields he knew that whether for an hour or a lifetime he was hers without reserve or withhold-

ing. It was almost like an ecstasy, this strangely mingled sense of exaltation and abasement; such a love was epic, like that of Hero and Leander, Pyramus and Thisbe or Romeo and Juliet . . . too wonderful, too marvelous to have come to any prosaic scientist like him . . . yet there it was. The vision of her pale, exquisite face seemed outlined in the bank of fleecy cirrus cloud that burned with rose reflection of the morning sun. A snatch from an old song, rescued from oblivion by radio, came unbidden to his lips:

"I dream of you all the day long,

You run through the hours like a song,

My dearie."

He crossed the Spellman field and then vaulted the snake fence that bordered old Lucinda Lafferty's poor land. The house of his beloved, the other, the beautiful Lucinda, must lie beyond the weed-grown orchard and the ruined mansion of the farm.

Now he was in the old crone's apple grove, and the gnarled boughs and bent boles of her trees rose round him like menacing figures in a Doré engraving. Strangely, too, the trees, bereft of leaves, shed far more shadow than he had thought possible. The sun seemed banked behind a rack of sudden storm clouds; the air was permeated with an unreal, brassy twilight, confusing, threatening. Perhaps it was the odor of the rotting windfalls on the leaf-mold round the twisted roots of the old trees, he could not say, but the very atmosphere of the place had a damp, dank chilliness. It smelled a little like the brackish water round the rotting piles of old wharves; there was something in it that made breathing difficult. A low-swinging branch knocked off his corduroy cap; as he leant to pick it up a limber twig snapped back and struck him on the cheek, not as if it were an accident, but viciously and purposefully.

He jerked his cap down low above his eyes and instantly another bough caught it and seemed to fling it off.

Something rustled in the undergrowth and flickered across his path. A squirrel? A rabbit? Possibly a cat, he could not be sure, but somehow it did not seem frightened; rather, it seemed to him, it was merely shifting position as if to get a better view of what was happening.

There came a sudden pattering. At first he thought it falling leaves, but there were few leaves on the withered boughs, and the pit-pat-patter grew into a steady rhythm, the beating of small feet, scores, hundreds of them, on the frost-dried leaves. Were they coming from the rear or in front? Or from the sides? It seemed at first as if they came from one direction, then another, finally from all around. Then something else cut straight across his path, and this time there could be no doubt. It was a rabbit running with the speed of panic, and as it passed him it seemed to say, "Get out of here, you fool—get out before it is too late!"

Now there seemed a little wind . . . no, it was no wind, it was a chorus of shrill, piping laughs, soft as chirping insects' cries, but spiteful and malicious as the cachinnation of a horde of mocking fiends. He took a running step forward, and brought up sharply with a startled grunt of pain. He had run full-tilt into a tree trunk—and he could have sworn there was no tree

there. Turning, he plunged to the right. This time there was no mistake. The tree sprang into his path to stop him. It happened quicker than a wink, faster than the flicker of a bacillus beneath the eyepiece of a microscope, but he saw it! The way was open when he leaped; then it was blocked by a tree trunk, and he was lying flat upon his back, the wind knocked out of him, his hat gone one way and his gun another, and round about him, from the earth and trees and air, the high, thin cachinnating screams of rancorous laughter sounded in his ears.

He rose and blundered on again, saw bright sunlight showing at the end of a short vista, and made for it in stumbling haste. Now he was at the orchard's edge; in ten yards he would be clear of it. He set his teeth and drew a deep breath, put his head down and sprinted.

The blow was like the hammering of a loaded bludgeon. Whether it were falling limb or shifting tree trunk he could not be sure. He knew only that something struck him on the head with devastating force, that a brilliant blue-white light flashed in his eyes and that he tripped sprawling lown into black oblivion.

The sun had sunk almost below the hog-backed ridge that broke the western horizon, and little feathers of dusk were drifting through the autumn leaves when he awoke to find Dr. Clancy standing above him. "Hullo," he greeted as he rose and felt his head with tentative, exploring fingers, "I must have slept here since morning——"

The half-jocular, half-embarrassed words died still-born on his lips as he looked into the other's face. "What's wrong?" he ended lamely.

Dr. Clancy's steady gaze bored into his. "That's what I'd like to know," he answered in a toneless flat voice. "I've been looking for you since this morning, and only just found you." Then, irrelevantly: "Where were you last night?"

A quick flush of resentment burned in Harrigan's cheeks. Who the deuce did Clancy think he was, putting him on the witness stand this way? "Why?" he jerked back. "What difference does it make?"

"It may make much. I sat with Judge Crumpacker's body last night, waiting for the coroner. It seemed unchristian to leave him alone, and sometime after three o'clock this morning I heard moans in your room. You'd been with him the day before; if he'd died from some strange infection—though I don't believe he did—you might have been stricken, too. So I went to you.

"You were crying in your sleep, like a homesick lad, but when I bent above you I distinguished words between your sobs." He paused a moment; then: "I'm used to confidences; this won't go any farther, but"—his blue eyes fairly seemed to blaze as they burned into Harrigan's—"you were begging someone named Lucinda to have pity on you, to let you touch her, kiss her, even if it were only her dress-hem or her shoes; pleading with her to accept you as her slave. Where—were—you—last—night—Edward Harrigan?"

Sullenly at first, then defiantly, finally with the ardor of a lover talking of his mistress, Harrigan retailed his night's adventure. When he told of

the tempestuous rainstorm that drove him to seek shelter at the mansion, Dr. Clancy crossed himself, muttering something in quick Latin which he could not catch, but which ended with *per Deum Patrem omnipotentem*.

"It's odd that lovely girl should have the same name as the old wi—the old woman," Harrigan concluded. "She tells me that they're constantly mistaken for each other by——"

"I don't doubt it," Clancy broke in; then, abruptly, "I don't suppose there's any hope of dissuading you from visiting her tonight?"

"Not the slightest," Harrigan replied. "I'm going to see her tonight, and tomorrow night, and every night she'll see me. If she'll have me, I'm going to marry her."

Dr. Clancy's hard gaze softened for a moment. "Would you care to tell me how you came here—under these trees?" he asked.

"I wouldn't," Harrigan snapped.

"I thought not," Clancy nodded understandingly. "Well, if you're set on seeing her, you're set on it, my boy. I've had enough experience to know that one can't argue when a man's in love."

He had no difficulty finding the house now. Clear and sharply defined against the moon-brightened sky, its chimneys rose to guide him like a landmark as he hurried down the highroad. Odd that he hadn't seen them in the morning. True, he'd approached from a different angle and his view had been obscured by the old apple trees . . . those trees! He laughed in recollection of his fight with them. Of course, he'd suffered an attack of vertigo. That was the answer. Up too late the night before, dream-troubled sleep, the shock of Judge Crumpacker's death. . . . Never mind all that, he was going to Lucinda; he'd be with her in five minutes . . . his pulses quickened at the thought.

She was sitting on the couch before the fireplace in the drawing-room as the butler Elijah announced him. The crackling fire put faint rose tints in her ivory skin, darkened the green in her long eyes.

"Edward!" Lightly as a tuft of breeze-blown thistle-down, she rose to her feet and held out soft bare arms in greeting. Once again he went completely breathless at the sight of her. Tall, graceful, altogether lovely she was, a being from another world, a sprite released from dark enchantment. Her coral-colored sleeveless gown was cut low and belted tightly at her slim waist with a corded silver girdle; her silver-shining hair was piled in clustering little curls upon her head. She wore little silver sandals on her bare feet, and the scent of gardenia, mingled with an overtone of sandalwood that wafted to him from her, mounted to his brain as if it were a potent drug from Araby or far Cathay.

Was she young, mature or ageless? It was as impossible to estimate her age as it would be to determine how old a statue is. A marble by Praxiteles or a bronze cast by Cellini is as young today—or in five hundred years—as when it left the master's hands. His eager, ravenous gaze took in the grace of her slim throat, the lovely contours of her outstretched arms, the softly glowing green lights in her half-closed eyes. Here was enchantment old as

magic, potent as immortal beauty's self—and she was holding out her gracious hands, filled with the offer of her matchless loveliness, to him! He felt himself grow weak with longing. His heart beat with a hurrying, frenzied rhythm, like a madman on a drum, then seemed to stop entirely.

She moved across the room so lightly, so effortlessly and so silently it seemed that she was wafted by an unfelt breeze. She flowed toward him until he felt her breath upon his cheeks and the perfume of her silver-glowing hair in his nostrils. Then swiftly, hungrily, she kissed him. The flame of her raced in his blood like wildfire in a pine wood and crashed against his brain like an explosion. He swayed drunkenly, reaching out unsteady hands.

But she slipped back before his questing fingers found her. "You love me, don't you, Edward?" she asked, and it seemed to him amusement flickered in her green eyes. "You love me very, very much?" She drawled the question in her husky, bell-toned voice, and the magic of its timbre seemed to set his nerves aquiver, like taut violin strings.

His breath rasped in his throat. "Love you?" he echoed hoarsely. "More than anything on earth——"

"Or in the heavens above, or waters underneath?" she supplied, and an acid mockery seemed to underlie her words.

"Or in the heavens above or waters underneath," he repeated like a formula.

"You want me to be yours, and you'd be mine forever—to the end of time, and beyond?"

He found no words to answer her; a gasp was all he could achieve, but with his tortured spirit looking from his eyes he nodded.

"Then place your hand upon my heart while I put mine on yours, and swear"—she took his hand in hers and held it to her bosom, and he felt the rondure of her breast beneath his fingers as she laid her free hand on his chest—"swear without reservation or withholding that as it is with me so it shall be with you; whom I serve you will serve, where I worship you will worship——"

Dimly, like a voice heard in a dream, or from a great distance, the command came to him: "Breathe on her, Edward Harrigan; breathe on her in the name of God!"

She drew away from him and raised her lovely arms as if in evocation. Her lips were redder than blood, and lights like green lightning-flashes flickered in her eyes.

"No!" she forbade, and now her voice had lost its bell-like resonance and was shrill and thin with terror. "No, Edward, pay no heed to him. *Astarte, Magna Mater*——" Tiny wrinkles seemed to etch themselves about her eyes, her sweetly rounded throat seemed shriveling, withering, the silver-luster faded in her hair.

Harrigan felt a shiver light as frosty air run through his body. Something terrified him—it was as if an awful unseen presence had come to the quiet firelit room, a thing of dreadful, everlasting chill and terror and wickedness.

Again the far hail sounded, fainter this time: "Breathe on her, Edward Harrigan; breathe on her in the name of God for your immortal soul's sake!"

Scarce knowing what he did he pursed his lips and blew into her face saying, "*In nomine Dei!*"

She turned her great eyes on him sadly, reproachfully. He'd seen a dying deer look so at the hunter.

"Wretched man," she whispered, and now her voice had all its old-time vibrance, "what have you done? Hear me before the end comes, Edward Harrigan. My shadow is upon you. Never shall you free yourself from it; it shall come between you and every woman whom you look on; you shall see me in the sunshine and the moonlight, hear my voice in wind and flowing water——"

A roaring like the thunder of Niagara filled his ears. The room was sliding past him, breaking up, as if it were a painting on a china plate smashed by a sudden blow. He fell, rose to his knees, then fell again. Then he sat up and looked about him dazedly.

Around him was a creeper-covered, ruined wall of crumbling brick. Sumac bushes grew in rank profusion from the piles of earth and rubble. To right and left he saw the outlines of a broken chimney, topless, shattered, smothered in a growth of whispering-leaved ivy and pointing like a broken monument to the pale sky from which the stars had been wiped by the half-moon's light. "Good heavens," he exclaimed, "have I been dreaming?"

"Pray Heaven you never have another dream like it, my son!" The voice was at his elbow, and as he started round he beheld Dr. Clancy, vested in surplice and stole, an open prayer book in his hand.

"Dr. Clancy—Father!" He blinked at the vested man in astonishment.

"Yes, my son, I am a priest," replied Clancy. "Most of the members of the club are non-churchmen, and because it might embarrass them to know there was a priest present, I've used my university degree when I came up here for a few days' shooting every autumn. Judge Crumpacker knew about me; so do half a dozen others, but to most I am just Dr. Clancy. I was on my way from early mass at the village church when I met you and the judge that morning."

"But—but——" stammered Harrigan.

"I know, my son, you can't understand how I came here," Father Clancy smiled. "I've suspected old Lucinda Lafferty for a long time, but one doesn't talk of witchcraft nowadays. It does no good, and only gets one laughed at. I've had my eye on her, just the same, and when the judge told me about his experience it worried me. Not enough, though. I didn't realize how malignant—or how powerful—she was until too late. Then I found you lying in her orchard, and what you told me made me fear for you. She had killed Judge Crumpacker's body. She would kill your soul, unless I could prevent it. But what could I do? You were a victim of the glamour she cast about herself and her house by her devilish arts; it was futile to attempt to reason with you. So I followed you.

"I saw you come to this old ruin, saw you greet the cursed witch, and heard you prepare to forswear your Christian birthright of salvation. I could exorcise the foul fiend that aided her, but you had to save yourself. Only

the victim of a witch's glamour can dispel the haze that binds him. Had I sent her off with a curse, you would have remained her victim all your life, believing that the things you'd seen were really there and that she was a young and lovely woman——"

"She was—she is!" cried Harrigan. "I've seen her, kissed her, held her in my arms——"

"You think so?" interrupted the priest. "Look there!" He pointed to an object half visible in the moonlight, half obscured by shadow.

At first he thought it was a scarecrow or a pile of old discarded clothing, but as Harrigan looked closer he saw it was a woman's body, old, emaciated, clothed in filthy rags. The face was incredibly wrinkled, bone-pale and hideously ugly. Even in death there was no dignity about it, only a kind of reptilian malignancy. The hands, claw-like, with broken, dirt-filled nails, were like the talons of a vulture, red, cracked, swollen-jointed; between the slackly opened bloodless lips showed a few broken, yellowed teeth, long, sharp and pointed as the fangs of a carnivore. The whole appearance of the corpse was horrible, revolting, frightening. Yet—he caught his breath in sudden sickness—as he realized it—underneath the ugliness, the filth, the squalor, was a faint resemblance to the lovely creature he had caressed. Like a devilishly inspired caricature Lucinda Lafferty the witch had a resemblance to his beloved silver-blond Lucinda, as a skilled cartoonist's drawing may suggest, though not look like, the subject which it parodies.

"Thank Heaven you were not too dazed to hear me call to you, and to obey me," Father Clancy told him kindly. "Had you not acted when you did, and blown upon her as I ordered, we dare not think what might have happened——"

The laugh that interrupted him was dreadful, as unexpected and as shocking as a strong man's scream of pain. It was a laugh of disillusionment, abysmal, stark, complete.

These things Edward Harrigan remembers as vividly as if they'd happened yesterday. He is a dour and silent man, efficient in his work, but utterly unsocial. He calls no man his friend, no woman interests him. His little world is bounded by his laboratory and his suite at the hotel, he shuns the parks and country, no one ever sees him strolling in the sunshine or the moonlight. Usually he works till late with his test-tubes and reagents, and there is a standing order at the hotel desk to call him every morning at five.

For, as he shuns the beauties of the woods and fields, and eschews woman's company and man's companionship, Edward Harrigan shuns sleep. Dreams come with sleep, and in his dreams he sees the vision of a fragile Dresden-china figure in a coral-colored gown cut in the Grecian fashion, with silver-gleaming curls piled high upon her dainty head and soft, bare arms held out in invitation. Sometimes he speaks to her; sometimes he reaches out to grasp the slender, rose-tipped hands in his.

But she never answers, and when he stretches out his hands to hers she fades slowly from his dream-sight, like moonlight fading just before the sky begins to brighten in the east.

# The Golden Hour of Kwoh Fan

by Frank Owen

*Frank Owen confides to us that he himself has never been in China, that his vision of China is a poetic dream of his own. And yet he has been told by Orientals themselves that he embodies the romance and dreams of a yellow empire, a romance that unfortunately too often is denied to those whose vision of Celestial Asia is limited to the hustle of a shouting Shanghai marketplace or a commercial Canton street.*

“W

WE GIVE too little thought to the forces which control life.” As Kwoh Fan spoke, he lifted the delicate cup of jasmine-scented tea to his lips and sipped slowly of the lush warm beverage. As he did so he closed his eyes as though he were praying. Drinking tea is as fine an art as etching or engraving.

“The real forces of life,” he continued musingly, “though seen are not realized. They are composed of lights and shadows, colors, tones, harmonies, rhythms, perfumes and sweet music. Color, I believe, is one of the main props of existence. Plants derive their gorgeous colors from the solar spectrum, especially in the Orient. That is why yellow predominates in China. The yellow-golden skin of gorgeous China girls—what could be more superb? Or the sacred yellow robes of Buddhist priests. China is different from all other countries primarily because of the presence of this pungent color. It swirls over everything like a flood. It brings on drowsiness and lassitude. My people are yellow people steeped in yellow. If white or red predominated, the whole history of China would be different. Its very existence is directly traceable to color, which in turn goes directly to the sun.”

As Kwoh Fan paused, Coutts Cummings surveyed him meditatively. After all, to a great extent, life was a mystical puzzle. It was odd to be sitting in that room in a house so immense and magnificent it was a veritable palace, and to know that it stood in one of the most silent, least inhabited spots in China far beyond the Western Hills of Peking. Every luxury of the Occident and the Orient had been drawn into its building until it had almost become as famous and mystical as Kwoh Fan himself, Kwoh Fan, the philosopher, the dreamer, Kwoh Fan who was fanatical in his pursuit of loveliness. About his house lingered lovely Chinese serving girls, golden-



yellow girls with almond eyes, sleek black hair and vivid lips. Their gowns were silken and of every shade and hue, as soft as though they had been fashioned of moonbeams or flower petals. Flower petals they resembled in the manner in which they clove to the gorgeous golden bodies of the girls.

Kwoh Fan spoke English perfectly without the slightest suggestion of an accent, pronouncing each word distinctly as though it were a lovely jewel. His eyes were sombre languid, brooding, which was fitting; for he was a philosopher whose fame had spread throughout the length and breadth of China. In Mongolia, Manchuria and even into far Tibet and Nepal the Kwoh Fan legend was whispered unto little children. Some had it that he conversed with dragons; others that he disported with foxes in the moonlight, while again it was told how he climbed up the clouds in the evenings.

Now as they sat sipping jasmine-scented tea, Coutts Cummings studied his host reflectively. At Peking he had heard the Kwoh Fan legend, though at Peking it had not been so fantastically distorted. According to the story there related, Kwoh Fan was a worshipper of all that was beautiful, of a dew-drenched blossom, of a glowing green emerald, or the pungent yellow body of an exquisite maiden. Kwoh Fan was intoxicated by loveliness. He tried to steep himself in it. Through loveliness he endeavored to banish everything harsh and sordid from his life. Fortunately he was immensely wealthy so he could afford to be eccentric in his enthusiasms. His palace was a veritable poem of soft tones and harmonies.

"For variation," said Kwoh Fan, "a cup of pearl-orchid scented tea and I will be content."

A girl brought him the tea as he spoke. He sighed softly as the tips of his fingers lightly touched her hand.

"Life itself," he meditated, "in its fullest sense is naught but a flower."

He quaffed languidly at his tea. "The tragedy of existence," he continued, "is that few of us ever realize the attainment of one perfect hour until it has passed. Each of us has an allotment of one perfect hour, one perfect hour in an entire life. It is the memory of that hour which makes the balance of life worth living. Memory is best preserved in sweet perfume. Perfume and light are the only two things in the Universe comparable to color. The three are interchangeable, collectively making that divine thing—perfection. No flower is ever lost that once has bloomed, nor can a perfume ever vanish that has been breathed into the air. Perfumes can absorb pictures to smallest details. Not infrequently a piquant perfume floating to one's nostrils recalls the exotic vision of some beloved woman. One of your poets, Baudelaire, I believe, has fashioned this truth into verse that is lyrically beautiful. Lavender makes one think of old English ladies creeping softly through the ancient halls of gabled houses. Aloeswood brings poignantly to mind Oriental princesses. The bazaars of every country have their own particular odors. And in those odors are preserved pictures of the incidents and occurrences that have emerged from embryo there. Perfume possesses more divinity than any religion or any creed."

Kwoh Fan rose abruptly to his feet.

"If you wish," he said impulsively, "I will take you to a room like unto

none other you have ever beheld. Nobody ever enters it but myself, though now I am moved to escort you there."

Coutts Cummings needed no second bidding. Slowly he followed Kwoh Fan down marvelous halls dim-lit with glimmering lanterns. Occasionally draperies fluttered in the breeze emitting a wondrous purple fragrance. Once or twice a slim girl disappeared around one of the many curves of that winding hall. The floor was covered by rugs of velvet softness. Everything was hushed. At last Kwoh Fan stopped. He drew a key from the sleeve of his coat and unlocked a great door. The next moment they were in a room entirely hung in dark blue draperies. At one end was a huge glass window through which the sun gleamed like an orange-gold lantern. It blended perfectly with the blue-soft sheen of the draperies.

"It is like living in the skies," said Coutts Cummings softly.

"It is far better," said Kwoh Fan, "for in this room is the famous 'Jade Jar of Ilibar.'"

As he spoke, he parted the velvet curtains at one end of the room and there in a crypt stood a huge jar covered with carvings and fantastic designs. Its extreme age could not be questioned. Centuries had passed over it like years.

Kwoh Fan clutched Coutts Cummings by the shoulder. "It is the rarest antiquity of earth," he breathed intensely. "It is of more value than all the famed jewels of India. No rajah has treasure like unto this. For sealed within this jar are a few drops of the rarest perfume ever drawn from flowers. Within the perfume are hidden all the wondrous scenes and adventures through which this jar has passed. Some day I will remove the cover, permitting the sweet perfume to issue from it. I have purposely had this room builded for that precious day. Can you imagine that perfect hour when all those wondrous scenes will loom up before me even as they appeared more than a thousand years ago?"

Late in the evening after the daylight had expired, Coutts Cummings wandered alone in the Chinese garden which surrounded the palace. The air was heavy with the breath of countless flowers. A soft breeze blew lyrically through the treetops. From the distance came the sound of music and the sing-song drone of celestial chanters. Overhead a yellow moon shimmered down, throwing the fronds of the trees into strong silhouette. It was a night of magic. The air was so cool it brushed his cheek like the soft hand of a Manchu princess.

Coutts Cummings breathed deeply of the fragrant air. The memory of that ancient jar in the blue-velvet room haunted him. He sighed softly as he re-entered the palace. In a lounging room he found Kwoh Fan listlessly drinking tea.

At his entrance, Kwoh Fan looked up drowsily. "Come linger here awhile with me," he said. "Before retiring I always drink a few cups of the supreme liquor of all—blue-poppy scented tea. It brings happiness through forgetfulness. Drink with me until the night grows old."

Kwoh Fan clapped his hands and a girl as frail as a flower brought a cup of the fragrant-scented tea and placed it on the table before Coutts Cummings. For a moment he breathed of the pungent vapor, then slowly

he lifted the jade cup to his lips. The tea was odd but not unpleasant to the taste. It coursed through his veins like old wine. He glanced toward Kwoh Fan. Life at that moment seemed very good. A perfect languidity hung over the room.

Kwoh Fan was dozing. He was breathing contentedly. But Coutts Cummings' perceptions seemed doubly clear. He drank once more of the blue-poppy scented tea, and as he drank fantastic thoughts crammed through his comprehension.

Before him lounged Kwoh Fan. He was sleeping. Within his sleeve was the key to the velvet room wherein the antique jar reposed. Coutts Cummings leaned toward his sleeping host. He touched his hand but Kwoh Fan did not move. He touched his cheek. But still he stirred not. Finally Coutts Cummings sprang to his feet. Stealthily he drew the key from Kwoh Fan's sleeve. The next moment he was gliding down the heavy-carpeted hall. Not a sound stirred within the palace.

Finally he arrived at the great door that led to the blue-draped chamber. His hands shook so he could scarcely insert the key in the lock. But at last the ponderous door swung open and closed behind him and he found himself in that room of romance and enchantment. There was no lantern lighted but the yellow moonlight streamed through the great glass window. It lighted up the blue folds of the draperies. Now more than ever they resembled the open sky. It was as though he stood beneath an immense inverted blue bowl. Softly he walked toward the green jar. He caressed it for a moment with his hands. Then from his pocket he drew a knife. Bit by bit he chipped away the wax that sealed the top; until all had been removed.

For a moment he hesitated before reverently lifting the cover. As he did so he sprang back, falling among the cushions and gazing in awe at the jar. At once a perfume like unto nothing in his experience commenced to pervade the room. Stronger and stronger it grew. It stirred up a thousand emotions within him.

And as he watched the jar it seemed as though a strange light were coming from it, a yellow golden glow as soft as the mist of rainbows. Gradually it increased in volume until it filled the room. It was a shower of soft gold that enmeshed him like a web. The room was quaintly brilliant now, yet it was not a room at all but a golden sunlit street. In the distance camels and mules were ambling toward a purple-golden sunset. Gone was the room of pungent draperies, while this strange city loomed up to take its place. Only the jar still remained. And now from the jar there stepped a maiden so peerless in beauty that his eyes burned at the sight of her. She was formed as perfectly as the rarest flower. Her silk-soft waist was of rose-petal texture. Her garments were simple, though not without some trace of costliness. The firm lines of her lovely body were accented by them rather than concealed. Like old ivory was her face and her lips crushed pomegranates. They were more scarlet than rubies and sweeter than wild honey. Her eyes were blacker than the black dungeon beneath Wan Shou Shan, and her cheeks were faintly pink as are coral beaches at sunrise.

Coutts Cummings gazed at her and his mind forsook him. So lovely she

was, his reason snapped. He crouched among the cushions and whimpered like a child. And as he sobbed she danced. And as she danced she slowly cast aside her garments until she stood before him a slim golden statue of a loveliness to ruin kingdoms.

He sprang toward her. But as he grasped at her his fingers closed on thin air. She existed only in the charming golden mist of the perfume. Again and again he tried to grasp her to draw her lovely form to his that he might kiss those lush red lips.

But ever he failed. He was reaching back through the dust of a thousand years to kiss a once famous dancer, the memory of whom had long vanished from mortal minds.

Above that dream of long ago there came a frightful din. Kwoh Fan had awaked from his slumbers. He had discovered the key was missing. And now he was outside the door pounding upon it and bellowing like a wounded forest animal. But his pounding availed him not. It could not seep through to Coutts Cummings' consciousness.

Finally it occurred to Kwoh Fan to try the door. It yielded to his touch. As he rushed blindly into the room he heeded not the exotic perfume nor did he see the gorgeous picture which hung in the perfumed golden mist.

He was consumed by hatred, hatred of the guest who had dared to enter his sacred blue chamber. He felt as though he were stifling, as though every bit of air had been drawn from the room. He was nauseated, strangling. In a paroxysm of frenzy he drove his arm through the great glass window.

At once there came a draft of clear cold night air. It stirred the golden mist. The lovely dancing girl shuddered, then slowly the whole picture commenced to dissolve, to float toward the open window. It was a perfumed vision only and the perfume was fading at the onslaught of the air.

Coutts Cummings crouched on the cushions. His eyes were wide with wonder. And now he beheld his gorgeous girl, the girl who had made prisoner his consciousness, dissolving into the very air. He emitted a wild cry and rushed to the window, just as the perfumed mist of the little dancer floated silently past. He grasped frantically at her form. As he did so he leaned far out of the window, so far that he lost his balance and fell. Down, down, down his body dropped until it was grasped in the cool soft arms of the river far below.

Kwoh Fan remained by the window. He gazed far off toward the stars. At last his anger had vanished. It had floated away like the mist of perfume. Kwoh Fan was a great philosopher. Throughout China his fame was legendary. He had devoted years of his life to study and profound meditation. He had lived for that one perfect hour when he would be able to view the visions which lay hidden in the jar. And now that hour had come and gone. The pictures had been before him but he had seen them not. He had always loved beauty, endeavored to drench himself in it. Yet in the supreme moment of his existence his hatred quite outweighed his love.

Kwoh Fan sighed softly. He returned to the tearoom.

"Life," he reflected, "is very strange." And he poured himself a cup of pearl-orchid scented tea.

# Uncommon Castaway

by Nelson S. Bond

*Nelson Bond, who made his start in the regular pulp magazines, rapidly graduated from that class to star his fine fantasies in the pages of the better popular magazines. Gifted with an easy, smooth narration, his themes may vary from trick inventions to hypothetical reconstructions of the beginning and end of man. In "Uncommon Castaway" he spins an anecdote of the recent war—an odd little adventure which might explain in modern terms one of the older mysteries of recorded lore.*































# Asleep in Armageddon

by Ray Bradbury

*Even when dealing with the perilously stereotyped modern interplanetary story, the devilish pen of Ray Bradbury achieves that originality of concept, that special spark of subtle pin-pricking that has made him outstanding. This story, the devilish pen of Ray Bradbury achieves that originality of concept, the most near-to-believable stage wherein one lone man can have an entire world to himself . . . to himself and few disquieting dreams.*

Y

YOU DON'T WANT death and you

don't expect death. Something goes wrong, your rocket tilts in space, a planetoid jumps up, blackness, movement, hands over the eyes, a violent pulling back of available power in the fore-jets, the crash . . .

The darkness. In the darkness, the senseless pain. In the pain, the nightmare.

He was not unconscious.

*Your name?* asked hidden voices. *Sale*, he replied in whirling nausea. *Leonard Sale. Occupation*, cried the voices. *Spaceman!* he cried, alone in the night. *Welcome*, said the voices. *Welcome, welcome.* They faded.

He stood up in the wreckage of his ship. It lay like a folded, tattered garment around him.

The sun rose and it was morning.

Sale pried himself out the small airlock and stood breathing the atmosphere. Luck. Sheer luck. The air was breathable. An instant's checking showed him that he had two months' supply of food with him. Fine, fine! And this—he fingered at the wreckage. Miracle of miracles! The radio was intact.

He stuttered out the message on the sending key. CRASHED ON PLANETOID 787. SALE. SEND HELP. SALE. SEND HELP.

The reply came instantly: HELLO, SALE. THIS IS ADDAMS IN MARSPORT. SENDING RESCUE SHIP LOGARITHM. WILL ARRIVE PLANETOID 787 IN SIX DAYS. HANG ON.

Sale did a little dance.

It was simple as that. One crashed. One had food. One radioed for help. Help came. *La!* He clapped his hands.

The sun rose and was warm. He felt no sense of mortality. Six days would be no time at all. He would eat, he would read, he would sleep. He glanced at his surroundings. No dangerous animals; a tolerable oxygen supply. What more could one ask. Beans and bacon, was the answer. The happy smell of breakfast filled the air.

After breakfast he smoked a cigarette slowly, deeply, blowing out. He nodded contentedly. What a life! Not a scratch on him. Luck. Sheer luck.

His head nodded. Sleep, he thought.

Good idea. Forty winks. Plenty of time to sleep, take it easy. Six whole long, luxurious days of idling and philosophizing. Sleep.

He stretched himself out, tucked his arm under his head, and shut his eyes.

Insanity came in to take him. The voices whispered.

*Sleep, yes, sleep,* said the voices. *Ab, sleep, sleep.*

He opened his eyes. The voices stopped. Everything was normal. He shrugged. He shut his eyes casually, fitfully. He settled his long body.

*Eeeeeeeeeeee,* sang the voices, far away.

*Abbbbbb,* sang the voices.

*Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep,* sang the voices.

*Die, die, die, die, die,* sang the voices.

*Oooooooooooooooooo,* cried the voices.

*Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm,* a bee ran through his brain.

He sat up. He shook his head. He put his hands to his ears. He blinked at the crashed ship. Hard metal. He felt the solid rock under his fingers. He saw the real sun warming the blue sky.

Let's try sleeping on our back, he thought. He adjusted himself, lying back down. His watch ticked on his wrist. The blood burned in his veins.

*Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep,* sang the voices.

*Obbbbbbhhhhhhhhhhhh,* sang the voices.

*Abbbbbbhhhhhhhhhhhh,* sang the voices.

*Die, die, die, die, die. Sleep, sleep, die, sleep, die, sleep, die!* *Oohhh. Abbbhh. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!*

Blood tapped in his ears. The sound of the wind rising.

*Mine, mine,* said a voice. *Mine, mine, he's mine!*

*No, mine, mine,* said another voice. *No, mine, mine; he's mine!*

*No, ours, ours,* sang ten voices. *Ours, ours, he's ours!*

His fingers twitched. His jaws spasmed. His eyelids jerked.

*At last, at last,* sang a high voice. *Now, now. The long time, the waiting. Over, over,* sang the high voice. *Over, over at last!*

It was like being undersea. Green songs, green visions, green time. Bubbled voices drowning in deep liquors of sea tide. Far away choruses chanting senseless rhymes. Leonard Sale stirred in agony.

*Mine, mine,* cried a loud voice. *Mine, mine!* shrieked another. *Ours, ours!* shrieked the chorus.

The din of metal, the crash of sword, the conflict, the battle, the fight, the war. All of it exploding, his mind fiercely torn apart!

Eeeeeeeeeeeee!

He leaped up, screaming. The landscape melted and flowed.

A voice said, "I am Tylle of Rathalar. Proud Tylle, Tylle of the Blood Mound and the Death Drum. Tylle of Rathalar, Killer of Men!"

Another spoke, "I am Iorr of Wendillo, Wise Iorr, Destroyer of Infidels!"

The chorus chanted, "And we the warriors, we the steel, we the warriors, we the red blood rushing, the red blood falling, the red blood steaming the sun—"

Leonard Sale staggered under the burden. "Go away!" he cried. "Leave me, in God's name, leave me!"

Eeeeeeeeeeee, shrieked the high sound of steel hot on steel.

Silence.

He stood with the sweat boiling out of him. He was trembling so violently he could not stand. Insane, he thought. Absolutely insane. Raving insane. Insane.

He jerked the food kit open, did something to a chemical packet. Hot coffee was ready in an instant. He mouthed it, spilled gushes of it down his shirt. He shivered. He sucked in raw gulps of breath.

Let's be logical, he thought, sitting down heavily. The coffee seared his tongue. No record of insanity in the family for two hundred years. All healthy, well-balanced. No reason for insanity now. Shock? Silly. No shock. I'm to be rescued in six days. No shock to that. No danger. Just an ordinary planetoid. Ordinary, ordinary place. No reason for insanity. I'm sane.

Oh? cried a small metal voice within. An echo. Fading.

"Yes!" he cried, beating his fists together. "Sane!"

Hahahahabababababab. Somewhere a vanishing laughter.

He whirled about. "Shut up, you!" he cried.

We didn't say anything, said the mountains. We didn't say anything, said the sky. We didn't say anything, said the wreckage.

"All right then," he said, swaying. "See that you don't."

Everything was normal.

The pebbles were getting hot. The sky was big and blue. He looked at his fingers and saw the way the sun burned on every black hair. He looked at his boots and the dust on them. Suddenly he felt very happy because he made a decision. I won't go to sleep, he thought. I'm having nightmares, so why sleep. There's your solution.

He made a routine. From nine o'clock in the morning, which was this minute, until twelve, he would walk around and see the planetoid. He would write on a pad with a yellow pencil everything he saw. Then he would sit down and open a can of oily sardines and some canned fresh bread with good butter on it. From twelve-thirty until four he would read nine chapters of *War and Peace*. He took the book from the wreckage, and

laid it where he might find it later. There was a book of T. S. Eliot's poetry, too. That might be nice.

Supper would come at five-thirty and then from six until ten he would listen to the radio from Earth. There would be a couple of bad comedians telling jokes and a bad singer singing some song, and the latest news flashes, signing off at midnight with the UN anthem.

After that?

He felt sick.

I'll play solitaire until dawn, he thought. I'll sit up and drink hot black coffee and play solitaire, no cheating, until sunrise.

Ho, ho, he thought.

"What did you say?" he asked himself.

"I said, 'Ha ha,'" he replied. "Some time, you'll have to sleep."

"I'm wide awake," he said.

"Liar," he retorted, enjoying the conversation.

"I feel fine," he said.

"Hypocrite," he replied.

"I'm not afraid of the night, or sleep, or anything," he said.

"Very funny," he said.

He felt bad. He wanted to sleep. And the fact that he was afraid of sleep made him want to lie down all the more and shut his eyes and curl up. "Comfy-cozy?" asked his ironic censor.

"I'll just walk and look at the rocks and the geological formations and think how good it is to be alive," he said.

"Ye gods," cried his censor. "William Saroyan!"

You'll go on, he thought, maybe one day, maybe one night, but what about the next night and the next, and the *next*? Can you stay awake *all* that time, for six nights? Until the rescue ship comes? Are you *that* good, *that* strong?

The answer was no.

What are you afraid of? I don't know. Those voices. Those sounds. But they can't hurt you, can they?

They *might*. You've got to face them some time. Must I? Brace up to it, old man. Chin up, and all that rot.

He sat down on the hard ground. He felt very much like crying. He felt as if life was over and he was entering new and unknown territory. It was such a deceiving day, with the sun warm; physically, he felt able and well, one might fish on such a day as this, or pick flowers or kiss a woman or anything. But in the midst of a lovely day, what did one get?

Death.

Well, hardly *that*.

Death, he insisted.

He lay down and closed his eyes. He was tired of messing around.

All right, he thought, if you *are* death, come get me. I want to know what all this damned nonsense is about.

Death came.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee, said a voice.

Yes, I know, said Leonard Sale, lying there. But what else?

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, said a voice.

I know that, also, said Leonard Sale, irritably. He turned cold. His mouth hung open wildly.

"I am Tylle of Rathalar, Killer of Men!"

"I am Iorr of Wendillo, Destroyer of Infidels!"

What is this place? asked Leonard Sale, struggling against horror.

"Once a mighty planet!" said Tylle of Rathalar.

"Once a place of battles!" said Iorr of Wendillo.

"Now dead," said Tylle.

"Now silent," said Iorr.

"Until *you* came," said Tylle.

"To give us life again," said Iorr.

You're dead, insisted Leonard Sale, flesh writhing. You're nothing but empty wind.

"We live, through you."

"And fight, through *you*!"

So that's it, thought Leonard Sale. I'm to be a battleground, am I? Are you friends?

"Enemies!" cried Iorr.

"Foul enemies!" cried Tylle.

Leonard smiled a rictal smile. He felt ghastly. How long have you waited? he demanded.

"How long is *time*?" Ten thousand years? "Perhaps." Ten million years? Perhaps."

What are you? Thoughts, spirits, ghosts? "All of those, and more." Intelligences? "Precisely." How did you survive?

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee, sang the chorus, far away.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang another army, waiting to fight.

"Once upon a time, this was fertile land, a rich planet. And there were two nations, strong nations, led by two strong men. I, Iorr. And he, that one who calls himself Tylle. And the planet declined and gave way to nothingness. The peoples and the armies languished in the midst of a great war which had lasted five thousand years. We lived long lives and loved long loves, drank much, slept much, fought much. And when the planet died, our bodies withered, and, only in time, and with much science, did we survive."

Survive, wondered Leonard Sale. But there is nothing of you!

"Our *minds*, fool, our *minds*! What is a body without a mind?"

What is a mind without a *body*, laughed Leonard Sale. I've got you there. Admit it, I've *got* you!

"True," said the cruel voice. "One is useless lacking the other. But survival is survival even when unconscious. The minds of our nations, through science, through wonder, survived."

But without senses, lacking eyes, ears, lacking touch, smell, and the rest?

"Lacking all those, yes. We were vapors, merely. For a long time. Un- today."

And now I am here, thought Leonard Sale. "You are here," said the voice. "To give substance to our mentalities. To give us our needed body!"

I'm only one, thought Sale. "Nevertheless, you are of use."

I'm an individual, thought Sale. I resent your intrusion.

"He resents our intrusion! Did you hear him, Iorr? He resents!"

"As if he had a right to resent!"

Be careful, warned Sale. I'll blink my eyes and you'll be gone, phantoms! I'll wake up and rub you out!

"But you'll have to sleep again, *some* time!" cried Iorr. "And when you do, we'll be here, waiting, waiting, waiting. For you."

What do you want? "Solidity. Mass. Sensation again." You can't *both* have it. "We'll fight that out between us."

A hot clamp twisted his skull. It was as if a spike had been thrust and beaten down between the bivalvular halves of his brain.

Now it was terribly clear. Horribly, magnificently clear. He was *their* universe. The world of his thoughts, his brain, his skull, divided into two camps, that of Iorr, that of Tylle. They were *using* him!

Pennants flung up on a pink mind sky! Brass shields caught the sun. Grey animals shifted and came rushing in bristling tides of sword and plume and trumpet.

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! The rushing.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! The roaring.

Nowwwwwwwww! The whirling.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm—

Ten thousand men hurtled across the small hidden stage. Ten thousand men floated on the shellacked inner ball of his eye. Ten thousand javelins hissed between the small bone hulls of his head. Ten thousand jeweled guns exploded. Ten thousand voices chanted in his ears. Now his body was riven and extended, shaken and rolled, he was screaming, writhing, the plates of his skull threatened to burst asunder. The gabbling, the shrilling, as across bone plains of mind and continent of inner marrow, through gullies of vein, down hills of artery, over rivers of melancholy, came armies and armies, one army, two armies, swords flashed in the sun, bearing down upon each other, fifty thousand minds snatching, scrabbling, cutting at him, demanding, using. In a moment, the hard collision, one army on another, the rush, the blood, the sound, the fury, the death, the insanity!

Like cymbals, the armies struck!

He leaped up, raving. He ran across the desert. He ran and ran and did not stop running.

He sat down and cried. He sobbed until his lungs ached. He cried very hard and long. Tears ran down his cheeks and into his upraised, trembling fingers. "God, God, help me, oh God, help me," he said.

All was normal again.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The rocks were baked by the sun.



He managed, after a time, to cook himself a few hot biscuits, which he ate with strawberry jam. He wiped his stained fingers on his shirt, blindly, trying not to think.

"At least I know what I'm up against," he thought. "Oh, Lord, what a world. What an innocent looking world, and what a monster it really is. It's good no one ever explored it before. Or *did* they?" He shook his aching head. Pity them, who ever crashed here before, if any ever did. Warm sun, hard rocks, not a sign of hostility. A lovely world.

Until you shut your eyes and relaxed your mind.

And the night and the voices and the insanity and the death padded in on soft feet.

"I'm all right now, though," he said, proudly. "Look at that!" He displayed his hand. By a supreme effort of will, it was no longer shaking. "I'll show you who in hell's ruler here," he announced to the innocent sky. "I am." He tapped his chest.

To think that *thought* could live that long! A million years, perhaps, all these thoughts of death and disorder and conquest, lingering in the innocent but poisonous air of the planet, waiting for a real man to give them a channel through which they might issue again in all their senseless virulence.

Now that he was feeling better, it was all silly. All I have to do, he thought, is stay awake six nights. They won't bother me that way. When I'm awake, I'm dominant. I'm stronger than those crazy monarchs and their silly tribes of sword-flingers and shield-bearers and horn-blowers. I'll stay awake.

But *can* you? he wondered. Six whole nights? Awake?

There's coffee and medicine and books and cards.

But I'm tired *now*, so tired, he thought. Can I hold out?

Well, if not. There's always the gun.

Where will these silly monarchs be if you put a bullet through their stage? All the world's a stage? No. *You*, Leonard Sale, are the small stage. And they the players. And what if you put a bullet through the wings, tearing down scenes, destroying curtains, ruining lines! Destroy the stage, the players, all, if they aren't careful!

First of all, he must radio through to Marsport, again. If there was any way they could rush the rescue ship sooner, then maybe he could hang on. Anyway, he must warn them what sort of planet this was, this so innocent-seeming spot of nightmare and fever vision—

He tapped on the radio key for a minute. His mouth tightened. The radio was dead.

It had sent through the proper rescue message, received a reply, and then extinguished itself.

The proper touch of irony, he thought. There was only one thing to do. Draw a plan.

This he did. He got a yellow pencil and delineated his six-day plan of escape.

Tonight, he wrote, read six more chapters of *War and Peace*. At four

in the morning have hot black coffee. At four-fifteen take cards from pack and play ten games of solitaire. This should take until six-thirty when—more coffee. At seven o'clock, listen to early morning programs from Earth, if the receiving equipment on the radio works at all. Does it?

He tried the radio receiver. It was dead.

Well, he wrote, from seven o'clock until eight, sing all the songs you remember, make your own entertainment. From eight until nine think about Helen King. Remember Helen. On second thought, think about Helen right now.

He marked that out with his pencil.

The rest of the days were set down in minute detail.

He checked the medical kit. There were several packets of tablets that would keep you awake. One tablet an hour every hour for six days. He felt quite confident.

"Here's mud in your evil eye, Iorr, Tylle!"

He swallowed one of the stay-wake tablets with a scalding mouth of black coffee.

Well, with one thing and another it was Tolstoy or Balzac, gin-rummy, coffee, tablets, walking, more Tolstoy, more Balzac, more gin-rummy, more solitaire. The first day passed, as did the second and the third.

On the fourth day he lay quietly in the shade of a rock, counting to a thousand by fives, then by tens, to keep his mind occupied and awake. His eyes were so tired he had to bathe them frequently in cool water. He couldn't read, he was bothered with splitting headaches. He was so exhausted he couldn't move. He was numb with medicine. He resembled a waxen dummy, stuffed with things to preserve him in a state of horrified wakefulness. His eyes were glass, his tongue a rusted pike, his fingers felt as if they were gloved in needles and fur.

He followed the hand of his watch. One second less to wait, he thought. Two seconds, three seconds, four, five, ten, thirty seconds. A whole minute. Now an hour less time to wait. Oh, ship, hurry on thy appointed round!

He began to laugh softly.

What would happen if he just gave up, drifted off into sleep? Sleep, ah, sleep; perchance to dream. All the world a stage. . . . What if he gave up the unequal struggle, lapsed down?

Eeeeeeeeeee, the high, shrill warning sound of battle metal.

He shivered. His tongue moved in his dry, burry mouth.

Iorr and Tylle would battle out their ancient battle.

Leonard Sale would become quite insane.

And whichever won the battle would take this ruin of an insane man, the shaking, laughing wild body, and wander it across the face of this world for ten, twenty years, occupying it, striding in it, pompous, holding court, making grand gestures, ordering heads severed, calling on inward unseen dancing girls. Leonard Sale, what remained of him, would be led off to some hidden cave, there to be infested with wars and worms of wars

for twenty insane years, occupied and prostituted by old and outlandish thoughts.

When the rescue ship arrived it would find nothing. Sale would be hidden somewhere by a triumphant army in his head. Hidden in some cleft of rock, placed there like a nest for Iorr to lie upon in evil occupation.

The thought of it almost broke him in half.

Twenty years of insanity. Twenty years of torture, doing what you don't want to do. Twenty years of wars raging and being split apart, twenty years of nausea and trembling.

His head sank down between his knees. His eyes snapped and cracked and made soft noises. His eardrums popped tiredly.

*Sleep, sleep,* sang soft sea voices.

I'll—I'll make a proposition with you, listen, thought Leonard Sale. You, Iorr, you, too, Tylle! Iorr, you can occupy me on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Tylle, you can take me over on Sundays, Tuesdays and Saturdays. Thursday is maid's night out. Okay?

*Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee,* sang the sea tides, seething in his brain.

*Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,* sang the distant voices softly, soft.

What'll you say, is it a *bargain*, Iorr, Tylle?

*No,* said a voice.

*No,* said another.

Greedy, both of you, greedy! complained Sale. A pox on both your houses!

He slept.

He *was* Iorr, jeweled rings on his hands. He arose beside his rocket and held out his fingers, commanding blind armies. He was Iorr, ancient ruler of jeweled warriors.

He *was* Tylle, lover of women, killer of dogs!

With some hidden bit of awareness, his hand crept to the holster at his hip. The sleeping hand withdrew the gun there. The hand lifted, the gun pointed.

The armies of Tylle and Iorr gave battle.

The gun exploded.

The bullet tore across Sale's forehead, wakening him.

He stayed awake for another six hours, getting over his latest siege. He knew it to be hopeless now. He washed and bandaged the wound he had given himself. He wished he had aimed straighter and it was all over. He watched the sky. Two more days. Two more. Come on, ship, come on. He was heavy with sleeplessness.

No use. At the end of six hours he was raving badly. He took the gun up and put it down and took it up again, put it against his head, tightened his hand on the trigger, changed his mind, looked at the sky again.

Night settled. He tried to read, threw the book away. He tore it up and burned it, just to have something to do.

So tired. In another hour, he decided. If nothing happens, I'll kill myself. This is for certain now. I'll *do* it, this time.

He got the gun ready and laid it on the ground next to himself.

He was very calm now, though tired. It would be over and done. He would be dead.

He watched the minute hand of his watch. One minute, five minutes, twenty-five minutes.

The flame appeared on the sky.

It was so unbelievable he started to cry. "A rocket," he said, standing up. "A rocket!" he cried, rubbing his eyes. He ran forward.

The flame brightened, grew, came down.

He waved frantically, running forward, leaving his gun, his supplies, everything behind. "You see that, Iorr, Tylle! You savages, you monsters, I beat you! I *won!* They're coming to rescue me now! I've won, damn you."

He laughed harshly at the rocks and the sky and the backs of his hands.

The rocket landed. Leonard Sale stood swaying, waiting for the door lid to open.

"Goodbye, Iorr, goodbye, Tylle!" he shouted in triumph, grinning, eyes hot.

*Eeeeeee*, sang a diminishing roar in time.

*Abbbbbb*, voices faded.

The rocket flipped wide its airlock. Two men jumped out.

"Sale?" they called. "We're Ship ACDN13. Intercepted your SOS and decided to pick you up ourselves. The Marsport ship won't get through until day after tomorrow. We want a spot or rest ourselves. Thought it'd be good to spend the night here, pick you up, and go on."

"No," said Sale, face melting with terror. "No spend night——"

He couldn't talk. He fell to the ground.

"Quick," said a voice, in the bleary vortex over him. "Give him a shot of food liquid, another of sedative. He needs sustenance and rest."

"No rest!" screamed Sale.

"Delirious," said one man softly.

"No sleep!" screamed Sale.

"There, there," said the man gently. A needle poked into Sale's arm.

Sale thrashed. "No sleep, go!" he mouthed horribly. "Oh, go!"

"Delirious," said one man. "Shock."

"No *sedative!*" screamed Sale.

The sedative flowed into him.

*Eeeeeeeeeee*, sang the ancient winds.

*Abbbbbbhhhhhhhh*, sang the ancient seas.

"No sedative, no sleep, please, don't, don't, *don't!*" screamed Sale, trying to get up. "You don't——understand!"

"Take it easy, old man, you're safe among us now, nothing to worry about," said the rescuer above him.

Leonard Sale slept. The two men stood over him.

As they watched, Sale's features changed violently. He groaned and cried and snarled in his sleep. His face was riven with emotion. It was the face of a saint, a sinner, a mend, a monster, a darkness, a light, one, many, an army, a vacuum, all, all!

He writhed in his sleep.  
Eeeeeeeeee! the sound burst from his mouth. Abbbbbb! he screamed.

"What's wrong with him?" asked one of the two rescuers.

"I don't know. More sedative?"

'More sedative. Nerves. He needs more sleep.'

They stuck the needle in his arm. Sale writhed and spat and moaned.

Then, suddenly, he was dead.

He lay there, the two men over him. "What a shame," said one of them.

"Can you figure that?"

"Shock. Poor guy. What a pity." They covered his face. "Did you ever see a face like that?"

"Totally insane."

"Loneliness. Shock."

"Yes. Lord, what an expression. I hope never to see a face like *that* again."

"What a shame, waiting for us, and we arrive, and he dies anyway."

They glanced around. "What shall we do? Shall we spend the night?"

"Yes. It's good to be out of the ship."

"We'll bury him first, of course."

"Naturally."

"And spend the night in the open, with good air, right? Good to be in the open again. After two weeks in that damned ship."

"Right. I'll find a spot for him. You start supper, eh?"

"Done."

"Should be good sleeping tonight."

"Fine, fine."

They made a grave and said a word over it. They drank their evening coffee silently. They smelled the sweet air of the planet and looked at the lovely sky and the bright and beautiful stars.

"What a night," they said, lying down.

"Pleasant dreams," said one, rolling over.

And the other replied, "Pleasant dreams."

They slept.

# The Inheritors

by John Michel and Robert Lowndes

*The test of existence is the ability of a species to adapt itself to a changing environment. The first law of existence would seem to be therefore the ability of each type of creature to combat the obstacles of nature successfully. Humanity is as subject to this as any other creature. Our success so far has been due entirely to our ability to outfox both the normal and abnormal attacks of nature. The greatest detriment to our struggle for survival has become in the past century our tendency to self-destruction. In this arresting and grim story, there is projected a climax to this struggle for existence. "The Inheritors" is a novelette from one of the minor pulps but it has already been hailed as a "lost classic" by fans in the know.*

## I

# A

GREAT BARE plain, misty, grey, vapours swirling in endless writhing strings. Horizons in shadow, dimmed, seemingly limited but stretching everywhere to nowhere. Small, jagged ridges covered with a green slime from which pale streamers arose in slow ascent to the invisible sky.

Silence. Heavy, thick, interwoven with the mists, a part of them. Silence, broken by footsteps, the sound of metal on rock.

A shape looming up out of the darkness, human, bulbous. A figure in grey metal with fantastic eyes of glass, metal-clad arms pumping up and down. Then for a few moments the monotonous click of his footsteps leading forward. To where?

"Hayward! Hayward! Why don't you answer? Where are you? Hayward!"

The cry pierced through nothing but the ether and was absorbed into silence. The figure who uttered it stopped and swung about. One metal-gloved hand clutched frantically at the face-plate of the gasproof suit's helmet.

A face within pressed against the glass, eyes popping, striving to spear through the impenetrable mists. Again the cry. The fumbling hands fell limp. The figure fell inert to the slimy floor of the endlessly stretching room. Its roof, the hidden sky, gave back no answer. But again.

"Tom, Tom, I'm lost. Tom, where are you? *Where am I?*"

The metal-cased human raised itself on one elbow and clutched for support at a small hilly mound a foot away. The hand closed on its top—and pulled away. The rock was rotten, eaten away as was everything else in the world of shadows. With a viscous splash, the figures fell back into the muck. Again the cry.

"The air's going fast. Tom! Where's the Fortress, where's the council, where's the Fortress . . . The Fortress!" an hysterical laugh, "yes, *where*. Where's *anything*? Anything but this muck and mist? Tom! If you don't come back the engines will stop. You were so good at mending them. Tom!" the voice took on a crafty note of supplication, "you wouldn't let the City die. Not Tom Hayward! I might. I'm weak. Amos Bevin's weak, Tom. He's no good to the Fortress, but now, *you*, you Tom Hayward, you, you. . . ."

The helmeted head slipped forward, buried itself in the green slime.

Rocks, earth, sky. All shifting vapours and unstable. No direction. No up or down. Merely a space between one nothingness and the next. No light but a wavering twilight, like evening seen through storm clouds. The earth a crushed vista of emptiness, without solidity, drowned in acid ooze. Silence, now, complete.

The precise spot occupied by the prostrate body had once been a farm in southern Ohio. Once—two hundred years before—it had borne green grass and laughing plants beneath a great, burning sun. The seasons had come and gone, the balmy Spring, Summer, the crisp Autumn, Winter. The land had remained the land. Sweet-smelling, green, drenched in light and sun and air. Southern Ohio. A mighty plain of waving wheat drinking from the warm, wet earth. Earth, damp with clean rain. Earth smelling of *earth*.

The wars came and changed this land. The metal monsters of guns and armored tanks swept over it and churned it and buried it. The seasons came and went and presently the land bore a new crop—of bones and rotting flesh and fragments of bombs. The sweet air was filled with the roar of cruelly clawed birds, birds that spat thunder and flame and obscured the sun. The rains came again and washed away the earth and exposed naked rock. And then the gas. The gas rolled in from the ocean and the northern lakes and from far above. It covered the land in thick clouds and buried it forever from the light of day and the light of night. It combined with the soil and the rocks and changed them into hissing slime. The people who used the land vanished. They went into the earth in giant steel fortresses and forgot the land and the smell of it and the sunlight and natural air. Because all this had been taken away. After a time they forgot what they were fighting for and fought blindly, fortress against fortress, with weapons mighty and irresistible. Presently nothing was left but a scarred surface and here and there at indistinguishable points, the fortress cities, immense masses of steel and glass, battered, pitted, buried away from even the gloomy ruins of the earth's surface, filled with complicated machinery that whirred and banged and filled the endless hours with endless

roaring, powered by obscure energies, djinns pouring forth hour by hour and day by day instruments of warfare.

Earth was dead—a heaving ball of ooze-covered rock and water, bubbling eternally as the explosive weapons fired from the cities beneath and burst at the surface, aimed nowhere, directed by caricatures of humanity, men with but one intent and one purpose, to fight, to fight, to kill and destroy.

The fallen figure stirred again. It did not cry out, but from within the helmet came sounds of helpless sobbing. Raising itself painfully, it straightened and staggered off.

One foot up, one foot down, onward and onward. Onward into the unchanging gloom until it blindly struck another figure, prone on the ground. The other's arms were outstretched; still fingers clutched the handle of a great metal door, hinged like the top of a cistern and welded into the top of an almost buried metal cylinder some two yards across.

"Tom!" the moving figure's diaphragm burst the silence in a shriek of delight that was silenced almost immediately. Amos Bevin reached down and shook the metal-cased image of Tom Hayward. There was no response.

"Tom! You've found the exit-port! You've found it. Come on, we're home. It's the Fortress!"

Hayward was dead. The other knelt weakly and turned him over. Through the face plate he saw a picture of utter horror. The face was gone. In its place was a shapeless, frozen mass. Expressionless, a mask of utter vacuity, the eyes bulging and congested with solidified blood.

"Tom! You found the Fortress and you—found—what the others found." A mad shriek of laughter. Bevin let the face plate drop and drew himself up. He shook a futile fist at the sky.

"You've taken him as you took the others! You devils! Who are you? What are you? *Where* are you? Oh, I felt you near. Tangible as steel and elusive as those damned mists. We need light to see *them*. . . ."

He broke off with a shuddering gasp and dashed his arms in helpless rage against the steel door.

For a short while he stood stiffly, gazing unseeingly into the invisible distance. Then he gently disengaged Hayward's armored fingers from the steel handle of the door, turned it and sprang back as it opened with a churning roar. He looked down at the inert form for an instant and without further ado jumped feet first into the blackness of the open well. Behind him the steel port clanged shut.

"He's waking. The stuff's good. Hadn't decayed *yet*, like the other. Weyman, lift him—so."

Bevin heard the words through a lightening blackness. His ears were buzzing and his whole consciousness was nothing but a memory of that final moment on the outside when he had jumped through the exit-port and fainted while going down. Then the light shifted rapidly to the accustomed light grey of the Fortress' interior, and his eyes were open.

"Hello, Bevin."



He shifted his glance upward and met the eyes of a tall, gaunt man who held a hypodermic whose needle was still dripping with a dark purple fluid. The tall man tossed the hypodermic to a male nurse who caught it deftly, and sat down on the bed beside Bevin.

"Well? What did you find?"

Bevin's eyes clouded with pain. He tried to turn them away but the others were insistent, commanding. He clenched his fists and held them tightly against his side.

"Nothing," he said flatly.

The three in attendance stared. The tall man laid a hand on his wrist. "Bevin. Wake up. What did you find?"

The inert figure groaned.

"Can't you stop that damn pounding?"

The other grunted and looked up at the two men standing beside the bed.

"He'll be all right in a minute. What's that about pounding?"

The man addressed as Weyman smoothed out the front of his tunic with the flat of his hand.

"It's the machinery. He feels it more than we do."

"Well, what do we do now?"

"Payton, we've got to wait. Wait until he can talk rationally." Weyman stared directly into the other's eyes, "We've got to know what's out there *now*. It took three this morning, two men and a woman, and among the best specimens we have," he raised a hand to his face, pale and tinged with a faint green. "Damn this air. It's getting foul." One of the men was an atmosphere expert. "The machine's broken down—"

Payton put out a warning hand.

"Wait," he's coming to again. Bevin! Tell us what you found."

The man on the bed woke to full consciousness. He made a faint gesture of hopelessness.

"I told you. Nothing. Hayward's dead. It got him. I left him outside at the shaft entrance," a fit of coughing shook him, "you might send somebody up after the suit. We haven't many left."

Payton arose and folded his arms disgustedly.

"Come on. Let's get over to the atmosphere plant. We've got to see about that machine," he put a hand to his mouth and masked a hacking cough, "before we all die of suffcaion."

They went out, leaving Bevin attended by the male nurse.

Payton and Weyman walked along the big corridor slowly. Their gait was irregular and shifty. Neither of them seemed able to balance perfectly. Nor could anyone else in the fortress. A hundred years of confinement in the machinery-crammed City had resulted in the degeneration of the inhabitants' synapses. Most of them acted like people with locomotor ataxia. The atmosphere had been overloaded with exhaust gases and the by-products of the liberation of energy for so long that it had finally taken effect on their organisms.

The skins of the fortress people were a ghastly shade of green, except for

the rims of the eyes which were dead white. The eyes themselves were completely colorless, the pupils shading into the oyster white of the irises. As a result of the introduction of synthetic food due to the loss of the earth's surface as source, their whole systems had become enervated and weakened. The physiological processes of life in the human animal had grown sluggish, almost inoperative. They found it impossible to synthesize several of the less important vitamins and were at the complete mercy of what were once minor respiratory infections. The life of the City, apart from its ceaseless production of materials for war, was a constant battle against disease and unconsciousness. Most of them were never completely aware of their environment. A sort of apathy tinged with resignation had gripped them, letting go only now and then to allow them to realize the full hideousness of their position.

None of them was brilliant. The intellectual minds among them had long ago vanished, leaving room for the sturdier and cruder, who organized the City into a military machine which operated in the main upon inertia and habit. The great weapons mounted upon the upper levels were loaded automatically. The men attending them had only to aim them somewhere above and touch off the charges. It had gone on like that for a very long time, aimlessly, by rote, an organized robotry that never slackened and seldom questioned. They were too full of poisons and toxins to think very clearly. The fortress was their whole life and it took every minute and used it relentlessly.

Far below the *machines* rumbled and roared. They filled the air with ceaseless noise and the odors of lubricating oils and heavy gases which were never completely dissipated and which further dimmed the feeble power of the illuminating system. Amidst the confusion the machines whirred on in their useless motions, converting energy into needed materials, immense quantities of explosives to feed the hungry juggernauts in the turrets above. And other machines growled and shook. Machines to make food. Machines to convert rock into air and light. Heaters, purifiers, filters, beakers, long lines of copper refrigeration coils, spinning dynamos, thumping ladles, tall rows of running belts, conveyor systems beyond comprehension. Power filled the spaces in the atmosphere left blank by the other elements and covered the steel walls and floors with crackling lightnings.

The machines were sick. Few knew their use and few could repair them. Coated with grime and oxides, deeply pitted, scarred, burnt, they whirled insanely until they broke down and were silent forever or were repaired by someone not yet sunk into complete apathy and forgetfulness. Alone in their majesty, they stood like gods and received homage: offerings of oil laid with tender care before them, polishing by the rhythmically moving hands of hundreds of dull-eyed humans, the adoration of those who came to watch and stand spellbound and helpless before them, eyes clouded by the lightnings, ears deafened by thunder, regarding the machines with supplication once hurled at the sun and moon.

The machines were everything. Their stirrings filled the universe. Payton's universe was the City.

He stopped suddenly in the corridor and nudged Weyman weakly. He pointed to a rivet-studded door.

"Here it is."

He stumbled to the portal and pressed a button. Groaning and whining, the door swung inward and to one side. A blast of air shot out of the opening, nearly knocking him over. He held on to his companion and dragged himself through. The door closed.

A man clad in an oil-streaked and dust-laden tunic came up to him, looming up out of the darkness. He spoke in a high voice. The machines were here. Their voices filled the room.

"Over here!" he shouted into Payton's ear.

He led the two men to a metal slab on which rested three figures, two of men, the other of a woman.

Weyman clutched his arm for support. He turned to his friend.

"They found them this morning."

"Accident?"

"*The Enemy!*"

"How did they die?"

Weyman stood aside and pointed.

It wasn't a pretty sight; these people had died unpleasantly. The woman's body was rigid in death. A bluish foam lay on her lips. Her eyes, wide open, stared at the ceiling. Every muscle was tensed. One of the men exhibited similar symptoms. The other's skull had been crushed in and the blood had coagulated instantly. It lay in cracked lines over the remains of the face. One of the feet was similarly damaged.

Payton shuddered. Icy fear seized him. He spoke without turning.

"No one was near?"

The attendant answered.

"They were alone."

"The ones we find dead are always *alone*," whispered Weyman to the air before him.

Payton seated himself wearily on a metal stool nearby and dismissed the attendant.

"The machinery was damaged. *Chewed*," he said in a slow, strained voice, "chewed ~~as~~ though by teeth."

Weyman shrugged his shoulders.

"There are no such teeth in the City."

"There is *something* in the City."

"Weyman!" Payton clutched the edge of the stool. His thin hands were like the hands of a skeleton. "We must kill them before they kill us all! The council must meet *now*."

## II

Somewhere in the murky distance the deep throat of a gong sounded insistently, rising out of the incessant hum of the machines. Again and again the warning timbre of it beat against the gloom until it seemed to penetrate the fibre and tissues of the defenders. And with that penetration

something long dormant awakened within them, something that was as yet uncertain and questioning. The deep notes meant something, they knew, bore within them some urgent message. Yet, what was it. . . .

In the Synthesis room, where, amidst the litter of laboratory equipment, the defenders peered with tired, dull eyes into microscopes and beakers, half-aimlessly going through the monotonous routine of testing foods, a solitary woman looked up from her work. To her fellow-workers, Martha Fiske was still attractive, according to the degenerated standards of beauty within the fortress. Somewhere, sometime, she had heard that gong before, knew that it carried a message. She leaned against the workbench, gazing listlessly up at the far ceiling, trying to think. What was it? It was so hard to remember, to think of anything now.

"John," she murmured, "I think that means we are supposed to stop."

The man she addressed also looked up. His eyes, she noticed, were not quite as dulled as those of the others; there was still something in them that passed for vitality among the dwellers in the City. Perhaps, Martha thought, she should mate again. There were so few capable women left now, and she knew that, when the time came for the periodic examination, the medical head would most likely recommend that the council assign her another mate. If she acted of her own volition, she might have some choice in the matter. Her thoughts, she noticed, were a little more clear now.

"What is it, John?" she asked.

"I know," he said slowly, the ghost of a smile playing about his wan lips at the thought of rising above the gloom for a moment. "It is a summons to all of us. The council is meeting."

The others had stopped now, were slowly gathering around the two.

"Where does the council meet?" someone wanted to know. That would be Harvey Grant. There hadn't been a full meeting within the span of his eighteen years.

"Everyone make sure you have your side arms ready," commanded Stilson. "Check them now."

As if a solemn ritual were being observed, each member of the party returned to his bench and picked up the small pistol, firing tiny heat-expansion pellets, that was always at the side of every defender, and went through the motions of examining and withdrawing safety-catches. When this was done, they intoned in a low voice, as his eyes met them, "check."

Without a word, John Stilson turned and started toward the farther door. Martha hesitated a second, then walked quickly up beside him.

"Let me walk with you," she said. "I, too, know the way."

In the large room where star shells were assembled, the last defender had murmured "check." Once this work had been done by machinery, but long before, so long that many had forgotten when it had occurred, the mechanisms had broken down and none had known how to repair them. This was a much larger body, situated at the very outskirts of the far-flung City. It was a precautionary measure that these operations took place here, although now had an accident occurred, nothing would have prevented a greater part of the city's being obliterated in a titanic burst of destruction.

The foreman, Crane, nodded and the party began to walk down the endless expanse of ill-lit corridors. They would have to traverse considerable lengths of darkness, and flashbeams were but few. That was why the older men, and the unmated youths, bore small, rapid-firing rifles and formed a solid knot around the couples. The lives of the younger women and healthy males of mating age were far too precious to permit any unnecessary risks—a somewhat mocking thing, now, for the demands of the City, with its unvarying program of production of material needs and production of defense and offense materials made any real semblance of adequate protection of any inhabitant questionable to say the least. But, to their weary thoughts, they were as safe as their resources could make them, and they walked on, in broken ranks, vaguely conscious of the overhanging menace that crept and crept upon them.

"Is it an attack?" asked one of the women, half tremulously.

For a moment or so no one answered.

"Hasn't been an attack that I can remember," volunteered one man, who walked with a limp.

"No," replied an old woman, old by the City's standards, "it isn't an attack. The alarm sounds then. It's a sharp ringing sound that you can never forget. This is something else."

"Do *you* remember an attack?" put in Crane.

"No. My father used to tell me about them many years ago. He heard the alarm once. . . ."

Jensen put down the wrenches slowly and crawled out onto the stone floor. His face bore the helpless look that was continually on the countenances of what few mechanics were left in the City. He wiped the grease on his hands on his trousers mechanically, and turned to his helpers.

"I guess we're wasting our time here," he stated at last. "This thing will never run again."

The others made no comment; no expressions of disappointment or despair lined their faces. This was a matter of course, something to be reported. The rarity was when the mechanic told them that he thought a machine might be made to work again.

Even here, the steady throb of the machines that were running could be heard. That is, it could have been heard by one newly entering the City. The defenders were aware of the incessant vibration only when it was altered by another unit ceasing work.

"What's that gong?" Olney wanted to know.

"Council meeting," quavered old Jep. "Somethin' happening. Ain't an attack because if it was, you'd feel that bell ringin' and a ringin' right through you."

Silently they checked their weapons and prepared to adjourn to the council chambers.

Old Jep's eyes showed that he was worried, as he trailed along behind Jensen and the other. They were coming to one of the dark corridors, where nothing was visible but a faint glow far in the distance which told of lights still in operation.

"Flashes on," spoke Jensen briefly. The three snapped the buttons on their pitifully tiny flashlights, bulbs barely capable of lighting dimly a few feet around them. Yet, to them, this was a good light and they felt a certain security in its pale glow.

At the end of the corridor, they met another, larger party, and the combined forces moved on to other expanses of darkness.

Old Jep's breathing became painfully apparent.

"Wait!" he cried out suddenly. "They's somethin' *followin'* us!"

At his cry, the entire party halted, as flashbeams were thrown in all directions and guns poised in readiness. Weak eyes strained themselves still further trying to pierce the ink blackness about them.

"Nothing there, pop," said Jensen finally.

"There is! There is!" the old man insisted. "I've *felt* it *followin'* us, an' now I just seen it. It ain't nothing human; it's a big patch of blackness, but I kin see it movin' behind us—like that critter the old people called a cat."

Startled murmurs resounded from the party at the old man's words, as expressionless faces lit up with fear.

"*There!*" the old man cried, pointing.

Again, the barrage of tiny lights flared.

"There's nothing there, Jep," stated Jensen kindly, but firmly. "Come, we have to move on."

"But I tell you—I seen—" protested the old man, then slumped limply into the arms of Olney. Quickly they laid him on the floor as a doctor examined him.

"Heart," was the laconic diagnosis. "Delirious at the end."

The party moved on.

### III

In the gloomy corridors all leading to a central point they passed other groups moving in the same direction. All displayed the same degree of interested lassitude, all were headed by two or more individuals more awake and alive than the others. Their garb was generally the same, the utilitarian tunic and leather and metal shoes. From their belts hung regulation heat-expansion pistols and the tiny flashlights. More often than not, both were rusted and useless. They had not been replaced for many years as the machines making them had broken down. Only the ammunition supply continued.

The fortress was constructed like a gigantic cylinder, several times as wide as it was high and with the rounded domed top through which protruded the immense cannon which fired endlessly and aimlessly at the world above. The mechanical operation of the City was centered mainly at the flat bottom and occupied several deep levels. The area at the top was designed entirely for the guns. Between were three levels set aside for living quarters, recreation, food supply manufacture and a small part of the atmosphere plant. Here too was a central hall which served as a crude sort of control point, crude because the ancient precision controls were mostly dead. The City itself

was built entirely of steel and heavily insulated within. When the wires rusted and parted they could not be located. Slowly, control broke down and was replaced by an extremely inefficient human relay system operating sporadically and degenerating constantly. The process of relay took up the activities of over two-thirds of the inhabitants of the City, who stood silently at their posts and pressed switches at the command of messengers who dashed from gloomy niche to gloomy niche and level to level in an endless round of activity. Generally the dullest of the brains were assigned to the relays.

The corridors were lined with them, each standing by his post. As the groups passed on and downward, they saluted feebly with a gesture reminiscent of the old military salute. It was not returned.

Accompanying the salute came a feeble cry: "The Chief!" This was answered.

It was the only rallying call left uttered by a human throat.

The Chief was the actual center of authority and power. An old, grizzled man of some sixty years of age, tough, gigantic in stature, thick-skinned and with darting, crafty eyes, he guided the affairs of the fortress according to his own lights. In the dim recesses of his mind which had once been keen and brilliant, he held to certain implanted ideas inherited from his predecessor who had been a man much like himself and had chosen him from among the others. The ideas were sketchy and retained only by the long exercise of discipline. They were also large and simple. Mainly they consisted of the single command spoken constantly in the back of the brain: "Keep the fortress going!" It was not as direct as that, of course, but it was there. The command dominated his every action, colored every thought. The Chief was a machine like the others, bulky, strong, unapproachable. He spoke only to the various section heads, who reported occasionally and generally brought bad news. He accepted it philosophically. He could have done nothing else. His imagination was dead.

At a table at one end of the central room he sat, flanked on both sides by his section heads, among whom were Payton and Weyman. His broad face, creased by innumerable wrinkles, was impassive. He looked neither to the right nor left. The big bland eyes stared through the murky light at the lines of metal stools several yards away. They held about as much expression as did his face.

Payton stirred finally. He had been sitting slumped on his chair—the few chairs left in the fortress were all behind the table, the last remnant of personal privilege—chin resting on the slanted palm of one hand. He raised his eyes and looked in front of him. Peering through the haze, illuminated by several badly blackened light bulbs in the low ceiling, he took in the scene of the chamber slowly filling. In twos and threes they filtered through the large door at the opposite side and seated themselves haphazardly.

He nudged Weyman who sat beside him.

"They're all here. Wake up," for Weyman was slumped wearily in his chair, dozing fitfully, "wake up."

Payton rose from his seat and faced the small throng. Their number was

about two or three hundred, every human being in the fortress who still possessed some flicker of active intelligence. He raised his hand. Instantly the murmurs which had smothered the throbbing of the buried machinery for awhile died. He looked aside at the Chief who also rose and stood beside him. For a few moments the whole mass was silent and motionless. Then the Chief raised his right hand and gave the ancient salute. This was enough. It was the symbol of his authority. Simultaneously he placed his other hand on Payton's shoulder. The transfer of power was complete. Momentary, but effective. All eyes turned on the tall gaunt figure of the nominal head of the atmosphere plant as the Chief resumed his seat and sat back, closing his eyes.

"The Chief has decided to call a meeting of all effectives to consider some means of combating the Enemy," Payton stated flatly. "Three were killed during the last twenty hours. The total number of effectives left is," he glanced down at a sheet of crumpled paper upon which he had been noting the number of arrivals, "two hundred and seventy-eight. This figure is divided almost equally between males and females. Steps must be taken, especially before the balance is further disturbed in favor of the males. Without sufficient females of gestating age the City cannot survive. As it is important first to correlate our forces, the Chief will now hear a report from each of the section heads. The first will be from myself," he paused and held a hand to his head for an instant, then continued tonelessly. "The atmosphere plant is operating at approximately twenty per cent of capacity as calculated according to the specifications of the City when built. The machinery is constantly failing at the rate of one-tenth of one percent every three hundred hours. As the atmosphere plant is the most necessary part of the fortress, it is obvious that at most we have not more than a hundred thousand hours left in which to devise a system of attack and better defense against the Enemy. Weyman, how about power?"

The other rose and faced the audience. His left hand twitched nervously. "The power sources are infinite and the rate of collapse of the machinery is about twice as good as your section, Payton. Reduction of the amount of power generated will better that figure by almost a hundred percent. Any weapon devised to combat the Enemy which is constructed more efficiently than our heaviest cannon must be designed to utilize power at the most economical rate. We have nothing to fear from a power failure at the source. But the converters are limited. We have no experts left to repair them," he finished and sat down.

Payton crooked a finger at a small man at the opposite end of the table, who arose and stood against it, hands pressing, bunched, on its top. "Sellers, what about food?"

The little man's voice was loud, almost electric and staccato.

"Like Weyman's power. Infinite. We cannot of course keep on manufacturing the less important foods. The Enemy has destroyed over half of the remaining machinery which at the time was in excellent condition. As we make our food from gases the rate of degenerating from friction and heavy



wear and tear is very low. The supply can be maintained at the present level until the power fails or the Enemy destroys more equipment. Payton, the question of light is more important than any, it seems to me. We have only a few thousand bulbs left in storage and we cannot manufacture any more. The filament ores cannot be synthesized."

"I know." Payton turned from Sellers and faced the audience, "From this moment on, light must be conserved. On your return switch off all unnecessary bulbs. Is that understood?"

The weary throng nodded a collective head. They stared at him intently, straining all of their feeble resources of energy to catch the import of everything he said.

Payton rested his own hands on the table.

"It is best that you all know that an instrument has been devised by Sellers which may—or may not—detect the Enemy. Its construction will involve the expenditure of several hundred hours' work. All competent mechanics of both sexes will report to him after the conclusion of this meeting. In closing, I remind you that the Enemy is everywhere. They cannot be seen, nor felt—except by those they kill. Reports have reached the Chief that hysteria is breaking out among certain of the more sensitive operators. Resist these impulses of fear. The Enemy can and must be met and conquered. Do not surrender to fantasies. Be aware only of the City and your duties. If any of you are attacked it is the duty of others to report the facts. Try to observe. Strain every sense to detect from what source the attack comes," he paused and again held his temples tightly between the fingers of his hand. He looked up again after a moment, "Remember that we must survive."

They filed out listlessly, leaving the group at the table alone.

Payton turned to Sellers.

"Take us to your section," he said.

Sellers stood on a small metal stool and indicated the blueprints hung on the walls. Payton, Weyman and two other section heads watched the charts closely. The Chief sat in the background in a chair, resting, his eyes closed, the huge frame crumpled and listless.

"The whole point of the matter is that this machine is designed to detect any vibration in the ether from the outermost ranges of the macro waves to the tiniest of the micro. It is also sensitive to the whole band of the spectrum—as far as is known," Sellers stepped down from the stool and regarded the four men with sombre eyes, "the Enemy have thus far shown absolutely no physical indication of their presence save the effects of their attack." He broke off for an instant and pondered, "Since the very earliest days of the fortress we have not ceased ourselves to attack the surface above except on such occasions as scouts were sent out. Who and what the Enemy is has been forgotten. Once, apparently, they could be seen and hurt. Now the Enemy seems to have adopted different methods of attack. *They are here*, within the City—and yet they are nowhere."

"The Enemy is here," repeated Weyman stubbornly. "Our people are dying. They are killed in clearly understood ways—frozen, macerated,

bisected along mathematically straight lines as if by gigantic saws, crushed. Some have even been found with no marks whatsoever of violence evidenced. You mean to imply that the force causing these deaths is not material?"

Sellers glowered.

"I imply nothing of the kind. Aside from the psychic fear induced by the presence of the Enemy at the point of attack—indeed, preceding the attack, we know that in some way they are very material. But how and in what way we do not know. It is a simple law of the ancient science that action begets reaction. The reaction in this case is death, a material fact. The *action* is unknown. Either we are the victims of some colossal *purely psychological* attack or else the laws of nature have altered."

Payton grunted.

"What could remain unchanged in that hell above?"

Weyman impatiently thrust forward.

"Have you the necessary equipment to construct this apparatus?"

"We shall be forced to demolish some of the more delicate inter-level communications machinery. But inasmuch as most of this is not operating anyway, there is small loss. The main thing I have to worry about is the strain on my mechanics. There aren't many left and we are all weak. My original estimate of the time required for its construction is probably understated."

"Well," commented Payton, wearily, "let us lose no further time. You have the necessary equipment and men. Begin building at once."

They finished Seller's machine at the enormous expenditure of six hundred hours of work and the lives of four irreplaceable men who dropped from utter exhaustion at the gruelling labor. Slowly the atmosphere was becoming poisonously tainted. And the lighting system was beginning to break down beyond repair. The City was now illuminated by bulbs lit at emergency spots. Everything else but the control room was in murky darkness.

The first trial was conducted in the control room in the presence of the Chief and the section heads. Several mechanics rolled the heavy detector into position. For once the room was brilliantly illuminated. Under the rays of twenty tremendous lighting units, the group gathered about the intricate construction of tangled wiring and humming motors. Sellers got up in the operator's chair, masked his face with a pair of heavy goggles and turned on the power.

A rising whine began.

The Chief sat up in his chair and stared. His sleepy mind was awake at last. He gripped the arms of his chair tensely.

The whine grew shriller and more penetrating. Sellers reached out a hand and adjusted some small controls. Now a thin aura of electric blue gathered about the machine and its operator and deepened in hue. The motors spun and hummed and spat sparks. The smell of ozone made them cough.

"Sixty decillion per second," Sellers spoke slowly through the lower half of the mask, "nothing on the macro-waves." He depressed his seat and threw

an arm back to shut off a small machine supported by a steel girder. The shrilling whine began to fade. Abruptly it stopped. Another noise began instead, and a steady and deepening beat progressed from a mere tap to what approximated thunder. The aura flashed and crackled. Seller's face became strained and worn. He hunched over the controls and spun them desperately. Now the throbbing was like a continuous earthquake. The metal walls shivered and quaked. Lightning played from floor to ceiling and outlined the scene in a hideous glare.

"Zero to micro!" screamed Sellers above the terrific clangor, "the spectrum is as empty as the ether. There's nothing here but us. . . ."

He glanced suddenly to one side. Abruptly his face became a congealed mass of horror beyond description. His eyes bulged to the bursting point. His fat hands fell to his sides and quivered like lumps of jelly. The others, startled, followed his gaze as the thunder died and the room was immersed in utter silence.

On the floor lay the prone body of the Chief. His head was missing.

#### IV

Payton lifted his hand for silence and the murmurings of the defenders, assembled again in a body, died away.

"In accordance with the often-expressed wishes of the Chief, and with the sealed orders he left to be opened in the event of an emergency resulting in his death or disability, I am taking over the command."

He paused to let the words sink into the consciousness of the assembly, then sheafed through a many-paged document before him.

"This," he continued, "was apparently drawn up many years ago, yet there are matters in it which should be brought to the attention of all of us. I shall read those portions which seem to me to be applicable at the present time."

He cleared his throat, lifted the papers closer to his eyes and read aloud, slowly, "The entire function of the Chief's office has been and must continue to be such as can be outlined in the simple phrase: 'Keep the fortress going.' All other matters must be subordinated to this aim.

"However, there may come a time when the further pursuance of this aim would be sheer folly, when infinitely superior forces opposed to us make further resistance useless.

"In such a case, the only course is to determine if a peace, on terms acceptable to us as human beings, can be made with the Enemy. Ours is a struggle for survival and a possible ultimate victory. What military aims we may have had when the war started cannot now be determined, still a study of such history as is available to us shows that eventually one side in a war must prevail.

"So long as the Fortress can be successfully defended, then so long must our efforts continue unabated. But if at any time it becomes apparent that our maximal achievements are inadequate to the protection of the Fortress and its defenders, then the question of surrender must be considered.

"To my successor, therefore, I submit the proposition that the acceptance

of defeat is more agreeable than total extinction, unless the Enemy's terms are so utterly barbarous and inhuman as to make such extinction preferable."

Payton laid down the paper and rubbed his eyes. "That is all," he said quietly. "Weyman will now give a report upon the situation that confronts us, and we will decide, as soon as possible, on the question of a temporary cessation of hostilities pending an attempt to contact the Enemy and learn his terms."

A deathly silence greeted Weyman as he arose. "There is very little to report except that the total failure of the detector shows that we are completely unable to strike back at the Enemy any longer.

"The Enemy has devised a form of attack which we cannot understand. We know the Enemy has penetrated the Fortress, but we cannot find any trace of him. My opinion is that he is using a weapon operated by remote control; he (or they) is not here physically—I mean," he fumbled a bit searching for words. "I do not think that the Enemy has any *men* inside our City."

He stood for a moment, blinking, as if trying to think of something else to add.

"That is all," he concluded.

One man stood up uncertainly. "Excuse me," he said hesitantly, "but what are we to do, then?"

"Cease hostilities," replied Payton, "send out a party to contact the Enemy, and turn our efforts to reconstructing the Fortress.

"I am ready to listen to any opposing arguments to this course."

Dead silence answered him. Nothing of this sort had occurred in the lifetimes of any of the defenders. The very thought of objecting or opposing any decision or suggestion of the Chief or the council was alien to them.

"If this policy is acceptable, then we shall proceed. The council will reassign all those now engaged in offense activities to reconstruction work."

Payton saluted the assembly as indication that the meeting was over and left the platform slowly. The full implications of the meeting had not struck him, nor had they occurred to the others. They were all too tired, too completely weary to understand what it meant. A few were capable of considering tasks of the next day, or a few days later, as part of the long-term program. These few usually found themselves in executive positions, eventually ending up as council members.

Peace? A truce? Contact the Enemy? The thoughts struck no responding chords in them. No more alertly would they have responded to the announcement that victory had been achieved and the Enemy destroyed. To the executives in the various offense departments, it meant that their departments would be put in order while they waited for further instructions. What would they do in the meantime? Rest perhaps. Or perhaps relieve the understaffed maintenance departments as well as they could.

It did not occur to any of them that the Enemy might continue to decimate them whether they continued the offense or not. Casualties had stopped meaning anything to them. Regularly men and women died, either from

sickness, exhaustion, or in the mysterious, ghastly manner in which their numbers had been decimated in recent years. They were all capable of fear at times, but, so long as they were in the City, it was a temporary, local matter.

Individually, their awareness was too dull to be much afraid of sudden death. Grief and regret for the lost was almost unheard of. The only remnant of emotion that remained to them was sorrow that younger women felt when a mate or child was lost. And even this rarely found expression in weeping or audible exhibitions; the bereaved mother or mate was usually in a state of apathy which left her incapable of work for an indefinite period. Eventually this passed and she went on as before.

As their sorrows were pale, so were their individual joys, if the latter could be applied to them at all. It was noted, however, that among the younger men and women, there was usually a slight increase of efficiency and application for an indefinite period after mating. And a woman whose child was born reasonably healthy usually worked somewhat better than average after the confinement and rest period had passed.

Thus the decision to cease hostilities and attempt making peace with the Enemy aroused no burst of what, in their standards, might have been termed enthusiasm. Peace was a term that bore no meaning to them; was a term that meant little more. There was only the Fortress to be kept going and the Enemy to try to keep off.

Greyness. Greyness and mist and swirling vapours. The thin writhing fingers of mist reaching up to the hidden sky. Nothing moving on the barren plain. Nothing visible in the fog save the looming of giant mushroom-like growths, lifting their umbrellas upward.

Then, a faint, lifting motion. A metal door rising slowly. Again silence. Then a shape gradually rising out of the cavity beneath the door. A shape vaguely human, ponderously lifting itself out of the depths onto the surface. A figure in greyish metal standing upright, alone.

Now other figures, similar in appearance, cautiously emerging from the trap door until the entire party blends against the grey of outside. One stoops and closes the door while another unrolls a large chart, and another studies a compass-like instrument attached to its belt. All are bearing packs on their shoulders. The figure rolls up the chart and places it inside his pack, turns to the others. A brief moment of hesitation, then the party starts moving slowly away toward the shadowy horizon.

John Stilson awoke suddenly, startledly. Where was he? The utter intensity of the blackness around him made his heart hammer in a burst of fear. What had happened? An attack? Had the lights been destroyed?

Someone was calling him. "John," came the voice. "John, it's your watch."

Then he remembered. It was Martha Fiske calling him. They were outside. He rolled over, sat up. Lightly he felt the tap tap tap of rain against his helmet as it trickled down his metal suit. The storm must have nearly abated by now.

"What report, Martha?" he asked.

The complete stillness of outside still bothered him, made it difficult for him to sleep despite weariness. He found himself listening for the familiar throb of machinery and the effort hurt.

"Grant is missing."

That made their losses a total of four. One man vanished, apparently wandering astray in the gloom, the first day. Two more were found *corroded* after a rest period the second. And today, Grant disappeared.

"He was with us when we stopped?"

"Yes."

Stilson had commanded that the party attach themselves together with rope after Prentice had vanished. It made checkups easier, and they would know quickly if anyone got in trouble. Little pits and crevices were common on the surface. A man might easily fall and be lost to sight before the others noticed he was missing. They could not afford to search for the lost ones.

"His rope—?"

"Broken."

Assign Steevens to the rear guard then. As soon as the ropes are reassembled and everyone checked, report to me. We'll start again as soon as you've had your rest."

"I'm all right, John," she protested. "We can start right away."

"No. You must rest. The others need it, too. How is the weather?"

"Storm ran out about an hour ago."

"Rain stopped? Strange, I can still feel—"

"Those are drops coming from the mushroom."

They slept on the bare earth, their metal suits affording as much protection as was possible to attain on the surface. No comforts but those that they brought with them were to be had. Suits could be discarded for limited periods when sanitary needs required, but helmets must never be doffed. In a way, it was fortunate for them that imagination was a faculty well-nigh lost; could they have realized, even dimly, the utter hostility of outside they never could have endured so much as a single day.

John Stilson took out his precious flashlamp and studied the equally precious chart carefully. He had gone over it painstakingly with Payton—rather, the Chief. It was hard to realize that the strange, seemingly eternal man he and the others had known as the Chief was gone, now, and Payton, whom he and several of the others knew quite well, was now in the supreme position. They had estimated a two-week journey to the Enemy's fortress and had brought along supplies for five weeks. Food concentrates, batteries for their suits, flashlamps, and rope. Compasses and communicators, the latter also run by batteries. Yes, so far as he could make out, they were on the right course. He rolled up the chart and put it away.

"All right?" he asked as he saw Martha again beside him.

"Check."

"Then rest now." He turned to start the round of sleepers.

"John," she called after him.

"What is it?" He came back under the towering mushroom, holding the flashlamp up to her helmet so that he could see her face.

"John—please be careful."

For a moment they gazed into each other's eyes, unspeaking.

"Rest well, Martha," he said simply as he turned away. The moon was sinking out of sight as he patrolled the sleeping figures, peering anxiously into the helmets of each one at regular intervals, checking, checking, checking.

Day after unvarying day punctuated by the black throat of night. Days spent tramping wearily along the fog-shrouded terrain, devoid of anything resembling life save the clusters of mushrooms, and other bits of fungi. And occasionally a pool of foul water surrounded by mold-growths. They came up fragments of metal and stone at times and upon crumbling bones, lost beneath fungus-like growths. The endless plain now and then gave way to slight upcroppings of blasted rock, rock strangely *cleft* as if by strokes of a titan's sword. One or two of the more curious in the party wanted to stop and examine these clefts, but Stilson urged them on. They could not afford to linger.

Onward, endlessly onward. They came to a large expanse of desert dotted with great patches of sheer glass where heat-bombs had fallen and fused the sand in solid masses. One man died here when his helmet burst open as he fell against the unyielding surface and the poisonous atmosphere filled his lungs. The glassy tracts too, were cleft in the same mysterious manner.

Day and night. Night and day. They marched on wordlessly, halting only to rest or to take nourishment, sleeping under the protection of mushrooms, or, if none were available, on the ground or sand itself. And the silent hand of the Enemy touched one here and one there so that they found the grim remains when they arose to go on. It seemed useless to keep watches at night, for never could they see what it was that menaced them, and never were they able to ward it off.

Stilson checked the chart and compass for the fifth time that day and turned to Sellers.

"We should be near, now. We'll try a message."

The older man nodded, understandingly, and withdrew the apparatus from his pack, assembling it quickly. He attached the batteries, then nodded to the leader who picked up the microphone and spoke into it slowly.

"Attention! Attention! We come in peace. We are unarmed and are proceeding to your fortress to make a treaty. Send a party out to guide us. We cannot find your fortress."

He repeated the message several times, then turned the power off. "If we are as near as we think we are, they probably heard us."

It did not occur to him that he could not expect his signals to be picked up in so short a broadcasting period, or that the Enemy might not be able to understand his spoken language. These, and other commonplace pointers had long been lost. The people of the City had long been in a state of thinking to be described only as naive.

They waited for the rest of the day, Stilson repeating his message every few hours. The long night came and passed without new casualties.

"Perhaps," suggested Martha as they started on, "they couldn't find us."

"But they must know where we are," protested Sellers. "We've been attacked constantly."

Further consideration of this point was interrupted by a call, through the party, from Steevens. He'd seen something 'way off to the left, he thought. They started off again in that direction, and, after a few moments, Stilson halted. "It's a dome," he said. "We're here."

## V

He had never seen Martha like this, he thought, never seen her under a real light. Even now, when her brow was wrinkled in a worried expression there was something about her that made his breath catch inside him. He forced these thoughts aside; there were more important things to consider.

"Nothing here, either."

Martha Fiske leaned against a bench. "I can't understand it," she whispered. "First, we find an opening in the dome—unguarded. Then we find an elevator running right down to the inner lock, and that's unguarded, too."

"And now we can't find anyone here."

They stared about them bewilderedly. "They're far superior to us in the upkeep of their fortress. Better light, better atmosphere, more equipment. No wonder they beat us."

"But where are they?"

"They might be having a council meeting," suggested Sellers.

"Even so, we should have set off some alarms. No one could enter our City without setting off a barrage of alarms, and our men would be out with guns ready before they could get to the inner lock."

The party had been exploring the dome city for over an hour. In many ways it was like the Fortress, in other ways different. They continually came upon things they did not recognize, or indications of a city far in advance of theirs. The dome was merely an entrance and the layout of the city seemed to be that of a wheel, with domes, apparently, at various spokes.

"Well," Stilson arose, "we'd better be moving on. I don't see how this place can be deserted. We'll finish exploring this corridor, then decide what to do if we don't find anyone by that time." The light and atmosphere were doing things to him, he realized. Doing things to all of them. They seemed to be beginning to feel alive for the first time in their existences. Several of the men were already complaining of headaches from the light.

Down the long corridor, room after empty room.

"John!" exclaimed Martha suddenly. "If this place is deserted, why can't we take it for ourselves?"

"You mean—move here? All of us? Everyone in the Fortress?"

"Yes."

His hand closed on hers. "Perhaps . . . perhaps . . ."

Steevens called out something and Stilson looked up. "What is it?"

"I found a man. He's asleep, I think."



The words fell upon John Stilson like leaden weights. "Where?"

"Over here." They followed him over to the other side of the corridor, stood in the doorway. "There!"

Stilson knelt by the solitary man's side. "I think he's alive," he murmured.

Martha smoothed the sleeper's brow, felt the dryness of his skin. At her touch, the man stirred slightly, then his eyes snapped open, stark fear staring out of them. His mouth gaped open; he reached to one side convulsively but his hand fell short. Then, seeing the numbers in the room, he relaxed.

He tried to speak, but only a whisper came forth from his lips. Sellers drew a glass of water from a nearby tap and put it to his mouth. The man drank avidly, then leaned back, breathing heavily, his eyes closed. Finally he opened them again, a resigned expression on his emaciated face.

"You have won," he said simply. "I am the last." He seemed vaguely surprised that they did not fall upon him and rend him on the spot.

Breathing more calmly now, he continued. "Our scientists went mad trying to find a way of counteracting your weapon. They couldn't even find a way of *detecting* your force, let alone combatting it. All we could do was stand by helplessly while one after another of us died and our doctors strove vainly to discover how they died.

"So you are the Enemy. That is strange; you seem human. You are kind to me. We did not think that anyone who could kill and kill as you have done could be anything but monsters. The corroding death and the freezing death, and the silent decapitations—and the destruction of our machines one after another in such a way that they appeared to be *eaten*—well, it is all over now and I am glad.

"Our City is yours for the taking. Farewell." He raised his hand to his head in salute, then closed his eyes. The hand fell limply to his side and his head rolled toward the wall.

For the first time in her life, Martha Fiske wept.

Stilson crouched by the body of Steevens, shook it futilely. It would never respond, he knew; why did he waste his energy?

He shook the next figure. It arose and the voice of Sellers murmured sleepily,

"Sellers," he said desperately. "Sellers, tell me—you must have some idea. What is *it*? What are *they*? *They're* not human, are they?"

The man sat up. "When I was young," he began, "I studied such things as history and biology. There was still a little time for learning then.

"This world—outside—wasn't always as it is now, John. I suppose you realize that, have always realized it more or less. All of us do.

"Once it was clean and beautiful and men lived on it. They didn't have to go underground because they got plenty of light from the Sun—and heat, too. And the atmosphere was clear. You could see the sky most of the time and when night came, you could see the moon clearly. There are other things up there that you could see, too, and it never really got dark.

"Then the wars came and cities above the ground—that's where they used

to have them—were destroyed, and all the—trees?—yes, trees and other growing things were destroyed, too. I think the color of the growing things was green and the sky was blue. But the wars changed all that. Poison gases of all kinds were dumped into the atmosphere and all over the ground. Bombs of all kinds blew the earth into bits and opened big holes in the earth, letting out more gases. Until at last the surface of the earth was just a big cloud of poison gas and fog like you see now.”

“But—the Enemy?”

“I was coming to that, John. This is only a theory—a guess on my part, because no one can be sure whether it’s right or not. But I think all this made something happen on earth. It brought into being forces which weren’t there before. And those forces reacted on each other and produced new forces and those in turn set other things going, until a new form of life appeared. A form particularly adapted for just such conditions as these. To this new form of life, all this is natural and clean and beautiful as the earth we once knew—the one none of us has ever seen, John—was to us.

“I remember a picture in one of the history books. It showed a strange looking thing called—let me think for a moment—called a dinosaur. There aren’t any more of them—weren’t any even in the old days when men had earth to themselves. Well, men are being wiped out just like the dinosaurs were. I mean, just as surely.

“This new form of life, John, is *the* coming race. It’s so superior to us we just can’t conceive of it. We can’t see it or hear it or smell it or touch it. Or feel it. We just have an idea that it’s there. And we know when it kills one of us. But it hasn’t come yet. I mean, it’s just in its primitive, animal stage now. Some day it’ll be big, big as we were in our day.”

He sat silently for a moment.

“I wonder if it’ll wipe itself out with wars the way we did.”

Stilson felt an emptiness inside him. “Sellers, what shall we tell them when we get back?”

“We’ll tell them that the Enemy won’t make peace. That we’ve got to keep fighting. Maybe—if I get back—if anyone gets back—it would be a good idea to put something in the water supply so that they all go to sleep painlessly and clean.

“Humanity’s done for, John. There’s no real sense in fighting or trying to go on. There’s nothing here on this earth,” and his hand swept over the night before them, “worth our living.”

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “Perhaps it’s worth the trouble, at least, of moving our people to the domed city. At least death won’t come in the dark and in poisoned atmosphere. And maybe—there, they can find a way—” His words trailed off because he knew he had no faith in them. What could they do when the far superior dome dwellers had failed utterly?

He snapped on the flashlamp and went on from sleeper to sleeper, shining it in their faces, checking, wondering with a chill in his heart if Martha would awaken when it was time to go on.

The night spread out about him, deep, pitiless. He could sense a deeper blackness within its ebon depths, moving, shifting, moving . . .

# The Dancer in the Crystal

by Francis Flagg

*It is bad enough to have a fuse in one's home blow out and to stumble about in unfamiliar darkness trying to replace it. The feeling of helplessness that strikes when one tries to switch on electric lights and equipment and obtains no response is one that must have been shared at one time or another by everyone. Now suppose the entire world was short-circuited—every electric channel and source diverted to some unknown wastage; a blown-out fuse in every home, town, industry, railroad, and continent! Such is the stage setting for the opening scene in Francis Flagg's unusual and colorful tale.*

1



HEY WHO LIVED during that terrible time will never forget it—twenty-five years ago, when the lights went out.

It was in 1956.

All over the world, in the same hour, and practically at the same minute, electrical machinery ceased to function.

The youth of today can hardly realize what a terrible disaster that was for the people of the middle Twentieth Century. England and America, as well as the major nations of Europe, had just finished electrifying their railroads and scrapping the ponderous steam engines which did duty on some lines up until as late as the summer of 1954. A practical method of harnessing the tides and using their energy to develop electricity, coupled with the building of dams and the generating of cheap power through the labor of rushing rivers and giant waterfalls, and the invention of a device for broadcasting it by wireless as cheaply as it was generated, had hastened this electrification. The perfection of a new vacuum tube by the General Electric Company at Schenectady, in the United States, had made gas economically undesirable. The new method, by which it was possible to relay heat for all purposes at one-third the cost of illuminating gas, swept the various gas companies into oblivion. Even the steamers which plied the seven seas, and the giant planes that soared the air, received the power that turned their propellers, warmed their cabins and cooked their foods, in much the same fashion as did the factories, the railroads, and the private homes and the hotels ashore. Therefore when electricity ceased to

drive the machines, the world stopped. Telegraph, telephone, and wireless communication ceased. Country was cut off from country, city from city, and neighborhood from neighborhood. Automobiles broke down; street-cars and electric trains refused to run; powerhouses were put out of commission; and at night, save for the flickering light of what lanterns, candles, and oil lamps could be resurrected, cities, towns, and hamlets were smothered in darkness.

I have before me the records of that time. It was ten and eleven o'clock in London, Paris, Berlin, and other continental cities when it happened. Restaurants, theaters, hospitals and private homes were plunged into darkness. Mighty thoroughfares that a moment before had glittered and glowed with thousands of lights and wheeling signs became gloomy canyons where people at first paused, questioned, and later plunged through in terrified clamor. Various men who later wrote their impressions for newspapers and magazines say that the thing which shook their nerves the most was the sudden silence which prevailed when all traffic ceased—that, and five minutes later the maddened cries and groans and curses of men and women fighting like wild beasts to escape from crowded restaurants and theaters.

People coursed through the streets shouting to one another that the power-houses had been blown up, that an earthquake had shaken them down. The most absurd statements were made, tossed from mouth to mouth, and added to the general bewilderment and panic. On the street corners religious fanatics suddenly sprang up, proclaiming that the end of the world had come, and that the sinners had better repent of their sins before it was too late. In the hospitals, nurses and doctors found themselves working under a frightful handicap. Gruesome tales are told of doctors caught in the midst of emergency operations. Because of the darkness it was impossible properly to attend the sick. Whenever available, candles, oil lamps and lanterns were pressed into service; but there were pitifully few of these to be had, and nowhere to turn for more. Telephone wires were dead, and automobiles, cars and busses stalled. To add to the horror, fire broke out in various places. There was no way of ringing in an alarm about them, and the fire apparatus could not have responded if there had been. So the fires spread. And the people of those neighborhoods where the flames leapt to heaven, at last had light—the light of their burning homes.

And then in the midst of all this horror and tumult the denizens of the dark, festering spots of the city crept forth. They swarmed from the filthy alleys and from the dives of the professional criminal, furtive-eyed, predatory; and houses were robbed, men killed, and women assaulted. The police were powerless to act; their mobility was gone; burglar alarms did not warn; and the city lay like a giant Samson shorn of its strength.

So that night passed, not for one city alone, but for hundreds of cities!

While all this was happening in the old world, chaos gripped the new. Across the Atlantic, in the eastern cities of the United States and Canada,

and as far west as Montreal and Chicago, the wheels stopped going at that hour when the workers began to pour forth from the factories and shops, and when the late shopping crowds were thronging the trains and the subways. On the surface cars and on the streets there was, of course, no immediate alarm. Moving-picture and vaudeville houses opened wide their doors, raised the blinds on their windows, and evacuated their patrons in good order. But underground in the various tubes and subways it was a different matter. Hundreds of cars bearing thousands of passengers were stalled in stifling blackness. Guards labored heroically to still the rising hysteria and panic. For perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes—in some cases as long as half an hour—they managed to maintain a species of order. But the great pumps and fans that usually circulated fresh air through the tunnels were no longer functioning. When the foul air fogged the lungs, the passengers went mad. Sobbing and cursing and praying, they fought to escape from the cars, as at the same moment the people of Berlin, Paris and London were fighting to escape from restaurants and theaters. They smashed the windows of the coaches, and in wriggling through them impaled the flesh of their bodies, their hands and faces, on jagged slivers of glass. They trampled each other under foot and flowed in terrified mobs along the right of way, searching madly for exits. In New York alone ten thousand of them perished. They bled to death, were crushed, or died of heart-failure and suffocation.

Above ground, the streets and avenues were thronged with millions of human beings trying to get home on foot. For hours dense crowds of workers, shoppers and businessmen filled the highways and byways. Here again panic was caused by the crashing planes. In Montreal the Royal Dominion air liner, *Edward VII*, on route on a non-stop flight from Halifax to Vancouver with four hundred passengers, fell from a height of three thousand feet onto Windsor Station, killing her own passengers and crew, and blotting out the lives of hundreds of people who were in the station at the time. In New York, Boston and Chicago, where the then new magnetic runabouts were making their initial appearance, hundreds of airplanes plunged to the ground, killing and maiming not only their passengers, but the men, women and children on whom they fell. "It was," states an eye-witness in a book he later wrote, called *The Great Debacle*, "a sight fit to appal the stoutest heart. Subway exits were disgorging ghastly mobs of clawing people; a crashing plane had turned a nearby street into a shambles; crowds ran this way and that, shrieking, praying. Everywhere was panic."

Panic indeed! Yet the records show that what they could do, the police and fire departments did. Mounted policemen were utilized to carry candles and oil lamps to hospitals, to scour the countryside for every available horse, and to ride through the city in an effort to calm the people. Firemen were marched to various points of vantage with axes and chemical containers, to combat any fire that might break out. But in the aggregate these precautions amounted to nothing. Whole hospitals passed the night in darkness; patients died by the hundreds; the flames of myriad

fires lit up the sky; and rumors ran from mouth to mouth adding to the terror and chaos.

America, screamed the mobs, was being attacked by a foreign power. The power-houses had been rendered useless by a powerful magnet. There had been a terrible storm down south; all South America was sinking; North America would go next. No one knew anything; everyone knew something. Nothing was too wild or absurd for millions to believe. Deprived of their accustomed sources of information, the inhabitants became a prey to their own fancies and the disordered fancies of others. Religious fanatics by the light of huge bonfires preached the second coming of Christ and the destruction of the world. Thousands of hysterical people prostrated themselves on the hard street pavements, babbling, weeping, praying. Thousands of others looted wine and strong drinks from the cellars of hotels and cafés and reeled drunken through the streets, adding to the din and the panic. Nor did daylight bring much relief. For some obscure reason, all over Europe, Asia, and America, during the hours of daylight, the sky was strangely dulled. Seemingly the sun shone with all its usual splendor, but the air was perceptibly darkened. Why this should be so not even the scientists could tell. Yet even under the light of what millions of people on earth believed to be their last day, human wolves came out of their dens and prowled through the cities, sacking stores and private homes, blowing open safes, and killing and robbing with impunity. The day that succeeded the night was more horrible than the night that preceded the day, because hundreds of thousands of people who had slept through the hours of darkness awoke and joined their fellows on the streets, and because there is something terrible about a big city in which no cars run and no factory whistles blow, in which the machine has died.

And while the cities and the inhabitants thereof were given over to madness and destruction, tragedy took its toll of the skies and stalked the seas. The aircraft of the world were virtually wiped out. Only those escaped which were at rest in their hangars, or which by some miracle of navigation glided safely to earth. Hardly a year passes now but that on some wild mountain peak, or in a gloomy canyon or the heart of the Sahara, fragments of those airships are found. Nor did ocean-going vessels suffer less. In the space of twenty hours, two thousand ships of all classes and tonnage met with disaster—disaster that ultimately wiped out the great firm of Lloyds, in London, and a host of lesser insurance companies. Fifteen hundred steamers vanished, never to be heard of more, thirty-five of these being giant passenger boats carrying upward of twenty thousand passengers. Of the other five hundred ships, some were dashed to pieces on inhospitable coasts, others drifted ashore and broke up, and the remainder were abandoned at sea. The fate of the missing steamers may be partly inferred from what happened to the *Olympia* and the *Orania*. This is taken from the account of the second officer of the former ship:

"The night was clear and starry, a heavy sea running. We were forging full speed ahead about two hundred miles off the Irish coast. Because of our electrically controlled gyroscope, however, the ship was as steady as a

rock. A dance was being given in both the first and second class ballrooms, the music for them being supplied by the Metropolitan dance orchestra of London. In the third class theater a television moving-picture was being shown. Couples were walking or sitting on the promenade decks as, though a stiff breeze was blowing, the night was warm. From the bridge I could see the *Orania* coming toward us. She made a wonderful sight, her portholes gleaming tier on tier, and her deck lights glowing and winking, for all the world looking like a giant glowworm or a fabulous trireme. Doubtless, to watchers on her bridge and decks, we presented the same glorious sight, because we were sister ships, belonging to the same line, and of the same build and tonnage. All the time she was coming up I conversed with the first officer on her bridge by means of our wireless phone; and it was while in the midst of this conversation, and while we were still a mile apart and he was preparing (so he said) to have the wheel put over so as to take the *Orania* to starboard of us that, without warning, her lights went out.

"Hardly crediting my eyes, I stared at the spot where a moment before she had been. 'What is the matter with you?' I called through my phone, but there was no answer; and even as I realized that the phone had gone dead, I was overcome with the knowledge that my own ship was plunged in darkness. The decks beneath me were black. I could hear the voices of passengers calling out, some in jest and others in rising alarm, questioning what had happened. 'I can't get the engine room; the ship doesn't answer her helm.' I said, facing the captain, who had clambered to the bridge. 'Quick, Mr. Crowley!' he cried. 'Down with you and turn out the crew. Put men at every cabin door and stairway and keep the passengers off the decks.' His voice thundered into the microphone, which repeated his words through loud-speaking devices in every saloon, cabin, and on every deck of the ship—or should have so repeated them if the instruments had been functioning. 'There is no need for alarm. A little trouble to the engines, and incidentally to the dynamos, has caused the lights to go out. I beg of you to be calm. In a half-hour everything will be fixed.' But even as I rushed to obey his orders, even as his crisp voice rang out on the night-air, I saw the enormous dark bulk bearing down on us, and the heart leapt in my throat. It was the *Orania*, helpless, without guidance, as were we ourselves, rushing ahead under the momentum acquired by her now stilled engines.

"She struck us, bow on, to one side, shearing through steel plates as if they were so much cheese. At that terrific impact, in the dark and the gloom, all order and discipline were swept away. Something had happened to the gyroscopes, and the ships were pitching and tossing, grinding and crashing against each other, our own ship settling by the head, the stern rising.

"Then ensued a terrible time. The night became hideous with the clamor of terrified voices. Maddened passengers fought their ways to the decks, and to the boats. Crowded boats went down into the surging waves bow on or stern first, spilling their human freight into the sea. Hundreds of

passengers, believing that the steamers would at any moment sink, leapt overboard with life-preservers, and in nearly all cases were drowned. All this in the first thirty minutes. After that the panic ebbed; it turned into dull despair. The crews of both steamers, what could be rallied of them, began to control the situation.

"Morning found the *Orania* practically intact, only making water in her No. 1 compartment. The *Olympia* forward compartments were all flooded, taking her down at the head, but the rear eight still held intact, and as long as they did so she could not sink. If the passengers had, from the beginning, remained calm and tractable, hardly a life need have been lost."

The second officer of the *Olympia* goes on to point out that both the giant liners had been thoroughly equipped with the most modern of electro-mechanical devices for use in emergencies; that they carried twin power-receiving engines; that they were electrically steered; and that from the pilot-house and the bridge communication could be had and orders and instructions given, to crew and passengers in every part of the ships. It was, he points out, the sudden and startling going out of the lights, and the totally unexpected breakdown of all machinery, which precipitated the tragedy, and not any negligence on the part of the officers and the crews.

Such is the story of one marine disaster; but the records are full of similar accounts, hundreds of them, which it is needless to set down here.

### 3

On the Pacific coast, especially in the cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco, better order was maintained than in the big cities of the Middle West and the East. Panic there was loss of life and damage to property both from fire and theft, but not on so colossal a scale. This was due to the fact that the authorities had several hours of daylight in which to prepare for darkness, and because in the two cities mentioned there were no subways to speak of. In the downtown districts clerks and businessmen were advised to stick to their offices and stores. Policemen, mounted and afoot, were sent to the residential districts and to the factories. Instead of allowing the workers to scatter, they formed them into groups of twenty, deputized, armed, and as nearly as possible set to patrolling the streets of the neighborhoods in which they lived. These prompt measures did much to avert the worst features of the horrors which swept New York and Chicago and the cities of Europe and Asia. But in spite of them the hospitals knew untold suffering, whole city blocks were destroyed by flames, religious frenzy ran high, and millions of people passed the hours of darkness in fear and trembling.

I was twenty-two at that time, living in Altadena, which is a suburb of Pasadena, about twenty miles from Los Angeles, and trying to write. That morning I had taken a book and a lunch and climbed up the Old Pole Road to the top of Mount Echo, intending to return by the cable car which for years has operated from the purple depths of Rubio Canyon to the towering peak. I reached the top of the mountain after a steep climb, ate my lunch



on the site of the old Lowe Observatory, and then became absorbed in my book.

The first inkling I had that something was wrong was when the light darkened. "It's clouding over," I thought, looking up, but the sky overhead was perfectly clear, the sun particularly bright.

Not a little disturbed in mind, and thinking, I must admit, of earthquakes, I strolled over to where a group of Mexican section workers, under the supervision of a white boss, had been doing some track repairing. The Mexicans were gesticulating and pointing to the cities and the countryside rolling away far beneath us. Now usually on a clear, sunny day there is a haze in the valley and one can not see for very many miles in any direction. But on this day there was an unwonted clarity in the air. Everything on which we gazed was sharply etched—no blurring, no fogging of lines. The houses stood out starkly; so did the spires of churches and the domes of public buildings. Though it was miles away to the westward, the mighty tower of the Los Angeles City Hall could be plainly seen. The light had darkened, yes; but the effect was that of gazing through slightly tinted glasses.

"What do you think it means?" I asked the track boss. But before he could make a reply, a Mexican cried out volubly, pointing one shaking hand up the steep ridge which rose behind us and crossing himself rapidly with the other.

It was an awe-inspiring sight on which we gazed. Over Mount Lowe a luminous, dancing light was growing. I did not know it then, but as far east as Denver and Omaha, and as far south as St. Louis and Galveston, men saw that light. Seen from the western cities of Calgary and Edmonton in Canada it was a pillar of blue flame growing out of the earth and, as the hours passed, mounting higher and higher into the heavens. Millions of eyes from all over the United States and the Dominion fearfully and superstitiously turned toward that glow. As night deepened upon the Pacific coast, the inhabitants of Southern California saw the sky to the north of them cloven asunder by a leaping sword. No wonder millions of people thought that the heavens had opened and Christ was coming.

But before night I had descended the steep slope of Mount Echo and walked the trackway into Altadena. Women and men called to me from doorways and wanted to know if there was a forest fire farther back in the hills. I could give them no answer. On Lake Avenue I saw the automobiles, street-cars, and motor-busses stranded.

"What is the matter?" I asked a conductor.

"I don't know," he said. "There isn't any power. They say all the power plants and machinery have stopped. A man rode through from downtown a few minutes ago and told us so."

I walked on into Pasadena. Everything was tied up. The streets were jammed with cars and people. Owing to the state ordinance which made it a penal offense for planes to fly over any California city—the air routes were so arranged, and the landing-stations and fields outside the cities, access to them being had by fast electric trains—the horror of airships falling on crowded city streets and on residences was entirely averted.

People spoke, however, of having seen a huge air liner and some smaller pleasure planes plunging to earth to the west of them, turning over and over; and afterward I learned that the New York-Los Angeles special, which had just taken the air, had crashed into an orchard with a terrible loss of life.

I went no farther than Madison Street on Colorado Boulevard and turned back. It was ominous to look from the windows and porches of the big house that night and see the city black and formless beneath us. Usually the horizon to the west and south was illuminated for thirty miles around. Now, save for the dull glare of several fires, the darkness was unbroken.

Everything that happened that night is printed indelibly on my memory. Far off, like the sound of surf beating on a rocky shore, we could hear the voice of the mob. It rose and fell, rose and fell. And once we heard the crackle of what we took to be machine-gun fire. In the Flintridge district, I heard later, houses were sacked and looted. Some men defending their homes were murdered and several women badly treated. But in Altadena, up in the foothills, no one suffered any violence. Only once were we alarmed by a procession marching up Lake Avenue, bearing torches and chanting hymns. It was a body of religious fanatics, Holy Rollers, men, women, and children, on their way to Mount Wilson, the better to wait the advent of Jesus. We could hear them shouting and singing, and in the flickering light of the torches, see them frothing at the mouth. They went by, and after that, save for a patrol from the sheriff's office, we saw no one until morning.

Dawn came, but if anything the tension and terror grew greater. All night the threatening scimitar of light over the mountains had grown taller and taller—one could see it literally growing—and the sinister brightness of it radiated like molten steel, nor did the coming of daylight dim its radiance.

None of us had slept during the night; none of us had thought of sleep. Haggard-faced we greeted the dawn, and with despair in our hearts realized that the light of day was perceptibly dimmer than it had been the day before. Could this actually be the end of the world? Were those poor fanatics who had gone by in the night right, and were the heavens opening, as they said? These, and more, were the thoughts that ran through my mind. Then—came the end!

It was 6 p. m. in London, 1 p. m. in New York, and 10 a. m. on the coast when it happened. Millions of people saw the pillar of light waver. For one pregnant moment it grew red-hot, with the crimson redness of heated iron. From its lofty summit, jagged forks of lightning leapt across the heavens and blinded the sight of those that watched. Then it vanished, was gone; and a few minutes after its going the street lights came on, the day brightened, telephone bells rang, wheels turned, and the twenty or so hours of terror and anarchy were ended!

4

What had been the cause of it all? No one knew. Learned men puzzled their heads over the problem. Scientists were baffled for an adequate answer. Many explanations were advanced, of course, but none of them held water. For a while there was a tendency on the part of various governments to

suspect one another of having invented and utilized a fiendish machine for the undoing of rival nations. However, this suspicion was speedily dropped when it was realized how world-wide had been the nature of the disaster. Dr. LeMont of the Paris Astronomical League advanced the theory that the spots on the sun had something to do with the phenomenon; Doolittle of the Royal Academy of Science in London was of the opinion that the Cosmic Ray discovered by Millikan in 1928 was responsible; while others not so highly placed in the world of science as these two outstanding celebrities suggested anything from a dark comet, a falling meteor, to disturbances in the magnetic centers of the earth. The *Encyclopædia Britannica*, twenty-one years after the disaster which nearly wrecked civilization and perhaps the world, quotes the above theories in detail, and many more besides, but winds up with the assertion that nothing authentic as to the cause of the tragedy of 1956 has ever been forthcoming. This assertion is not true. In the fall of 1963 there was placed before the Royal Academy of Science in Canada evidence as to the origin of the great catastrophe sufficient to call forth an extended investigation on the part of that body.

Though eighteen years have passed since then, the results of that investigation have never been made public. I will not speculate as to the reason for that. In the interim a report was made of the matter to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, to the Royal Academy of Science in London, and to the Paris Astronomical League in France—a report which these learned bodies chose to ignore. And what was the evidence the Royal Academy of Science in Canada investigated?

As I have already stated, I was in California in 1956 and lived through one phase of the great disaster. Three years later—in the summer of 1959—having broken into the pages of some of the better class magazines with my stories, I made a trip to western Canada for the purpose of writing a series of stories for a western journal. It was there, miles from any city and in the foothills of the Rockies, that I met and listened to the story of the dying recluse. He was a young man, I judged, not a whit older than myself, but in the last stages of consumption.

I came upon the ranch-house—a four-room cabin made of split logs and undressed stone—after a hard day's ride. I pitched my tent on the banks of a tumbling mountain stream about a quarter of a mile from the house, and gladly accepted the invitation of the comely young mistress of the place to take dinner with them that evening. She was, I gleaned, the sick man's sister. Her husband, now absent rounding up cattle, was proving up on an adjoining quarter section, having already done so on two others in his wife's and brother-in-law's names.

After dinner I sat on the wide veranda with the sick man, whose sleeping-porch I surmised it was, talking with him and smoking my pipe.

"Visitors are rare out this way," he said, "and an educated man a godsend."

I was surprised to find him a man of no little education himself.

"You went to college?" I hazarded.

"Yes, McGill. I took my B. A. And after that, two years of medicine."

Over the plains the sun had sunk in red splendor below the horizon and the

sky was on fire with its reflected glory. Nearer in I saw a ragged black splotch on the billowing earth, burnt-looking, charred.

"A prairie fire," I not so much questioned as stated.

The invalid, propped up on his couch, followed my finger with his cavernous black eyes.

"No," he said. "No. That is where *it*—was."

"It?" I queried.

"Yes," he replied; what the papers called the pillar of fire."

Then I remembered, of course. The burnt splotch was the place where the terrible luminous glow, the cleaving sword I had seen over Mount Lowe, had had its source. I stared, fascinated.

"Nothing," said the man on the couch, "will grow there—since then. The soil has no life in it—no life. It is," he said faintly, "like ashes—black ashes."

Silence fell between us for many minutes. The shadows lengthened and the twilight deepened. It was mournful sitting there in the growing gloom, and I felt relieved when the woman turned on the light in the sitting-room and its cheerful rays flooded through the open windows and the doorway. Finally the invalid said:

"I was here at the time. My sister and her husband were absent on a visit to his folks in Calgary."

"It must have been a stupendous sight," I remarked for want of a better thing to say.

"It was hell," he said. "That's how I got this," tapping himself on the chest and bringing on a fit of coughing. "The air," he gasped; "it was hard on the lungs."

His sister came out and gave him some medicine from a black bottle.

"You mustn't talk so much, Peter; it isn't good for you," she admonished.

He waved an impatient hand, "Let be!" he said. "Let be! What difference does it make? In another day, another week——"

His voice trailed away and then picked up again on a new sentence.

"Oh, don't pity me! Don't waste your pity on the likes of me! If ever a wretch deserved his fate, I deserve mine. Three years now I've suffered the tortures of the damned. Not of flesh alone, but of mind. When I could still walk about, it wasn't so bad; but since I've been chained to this bed I've done nothing but think, think. . . . I think of the great disaster; of the hours of terror and despair known by millions of people. I think of the thousands and thousands of men, women and children trapped in subways and theaters, trampled to death, butchered, murdered. I visualize the hospitals full of the sick and the dying, the giant liners of the air and of the ocean crashing, colliding, going down into the sea; and I seem to hear the screams and the pitiful prayers for help of the maddened passengers. Tell me, what fate should befall the fiend who would loose such woe and misery on an unsuspecting world?"

"There, there," I said soothingly, thinking him delirious, judging his mind unhinged from too much morbid brooding. "It was frightful, of course, but no one could help what happened—no one."

But my words did not calm him. On the contrary they added to his excitement. "That isn't true," he gasped. "It isn't true. No, no, sister, I won't be still, I'm not raving! Give me a drop of brandy—so; and bring me the little cedar box from the cupboard over there."

She complied with his request.

"It's all written down and put away in here," he said, tapping the box. "Put away in here, along with the third crystal which came home in the saddle-bag of John's runaway horse."

His eyes were like two black coals fastened on my face.

"I've told no one," he said tensely "but I can't keep silent any longer. I must speak! I must!"

One of his feverish hands gripped my own. "Don't you understand?" he cried. "I'm the fiend who caused the great world disaster. God help me! I, and one other!"

"No, no," he said, correctly reading the look on my face, "I'm not crazy, I'm not raving. It is God's truth I'm telling you, and the evidence of it is in this cedar box. It began in Montreal when I was going to McGill University. The under-professor of physics there was a young French-Canadian by the name of John Cabot. He——"

A fit of coughing stopped his voice. His sister gave him a sip of water.

"Peter," she pleaded, "let it go for tonight. Tomorrow——"

But he shook his head. "I may be dead tomorrow. Let me talk now." His eyes sought mine. "Did you ever hear about the meteorite that fell back in Manitoba in 1954?"

"No."

"Nor about the seven crystals that were found in it?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, they were found," he said; "seven of them as large as grapefruit. There's nothing remarkable about finding crystals in a meteorite. That has been done before and since. But those seven crystals were not ordinary ones. They were perfectly rounded and polished, as if by hand. Nor was that all: at the core of each of them was a vibrant fluid, and in that fluid was a black spot——"

A spasm of coughing choked his utterance, and this time I joined with his sister in urging him to rest, but desisted when I saw that such advice, and any effort on my part to withdraw, only succeeded in adding to his painful excitement.

"A black spot," he gasped, "that danced and whirled and was never still. Don't try to stop me! I must tell you about it! The scientists of the world were all agog over them. Where, they asked, had the meteor come from, and what were the fluid and the spot at the center of each crystal? In the course of time the crystals were sent various places for observation and study. One went to England, another to France, two to Washington, while the remaining three stayed in Canada, finally coming to rest in the Museum of Natural Science in Montreal which is now under the jurisdiction of McGill University.

"It was during my first year at medical school that I entered the museum

one afternoon, almost by accident. The sight of the crystals, newly exhibited, fascinated me. I could hardly tear myself away in time for a lecture.

"The next afternoon I came again. I watched the black spots dancing in their vibrant fluid. Sometimes they would whirl in the center of the liquid with monotonous regularity. Then suddenly they would dash at the walls which held them in and circle them with inconceivable speed. Was it my imagination, or did the specks take on shape or form? Were they prisoners forever beating their heads against the bars of a cell, seeking to be free? Engrossed in such thoughts I did not know that another had entered the museum until a voice addressed me.

"So you have come under their spell, too, Ross."

"I looked up with a start and recognized John Cabot. We knew each other, of course, because I had studied under him for two years.

"They look so life-like, sir," I replied. "Haven't you noticed it?"

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "they are life."

"The thought stirred my imagination.

"You know," he went on, "that there are scientists who claim life originally came to the earth from some other star, perhaps from outside the universe entirely. Maybe," he said, "it came, even as these crystals came, in a meteor."

The sick man paused and moistened his lips with water.

"That," he said, "was the beginning of the intimacy which sprang up between John Cabot and me. It was often possible for Cabot to take one of the crystals to his room, and then we would foregather there and ponder the mystery of it. Cabot was a sound teacher of physics, but he was more than that. He was a scientist who was also a speculative philosopher, which meant being something of a mystic. Have you ever studied mysticism? No? Then I can't tell you about that. Only from him and his speculations I struck fire. How can I describe it? Perhaps gazing in the crystal hypnotized us both. I don't know as to that. Only night and day both of us became eaten with an overwhelming curiosity.

"What do the scientists say is inside the crystals?" I asked Cabot.

"They don't say," he replied. "They don't know. A message from Mars perhaps, or from beyond the Milky Way."

"From beyond the Milky Way," whispered the sick man. "Can't you see what that would mean to our imaginations?"

He beat the quilt that covered him with his hand.

"It meant," he said, "the forbidden. We dreamed of doing what the scientists of America and Europe said they hesitated to do for fear of the consequences—or for fear of destroying objects valuable to science. We dreamed of breaking the crystal!"

A big moth fluttered into the radius of light and the dying man followed it with his eyes. "That's what we were, Cabot and I, though we didn't know it: moths, trying to reach a searing flame."

By this time I was engrossed in his story. "What then?" I prompted.

"We stole the crystals! Perhaps you read about it at the time?"

I shook my head.

"Well, it was in all the papers."

I explained that in those days I had seldom seen a paper from one week's end to another. He nodded feebly.

"That accounts for it, then. The theft caused a sensation in university circles, and both Cabot and I were thoroughly questioned and searched. But we had been too clever!" The sick man laughed mirthlessly. "God help us! too clever! What wouldn't I give now," cried Peter Ross bitterly, "if we had been discovered! But a malignant fate ordered otherwise. We were successful. During the holidays I took the crystal home with me, home, to these hills and plains. Later Cabot joined me."

He broke off for a moment as if exhausted.

"I wonder," he said, after a few minutes, "if I can make what we felt and thought clear to you. It wasn't just idle curiosity that was driving us. No! It was more than that. Out of the unknown itself had come a meteor with a message for mankind. Something stupendous was hidden in the cores of those crystals. Yet what had the scientists of the world done? They had contented themselves with weighing the crystals, looking at them under a microscope, photographing them, writing learned articles about them, and then putting them away on museum shelves! None of them—not one; or so it seemed to us—had had the courage to open a crystal. Their reasons—deadly germs, virulent forms of life, terrific explosions—we dismissed as cowardly vaporings. The time had come, we said, to investigate more thoroughly. God help us," whispered Peter Ross, "we blinded ourselves to what might be the consequences of our rash experiment! We eased our consciences with the reflection that we were safeguarding humanity from any danger by carrying it out in the wilderness, miles from any city or human habitation. If there were to be any martyrs, we thought egotistically, it would be us alone. We had, of course, no inkling of the terrible force we were about to loose.

"Early in the morning of the day of the disaster we rode from this place down there to the plains, down to where you saw that charred splotch. We had with us a portable outfit of chemical instruments. It was our intention to smash one of the crystals, catch the fluid in our test-tubes, isolate the black spot, and make an analysis of it and the liquid later. But we never did," he said; "we never did."

A cough rattled in his throat.

"It was Cabot who broke the crystal. Before noon, it was, but I'm not sure of the time. He knew how to do it; he had all the tools necessary. The crystal lay inside a metal container. I tell you there was something uncanny about it glimmering in the sun! The black spot was whirling madly, dashing itself with violence against the restraining walls as if it sensed that freedom was near.

"'Look at him,' said Cabot tensely. 'Look at him leaping and kicking. What a dancer! What a—in a minute now and he'll be out of that!'

"Perhaps it was the phrase; perhaps it was the masculine pronoun used in connection with the black spot; but suddenly I was afraid of the thing we would do. Fearful possibilities ran through my mind.

" 'John,' I cried, stepping back several paces, 'John, don't!'

"But Cabot never heard me. His hand went up with the heavy hammer.

"Poor John! Nothing warned him—nothing stayed him!

"The blow came down. I heard the tinkling crash; then——

" 'Oh my God!'

"It was Cabot's voice in a shrill scream of unutterable horror and agony. His bent figure straightened up, and from his hair and his outflung arms blue lights crackled and streamed, and all around his body a column of something shimmered and shifted and grew. So for a moment he postured; then he began to dance. I tell you he began to dance, not by any force or power that resided in his own limbs, but as if he were jerked or writhed about by an external agent. I saw what that agent was. It was the black spot! Out of the ground it rose like an evil jinnee and took on the form and shape of something monstrous, inhuman, horrible. It leapt and whirled; and yes, though I couldn't hear it, it sang and shouted. It was the nucleus of an increasing body of light. I felt searing heat scorch my cheeks and burn my throat with every breath I drew. More! I felt that streaming fingers of light were reaching out at me, clutching.

"With a sob of fear I turned and ran. Cabot's horse had broken loose and was running wildly across the plains. My own was plunging madly at the end of its picket rope. Somehow I mounted and fled, but after several miles of such flight my horse put its hoof in a prairie-dog hole and broke its leg, pitching me over its head.

"How long I lay dead to the world I don't know; but the long shadows were running eastward when I came to. The air was acrid and bitter. With fearful eyes I saw that the day was unaccountably dark and that the pillar of fire out on the plains had grown to immense proportions. Even as I gazed on it, it grew. Hour after hour it grew, adding to its circumference and height. From the four corners of the horizon, in mighty arches that dipped to a common center, flowed infinitesimal particles of what seemed golden dust. I know now that all the electricity was being sucked out of the air, darkening the day, blackening the night, and rendering all machinery useless. But then I knew only that the pillar of fire, the center to which those particles cohered, was drawing nearer and nearer to where I lay. For I could barely move, my feet seemed like lead, and there was a tight band round my chest.

"Perhaps I was delirious, out of my head; I do not know, but I got on my feet and walked and walked, and when I couldn't walk I crawled. Hours and hours I crawled, driven ahead by a growing horror of the nightmare that pursued me; yet when I stopped, exhausted, I was still far away from the foothills and the pillar of fire was nearer than ever. I could see the monstrous black thing inside of it dancing and whirling. My God! It was reaching out dark streamers of fire after me; it was calling out that it wanted me, that it would have me, that nothing this side of heaven or hell could keep it from me; and as it shot this implacable message into my senses, it grew bigger, it danced faster, and it came closer.

"Again I staggered to my feet and ran. Late night found me several



miles below here, quenching my thirst at a spring of water which trickles from the side of a rock. I looked back, and the pillar of fire was now so high that it lost itself in the heavens. All around me played a livid light, a light that flung the shape of a gigantic dancing horror this way and that. Did I tell you that this light was like a pillar? Yes, it was like a pillar whose middle swelled out in a great arc; and I knew that I was doomed, that I could not escape, and swooning horror overcame me and I fell to the ground and buried my face in my hands.

"Hours passed—or was it only minutes? I cannot say. I could feel my body writhing, twisting. Every atom of my flesh was vibrating to an unnatural rhythm. I was crazy, yes, out of my head, delirious, but I swear to you that I heard John Cabot crying to me, imploring, 'For God's sake, break the crystal, break the crystal!' and I cried back into my huddled arms not speaking, yet screaming it, 'We broke the crystal! God help us! We broke the crystal!'

"Then suddenly it came to me that he meant the second crystal. Yes, yes, I understood. The fiendish thing out there on the plain was seeking, not me but its counterpart.

"The second crystal was in the knapsack still swung on my back. With insane fury I tore it out of its padded, protected housing and whirled it over my head. Filled with loathing of the terrible thing, I flung it from me as far as the strength of my arm would permit. Perhaps twenty yards away it crashed into a rock and was shattered to pieces. I saw the slivers of it glint and flash; then from the spot where it struck rose a column of light, and in the column of light was a whirling speck. Like its predecessor it grew and grew, and as it grew, receded from me in the direction of the mightier pillar whirling and calling. How can I tell you of the weird dance of the evil ones? They sang to each other, and I know the song they sang, but I cannot tell it to you because it was not sung in words.

"At what hour they came together, whether it was day or night, I do not know. Only I saw them merge. With their coming together the terrible power that was sucking in the world's electrical forces to one gigantic center became neutralized. The heavens split open as the bolts of lightning devastated the sky. Through the rent firmament I saw a black shape cleave its way. Whatever had been in the two crystals was leaving the earth, was plunging through the Milky Way, through the incalculable spaces beyond the reach of our most powerful telescopes, back back. . . "

Two days later, in a grave beside the tumbling mountain stream, his brother-in-law and I buried all that was mortal of Peter Ross. Over his resting-place we piled a great cairn of rocks so that the spring floods might not wash his body away nor coyotes worry the tomb of the dead. When I parted with the bereaved sister, she pressed me to accept the cedar box.

"Poor Peter!" she said. "Toward the last he ran a fever all the time and was delirious; but he wanted you to have the box, and so you must take it." I saw that she attached no importance to his story.

"He never mentioned it before," she said; "he was out of his head."

And so I was inclined to believe until I examined the contents of the box. Then I changed my mind. If what he told us had been naught but the result of morbid brooding and delirium, then he must have been morbid and delirious for years preceding his death, because the written version of his story began simply, "It is nearly a year now since," and was a bare recital of facts, written plainly and in the manner of a man with no especial gift for expressing himself in words. Nor was that all. Besides the manuscript mentioned were revealed various letters which I perused, letters from Cabot to Ross, Ross to Cabot, covering a period of years and telling of their ideas and plans and of the theft of the crystals. The whole story, save for its denouement, could be pieced together from those letters.

Incredible as Peter Ross's tale had sounded in the telling, wild and incoherent though it had been, and colored with fever and delirium none the less it was true. And as if to rout whatever disbelief might be still lurking in my mind, I saw that which finally led me to place the whole matter before the Royal Academy of Science in Canada, and before various other scientific bodies, as I have recorded; and which in this latter day, so that mankind may be warned against the menace imprisoned in the crystals, has made me put everything down here: the crowning evidence of all. For in the bottom of the box was a round object; and when I picked it up, my fascinated eyes were held by a transparent bubble the size of an orange with a black spot at its core, dancing, dancing. . . .

**THE END**

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