

Hell Is Forever

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Round and round the shutter'd Square

I strolled with the Devil's arm in mine.

No sound but the scrape of his hoofs was there

And the ring of his laughter and mine.

We had drunk black wine.

I screamed, "I will race you, Master!"

"What matter," he shriek'd, "tonight

Which of us runs the faster?

There is nothing to fear tonight

In the foul moon's light!"

Then I look'd him in the eyes,

And I laughed full shrill at the lie he told

And the gnawing fear he would fain disguise.

It was true, what I'd time and again been told

He was old—old.

From "Fungoids," by Enoch Soames

There were six of them and they had tried everything.

They began with drinking and drank until they had exhausted the sense of taste. Wines—Amontillado, Beaune, Kirschwasser, Bordeaux, Hock, Burgundy, Medoc and Chambertin; whiskey, Scotch, Irish, usquebaugh and Schnapps; brandy, gin and rum. They drank them separately and together; they mixed the tart alcohols and flavors into stupendous punches, into a thousand symphonies of taste; they experimented, created, invented, destroyed—and finally they were bored.

Drugs followed. The milder first, then the more potent. Crisp brown licoricelike opium, toasted and rolled into pellets for smoking in long ivory pipes; thick green absinthe sipped bitter and strong, without sugar or water; heroin and cocaine in rustling snow crystals; marijuana rolled loosely in brown-paper cigarettes; hashish in milk-white curds to be eaten or tarry plugs of Bhang that were chewed and stained the lips deep tan—and again they were bored.

Their search for sensation became frantic with so much of their senses already dissipated. They enlarged their parties and turned them into festivals of horror. Exotic dancers and esoteric half-human creatures crowded the broad low room and filled it with their incredible performances. Pain, fear, desire, love and hatred were torn apart and exhibited to the least quivering detail like so many laboratory specimens.

The cloying odor of perfume mingled with the knife-sharp sweat of excited bodies; the anguished screams of tortured creatures merely interrupted their swift, never-ceasing talk—and so in time this, too, palled. They reduced their parties to the original six and returned each week to sit, bored and still hungry for new sensations. Now, languidly and without enthusiasm, they were toying with the occult; turning the party room into a necromancer's studio.

Offhand you would not have thought it was a bomb shelter. The room was large and square, the walls paneled with imitation-grained soundproofing, the ceiling low-beamed. To the right was an inset door, heavy and bolted with an enormous wrought-iron lock. There were no windows, but the air-conditioning inlets were shaped like the arched slits of a Gothic monastery. Lady Sutton had paned them with stained glass and set small electric bulbs behind them. They threw showers of sullen color across the room.

The flooring was of ancient walnut, high polished and gleaming like metal. Across it were spread a score of lustrous Oriental scatter rugs. One enormous divan, covered with Indian Batik, ran the width of the shelter against a wall. Above, were tiers of book shelves, and before it was a long trestle table piled with banquet remains. The rest of the shelter was furnished with deep, seductive chairs, soft, quilted and inviting.

Centuries ago this had been the deepest dungeon of Sutton Castle, hundreds of feet beneath the earth. Now—drained, warmed, air-conditioned and refurnished, it was the scene of Lady Sutton's sensation parties. More—it was the official meeting place of the Society of Six. The Six Decadents, they called themselves.

"We are the last spiritual descendants of Nero—the last of the gloriously evil aristocrats," Lady Sutton would say. "We were born centuries too late, my friends. In a world that is no longer ours we have nothing to live for but ourselves. We are a race apart—we six."

And when unprecedented bombings shook England so catastrophically that the shudders even penetrated to the Sutton shelter, she would glance up and laugh:

“Let them slaughter each other, those pigs. This is no war of ours. We go our own way, always, eh? Think, my friends, what a joy it would be to emerge from our shelter one bright morning and find all London dead—all the world dead—” And then she laughed again with her deep hoarse bellow.

She was bellowing now, her enormous fat body sprawled half across the divan like a decorated toad, laughing at the program that Digby Finchley had just handed her. It had been etched by Finchley himself—an exquisite design of devils and angels in grotesque amorous combat encircling the cabalistic lettering that read:

THE SIX PRESENT

ASTAROTH WAS A LADY

By Christian Braugh

Cast:

(In order of appearance)

A Necromancer Christian Braugh

A Black Cat Merlin

(By courtesy of Lady Sutton)

Astaroth Theone Dubedat

Nebiros, an Assistant Demon Digby Finchley

Costumes Digby Finchley

Special Effects Robert Peel

Music Sidra Peel

Finchley said: “A little comedy is a change, isn’t it?”

Lady Sutton shuddered with uncontrolled laughter. “Astaroth was a lady! Are you sure you wrote it, Chris?”

There was no answer from Braugh, only the buzz of preparations from the far end of the room, where a small stage had been erected and curtained off.

She bellowed in her broken bass: “Hey, Chris! Hey, there—”

The curtain split and Christian Braugh thrust his albino head through. His face was partially made up with red eyebrows and beard and dark-blue shadows around the eyes. He said: “Beg pardon, Lady Sutton?”

At the sight of his face she rolled over the divan like a mountain of jelly. Across her helpless body, Finchley smiled to Braugh, his lips unfolding in a cat’s grin. Braugh moved his white head in imperceptible answer.

“I said, did you really write this, Chris ... or have you hired a ghost again?”

Braugh looked angry, then suddenly disappeared behind the curtain. “Oh my hat!” gurgled Lady Sutton. “This is better than a gallon of champagne. And, speaking of the same . . . who’s nearest the bubbly? Bob? Pour some more. Bob! Bob Peel!”

The man slumped in the chair alongside the ice buckets never moved. He was lying on the nape of his neck, feet thrust out in a V before him, his dress shirt buckled under his bearded chin. Finchley went across the room and looked down at him.

“Passed out,” he said.

“So early? Well, no matter. Fetch me a glass, Dig, there’s a good lad.” Finchley filled a prised champagne glass and brought it to Lady Sutton. From a small, cameo-faced vial she added three drops of laudanum, swirled the sparkling mixture once and then sipped while she read the program.

“A Necromancer . . . that’s you, eh, Dig?”

He nodded.

“And what’s a Necromancer?”

“A kind of magician, Lady Sutton.”

“Magician? Oh, that’s good . . . that’s very good!” She spilled champagne on her vast, blotchy bosom and dabbed ineffectually with the program.

Finchley lifted a hand to restrain her and said: “You ought to be careful with that program, Lady Sutton. I made only one print and then destroyed the plate. It’s unique and liable to be valuable.”

“Collector’s item, eh? Your work, of course, Dig?”

“Yes.”

“Not much of a change from the usual pornography, hey?” She burst into another thunder of laughter that degenerated into a fit of hacking coughs. She dropped the glass altogether. Finchley flushed, then retrieved the glass and returned it to the buffet, stepping carefully over Peel’s legs. “And who’s this Astaroth?” Lady Sutton went on.

From behind the curtain, Theone Dubedat called: “Me! I! Ich! Moi!” her voice was husky. It had a quality of gray smoke.

“Darling, I know it’s you, but what are you?”

“A devil, I think.”

Finchley said: “Astaroth is some sort of legendary arch-demon—a top-ranking devil, so to speak.”

“Theone a devil? No doubt of it—” Exhausted with rapture, Lady Sutton lay quiescent and musing on the patterned divan. At last she raised an enormous arm and examined her watch. The flesh hung from her elbows in elephantine creases, and at the gesture it shook and a little shower of torn sequins glittered down from her sleeve.

“You’d best get on with it, Dig. I’ve got to leave at midnight .”

“Leave?”

“You heard me.”

Finchley’s face contorted. He bent over her, tense with suppressed emotions, his bleak eyes examining her. “What’s up? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Then—”

“A few things have changed, that’s all.”

“What’s changed?”

Her face turned harsh as she returned his stare. The bulging features seemed to stiffen into obsidian. “Too soon to tell you . . . but you’ll find out quick enough. Now I don’t want any more pestering from you, Dig, m’lad!”

Finchley’s scarecrow features regained some measure of control. He started to speak, but before he could utter a word Sidra Peel suddenly popped her head out of the alcove alongside the stage, where the organ had been placed. She called: “Robert!”

In a constricted voice Finchley said: “Bob’s passed out again, Sidra.”

She emerged from the alcove, walked jerkily across the room and stood looking down in her husband’s face. Sidra Peel was short, slender and dark. Her body was like an electric high-tension wire, alive with too much current, yet coruscated, stained and rusted from too much exposure to passion. The deep black sockets of her eyes were frigid coals with gleaming white points. As she gazed at her husband, her long fingers writhed; then, suddenly, her hand lashed out and struck the inert face.

“Swine!” she hissed.

Lady Sutton laughed and coughed all at once. Sidra Peel shot her a venomous glance and stepped toward the divan, the sharp crack of her heel on the walnut sounding like a pistol shot. Finchley gestured a quick warning that stopped her. She hesitated, then returned to the alcove, and said: “The music’s ready.”

“And so am I,” said Lady Sutton. “On with the show and all that, eh?” She spread herself across the divan like a crawling tumor the while Finchley propped scarlet pillows under her head. “It’s really nice of you to play this little comedy for me, Dig. Too bad there’re only six of us here tonight. Ought to have an audience, eh?”

“You’re the only audience we want, Lady Sutton.”

“Ah! Keep it all in the family?”

“So to speak.”

“The Six—Happy Family of Hatred.”

“That’s not so, Lady Sutton.”

“Don’t be an ass, Dig. We’re all hateful. We glory in it. I ought to know. I’m the Bookkeeper of Disgust. Some day I’ll let you see all the entries. Some day soon.,,

“What sort of entries?”

“Curious already, eh? Oh, nothing spectacular. Just the way Sidra’s been trying to kill her husband—and Bob’s been torturing her by holding on. And you making a fortune out of filthy pictures and eating your rotten heart out for that frigid devil, Theone—”

“Please, Lady Sutton!”

“And Theone,” she went on with relish, “using that icy body of hers like an executioner’s scalpel to torture and . . . and Chris . . . How many of his books d’you think he’s stolen from those poor Grub Street devils?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“I know. All of them. A fortune on other men’s brains. Oh, we’re a beautifully loathsome lot, Dig. It’s the only thing we have to be proud of—the only thing that sets us off from the billion blundering moralistic idiots that have inherited our earth. That’s why we’ve got to stay a happy family of mutual hatred.”

“I should call it mutual admiration,” Finchley murmured. He bowed courteously and went to the curtains, looking more like a scarecrow than ever in the black dinner clothes. He was extremely tall—three inches over six feet—and extremely thin. The pipestem arms and legs looked like warped dowel sticks, and his horsy flat features seemed to have been painted on a pasty pillow.

Finchley pulled the curtains together behind him. A moment after he disappeared there was a whispered cue and the lights dimmed. In the vast room there was no sound except Lady Sutton’s croupy breathing. Peel, still slumped in his deep chair, was motionless and invisible except for the limp angle of his legs.

From infinite distances came a slight vibration—almost a shudder. It seemed at first to be a sinister reminder of the hell that was bursting across England, hundreds of feet over their heads. Then the shuddering quickened and by imperceptible stages swelled into the deepest tones of the organ. Above

the background of the

throbbing diapasons, a weird tremolo of fourths, empty and spine-chilling, cascaded down the keyboard in chromatic steps.

Lady Sutton chuckled faintly. “My word,” she said, “that’s really horrid, Sidra. Ghastly.”

The grim background music choked her. It filled the shelter with chilling tendrils of sound that were more moan than tone. The curtains slipped apart slowly, revealing Christian Braugh garbed in black, his face a hideous, twisted mass of red and purple-blue that contrasted starkly to the near-albino white hair. Braugh stood at the center of the stage surrounded by spider-legged tables piled high with Necromancer’s apparatus. Prominent was Merlin, Lady Sutton’s black cat, majestically poised atop an iron-bound volume.

Braugh lifted a piece of black chalk from a table and drew a circle on the floor twelve feet around himself. He inscribed the circumference with cabalistic characters and pentacles. Then he lifted a wafer and exhibited it with a flirt of his wrist.

“This,” he declaimed in sepulchral tones, “is a sacred wafer stolen from a church at midnight.”

Lady Sutton applauded satirically, but stopped almost at once. The music seemed to upset her. She moved uneasily on the divan and looked about her with little uncertain glances.

Muttering blasphemous imprecations, Braugh raised an iron dagger and plunged it through the center of the wafer. Then he arranged a copper chafing dish over a blue alcohol flame and began to stir in powders and crystals of bright colors. He lifted a crystal vial filled with purple liquid and poured the contents into a porcelain bowl. There was a faint detonation and a thick cloud of vapor lifted to the ceiling.

The organ surged. Braugh muttered incantations under his breath and performed oddly suggestive gestures. The shelter swam with scents and mists, violet clouds and deep fogs. Lady Sutton glanced toward the chair across from her. “Splendid, Bob,” she called. “Wonderful effects—really.” She tried to make her voice cheerful, but it came out in a sickly croak. Peel never moved.

With a savage motion, Braugh pulled three black hairs from the cat’s tail. Merlin uttered a yowl of rage, and sprang at the same time from the table to the top of an inlaid cabinet in the background. Through the mists and vapors his giant yellow eyes gleamed balefully. The hairs went into the chafing dish and a new aroma filled the room. In quick succession the claws of an owl, the powder of vipers, and a human-shaped mandrake root followed.

“Now!” cried Braugh.

He cast the wafer, transfixed by the dagger, into the porcelain bowl containing the purple fluid, and then poured the whole mixture into the copper chafing dish.

There was a violent explosion.

A jet-black cloud enfolded the stage and swirled out into the shelter. Slowly it cleared away, faintly revealing the tall form of a naked devil; the body exquisitely formed, the head a frightful mask. Braugh had disappeared.

Through the drifting clouds, in the husky tones of Theone Dubedat, the devil spoke: “Greetings, Lady Sutton—”

She stepped forward out of the vapor. In the pulsating light that shot down to the stage her body shone with a shimmering nacreous glow of its own. The toes and fingers were long and graceful. Color slashed across the rounded torso. Yet that whole perfect body was cold and lifeless—as unreal as the grotesque papiermâché that covered her head.

Theone repeated: “Greetings—”

“Hi, old thing!” Lady Sutton interrupted. “How’s everything in hell?”

There was a giggle from the alcove where Sidra Peel was playing softly. Theone posed statuesquely and lifted her head a little higher to speak. “I bring you—”

“Darling!” shrieked Lady Sutton, “why didn’t you let me know it was going to be like this. I’d have sold tickets!”

Theone raised a gleaming arm imperiously. Again she began: “I bring you the thanks of the five who—” And then abruptly she stopped.

For the space of five heartbeats there was a gasping pause while the organ murmured and the last of the black smoke filtered away, mushrooming against the ceiling. In the silence Theone’s rapid, choked breathing mounted hysterically— then came a ghastly, piercing scream.

The others darted from behind the stage, exclaiming in astonishment—Braugh, Necromancer’s costume thrown over his arm, his make-up removed; Finchley like a pair of animated scissors in black habit and cowl, a script in his hand. The organ stuttered, then stopped with a crash, and Sidra Peel burst out of the alcove.

Theone tried to scream again, but her voice caught and broke. In the appalled silence Lady Sutton cried: “What is it? Something wrong?”

Theone uttered a moaning sound and pointed to the center of the stage. “Look— There—” The words came off the top of her throat like the squeal of nails on slate. She cowered back against a table upsetting the apparatus. It clashed and tinkled.

“What is it? For the love of—”

“It worked—” Theone moaned. “The r-ritual—It worked!”

They stared through the gloom, then started. An enormous sable Thing was slowly rising in the center of the Necromancer’s circle—a vague, morphous form towering high, emitting a dull, hissing sound like the whisper of a caldron.

“Who is that?” Lady Sutton shouted.

The Thing pushed forward like some sickly extrusion. When it reached the edge of the black circle it halted. The seething sounds swelled ominously.

“It is one of us?” Lady Sutton cried. “Is this a stupid trick? Finchley . . . Braugh—”

They shot her startled glances, bleak with terror.

“Sidra ... Robert. . . Theone . . . No, you’re all here. Then who is that? How did it get in here?”

“It’s impossible,” Braugh whispered, backing away. His legs knocked against the edge of the divan and he sprawled clumsily.

Lady Sutton beat at him with helpless hands and cried: “Do something! Do something—”

Finchley tried to control his voice. He stuttered: “W-we’re safe so long as the circle isn’t broken. It can’t get out—”

On the stage, Theone was sobbing, making pushing motions with her hands. Suddenly she crumpled to the floor. One outflung arm rubbed away a segment of the black chalk circle. The Thing moved swiftly, stepped through the break in the circle and descended from the platform like a black fluid. Finchley and Sidra Peel reeled back with terrified shrieks. There was a growing thickness pervading the shelter atmosphere. Little gusts of vapor twisted around the head of the Thing as it moved slowly toward the divan.

“You’re all joking!” Lady Sutton screamed. “This isn’t real. It can’t be!” She heaved up from the divan and tottered to her feet. Her face blanched as she counted the tale of her guests again. One—two—and four made six—and the shape made seven. But there should only be six— She backed away, then began to run. The Thing was following her when she reached the door. Lady Sutton pulled at the door handle, but the iron bolt was locked. Quickly, for all her vast bulk, she ran around the edge of the shelter, smashing over the tables. As the Thing expanded in the darkness and filled the room with its sibilant hissing, she snatched at her purse and tore it open, groping for the key. Her shaking hands scattered the purse’s contents over the room.

A deep bellow pierced the blackness. Lady Sutton jerked and stared around desperately, making little animal noises. As the Thing threatened to engulf her in its infinite black depths, a cry tore up through her body and she sank heavily to the floor.

Silence.

Smoke drifted in shaded clouds.

The china clock ticked off a sequence of delicate periods.

“Well—” Finchley said in conversational tones. “That’s that.”

He went to the inert figure on the floor. He knelt over it for a moment, probing and testing, his face flickering with savage hunger. Then he looked up and grinned. “She’s dead, all right. Just the way we figured. Heart failure. She was too fat.”

He remained on his knees, drinking in the moment of death. The others clustered around the toadlike body, staring with distended nostrils. The moment hardly lasted, then the languor of infinite boredom again shaded across their features.

The black Thing waved its arms a few times. The costume split at last to reveal a complicated framework and the sweating, bearded face of Robert Peel. He dropped the costume around him,

stepped out of it, and went to the figure in the chair.

“The dummy idea was perfect,” he said. His bright little eyes glittered momentarily. He looked like a sadistic miniature of Edward VII. “She’d never have believed it if we hadn’t arranged for a se~venth unknown to enter the scene.” He glanced at his wife. “That slap was a stroke of genius, Sidra. Wonderful realism—”

“I meant it.”

“I know you did, dearly beloved, but thanks nevertheless.”

Theone Dubedat had risen and gotten into a white dressing gown. She stepped down and walked over to the body, removing the hideous devil’s mask. It revealed a beautifully chiseled face, frigid and lovely. Her blond hair gleamed in the darkness.

Braugh said: “Your acting was superb, Theone—” He bobbed his white albino head appreciatively.

For a time she didn’t answer. She stood staring down at the shapeless mound of flesh, an expression of hopeless longing on her face; but there was nothing more to her gazing than the impersonal curiosity of a bystander watching a window chef. Less.

At last Theone sighed. She said: “So it wasn’t worth it, after all.”

“What?” Braugh groped for a cigarette.

“The acting—the whole performance. We’ve been let down again, Chris.”

Braugh scratched a match. The orange flame flared, flickering across their disappointed faces. He lit his cigarette, then held the flame high and looked at them. The illumination twisted their features into caricatures, emphasizing their weariness, their infinite boredom. Braugh said: “My-my—”

“It’s no use, Chris. This whole murder was a bust. It was about as exciting as a glass of water.”

Finchley hunched his shoulders and paced up and back of the shelter like a bundle of stilts. He said: “I got a bit of a kick when I thought she suspected. It didn’t last long, though.”

“You ought to be grateful for even that.”

“I am.”

Peel clucked his tongue in exasperation, then knelt like a bearded humptydumpty, his bald head gleaming, and raked in the contents of Lady Sutton’s scattered purse. The banknotes he folded and put in his pocket. He took the fat dead hand and lifted it slightly toward Theone. “You always admired her sapphire, Theone. Want it?”

“You couldn’t get it off, Bob.”

“I think I could,” he said, pulling strenuously.

“Oh, to hell with the sapphire.”

“No-it’s coming.”

The ring slipped forward, then caught in the folds of flesh at the knuckle. Peel took a fresh grip and tugged and twisted. There was a sucking, yielding sound and the entire finger tore away from the hand. The dull odor of putrefaction struck their nostrils as they looked on with vague curiosity.

Peel shrugged and dropped the finger. He arose, dusting his hands slightly. “She rots fast,” he said. “Peculiar—”

Braugh wrinkled his nose and said: “She was too fat.”

Theone turned away in sudden frantic desperation, her hands clasping her elbows. “What are we going to do?” she cried. “What? Isn’t there a sensation left on earth we haven’t tried?”

With a dry whirl the china clock began quick chimes. Midnight.

Finchley said: “We might go back to drugs.”

“They’re as futile as this paltry murder.”

“But there are other sensations. New ones.”

“Name one!” Theone said in exasperation. “Only one!” “I could name several—if you’ll have a seat and permit me—” Suddenly Theone interrupted: “That’s you speaking, isn’t it, Dig?” In a peculiar voice Finchley answered: “N~no. I thought it was Chris.” Braugh said: “Wasn’t me.”

“You, Bob?”

‘No.

“Th-then—”

The small voice said: “If the ladies and gentlemen would be kind enough to—” It came from the stage. There was something there—something that spoke in

that quiet, gentle voice; for Merlin was stalking back and forth, arching his high black back against an invisible leg.

“—to sit down,” the voice continued persuasively.

Braugh had the most courage. He moved to the stage with slow, steady steps, the cigarette hanging firmly from his lips. He leaned across the apron and peered. For a while his eyes examined the stage, then he let a spume of smoke jet from his nostrils and called: “There’s nothing here.”

And at that moment the blue smoke swirled under the lights and swept around a figure of emptiness. It was no more than a glimpse of an outline—of a negative, but it was enough to make Braugh cry out and leap back. The others turned sick, too, and staggered to chairs.

“So sorry,” said the quiet voice. “It won’t happen again.”

Peel gathered himself and said: “Merely for the sake of—”

“Yes?”

He tried to freeze his jerking features. “Merely for the sake of s-scientific curiosity it—”

“Calm yourself, my friend.”

“The ritual . . . it did w-work?”

“Of course not. My friends, there is no need to call us with such fantastic ceremony. If you really want us, we come.”

“And you?”

“I? Oh... I know you have been thinking of me for some time. Tonight you wanted me—really wanted me, and I came.”

The last of the cigarette smoke convulsed violently as that terrible figure of emptiness seemed to stoop and at last seat itself casually at the edge of the stage. The cat hesitated and then began rolling its head with little mews of pleasure as something fondled it.

Still striving desperately to control himself, Peel said: “But all those ceremonies and rituals that have been handed down—”

“Merely symbolic, Mr. Peel.” Peel started at the sound of his name. “You have read, no doubt, that we do not appear unless a certain ritual is performed, and only if it is letter-perfect. That is not true, of course. We appear if the invitation is sincere—and only then—with or without ceremony.”

Sick and verging on hysteria, Sidra whispered: “I’m getting out of here.” She tried to rise.

The gentle voice said: “One moment, please—”

“No!”

“I will help you get rid of your husband, Mrs. Peel.”

Sidra blinked, then sank back into her chair. Peel clenched his fists and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could begin, the gentle voice continued: “And yet you will not lose your wife, if you really want to keep her, Mr. Peel. I guarantee that.”

The cat was suddenly lifted into the air and then settled comfortably in space a few feet from the floor. They could see the thick fur on the back smooth and resmooth from the gentle petting.

At length Braugh asked: “What do you offer us?”

“I offer each of you his own heart’s desire.”

“And that is?”

“A new sensation—all new sensations—”

“What new sensation?”

“The sensation of reality.”

Braugh laughed. “Hardly anyone’s heart’s desire.”

“This will be, for I offer you five different realities—realities which you may fashion, each for himself. I offer you worlds of your own making wherein Mrs. Peel may happily murder her husband in hers—and yet Mr. Peel may keep his wife in his own. To Mr. Braugh I offer the dreamworld of the writer, and to Mr. Finchley the creation of the artist—”

Theone said: “Those are dreams, and dreams are cheap. We all possess them.”

“But you all awaken from your dreams and you pay the bitter price of that realization. I offer you an awakening from the present into a future reality which you may shape to your own desires—a reality which will never end.”

Peel said: “Five simultaneous realities is a contradiction in terms. It’s a paradox—impossible.”

“Then I offer you the impossible.”

“And the price?”

“I beg pardon?”

“The price,” Peel repeated with growing courage. “We’re not altogether naïve. We know there’s always a price.”

There was a long pause, then the voice said reproachfully: “I’m afraid there are many misconceptions and many things you fail to understand. Just now I cannot explain, but believe me when I say there is no price.”

“Ridiculous. Nothing is ever given for nothing.”

“Very well, Mr. Peel, if we must use the terminology of the market place, let me say that we never appear unless the price for our service is paid in advance. Yours has already been paid.”

“Paid?” They shot involuntary glances at the rotting body on the shelter floor.

“In full.”

“Then?”

“You’re willing, I see. Very well—”

The cat was again lifted high in the air and deposited on the floor with a last gentle pat. The remnants of mist clinging to the shelter ceiling weaved and churned as the invisible donor advanced. Instinctively the five arose and waited, tense and fearful, yet with a mounting sense of fulfillment.

A key’ darted up from the floor and sailed through midair toward the door. It paused before the lock an instant, then inserted itself and turned. The heavy wroughtiron bolt lifted and the door swung wide.

Beyond should have been the dungeon passage leading to the upper levels of Sutton Castle—a low, narrow corridor, paved with flags and lined with limestone blocks. Now, a few inches beyond the door jamb, there hung a veil of flame.

Pale, incredibly beautiful, it was a tapestry of flickering fire, the warp and weft an intermesh of rainbow colors. Those pastel strands of color locked and interlocked, swam, threaded and spun like so many individual life lines. They were an infinity of beads, emotions, the silken countenance of time, the swirling skin of space— They were all things to all men, and above all else, they were beautiful.

“For you,” that quiet voice said, “your old reality ends in this room—”

“As simply as this?”

“Quite.”

“But—”

“Here you stand,” interrupted the voice, “in the last kernel, the last nucleus so to speak, of what once was real for you. Pass the door—pass through the veil, and you enter the reality I promised.”

“What will we find beyond the veil?”

“What each of you desires. Nothing lies beyond that veil now. There is nothing there—nothing but time and space waiting for the molding. There is nothing and the potential of everything.”

Peel, in a low voice, said: “One time and one space? Will that be enough for all different realities?”

“All time, all space, my friend,” the quiet voice answered. “Pass through and you will find the matrix of dreams.”

They had been clustered together, standing close to each other in a kind of strained companionship. Now, in the silence that followed, they separated slightly as though each had marked out for himself a reality all his own—a life entirely divorced from the past and the companions of old times. It was a gesture of utter isolation.

Mutually impelled, yet independently motivated, they moved toward the glittering veil“

I am an artist, Digby Finchley thought, and an artist is a creator. To create is to be godlike, and so shall I be. I shall be god of my world, and from nothing I shall create all—and my all will be beauty.

He was the first to reach the veil and the first to pass through. Across his face

the riot of color flicked like a cool spray. He blinked his eyes momentarily as the brilliant scarlets and purples blinded him. When he opened them again he had left the veil a step behind and stood in the darkness.

But not darkness.

It was the blank jet-black of infinite emptiness. It smote his eyes like a heavy hand and seemed to

press the eyeballs back into his skull like leaden weights. He was terrified and jerked his head about, staring into the impenetrable nothingness, mistaking the ephemeral flashes of retinal light for reality.

Nor was he standing.

For he took one hasty stride and it was as though he were suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. His terror was tinged with horror as he became aware that he was utterly alone; that there was nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. A bitter loneliness assailed him and in that instant he understood how truthfully the voice in the shelter had spoken, and how terribly real his new reality was.

That instant, too, was his salvation. “For,” Finchley murmured with a wry smile to the blankness, “it is of the essence of godhood to be alone—to be unique.”

Then he was quite calm and hung quiescent in time and space while he mustered his thoughts for the creation.

“First,” Finchley said at length, “I must have a heavenly throne that befits a god. Too, I must have a heavenly kingdom and angelic retainers; for no god is altogether complete without an entourage.”

He hesitated while his mind rapidly sorted over the various heavenly kingdoms he had known. There was no need, he thought, to be especially original with this sort of thing. Originality would play an important role in the creation of his universe. Just now the only essential thing was to insure himself a reasonable degree of dignity and luxury—and for that the secondhand furnishings of ancient Yahweh would do.

Raising one hand in a self-conscious gesture, he commanded. Instantly the blackness was riven with light, and before him a flight of gold-veined marble steps rose to a glittering throne. The throne was high and cushioned. Arms, legs and back were of glowing silver, and the cushions were imperial purple. And yet—the whole was incredibly hideous. The legs were too long and thin, the arms were rachety, the back narrow and sickly.

Finchley said: “Ow-w-w-w!” and tried to remodel. Yet no matter how he altered the proportions, the throne remained horrible. And for that matter, the steps, too, were disgusting, for by some freak of creation the gold veins twisted and curved through the marble to form obscene designs too reminiscent of the pictures Finchley had drawn in his past existence.

He gave it up at last, mounted the crooked steps and settled himself uneasily on the throne. It felt as though he was sitting on the lap of a corpse with dead arms poised to infold him in ghastly embrace. He shuddered slightly and said:

“Oh, hell, I was never a furniture designer—”

Finchley glanced around, then raised his hand again. The jet clouds that had crowded around the throne rolled back to reveal high columns of crystal and a

soaring roof arched and paved with smooth blocks. The hall stretched back for thousands of yards like some never-ending cathedral, and all that length was filled with rank on rank of his retainers.

Foremost were the angels: slender, winged creatures, white-robed, with blond, shining heads, sapphire-blue eyes, and scarlet, smiling mouths. Behind the angels knelt the order of Cherubin: giant winged bulls with tawny hides and hoofs of beaten metal. Their Assyrian heads were heavily bearded

with gleaming jet curls. Third were the Seraphim: ranks of huge six-winged serpents whose jeweled scales glittered with a startling silent flame.

As Finchley sat and stared at them with admiration for his handiwork, they chanted in soft unison: “Glory to god. Glory to the Lord Finchley, the All Highest. . . . Glory to the Lord Finchley—”

He sat and stared and it was as though his eyes were slowly acquiring the distortion of astigmatism, for he realized that this was more a cathedral of evil than of heaven. The columns were carved with revolting grotesques at the capitals and bases, and as the hall stretched into dimness it seemed peopled with cavorting shadows that grimaced and danced.

And in the far reaches of those twisting lengths, covert little scenes were playing that sickened him. Even as they chanted, the angels gazed sidelong with their glistening blue eyes at the Cherubin; and behind a column he saw one winged creature reach out and seize a lovely blond angel of lust to crush her to him.

In sheer desperation Finchley raised his hand again, and once more the blackness swirled around him— “So much,” he said, “for a Heavenly Kingdom—”

He pondered for another ineffable period as he drifted in emptiness, grappling with the most stupendous artistic problem he had ever attacked.

Up to now, Finchley thought with a shudder for the horror he had recently wrought, I have been merely playing—feeling my strength—warming up, so to speak, the way an artist will toy with pastel and a block of grained paper. Now it’s time for me to go to work.

Solemnly, as he thought would befit a god, he conducted a laborious conference with himself in space.

What, he asked himself, has creation been in the past?

One might call it nature.

Very well, we shall call it nature. Now, what are the objections to nature’s creation?

Why—nature was never an artist. Nature merely blundered into things in an experimental sort of way. Whatever beauty existed was merely a byproduct. The difference be— The difference, he interrupted himself, between the old nature and the new God Finchley shall be order. Mine will be an ordered cosmos devoid of waste and devoted to beauty. There will be nothing haphazard. There will be no blundering.

First, the canvas.

“There shall be infinite space!” Finchley cried.

In the nothingness, his voice roared through the bony structure of his skull and echoed in his ears with a flat, sour sound; but on the instant of command, the opaque blackness was filtered into a limpid jet. Finchley could still see nothing, but he felt the change.

He thought: Now, in the old cosmos there were simply stars and nebulae and vast fiery bodies

scattered through the realms of the sky. No one knew their purpose—no one knew their origin or destination.

In mine there shall be purpose, for each body shall serve to support a race of creatures whose sole function shall be to serve me— He cried: “Let there be universes to the number of one hundred, filling space. One thousand galaxies shall make up each universe, and one million suns shall be the sum of each galaxy. Ten planets shall circle each sun, and two moons each planet. Let all revolve around their creator! Let all this come to pass. Now!”

Finchley screamed in terror as light burst in a soundless cataclysm around him. Stars, close and hot as suns, distant and cold as pinpricks— Separately, by twos and in vast smudgy clouds— Blazing crimson—yellow—deep green and violet— The sum of their brilliance was a welter of light that constricted his heart and filled him with a devouring fear of the latent power within him.

“This,” Finchley whimpered, “is enough cosmic creation for the time being—”

He closed his eyes determinedly and exerted his will once more. There was a sensation of solidity under his feet and when he opened his eyes cautiously he was standing on one of his earths with blue sky and a blue-white sun lowering swiftly toward the western horizon.

It was a bare, brown earth—Finchley had seen to that—it was a vast sphere of inchoate matter waiting for his molding, for he had decided that first above all other creation he would form a good green earth for himself—a planet of beauty where Finchley, God of all Creation, would reside in his Eden.

All through that waning afternoon he worked, swiftly and with artistic finesse. A vast ocean, green and with sparkling white foam, swept over half the globe; alternating hundreds of miles of watery space with clusters of warm islands. The single continent he divided in half with a backbone of jagged mountains that stretched from pole to snowy pole.

With infinite care he worked. Using oils, water colors, charcoal and plumbago sketches, he planned and executed his entire world. Mountains, valleys, plains; crags, precipices and mere boulders were all designed into a fluent congruence of beautifully balanced masses.

All his spirit of artistry went into the clever scattering of lakes like so many sparkling jewels; and into the cunning arabesques of winding rivers that traced intricate glistening designs over the face of the planet. He devoted himself to the selection of colors: gray gravels; pink, white and black sands; good earths, brown, umber and sepia; mottled shales, glistening micas and silica stones— And when the sun at last vanished on the first day of his labor, his Eden was a shining jewel of stone, earth and metal, ready for life.

As the sky darkened overhead, a pale, gibbous moon with a face of death was

revealed riding in the vault of the sky; and even as Finchley gazed at it uneasily, a second moon with a blood-red disk lifted its ravaged countenance above the eastern horizon and began a ghastly march across the heavens. Finchley tore his eyes away from them and stared out at the twinkling stars.

There was much satisfaction to be gained from their contemplation. “I know exactly how many there are,” he thought complacently. “You multiply one hundred by a thousand by a million and there’s your answer— And that happens to be my idea of order!”

He lay back on a patch of warm, soft soil and placed palms under the back of his head, staring up.

“And I know exactly what all of them are there for—to support human lives—the countless billions upon billions of lives which I shall design and create solely to serve and worship the Lord Finchley— That’s purpose for you!”

And he knew where each of those blue and red and indigo sparks were going, for even in the vasty reaches of space they were thundering a circular course, the pivot of which was that point in the skies he had just left. Some day he would return to that place and there build his heavenly castle. Then he would sit through all eternity watching the wheeling flight of his worlds.

There was a peculiar splotch of red in the zenith of the sky. Finchley watched it absently at first, then with guarded attention as it seemed to burgeon. It spread slowly like an ink stain, and as the curious moments fled by, became tinged with orange and then the purest white. And for the first time Finchley was uncomfortably aware of a sensation of heat.

An hour passed and then two and three. The fist of red-white spread across the sky until it was a fiery nebulous cloud. A thin, tenuous edge approached a star gently, then touched. Instantly there was a blinding blaze of radiance and Finchley was flooded with gleaming, glittering light that illuminated the landscape with the eerie glow of flaring magnesium. The sensation of heat grew in intensity and tiny beads of perspiration prickled across his skin.

With midnight, the incredible inferno filled half the sky, and the gleaming stars, one after another, were bursting into silent explosions. The light was blinding white and the heat suffocating. Finchley tottered to his feet and began to run, searching vainly for shade or water. It was only then that he realized his universe was running amuck.

“No!” he cried desperately. “No!”

Heat bludgeoned him. He fell and rolled across cutting rocks that tore at him and anchored him back down with his face upthrust. Past his shielding hands, past his tight-shut eyelids, the intolerable light and heat pressed.

“Why should it go wrong?” Finchley screamed. “There was plenty of room for everything! Why should it—”

In heat-borne delirium he felt a thunderous rocking as though his Eden were beginning to split asunder.

He cried: “Stop! Stop! Everything stop!” He beat at his temples with futile fists and at last whispered: “All right . . . if I’ve made another mistake then— All right—” He waved his hand feebly.

And instantly the skies were black and blank. Only the two scabrous moons rode overhead, beginning the long downward journey to the west. And in the east a faint glow hinted at the rising sun.

“So,” Finchley murmured, “one must be more a mathematician and physicist to run a cosmos. Very well, I can learn all that later. I’m an artist and I never pretended to know all that. But . . . I am an artist, and there is still my good green earth to people— Tomorrow— We shall see . . . tomorrow—”

And so presently he slept.

The scarlet sun was high when he awoke, and its evil solitary eye filled him with unrest. Glancing at the landscape he had fashioned the day previous, he was even more uncertain; for there was some subtle

distortion in everything. Valley floors looked unclean with the pale sheen of lepers scales. The mountain crags formed nebulous shapes suggestive only of terror. Even the lakes contained the hint of horror under their smooth, innocent surfaces.

Not, he noticed, when he stared directly at these creations, but only when his glance was sidelong. Viewed full-eyed and steadfastly, everything seemed to be right. Proportion was good, line was excellent, coloring perfection. And yet— He shrugged and decided he would have to put in some practice at drafting. No doubt there was some subtle error of distortion in his work.

He walked to a tiny stream and from the bank scooped out a mass of moist red clay. He kneaded it smooth, wet it down to a thin mud and strained it. After it had dried under the sun slightly he arranged a heavy block of stone as a pedestal and set to work.

His hands were still practiced and certain. With sure fingers he shaped his concept of a large, furred rabbit. Body, legs and head; exquisitely etched features—it crouched on the stone ready, it seemed, to leap off at a moment's notice. Finchley smiled affectionately at his work, his confidence at last restored. He tapped it once on the rounded head and said: "Live, my friend—"

There was a second's indecision while life invaded the clay form, then it arched its back with an incredibly clumsy motion and attempted to leap. It moved forward to the edge of the pedestal where it hung crazily for an instant before it dropped heavily to the ground. As it lumbered along on a crazy course, it uttered horrible little grunting sounds and turned once to gaze at Finchley. On that animal face was an evil expression of malevolence.

Finchley's smile froze. He frowned, hesitated, then scooped up another chunk of clay and set it on the stone. For the space of an hour he worked, shaping a graceful Irish setter. At last he tapped this, too, on the narrow skull and said:

"Live—"

Instantly the dog collapsed. It mewled helplessly and then struggled to shaking feet like some enormous spider, eyes distended and glassy. It tottered to the edge of the pedestal, leaped off and collided with Finchley's leg. There was a low growl and the beast tore sharp fangs into Finchley's skin. He leaped back with a cry and kicked the animal furiously. Mewling and howling, the setter went gangling across the fields like a crippled monster.

With furious intent, Finchley returned to his work. Shape after shape he modeled and endowed with life; and each: ape, monkey, fox, weasel, rat, lizard and toad— fish; long and short, stout and slender—birds by the score—each was a grotesque monstrosity that swam, shambled or fluttered off like some feverish nightmare. Finchley was horrified and exhausted. He sat himself down on the pedestal and began to sob while his tired fingers still twitched and prodded at a lump of clay.

He thought: "I'm still an artist—What's gone wrong? What turns everything I do into horrible nonsense?"

His fingers turned and twisted, and without his realizing it, a head began to form in the clay.

He thought: "I made a fortune with my art once. Everyone couldn't have been crazy. They bought my work for many reasons—but an important one was that it was beautiful."

He stared at the lump of clay in his hands. It had been partially formed into a woman's head. He

examined it closely and for the first time in many hours, he smiled.

“Why, of course!” he exclaimed. “I’m no shaper of animals. Let’s see how well I do with a human figure—”

Swiftly, with heavy chunks of clay, he built up the understructure of his figure. Legs, arms, torso and head were formed. He hummed slightly under his breath as he worked, and he thought: She’ll be the loveliest Eve ever created—and more—her children shall truly be the children of a god!

With loving hands he turned the full swelling calves and thighs, and cunningly joined slender ankles to graceful feet. The hips were rounded and girdled a flat slightly mounded belly. As he set the strong shoulders, he suddenly stopped and stepped back a pace.

Is it possible? He wondered.

He walked slowly around the half-completed figure.

Yes— Force of habit, perhaps?

Perhaps that—and maybe the love he had borne for so many empty years.

He returned to the figure and redoubled his efforts. With a sense of growing elation, he completed arms, neck and head. There was a certainty within him that told him it was impossible to fail. He had modeled this figure too often not to know it down to the finest detail. And when he was finished, Theone Dubedat, magnificently sculpted in clay, stood atop the stone pedestal.

Finchley was content, Warily he sat down with his back to a jagged boulder, produced a cigarette from space and lit it. For perhaps a minute he sat, dragging in the smoke to quiet his jerking nerves. At last with a sense of chaotic anticipation he said: “Woman—” ~

He choked and stopped. Then he began again.

“Be alive—Theone!”

The second of life came and passed. The nude figure moved slightly, then began to tremble. Magnetically drawn, Finchley arose and stepped toward her,

arms outstretched in mute appeal. There was a hoarse gasp of indrawn breath and slowly the great eyes opened and examined him.

The living girl straightened and screamed. Before Finchley could touch her she beat at his face, her long nails ripping his skin. She fell backward off the pedestal, leaped to her feet and began running off across the fields like all the others— running like a crazy, crippled creature while she screamed and howled. The low sun dappled her body and the shadow she cast was monstrous.

Long after she disappeared, Finchley continued to gaze in her direction while within him all that futile, bitter love surged and burned with an acid tide. At length he turned again to the pedestal and with icy impassivity set once more to work. Nor did he stop until the fifth in a succession of lurid creatures ran screaming out into the night—Then and only then did he stop and stand for a long time gazing alternately at his hands and the crazy, careening moons that sailed overhead.

There was a tap on his shoulder and he was not too surprised to see Lady Sutton standing beside him. She still wore the sequined evening gown, and in the lurid moonlight her face was as course and masculine as ever.

Finchley said: "Oh . . . it's you."

"How are you, Dig, m'lad?"

He thought it over, trying to bring some reason to the dumb despair and yet ludicrous insanity that pervaded his cosmos. At last he said: "Not so good, Lady Sutton."

"Trouble?"

"Yes—" He broke off and stared at her. "I say, Lady Sutton, how the devil did you get here?"

She laughed. "I'm dead, Dig. You ought to know."

"Dead? Oh . . . I—" He floundered in a horror of embarrassment.

"No hard feelings, though. I'd have done the same m'self, y'know."

"You would?"

"Anything for a new sensation. That was always our motto, eh?" She nodded complacently and grinned at him. It was that same old grin of pure deviltry.

Finchley said: "What are you doing here? I mean, how did—"

"I said I was dead," Lady Sutton interrupted. "There's lots you don't understand about this business of dying."

"But this is my own personal private reality. I own it."

"And I'm still dead, Dig. I can get into any bloody damned reality I choose. Wait—you'll find out."

He said: "I won't—ever—That is, I can't. Because I won't ever die."

"Oh-ho?"

"No, I won't. I'm a god."

"You are, eh? How d'you like it?"

"I ... I don't." He faltered for words. "I ... that is, someone promised me a reality I could shape for myself, but I can't, Lady Sutton, I can't."

"And why not?"

"I don't know. I'm a god, and yet every time I try to shape something beautiful it turns out disgusting and loathsome."

“As how, for instance?”

He showed her the twisted mountains and plains, the evil lakes and rivers, the distorted grunting creatures he had created. All this Lady Sutton examined carefully and with close attention. At last she pursed her lips and thought for a moment; then she gazed keenly at Finchley and said: “Odd that you’ve never made a mirror, Dig.”

“A mirror?” he echoed. “No, I haven’t—I never needed one—”

“Go ahead. Make one now.”

He gave her a perplexed look, and still staring at her, waved a hand in the air. A square of silvered glass appeared in his hand and he held it toward her.

“No,” Lady Sutton said, “it’s for you. Look in it.”

Wondering, he raised the mirror and gazed in it. He uttered a hoarse cry and peered closer. Leering back at him out of the dim night was the distorted, evil face of a gargoyle. In the small slant-set eyes, the splayed nose, the broken yellow teeth, the twisted ruin of a face he saw everything he had seen in his ugly cosmos.

He saw the distorted cathedral of heaven and all its unholy hierarchy of ribald retainers; the spinning chaos of crashing stars and suns; the lurid landscape of his Eden; each mewling, ghastly creature he had created; every individual horror that his brain had spawned.

Violently he hurled the mirror spinning and turned to confront Lady Sutton.

“What?” he demanded hoarsely, “what is this?”

“Why, you’re a god, Dig,” Lady Sutton laughed, “and you ought to know that a god can create only in his own image. Yes—the answer’s as simple as that. It’s a grand joke, ain’t it?”

“Joke?” The import of all the eons to come thundered down over his head. An eternity of living with his hideous self, upon himself, inside himself—over and over, re-repeated in every sun and star, every living and dead thing, every creature, every everlasting moment. A monstrous god feeding upon himself and slowly, inexorably going mad.

“Joke!” he screamed.

He flung out his hand and instantly he floated once more, suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. Once more he was utterly alone, with nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. And as he pondered for another ineffable period on the inevitable futility of his next attempt, he heard quite distinctly, the deep bellow of familiar laughter.

Of such was the Kingdom of Finchley’s Heaven.

“Give me the strength! Oh, give me the strength!”

She went through the veil sharp on Finchley’s heels, that short, slender, dark woman; and she found herself in the dungeon passage of Sutton Castle. For a

moment she was startled out of her prayer, half disappointed at not finding a land of mists and dreams. Then, with a bitter smile, she recalled the reality she wanted.

Before her stood a suit of armor; a strong, graceful figure of polished metal edged with sweeping flutings. She went to it and stared. Dully from the gleaming steel cuirass, a slightly distorted reflection stared back. It showed the drawn, highstrung face, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping down over the brow in a sharp widow’s peak. It said: “This is Sidra Peel. This is a woman whose past has been fettered to a dull-witted creature that called itself her husband. She will break that chain this day if only she finds the strength—”

“Break the chain!” she murmured fiercely, “and this day repay him for a life’s worth of agony. God—if there be a god in my world—help me balance the account in full! Help me—”

Sidra stared, then froze while her pulse jerked wildly. Someone had come soundlessly down the lonesome passage and stood behind her. She could feel the heat—the aura of a presence—the almost imperceptible pressure of a body against hers. Mistily in the mirror of the armor she made out a face peering over her shoulder.

She spun around, crying: “Ahhhh!”

“So sorry,” he said. “Thought you were expecting me.”

Her eyes riveted to his face. He was smiling slightly in an affable manner, and yet the streaked blond hair, the hollows and mounds, the pulsing veins and shadows of his features were a lurid landscape of raw emotions.

“Calm yourself,” he said while she teetered crazily and fought down the screams that were tearing through her.

“But wh-who—” she broke off and tried to swallow.

“I thought you were expecting me,” he repeated.

“I ... expecting you?”

He nodded and took her hands. Against his, her palms felt chilled and moist. “We had an engagement.”

She opened her mouth slightly and shook her head.

“At twelve forty—” He released one of her hands to look at his watch. “And here I am, on the dot.”

“No,” she said, yanking herself away. “No, this is impossible. We have no engagement. I don’t know

you.”

“You don’t recognize me, Sidra? Well—that’s odd; but I think you’ll recollect who I am before long.”

“But who are you?”

“I shan’t tell you. You’ll have to remember yourself.”

A little calmer, she inspected his features closely. Suddenly, with the rush of a waterfall, a blended sensation of attraction and repulsion surged over her. This man alarmed and fascinated her. She was filled with horror at his mere presence, yet intrigued and drawn.

At last she shook her head and said: “I still don’t understand. I never called for you, Mr. Whoever-you-are, and we had no engagement.”

“You most certainly did.”

“I most certainly did not!” she flared, outraged by his insolent assurance. “I wanted my old world. The same old world I’d always known—”

“But with one exception?”

“Y-yes—” Her furious glance faltered and the rage drained out of her. “Yes, with one exception.”

“And you prayed for the strength to make that exception?”

She nodded.

He grinned and took her arm. “Well, Sidra, then you did call for me and we did have an engagement. I’m the answer to your prayer.”

She suffered herself to be led through the narrow, steep-mounting passages, unable to break free of that magnetic leash. His touch on her arm was a frightening thing. Everything in you cried out against the misery and disgust—and yet another something in you welcomed it eagerly.

As they passed through the cloudy light of infrequent lamps, she watched him covertly. He was tall and magnificently built. Thick cords strained in his muscular neck at the slightest turn of his arrogant head. He was dressed in tweeds that had the texture of sandstone and gave off a pungent, peaty scent. His shirt was open at the collar, and where his chest showed it was thickly matted.

There were no servants about on the street floor of the castle. The man escorted her quietly through the graceful rooms to the foyer where he removed her coat from the closet and placed it around her shoulders. Suddenly he pressed his hard hands against her arms.

She tore herself away at last, one of the old rages sweeping over her. In the quiet gloom of the foyer she could see that he was still smiling, and it added fuel to her fury.

“Ah,” she cried, “what a fool I am ... to take you so for granted. ‘I prayed for you—’ you say. ‘I know you—’ what kind of booby do you think I am? Keep your hands off me!”

She glared at him, breathing heavily, and he made no answer. His expression remained unchanged. It's like those snakes, she thought, those snakes with the jeweled eyes. They coil in their impassive beauty and you can't escape the deadly fascination. It's like soaring towers that make you want to leap to earth—like keen, glittering razors that invite the tender flesh of your throat. You can't escape!

“Go on!” she screamed in a last desperate effort. “Get out of here! This is my world. It's all mine to do with as I choose. I want no part of your kind of rotten, arrogant swine!”

Swiftly, silently, he gripped her shoulders and brought her close to him. While he kissed her she struggled against the hard talons of his fingers and tried to force her mouth away from his. And yet she knew that if he had released her she could not have torn herself away from that savage kiss.

She was sobbing when he relaxed his grip and let her head drop back. Still in the affable tones of a casual conversation he said: “You want one thing in this world of yours, Sidra, and you must have me to help you.”

“In Heaven's name, who are you?”

“I'm that strength you prayed for. Now come along.”

Outside the night was pitch black, and after they had gotten into Sidra's roadster and started for London, the road was impossible to follow. As she edged the car cautiously along, Sidra was able at last to make out the limed white line that bisected the road, and the lighter velvet of the sky against the jet of the horizon. Overhead the Milky Way was a long smudge of powder.

The wind on her face was good to feel. Passionate, reckless and headstrong as ever, she pressed her foot on the accelerator and sent the car roaring down the dangerous dark road, eager for more of the cool breeze against her cheeks and brow. The wind tugged at her hair and sent it streaming back. The wind gusted over the top of the glass shield and around it like a solid stream of cold water. It whipped up her courage and confidence. Best of all, it recalled her sense of humor.

Without turning, she called: “What's your name?”

And dimly through the chattering breeze came his answer: “Does it matter?”

“It certainly does. Am I supposed to call you: ‘Hey!’ or ‘I say there—’ or ‘Dear sir—’

“Very well, Sidra. Call me Ardis.”

“Ardis? That's not English, is it?”

“Does it matter?”

“Don't be so mysterious. Of course it matters. I'm trying to place you.”

“I see.”

“D'you know Lady Sutton?”

Receiving no answer she glanced at him and received a slight chill. He did look mysterious with his head silhouetted against the star-filled sky. He looked out of place in an open roadster.

“D’you know Lady Sutton?” she repeated.

He nodded and she turned her attention back to the road. They had left the open country and were boring through the London suburbs. The little squat houses, all alike, all flat-faced and muddy-colored, whisked past with a muffled whump-whumpwhump, echoing’ back the drone of the engine.

Still gay, she asked: “Where are you stopping?”

“In London.”

“Where, in London.”

“Chelsea Square.”

“The Square? That’s odd. What number?”

“One hundred and forty-nine.”

She burst into laughter. “Your impudence is too wonderful,” she gasped, glancing at him again. “That happens to be my address.”

He nodded. “I know that, Sidra.”

Her laughter froze—not at the words, for she had hardly heard them. Barely suppressing another scream, she turned and stared through the windshield, her hands trembling violently on the wheel. For the man sat there in the midst of that howling turmoil of wind and not a hair of his head was moving.

“Merciful Heaven!” she cried in her heart, “what kind of mess did I—Who is this monster, this—Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy—Get rid of

him! I don’t want him. If I’ve asked for him, consciously or not, I don’t want him now. I want my world changed. Right now! I want him out of it!”

“It’s no use, Sidra,” he said.

Her lips twitched and still she prayed: “Get him out of here! Change anything—everything, only take him away. Let him vanish. Let the darkness and the void devour him. Let him dwindle, fade—”

“Sidra,” he shouted, “stop that!” He poked her violently. “You can’t get rid of me that way—it’s too late!”

She stopped as a final panic overtook her and congealed her brain.

“Once you’ve decided on your world,” Ardis explained carefully as though to a child, “you’re committed to it. There’s no changing your mind and making minor alterations. Weren’t you told?”

“No,” she whispered, “we weren’t told.”

“Well, now you know.”

She was mute, numb and wooden. Not so much wooden as putty. She followed his directions without a word; drove carefully to the little park of trees that was behind her house, and parked there. Very carefully, Ardis explained that they would have to enter the house through the servants' door.

"You don't," he said, "walk openly to murder. Only clever criminals in storybooks do that. We, in real life, find it best to be cautious."

Real life! she thought hysterically as they got out of the car. Reality! That Thing in the shelter— Aloud, she said: "You sound experienced."

"Through the park," he answered, touching her lightly on the arm. "We shan't be seen."

The path through the trees was narrow and the grass and prickly shrubs on either side were high. Ardis stepped aside and then followed her as she passed the iron gate and entered. He strode a few paces behind her.

"As to the experience," he said, "yes—I've had plenty. But then, you ought to know, Sidra."

She didn't know. She didn't answer. Trees, brush and grass were thick around her, and although she had traversed this park a hundred times, they were alien and distorted. They were not alive—no, thank God for that—she was not yet imagining things; but for the first time she realized how skeletal and haunted they looked. Almost as if each had participated in some sordid murder or suicide through the years.

Deeper into the park, a dank mist made her cough, and behind her, Ardis patted her back sympathetically. She quivered like a length of supple steel under his touch, and when she had stopped coughing and the hand still remained on her shoulder, she knew in another burst of terror what he would attempt here in the darkness.

She quickened her stride. The hand left her shoulder and hooked at her arm. She yanked her arm free and ran crazily down the path, stumbling on her stilt heels. There was a muffled exclamation from Ardis and she heard the swift pound of his feet as he pursued her.

The path led down a slight depression and past a marshy little pond. The earth turned moist and sucked at her feet with hollow grunts. In the warmth of the night her skin began to prickle and perspire, but the sound of his panting was close behind her.

Her breath was coming in gasps and when the path veered and began to mount, she felt her lungs would burst. Her legs were aching and it seemed that at the next instant she would flounder to the ground. Dimly through the trees, she made out the iron gate at the other side of the park, and with the little strength left to her she redoubled her efforts to reach it.

But what, she wondered dizzily, what after that? He'll overtake me in the street— Perhaps before the street—I should have turned for the car—I could have driven— He clutched at her shoulder as she passed the gate and she would have surrendered at that moment. Then she heard voices and saw figures on the street across from her. She cried: "Hello, there!" and ran to them, her shoes clattering on the pavement. As she came close, still free for the moment, they turned.

"So sorry," she babbled crazily, "thought I recognized you ... was walking through the par—"

She stopped short. Staring at her were Finchley, Braugh and Lady Sutton.

“Sidra darling! What the devil are you doing here?” Lady Sutton demanded. She cocked her gross head forward to examine Sidra’s face, then nudged at Braugh and Finchley with her elbows. “The girl’s been running through the park. Mark my words, Chris, she’s touched.”

“Looks like she’s been chevied,” Braugh answered. He stepped to one side and peered past Sidra’s shoulder, his white head gleaming in the starlight.

Sidra caught her breath at last and looked about uneasily. Ardis stood alongside her, calm and affable as ever. There was, she thought helplessly, no use trying to explain. No one would believe her. No one would help.

She said: “Just a bit of exercise. It was such a lovely night.”

“Exercise!” Lady Sutton snorted. “Now I know you’re cracked!”

Finchley said: “Why’d you pop off like that, Sidra? Bob was furious. We’ve just been driving him home.”

“I—” It was too insane. She’d seen Finchley vanish through the veil of fire less than an hour ago—vanish into the world of his own choosing. Yet here he was, asking questions.

Ardis murmured: “Finchley was in your world, too. He’s still here.”

“But that’s impossible!” Sidra exclaimed. “There can’t be two Finchleys.”

“Two Finchleys?” Lady Sutton echoed. “Now I know where you’ve been and gone, my girl! You’re drunk. Reeling, stinking drunk. Running through the park! Exercise! Two Finchleys!”

And Lady Sutton? But she was dead. She had to be! They’d murdered her less than— Again Ardis murmured: “That was another world ago, Sidra. This is your new world, and Lady Sutton belongs in it. Everyone belongs in it—except your husband.”

“But . . . even though she’s dead?”

Finchley started and asked: “Who’s dead?”

“I think,” Braugh said, “we’d better get her upstairs and put her to bed.”

“No,” Sidra said, “no—there’s no need—really! I’m quite all right.”

“Oh, let her be!” Lady Sutton grunted. She gathered her coat around her tub of a waist and moved off. “You know our motto, m’lads. ‘Never Interfere.’ See you and Bob at the shelter next week, Sidra. ‘Night—’”

“Good night.”

Finchley and Braugh moved off, too—the three figures merging with the shadows with the delicate shadings of a misty fade-out. And as they vanished, Sidra heard Braugh murmur: “The motto ought to be ‘Unashamed’!”

“Nonsense,” Finchley answered. “Shame is a sensation we seek like all others, it redu—”

Then they were gone.

And with a return of that horrible chill, Sidra realized that they had not seen Ardis—nor heard him—nor been aware even of his— “Naturally,” Ardis interrupted.

“But how, naturally?”

“You’ll understand later. Just now we’ve a murder before us.”

“No!” she cried, hanging back. “No!”

“How’s this, Sidra? Aftd after you’ve looked forward to this moment for so many years. Planned it. Feasted on it—”

“I’m ... too upset . . . unnerved.”

“You’ll be calmer. Come along.”

Together they walked a few steps down the narrow street, turned up the gravel path and passed the gate that led to the back court. As Ardis reached out for the knob of the servants’ door, he hesitated and turned a suffused face to her.

“This,” he said, “is your moment, Sidra. It begins now. This is the time when you break that chain and make payment for a life’s worth of agony. This is the day when you balance the account. Love is good—hate is better. Forgiveness is a trifling virtue—passion is all-consuming and the end-all of living!”

He pushed open the door, grasped her elbow and dragged her after him into the pantry. It was dark and filled with odd corners. They eased through the darkness cautiously, reached the swinging door that led to the kitchen, and pushed past it. Sidra stared and gagged. She uttered a faint moan and sagged against Ardis.

It had been a kitchen at one time. Now the stoves and sinks, cupboards and tables, chairs, closets and all loomed high and twisted like the distorted scenery of a nightmare jungle. A dull-blue spark glittered on the floor, and around it cavorted a score of silent shadows.

They were solidified smoke—semiliquid gas. Their translucent depths writhed and interplayed with the nauseating surge of living muck. Like looking through a microscope, Sidra thought in sick horror, at those creatures that foul corpse-blood; that scum a slack-water stream; that fill a swamp with noisome vapors—And most hideous of all, they were all in the wavering gusty image of her husband. Twenty Robert Peels, gesticulating obscenely and singing a whispered chorus:

“Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa Perfusus liquidis urget odoribus

Grato, Sidra, sub antro?”

“Ardis! What is this?”

“Don’t know yet, Sidra.”

“But these shapes!”

“We’ll find out.”

Twenty leaping vapors crowded around them, still chanting. Sidra and Ardis were driven forward and stood at the brink of that sapphire spark that burned in the air a few inches above the floor. Gaseous fingers pushed and probed at Sidra, pinched and prodded while the blue figures cavorted with hissing laughter, slapping their naked rumps in weird ecstasies.

A slash on Sidra’s arm made her start and cry out, and when she looked down, unaccountable beads of blood stood out on the white skin of her wrist. And even as she stared in disembodied enchantment, her wrist was raised to Ardis’ lips. Then his wrist was raised to her mouth and she felt the stinging salt of his blood on her lips.

“No!” she screamed. “I don’t believe this. You’re making me see this—”

She turned and ran from the kitchen toward the serving pantry. Ardis was close behind her. And the blue shapes still hissed a droning chorus:

“Qui nunc te fruitur credulus aurea:

Qui semper vacuum, semper amabilem,

Sperat, nescius aurae

Fallacis—”

When they reached the foot of the winding stairs that led to the upper floors, Sidra clutched at the balustrade for support. With her free hand she dabbed at her mouth to erase the salt taste that made her stomach crawl.

“I think I’ve an idea what all that was,” Ardis said.

She stared at him.

“A sort of betrothal ceremony,” he went on casually. “You’ve read of something like that before, haven’t you? Odd, wasn’t it—Some powerful influences in this house. Recognize those phantoms?”

She shook her head insanely. What was the use of thinking—talking?

“Didn’t, eh? We’ll have to see about this. I never cared for unsolicited haunting. We shan’t have any more of this tomfoolery in the future—” He mused for a moment, then pointed up the stairs. “Your husband’s up there, I think. Let’s continue.”

They trudged up the sweeping gloomy stairs, and the last vestiges of Sidra’s sanity struggled up, step

by step, with her.

One—You go up the stairs. Stairs leading up to what? More madness? That damned Thing in the shelter!

Two—this is hell, not reality.

Three—Or nightmare. Yes! Nightmare. Lobster last night. Where were we last night, Bob and I?

Four—Dear Bob. Why did I ever—And this Ardis. I know why he's so familiar. Why he almost speaks my thoughts. He's probably some— Five—Nice young man who plays tennis in real life. Distorted by a dream. Yes.

Six— Seven— “Don't run into it!” Ardis cautioned.

She halted in her tracks, and simply stared. There were no more screams or shudders left in her. She simply stared at the thing that hung with a twisted head from the beam over the stair landing. It was her husband, limp and slack, dangling at the end of a length of laundry rope.

The limp figure swayed ever so slightly, like the gentle swing of a massive pendulum. The mouth was wrinkled into a sardonic grin and the eyes popped from their sockets and glanced down at her with impudent humor. Vaguely, Sidra was aware that ascending steps behind it showed through the twisted form.

“Join hands,” the corpse said in sacrosanct tones.

“Bob!”

“Your husband?” Ardis exclaimed.

“Dearly beloved,” the corpse began, “we are gathered together in the sight of God and in the face of this company to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is commanded to be honorable among all men and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly—” The voice boomed on and on and on.

“Bob!” Sidra croaked.

“Kneel!” the corpse commanded.

Sidra flung her body to one side and ran stumbling up the stairs. She faltered for a gasping instant, then Ardis' strong hands grasped her. Behind them the shadowy corpse intoned: “I pronounce you man and wife—”

Ardis whispered: “We must be quick, now! Very quick!”

But at the head of the stairs Sidra made a last bid for liberty. She abandoned all hope of sanity, of understanding. All she wanted was freedom—and a place where she could sit in solitude, free of the passions that were hedging her in, gutting her soul. There was no word spoken, no gesture made. She drew herself up and faced Ardis squarely. This was one of the times, she understood, when you fought motionlessly.

For minutes they stood, facing each other in the dark hall. To their right was the descending well of the stairs; to the left, Sidra's bedroom; behind them, the short hallway that led to Peel's study—to the room where he was so unconsciously awaiting slaughter. Their eyes met, clashed and battled silently. And even as Sidra met that deep, gleaming glance, she knew with an agonizing sense of desperation that she would lose.

There was no longer any will, any strength, any courage left in her. Worse, by

some spectral osmosis it seemed to have drained out of her into the man that faced her. While she fought she realized that her rebellion was like that of a hand or a finger rebelling against its guiding brain.

Only one sentence she spoke: "For Heaven's sake! Who are you?"

And again he answered: "You'll find out—soon. But I think you know already. I think you know!"

Helpless, she turned and entered her bedroom. There was a revolver there and she understood she was to get it. But when she pulled open the drawer and yanked aside the piles of silk clothes to pick it up, the clothes felt thick and moist. As she shuddered, Ardis reached past her and picked up the gun. Clinging to the butt, a finger tight-clenched around the trigger, was a hand, the stump of a wrist clotted and torn.

Ardis clucked his lips impatiently and tried to pry the hand loose. It would not give. He pressed and twisted a finger at a time and still the sickening corpse-hand clenched the gun stubbornly. Sidra sat at the edge of the bed like a child, watching the spectacle with naïve interest, noting the way the broken muscles and tendons on the stump flexed as Ardis tugged.

There was a crimson snake oozing from under the closed bathroom door. It writhed across the hardwood floor, thickening to a small river as it touched her skirt so gently. As Ardis tossed the gun down angrily, he noted the stream. Quickly he stepped to the bathroom and thrust open the door, then slammed it a second later. He jerked his head at Sidra and said: "Come on!"

She nodded mechanically and arose, careless of the sopping skirt that smacked against her calves. At Peel's study she turned the doorknob carefully until a faint click warned her that the latch was open, then she pushed the door in. The leaf opened to reveal her husband's study in semi-darkness. The desk was before the high window curtains and Peel sat at it, his back to them. He was hunched over a candle or a lamp or some rosy light that enhaloed his body and sent streams of light flickering out. He never moved.

Sidra tiptoed forward, then hesitated. Ardis touched finger to lips and moved like a swift cat to the cold fireplace where he picked up the heavy bronze poker. He brought it to Sidra and held it out urgently. Her hand reached out of its own accord and took the cool metal handle. Her fingers gripped it as though they had been born for murder.

Against all that impelled her to advance and raise the poker over Peel's head, something weak and sick inside her cried out and prayed. Cried, prayed and moaned with the mewlings of a fevered child. Like spilt water, the last few drops of her self-possession trembled before they disappeared altogether.

Then Ardis touched her. His fingers pressed against the small of her back and a charge of bestiality shocked along her spine with cruel, jagged edges. Surging with hatred, rage and livid vindictiveness, she raised the poker high and crashed it down over the still-motionless head of her husband.

The entire room burst into a silent explosion. Lights flared and shadows whirled. Remorselessly, she

beat and pounded at the falling body that toppled out of the

chair to the floor. She struck again and again, her breath whistling hysterically, until the head was a mashed, bloodied pulp. Only then did she let the poker drop and reel back.

Ardis knelt beside the body and turned it over.

“He’s dead all right. This is the moment you prayed for, Sidra. You’re free!” She looked down in horror. Dully, from the crimsoned carpet, a slightly distorted corpse face stared back. It showed the drawn, high-strung features, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping over the brow in a sharp widow’s peak.

She moaned as understanding touched her.

The face said: “This is Sidra Peel. In this man whom you have slaughtered you have killed yourself—killed the only part of yourself worth saving.”

She cried: “Aieeee—” and clasped arms about herself, rocking in agony.

“Look well on me,” the face said. “By my death you have broken a chain— only to find another!”

And she knew. She understood. For though she still rocked and moaned in the agony that would be never-ending, she saw Ardis arise and advance on her with arms outstretched. His eyes gleamed and were pools of horror; and his reaching arms were tendrils of her own unslaked passion eager to infold her. And once infolded, she knew there would be no escape—no escape from this sickening marriage to her own lusts that would forever caress her.

So it would be forevermore in Sidra’s brave new world.

IV

After the others had passed the veil, Christian Braugh still lingered in the shelter. He lit another cigarette with a simulation of perfect aplomb, blew out the match, then called: “Er ... Mr. Thing?”

“What is it, Mr. Braugh?”

Braugh could not restrain a slight start at that voice sounding from nowhere. “I—well, the fact is, I stayed for a chat.”

“I thought you would, Mr. Braugh.”

“You did, eh?”

“Your insatiable hunger for fresh material is no mystery to me.”

“Oh!” Braugh looked around nervously. “I see.”

“Nor is there any cause for alarm. No one will overhear us. Your masquerade will remain undetected.”

“Masquerade!”

“You’re not a really bad man, Mr. Braugh. You’ve never belonged in the Sutton shelter clique.”

Braugh laughed sardonically.

“And there’s no need to continue your sham before me,” the voice continued in the friendliest manner. “I know the story of your many plagiarisms was merely another concoction from the fertile imagination of Christian Braugh.”

“You know?”

“Of course. You created that legend to obtain entree to the shelter. For years you’ve been playing the role of a lying scoundrel, even though your blood ran cold at times.”

“And do you know why I did that?”

“Naturally. As a matter of fact, Mr. Braugh, I know almost everything; but I do confess that one thing still confuses me.”

“What’s that?”

“Why, in that devouring appetite for fresh material, were you not content to work as other authors do? Why this almost insane desire for unique material—for absolutely untrodden fields? Why were you willing to pay such a bitter and often exorbitant price for a few, ounces of novelty?”

“Why—” Braugh sucked in smoke and gushed it out past clenched teeth. “I’ll tell you why. It’s something that’s been torturing me all my life. A man is born with imagination.”

“Ah . . . imagination.”

“If his imagination is slight, a man will always find the world a source of deep and infinite wonder, a place of many delights. But if his imagination is strong, vivid, restless, he finds the world a sorry place indeed—a drab jade beside the wonders of his own creations!”

“These are wonders past all imagining.”

“For whom? Not for me, my invisible friend. Nor for any earth-bound, fleshbound creature. Man is a pitiful thing. Born with the imagination of gods and forever pasted to a round lump of spittle and clay. I have within me the uniqueness, the ego, the fertile loam of a timeless spirit . . . and all that richness is wrapped in a parcel of quickly rotting skin!”

“Ego-” mused the voice. “That is something which, alas, none of us can understand. Nowhere in all the knowable cosmos is it to be found but on your planet, Mr. Braugh. It is a frightening thing that convinces me at times that yours is the race that will—” The voice broke off abruptly.

“That will—” Braugh prompted.

“Come,” said the Thing briskly, “there is less owing you than the others and I shall give you the benefit of my experience. Let me help you select a reality.’,”

Braugh pounced on the word: “Less?”

And again he was brushed aside. “Will you have another reality in your own cosmos? I can offer you vast worlds, tiny worlds; great creatures that shake space and fill the voids with their thunders, little creatures of charm and perfection that barely touch the ear with the sensitive timbre of their tinkling. Will you care for terror? I can give you a reality of shudders. Beauty? I can show you realities of infinite ecstasy. Pain. Torture. Any sensation. Name one, several, all. I will shape you a reality to outdo even the giant intellect that is assuredly yours.”

“No-” Braugh answered at length. “The senses are only senses at best—and in time they tire of anything. You cannot satisfy the imagination with whipped cream in new forms and flavors.”

“Then I can take you to worlds of extra dimensions that will stun your imagination. There is a region I know that will entertain you forever with incongruity—

where, if you sorrow, you scratch your ear; where, if you love, you eat a potato; where, if you die, you burst out laughing— “There is a dimension I have seen where one can assuredly perform the impossible—where creatures daily compete in the composition of paradox and where the mere feat of turning oneself mentally inside out is known as ‘chrythna,’ which is to say, ‘corny’ in the American jargon.

“Do you want to probe the emotions in classical order? I can take you to a dimension of twenty-seven planes where one by one, *seriatim et privatim*, you may exhaust the intricate nuances of the twenty-seven primary emotions—and thence go on to infinite combinations and permutations. Come, which will you take?”

“None,” Braugh said impatiently. “It is obvious, my friend, that you do not understand the ego of man. The ego is not a childish thing to be satisfied with toys; and yet it is a childish thing in that it yearns after the unattainable—”

“Yours seems to be a childish thing in that it does not laugh. You have no sense of humor, Mr. Braugh.”

“The ego,” Braugh continued abstractedly, “desires only what it cannot hope to attain. Once a thing is attainable, it is no longer desired. Can you grant me a reality where I may possess something which I desire because I cannot possibly possess it; and by that same possession not break the qualifications of my desire? Can you do this?”

“I’m afraid,” the voice answered hesitantly, “that your imagination reasons too deviously for me.”

“Ah,” Braugh murmured, half to himself. “I was afraid of that. Why does the universe seem to be run by second-rate individuals not half so clever as myself? Why this mediocrity in the appointed authorities?”

“You seek to attain the unattainable,” the voice said in reasonable tones, “and by that act not to attain it. The limitations are within yourself. Would you be changed?”

“No ... no, not changed.” Braugh shook his head. He stood for a moment deep in thought, then

sighed and tamped out his cigarette. “There’s only one solution for my problem.”

“And that is?”

“Erasure. If you cannot satisfy a desire, you must explain it away. If a man cannot find love, he must write a psychological treatise on passion. I shall do much the same thing—”

He shrugged and moved toward the veil. There was a slight motion behind him and the voice asked: “Where does that ego of yours take you, O man?”

“To the truth of things,” Braugh called. “If I cannot slake my yearning, at least I shall find out why I yearn.”

“You’ll find the truth only in hell, my friend.”

“How so?”

“Because truth is always hell.”

“Nevertheless I’m going there—to hell or wherever truth is to be found.”

“May you find the answers pleasant, O man.” “Thank you.”

“And may you learn to laugh.”

But Braugh no longer heard, for he had passed the veil.

And he found himself standing before a high desk—a bench, almost—as high as the top of his head. Around him was nothing else. It looked as though a sulphurous fog had filled the room, concealing everything but this clerkly bench. Braugh tilted his head back and looked up. Staring down at him from the other side was a tiny little face, ancient as sin, whiskered and cockeyed. It was on a shriveled little head that was covered with a high-pointed hat. Like a sorcerer’s cap. Or a dunce cap, Braugh thought.

Dimly, behind the head, he made out towering shelves of books and files labeled: A—AB, AC—AD, and so on. There was also a gleaming black pot of ink and a rack of quill pens. An enormous hourglass completed the picture. Inside the hourglass a spider had spun a web and was crawling shakily across sand-clotted strands.

The little man croaked: “A-mazing! A-stonishing! Incredible!”

Braugh still stared.

The little man hunched forward like Richard Crookback in an amateur play and got his seamed, comical face as close as possible to Braugh’s. He reached down a knobby finger and poked Braugh gingerly. Abruptly he tumbled backward and bawled: “THAMM—UZ! DA—GON! RIMM—ON!”

There was a busy bustle and three more little men bounced up behind the desk and gaped at Braugh. The staring went on for minutes.

“All right,” Braugh said at last. “That’s enough gawping. Say something. Do something!”

“It speaks!” they shouted in unison. “Its alive!” They pressed four noses together and began to gabble swiftly. It went: “Most astonishing thing Dagon that Belial you’d think there must be some explanation if you think so Thammuz can’t say!”

Then it stopped.

One said: “First thing is to find out how it got here.”

“Not at all. Find out what it is.”

The third said: “Find out where it’s from.”

“I don’t know about that, Belial. Cart before the horse, you know.”

They raved and again turned noses together. The gabble was very loud: “THE IMPORTANT THING’S WHERE NOT AT ALL IT’S WHERE FROM YOU ‘RE CRAZY YOU’RE BOTH CRAZY LISTEN TO ME HOW CAN YOU OH ALL RIGHT ALL RIGHT ALL RIGHT!”

Then apparently they came to a decision. The number one sorcerer pointed an accusing finger at Braugh and said: “What are you doing here?”

“The point is,” Braugh countered, “where am I?”

The little man turned to brothers Thammuz, Dagon and Rimmon. He smirked and said: “It wants to know where it is.”

Dagon said: “Silly animal, ain’t he, Belial?”

Rimmon said: “Oh, get on with it, Belial. Can’t hold up business all day.”

“You!” Belial swiveled on Braugh. “Listen carefully. This is General Administration, Universal Control Center. Belial, Rimmon, Dagon and Thammuz, acting for Satan.”

“Tuts,” said Braugh, “I came here to see Satan.”

“It wants to see Satan!” They were utterly appalled. Then Dagon jabbed the others with his sharp little elbows and placed a finger alongside his nose with a shrewd look.

“Spy!” he said. To elaborate, he jabbed one finger significantly toward the ceiling, then gave a shrewd look.

“Could be . . . could be,” Belial said, flipping the pages of a giant ledger. “It certainly don’t belong here. No deliveries scheduled today. It’s not dead because it don’t smell. It’s not alive because only the dead ones come here. Question still is: What is it? What do we do with it?”

Thammuz said: “Divination. Only answer.” “Right!”

“Great mind, that Thammuz!” Belial glared at Braugh and snapped: “Name?” “Christian Braugh.”

“Ha!” cried Dagon. “Onomancy—C, third letter—H, eighth letter—and so

on. Take total sum. Double it and add ten. Divide by two, then subtract original total—”

They added and divided. Quills scratched on parchment and a bumbling, muttering noise droned. At last Belial held up the scrap and scrutinized it carefully. They all scrutinized it. As one man they shrugged and tore the parchment up.

“I can’t understand it,” Dagon complained. “We always get five for an answer.”

“Never mind!” Belial glared at Braugh. “When born?”

“December eighteenth, nineteen thirteen.”

“Time?”

“Twelve fifteen, a.m.”

“Star Charts!” screamed Thammuz. “We’ll try Genethliacs.”

They tore at the books behind them and took out huge sheets that unrolled like window shades. This time it took them fifteen minutes to produce a scrap of parchment which they again examined carefully and again tore up.

Rimmon said: “It is odd.”

Belial said: “It gets odder and odder.”

Thammuz said: “We better take it into the laboratory for a check. The old boy will be plenty peeved if we muff this one.”

They leaned over the bench and beckoned imperatively. Braugh followed their directions, walked around the side of the bench and found himself before a small door set in the books. The four little sorcerers bounced down from the desk and crowded him through. They just about came up to his waist.

Braugh entered the so-called laboratory. It was a circular room with a low

ceiling, tile floors and walls covered with cupboards, shelves, glass gimmicks, alchemists’ gadgets, books, bones and bottles. In the center was a large flat rock, the shape of a millstone. There was a slight depression in the center that had a charred look. But there wasn’t any chimney over it.

Belial rooted around in a corner and came out with an armful of dry sticks.

“Altar fire,” he said and tripped. The sticks went flying. Braugh solemnly bent to pick up the pieces of wood.

“Sortilege!” Rimmon squawked. He yanked a lizard out of a box and began writing on its back with a piece of charcoal, noting the order in which Braugh picked up the scattered bits of wood.

“Which way is east?” Rimmon demanded, crawling after the lizard. Thammuz pointed directly overhead. Rimmon nodded curt thanks and began to figure rapidly on the lizard’s back. Gradually his hand moved slower. By the time Braugh had helpfully placed the bundle of wood on the altar, Rimmon was holding the lizard by the tail, gawping at his notations with a look of sickly wonder. Finally he shoved the lizard under the wood pile. Instantly it caught fire.

Rimmon said: “Salamander. Not bad, eh?” and swaggered off.

Dagon screamed: “Pyromancy!” and ran to the flames. He stuck his nose within an inch of the fire and mumbled rapidly in a long, droning whisper. Belial fidgeted uneasily and muttered to Thammuz: “Last time he tried that he fell asleep.”

The droning faded out and Dagon, eyes blissfully closed, fell forward into the crackling flames.

“Did it again!” Belial snapped irritably.

They ran up and dragged Dagon out of the flames. After they had slapped his face awhile, his whiskers stopped burning. Thammuz sniffed the stench of burned hair, then pointed overhead to the drifting smoke.

“Capnomancy!” he said. “It can’t fail. We’ll find out what this thing is yet!”

All four joined hands and danced around the rising smoke cloud, puffing at it with little pursed lips. Eventually the smoke disappeared. Thammuz gave a sour look and said: “It failed.”

There was a dead silence and all glared angrily at Braugh. He endured it about as long as he could, then he said: “What’s up, lads? Anything wrong?”

“It wants to know if anything’s wrong,” Belial sneered.

“Deceitful thing!” said Dagon.

“Not at all,” Braugh said. “I’m not hiding anything. Of course I don’t believe a particle of what’s happening here, but that don’t matter.”

“Don’t matter! What d’you mean, you don’t believe?”

“Why,” Braugh said, “you can’t make me believe that you charlatans have anything to do with truth—much less His Black Majesty, Father Satan.”

“Anything to do with— Why, you blasted booby, we’re Satan—”

A second later they looked scared, lowered their voices and added: “So to speak.”

Belial glanced around uneasily and said to unseen ears; “No offense—”

“Merely referring to power of attorney,” Dagon trembled.

“I see,” Braugh said. “And how, exactly, am I deceiving you?”

“How? We’ll tell you how! You’ve got a devil with you that obstructs official divination. You’re a cacodaemon or maybe a barghest or an ouphe or an incubus. But we’ll get to the heart of the matter. We’ll ferret you out. We’ll track you down. We’ll make you talk. Bring on the iron!”

Well, Braugh thought, what’s all this? Bring on the iron. Sounds like dancing girls.

Dagon trundled out a little wheelbarrow filled with lumps of iron. To Braugh he said: “Take one—any one.” Braugh picked up a heavy lump of blue-gray metal and handed it to Dagon, who snatched it from him irritably and plunked it into a small vat. He placed the vat over the fire and got a pair of bellows which he pumped energetically into the flames. The iron heated white-hot. They nipped it out with pincers and waved it over Braugh’s head, chanting: “Sideromancy! Sideromancy! Sideromancy!”

After a while, Dagon said: “No soap.”

“Let’s try Molybdomancy,” Belial suggested.

They dropped the iron into a pot of solid lead. It hissed and fumed as though it had been dropped into cold water. Presently the lead melted. Belial tipped the pot over and the silvery liquid streamed slowly across the floor.

“Lead, lead, beautiful lead!” chanted Rimmon. “Tell us the story of this creature. Is it a man? Is it a—”

A crack, loud and sharp as a pistol shot, answered him. One of the floor tiles shattered to pieces, the lead dropped with a gurgle, and the next instant a fountain of water hissed and spurted up through the hole.

Belial said: “We busted the pipes again.”

“Pegomancy!” Dagon cried eagerly. He approached the fountain with a reverent look, knelt before it and began to drone. In thirty seconds his eyes closed rapturously and he fell forward into the water. They dragged him back and wrung out his beard.

“Got to get him dry,” Thammuz said hastily. “He’ll catch his death. Get him over to the fire.”

Taking Dagon by each arm, Thammuz and Belial ran him over to the altar fire. They circled the bright blaze once, and as they were about to stop, Dagon choked:

“Keep me moving. We’ll try Gyromancy. There’s got to be some answer to what that thing is!”

They made another circle while Dagon muttered: “Hubbble-ka-bubble-ka-hubble-ka-bubble—”

Suddenly Rimmon, who was squatting over the broken tile, paddling ineffectually at the food, stopped and said: “Ui!”

The others stopped, too, and said: “Oi!”

Braugh turned.

A girl had just entered the door. She was short, red-headed, and delightfully the right side of plump. Her copper hair was done up on top of her head. She was breathing with indignant short breaths that

made her look as though she would shake to pieces. She wore an expression of utter exasperation and nothing else.

“So!” she rapped out. “At it again!”

No answer. Much quartet trembling.

“How many times—” she began, then stopped and bit her lip. Abruptly she ran to the wall, seized a prodigious glass retort and hurled it straight and true. When the pieces stopped falling, she said: “How many times have I told you to cut out this nonsense or I’d report you!”

“N-nonsense?” quavered Belial. He tried to stanch his bleeding cuts and attempted an innocent smile. “Why Astarte, wh-what d’ you m-mean?”

“You know damned well what I mean! I will not have you smashing my ceiling, dripping things down on my office. First molten lead—then water. Four weeks work ruined. My new Sheraton desk ruined!” She hitched around and exhibited a long red sear that ran straight down from shoulder to hip. “Twelve inches of skin—ruined!”

Belial went: “Tsk-tsk!”

Braugh went: “My-my!”

The red-headed Astarte turned on him and lanced him with level green eyes. “Who’s this?”

“We don’t know,” Belial began eagerly in an effort to change the subject. “That’s why we were . . . er—Well, it just walked up to my desk, and .

and that’s all.”

As Braugh stepped forward he heard Rimmon whisper: “Might try Parthenomancy . . . that is, if Astarte is—”

Then he took the girl’s hand and said: “The name is Braugh. Christian Braugh.”

Her hand was cool and firm. She said: “The name is Astarte. I, too, am a Christian.”

“Satan’s crew Christians?”

“Why not?”

There was no answer to that. He said: “Is there some place where we can get away from these Zanies?”

“There’s always my office.”

“I like offices.”

And he also liked Astarte. She ushered him into her place, on the floor below, swept a pile of papers and books off a chair, and casually invited him to sit down. Then she sprawled before the ruin of her desk and after one malevolent glance at the ceiling, listened to his story.

“As I get this,” she said, “you’re looking for Satan. Evil Lord of the Universe. Well, this is the only hell there is, and ours is the only Satan there is. You’re in the right place.”

Braugh was perplexed. “Hell?” he inquired. “Fire, brimstone, and so forth?”

“There are the business offices,” she explained. “If you’re looking for torments—”

“No,” Braugh interrupted hastily. “I thank you. No torments.”

She smiled at his solemn face and went on: “All this brings us to something rather vital. Just how did you get here? Dead?”

Braugh shook his head.

“Hm-m-m—” She made an interested survey. “You’ll bear more looking into. I’ve never had anything to do with the live ones. You are alive, aren’t you?”

“Very much so.”

“And what business have you with Father Satan?”

“The truth,” Braugh said. “I was granted a wish. I wished to discover the truth of all. I was sent here. Why Father Satan, as you call him, should be official purveyor of truth rather than—” He hesitated, then delicately indicated heaven. “I don’t know. But to me the truth is worth any price, so I should like very much to have an interview.”

Astarte rapped glittering nails on the desk and smiled broadly. “This,” she said, “is going to be delicious!” She arose, flung open the door of her office and pointed down the corridor. “Straight ahead,” said Astarte, “then turn to the left. Keep on and you can’t miss.”

“I’ll see you again?” Braugh asked as he set off.

“You’ll see me again,” Astarte laughed.

This, Braugh thought as he trudged along the corridor, is all too ridiculous. You pass a veil intending to seek the Citadel of Truth. You are entertained by four ridiculous creatures and by a red-head goddess. You ask to see the Knower of All Things and discover Him to be Satan rather than God. Then off you go down a musty corridor, turn left and then straight ahead.

What of this yearning of mine? What of these truths I seek? Is there no solemnity, no dignity anywhere? Is not Satan a fearful, thunderous deity? Why all this low comedy—this saturnalian air of slapstick that pervades the Underworld Offices of Satan?

He turned the corner to the left and kept on. The short hall ended abruptly in a pair of green baize doors. Almost timidly Braugh pushed them open and to his great relief found himself merely entering an open stone bridge—rather like the Bridge of Sighs, he thought. Around him was nothing but that same sulphurous mist. Behind him was the giant façade of the building he had just left—a wall of brimstone blocks. Before him was a smallish building shaped like a globe.

He stepped quickly across the bridge, for those misty depths on either side of him made him queasy.

He paused only a moment before a second pair of baize doors to gather his courage, then tried to smile and pushed them in. You do not, he muttered to himself, come before Satan with a smirk in your heart; but there is an air of general insanity in hell that has touched me.

It was a large office—a kind of file room, and for the second time Braugh was relieved at having put the awesome moment a little further into the future. The office was round as a planetarium and was filled with the largest and most complicated adding machine Braugh had ever seen in his life. The thing was all keyboard. A long platform before the banks of keys buckled and creaked like a painter's scaffolding as a dried-out little clerk wearing glasses the size of binoculars rushed up and back, punching keys with lightning speed.

More as an excuse to put off the meeting than anything else, Braugh watched the little old man scurry before those keys, punching them so rapidly they chat-

tered like a dozen stuttering motors. This little old chap, Braugh thought, has probably put in an eternity figuring out sin totals and death totals and all sorts of statistical totals. He looks like a total himself.

Aloud, Braugh called: "Hello, there!"

Without wavering, the clerk said: "What is it?" His voice was drier than his skin.

Braugh said: "Those figures can wait a moment, can't they?"

"Sorry," said the little old man. He hustled down the scaffolding on a mad run.

"Will you stop a moment!" Braugh shouted.

The clerk paused and turned, removing the enormous binoculars very slowly.

"Now—that's better," Braugh said. "See here, my man, I'd like to get in to see Satan. His Black Majesty, Satan—"

"That's me," said the little man.

"Braugh said: "G-Gug—"

For a fleeting instant the dried-out face flickered into a smile. "Yes, that's me, son. I'm Satan."

And, despite all his imagination, Braugh had to believe.

He slumped down on the lowermost tread of the steps that led up to the scaffold. Satan chuckled faintly and touched a clutch on the gigantic adding machine. Instantly there was a click of gears and with the sound of free-wheeling the machine began to cluck softly like a contented hen.

His Diabolic Majesty came creaking down the stairs and seated himself alongside Braugh. He took out an old silk handkerchief and began polishing his glasses. He was just a nice little old man sitting friendly like alongside Braugh. At last he said: "What's on your mind, son?"

"W-well, Satan—" Braugh began.

"You can call me Father, son."

“B-but why should I? I mean—” Braugh broke off in embarrassment.

“Well now, son, I guess you’re a little worried about that heaven-and-hell business, eh?”

Braugh nodded.

Satan clicked his tongue and shook his head dubiously. “Don’t know what to do about that,” he said. “Fact is, son, it’s all the same thing. Naturally I let it get around in certain quarters that there’s two places. Got to, to keep certain folks on their toes. But the fact is, it’s not really so. I’m all there is, son. God or Satan or Siva or Official Co-ordinator or Nature—or whatever you want to call it.”

With a sudden rush of good feeling toward this friendly old man, Braugh said:

“I call you a fine old man!”

“Well—that’s nice of you, son. Glad you feel that way. You understand, of course, that we couldn’t let everyone see me that way. Might instill disrespect.”

“Y-yes, sir, I see.”

“Got to have efficiency.” The little old man went: Tsk! and shook his head. “Got to frighten folks now and then. Got to have respect, you understand. Can’t run things without respect.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Got to have efficiency. Can’t be running things all day long, all year long, all eternity long, without efficiency. Can’t have efficiency without respect.”

Again Braugh said: “Yes, sir—” While within him a hideous uncertainty grew.

This was a nice old man—but this was also a maudlin old man. His Satanic

Majesty was a tired creature much duller and not nearly so clever as Christian

Braugh.

“What I always say,” the old man went on, rubbing his knee reflectively, “is that love and all that—you can have ‘em. They’re nice, of course, but I’ll take efficiency any time. Yes, indeed . . . any time . . . leastways, for a body in my position. Now then, son, what was on your mind?”

Mediocrity, Braugh thought grimly. He said: “The Truth, Father Satan. I came seeking the truth.”

“And what do you want with the truth, Christian?”

“I just want to know it, Father Satan. I came seeking it. Want to know why we are, why we live, why we yearn—I want to know all that.”

“Well, now”—the old man chuckled—“that’s quite an order, son. Yes, sir, quite an order indeed.”

“Can you tell me, Father Satan?”

“A little, son, just a little. What was it you wanted to know mostly?”

“What there is inside of us that makes us seek the unattainable!” Braugh cried with passion. “What are those forces that pull and tug and surge within us? What is this ego of mine that gives me no rest, that seeks no rest, that frets at turbulence and yet seeks nothing but turbulence. What is all this?”

“Why,” the old man said, pointing to his adding machine. “It’s that gadget over there. It runs everything.”

“That!”

“Yes. That.”

“It runs everything?”

“Everything that I run—and I run everything there is.” The old man chuckled again, then held out the binoculars. “You’re an unusual boy, Christian. First person that ever said a kind word for old Father Satan. First person that ever had the decency to pay the old man a visit. I’ll return the favor. Here!”

Wondering, Braugh accepted the glasses.

“Put ‘em on.” said the old man.

And then the wonder began, for as Braugh slipped the glasses over his head he found himself peering with the eyes of the universe at all the universe. And the adding machine was no longer a machine, but a vastly complex marionetteers crossbar from which an infinity of shimmering silver threads descended.

And with his all-seeing eyes, with the spectacles of Satan, Braugh perceived how each thread attached itself to the nape of the neck of a creature and how each living entity danced the dance of life to the tune of Father Satan’s efficient machine. ,

Wondering, he stumbled up to the scaffold and reached toward the banks of keys. One key he pressed and on a pale planet a creature hungered and killed. A

second key and it felt remorse. A third, and it forgot. A fourth, and a half a continent away another entity arose five minutes early and so began a chain of events that culminated in discovery and hideous punishment for the murderer.

Slowly Braugh backed away from the adding machine and in a kind of horror slipped the glasses up to his brow. The machine went on clucking, and only vaguely did he note that the meticulous chronometer on the wall had ticked away a space of three months’ time.

“This,” he thought, “is ghastliest of all. We were puppets. We danced the dance of death in life, for we were little better than dead things hung from a string. Up here an old man, not overly intelligent, clicks a few keys, and down there we dance on our strings and take it for a thousand things—for fate, for free will, for Karma, for evolution, for nature, for a thousand false things.

“And none of us knew or knows or will care to know the truth—that there is neither reason, nor beauty, nor sanity to life. That all our mysterious yearning is the push of a decrepit finger on a tab. Oh—it’s a bitter thing, this sour discovery. It’s a bitter thing always to yearn after truth and find it to be

shoddy!”

He glanced down. Old Father Satan was still seated on the steps, but his head slumped a little to one side, his eyes were half closed and he murmured indistinctly about work and rest and not enough of it.

“You’re a good boy, Christian,” the old man mumbled, “a good boy—” And revolt stirred in Braugh. “This isn’t fair!” he cried. “Father Satan!” “Yes, my boy?” The old man roused himself slightly.

“This is true? We all dance to your key-tapping?” “All of you, my boy. All of you.”

“And although we think we are free, yet we dance to your tune?”

“You all think yourselves free, Christian, and yet you all dance to Father Satan’s playing.”

“Then, Father, grant me one thing—one very small thing. There is in a small corner of your mighty kingdom a very tiny planet . . . a very insignificant speck called the Earth—”

“Earth? Earth? Can’t say I recollect it off-hand, son, but I could look it up.”

“No, don’t bother, Father Satan. It’s there. Only grant me this favor—break the cords that bind it. Let it go free!”

“Now, son, don’t be foolish. I can’t do that.”

“In all your kingdom,” Braugh pleaded, “there are souls too numerous to count. There are suns and planets too vast to measure. Surely this one tiny bit of dust with its paltry few people—You who own so much can surely part with so little!”

“No, my boy, couldn’t do it. Sorry—”

“You who alone knows freedom,” Braugh cried. “Would you deny it to others?”

But the Co-ordinator of All slumbered.

“This, then, is His Satanic Majesty,” Braugh thought. “This likable, simple old man is the one free agent in an entire cosmos. This is the answer to my seeking, and behold, the answer sleeps!”

Braugh grimly slipped the glasses back over his eyes. Let him slumber then,

Book of Maart; XIII:29—37. while Braugh, Satan pro tem, takes over. Oh, we shall be repaid for this disappointment. We shall have a giddy time writing novels in flesh and blood! And perhaps, if we can find the cord that leads to my neck and search out the proper key in all these billions, we may do something to free Christian Braugh!

He turned from the keyboard and craned his head over his shoulder, and even as his eyes searched, he stopped short, stunned, transfixed. His eyes ran up, then down, then up again. His hands began to tremble, then his arms, and finally his whole body shuddered uncontrollably. For the first time in his life he began to laugh, and the hysterical peals rang through the vast-domed room.

And Father Satan awoke and cried anxiously: “Christian! What is it? What is this laughter?”

Laughter of frustration? Laughter of relief? Laughter of promise? He could not tell as he shook at the sight of that slender tendril that stretched from the nape of Satan's neck and turned him, too, into a capering puppet. A silver thread that stretched upward into the infinite heights toward some other vaster machine hidden in the still unknowable reaches of the cosmos— The blessedly unknowable cosmos.

V

Now in the beginning all was darkness. There was neither land nor sea nor sky nor the circling stars. There was nothing. Then came Yaldabaoth and rent the light from the darkness. And the darkness He gathered up and formed into the night and the skies. And the light He gathered up and formed into the Sun and the stars. Then from the flesh and the blood of His blood did Yaldabaoth form the earth and all things upon it.

But the children of Yaldabaoth were new and green to living and unlearned, and the race did not bear fruit. And as the children of Yaldabaoth diminished in numbers they cried out unto their Lord: "Grant us a sign, Great God, that we may know how to increase and multiply! Grant us a sign, O Lord, that Thy good and mighty race may not perish from Thine earth!"

And Lo, Yaldabaoth withdrew himself from the face of his importunate people and they were sore at heart and sinful, thinking their Lord had forsaken them. And their paths were the paths of evil until a prophet arose whose name was Maart. Then did Maart gather the children of Yaldabaoth around him and spoke to them, saying: "Evil are thy ways, O people of Yaldabaoth, to doubt thy God. For He has given a sign of faith unto you."

Then gave they answer, saying: "Where is this sign?"

And Maart went into the high mountains and with him was a vast concourse of people. Nine days and nine nights did they travel even unto the peak of Mount Sinar. And at the crest of Mount Sinar all were struck with wonder and fell to their knees, crying: "Great is God! Great are His works!"

For Lo, before them blazed a mighty curtain of fire.

Pass the veil toward what reality? There's no sense trying to make up my mind. I cannot. God knows, that's been the agony of living for me—trying to make up my mind. How can I when I've felt nothing . . . when nothing's touched me— ever! Take this or take that. Take coffee or tea. Buy the black gown or the silver. Marry Lord Buckley or live with Freddy Witherton. Let Finchley make love to me or stop posing for him. No—there's no sense even trying.

How it glitters in the doorway. Like silk moire or rainbow lamé. There goes Sidra. Passed through as though nothing was there. Doesn't seem to hurt. That's good. God knows I could stand anything except being hurt. No one left but Bob and myself—and he doesn't seem to be in any hurry. My turn now, I suppose. But where to?

To nowhere?

Yes—that's it. To nowhere!

In this world I'm leaving there's never been any place for me. There was nothing I could do; nothing I ever wanted to do. The world wanted nothing from me but my beauty. It had no need of me. Nothing but to pose naked while nearsighted little men smudged pictures on canvas.

I want to be useful. I want to belong. Perhaps if I belonged—if living had some purpose for me, this lump of ice in my heart might melt. I could learn to feel things—enjoy things. Even learn to fall in love.

Yes—that's it. To nowhere!

Let the reality that needs me, that wants me, that can use me . . . let that reality have me and call me to itself. For if I must choose, I know I shall choose wrong again. And if I am not wanted . . . anywhere; if I go through to wander forever in blank time and space . . . still am I better off.

Take me, you who want me and need me!

How cool the veil . . . like scented sprays caressing the skin.

And even as the multitude knelt in prayer, Maart cried aloud: "Rise, ye children of Yaldabaoth, and behold!"

Then did all arise and were struck dumb and trembled. For through the curtain of fire stepped a beast that chilled the hearts of all. To the height of eight cubits it stood and its skin was pink and white as nacre. The hair of its head was yellow and its body was long and curving like unto a sickly tree. And all was covered with slack folds of white fur.

Book of Maart; XIII: 38—39

God in Heaven!

Is this the reality that called me? This the reality that needs me?

That scarlet sun . . . so high . . . with its blood-red evil eye. Mountaintops like pain-racked titans. Towering mounds of gray slime—The scabrous sheen

of valley floors—The pervading sickroom stench of fetid ruination— And those monstrous creatures crowding around me—like gorillas made of black,

rotting coal. Not animal, not human. As though man had fashioned beasts not too

well—or beasts had fashioned men still worse. They have a familiar look to them, these monstrosities. The landscape has a familiar look. Somewhere I have seen all this before. Somehow I have been here before. In dreams of death—Yes— This is a reality of death and twisted shadows.

Again the multitude cried out: “Glory to Yaldabaoth!” and at the sound of the sacred name, the beast turned toward the curtain of flames whence it had come. And Behold! The curtain was gone.

Book of Maart; XIII: 40.

No retreat?

No way out?

No way back to sanity?

But it was behind me a second ago, the veil! No escape—Listen to the sounds they make. The swilling of swine in muck. This can’t be real. No reality was ever so horrible. This is all a ghastly trick. Like the one we played on Lady Sutton. I’m in the shelter now. Bob Peel’s given us a new kind of hashish or opium—I’m lying on the couch dreaming and groaning. Presently I’ll be awake—Before they come any closer— I must awaken!

With a loud and piercing cry, the beast of the fire ran through the multitude. Through all the gathered thousands it ran and thundered down the mountainside. And the shrill sound of its cries was as the brazen clangor of beaten shields.

And as it passed under the low boughs of the mountain trees, the children of Yaldabaoth cried out in new alarm; for the beast shed its white furred hide in a manner horrible to behold. And the skin remained clinging to the trees. And the beast ran farther, a hideous pink-and-white thing.

Book of Maart; XIII: 4 1—43.

Quick! Quick! Run through them before they clutch me. Down the mountainside! If this is a nightmare, running will awaken me. If this is reality—But it can’t be. That so cruel a thing should happen to me—Were the gods jealous of my beauty? Jealous of the pride I took in my beauty? No. The gods are never jealous.

My dressing gown!

Gone.

No time to go back for it. Run naked, then—Listen to them howl at me—Raven at me. Down! Down! Quickly and down. This rotten soft offal earth sucks my feet like a leech’s mouth. Like the pulsating tendrils of an octopus.

They’re following.

Why can't I wake up?

My breath—like knives in my chest that dance quickstep of cutting torture.

Why can't I wake up?

Close! I hear them. Close!

WHY CAN'T I WAKE UP?

And Maart cried aloud: "Take you this beast for an offering to our Lord Yaldabaoth!"

Then did the multitude raise stout courage and gird its loins. With clubs and stones all pursued the beast down the jagged slopes of Mount Sinar, chanting the name of the Lord.

And on a small plateau stout warriors pursued it until a shrewdly thrown stone brought the beast to its knees, still screaming in a manner horrible to hear. Then did the warriors smite it many times with strong clubs until at last the cries ceased and the beast was still. And out of the pink-and-white carcass oozed a fetid red matter that sickened all who beheld it.

But when the beast was brought to the High Temple of Yaldabaoth and placed in a cage before the altar, the cries once more resounded, desecrating the sacred halls., And the High Priests were troubled, saying: "What foul offering is this to place before Yaldabaoth, Lord of Gods?"

Book of Maart; XIII: 44—47.

Pain.

Like burning and scalding.

Can't move.

No dream was ever so long—so real. This, then, is real, all real. And I, too, am real. A stranger in a reality of filth and horror and torture. My beauty—But why? Why? Why?

My head—still ringing. It feels twisted. It itches inside. I want to scratch it.

This is torture, and somewhere . . . some place—I have heard that word before. Torture. It has a pleasant sound. Torture. The sound of a madrigal; the name of a boat; the title of a prince. Prince Torture.

So light in my head. Great lights and blinding sounds that come and go and have no meaning.

Once upon a time I torture a man—they say.

His name was?

Finchley? Yes. Digby Finchley.

Digby Finchley, they say, loved a pink ice goddess named Theone Dubedat— they say.

The pink ice goddess.

Where is she now?

And while the beast did moan malicious spells upon the altar steps, the Sanhedrin of Priests held council, and to the council came Maart, saying: “O ye priests of Yaldabaoth, raise up your hearts and voices in praise of our Lord. For He was displeased with us and turned His face away. And Lo, a sacrifice has been vouchsafed unto us that we may make our peace with Him.”

Then spoke the High Priest, saying: “How now, Maart? Do ye say that this is a sacrifice for our Lord?”

And Maart spoke: “Yea. For it is a beast of fire. It was born of the fire and through fire it shall return whence it came.”

And the High Priest said: “Is this offering seemingly in the sight of Yaldabaoth?”

And Maart spoke, saying: “All things are from Yaldabaoth. Therefore are all things good in His sight. Perchance through this strange offering Yaldabaoth will grant us a sign that His people may not vanish from the earth. Let the beast be offered.”

Then did the priests agree, for they, too, were sore afraid lest the children of the Lord be no more.

Book of Maart; XIII: 48—54.

See the pretty monkeys dance.

They dance around and around and around.

And they snort.

Almost like speaking.

Almost like—I must stop the singing in my head. The ring-ring-singing. Like the days when Dig was

working hard and I would take those difficult poses and hold them for hour after hour with maybe five minutes' time out and I would get dizzy sometimes and reel off the dais and Dig would drop his palette in fright and come running with those big solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

And I knew he loved me and I wanted to love him, but I had no need then. I had no need of anything but finding myself. Now I'm found. This is me. Now I have a need and an ache and a loneliness deep, deep inside for Dig and his love. To see him all eyes and fright at the fainting spells and dancing around me with a cup of tea.

Dancing—dancing—dancing— And thumping their chests and grunting and thumping.

And when they grunt the spittle drools and gleams on their yellow fangs. And those seven with the rotting shreds of cloth across their chests.

See the pretty monkeys dance.

They dance around and around and around— So it came to pass that the high holiday of Yaldabaoth was nigh. And on that

day did the priests throw wide the portals of the temple and the hosts of children of Yaldabaoth did enter. Then did the priests remove the beast from the cage and drag it to the altar. Each of four priests held a limb and spread the beast wide across the altar stone, and the beast screamed again with evil, blasphemous sounds.

Then cried Maart: "Rend this thing to pieces that the smell of its evil death may rise to please the nostrils of Yaldabaoth!"

And the four priests, strong and holy, put powerful hands to the limbs of the

beast so that its struggles were wondrous to behold; and the light of evil on its hideous hide struck terror into all.

And as Maart lit the altar fires, a great trembling shook the earth.'

Book of Maart; XIII: 55—59.

Digby, come to me!

Digby—wherever you are—come to me!

Digby, I need you.

This is Theone.

Theone.

The pink ice goddess.

No longer pink ice, Digby.

Digby, I can't stay sane much longer.

Wheels whirl faster in my head.

Faster and faster.

Digby, come to me.

I need you.

Torture— Then did the vaults of the temple split asunder with a thunderous roar, and all

that were gathered there quailed and their bowels were as water. And all beheld the glittering image of the Lord, Yaldabaoth, descend from pitch-black skies to the temple. Yea, to the very altar itself.

For the space of an eternity did the Lord God Yaldabaoth gaze at the beast of the fire and the beast snarled and writhed, helpless in its evil.

Book of Maart; XIII: 59—60.

It is the final horror—the torture.

This monstrosity that floats down from the heavens.

This hideous apelike, manlike, bestial thing.

It is the final jest that it should float down like the ephemera, like a thing of fluff, a thing of lightness and joy. A monster on wings of light. A monster that stands like a rotting corpse with its twisted legs and twisted arms and the shaggy, loathsome body. A monster with the head of a man that looks torn and broken, smashed and ravaged. With those great saucer eyes— Eyes? Where have I— THOSE EYES!

This isn't madness. No. I know those eyes—those great, solemn eyes. I've seen them before. Years ago. Minutes ago. Great, solemn eyes filled with hopeless love and adoration.

No-let me be wrong.

Those big, solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

No, not Digby. It can't be. Please—

Thus ends the Book of Maart. That's where I've seen this scene before, seen these creatures and the landscape—Digby's drawings. Those monstrous pictures he drew.

But why does he look like that? Why is he rotten and loathsome like the others—like his pictures?

This is your reality, Digby? Did you call me? Need me? Want me?

Digby!

Why don't you listen to me? Why do you look at me that way, like a mad thing when only a minute ago you walked up and back the length of the shelter and finally darted through the veil toward— And with a voice like unto shattering mountains, the Lord Yaldabaoth spoke to

His people, saying: "Now praise ye the Lord, my children, for one has been sent unto you to be thy queen and consort to thy God."

With one voice the multitude cried out: "Praise the Lord, Yaldabaoth!" And Maart groveled before the Lord and spoke, saying: "A sign to Thy children, O Lord, that they may increase and multiply!"

Then the Lord God reached out to the beast and touched it, raising it with both hands from the altar fires. And behold! The evil cried out for the last time and fled the body of the beast, leaving only a pleasant song in its place. And the Lord spoke unto Maart, saying: "Lo, I will give you a sign."

Book of Maart; XIII: 60—63.

Let me die.

Let me die.

Let me not see and not hear and not feel the— The?

Pretty monkeys that dance around and around and around while the great, solemn eyes stare into my soul, and Digby, the darling, touches me with hands so strangely changed.

Changed by the turpentine, perhaps, or the ochre or the bice green or Vandyke brown or burnt umber or sepia or chrome yellow which always seemed to stain his fingers each time he put down the brush.

How good to be loved by Digby. How warm and comforting to be loved and to be needed to want one alone in all the millions and to find him so strangely walking in a reality like that of when Sutton Castle can't see and I really knew that the cliffs down which I ran so funny so funny so funny so funny so funny— Then did the children of Yaldabaoth take the sign of the Lord to their hearts,

and Lo, thenceforward did they increase and multiply, forever chanting the praise of their Lord and His Consort on high.

Exactly at the moment when he entered the veil, Peel paused in astonishment. He had not yet made up his mind. To him, a man of utter objectivity and absolute logic, this was an amazing thing. It was the first time in all his life that he had not made a decision with trigger speed. It was the final proof of how violently the Thing in the shelter had socked him.

He stood where he was and took stock. He was sheathed in a mist of fire that flamed like an opal and was far thicker than any veil should be. It was not beautiful to Peel, but it was interesting. The color dispersion was wide and embraced hundreds of fine gradations of the visible spectrum. He could identify more than a score by name.

With the little data he had at hand he judged that he was standing somewhere either outside time and space or between dimensions. Evidently the Thing in the shelter had placed all of them en rapport with the matrix of existence so that the mere intent as they entered the veil could govern the direction they would take on emergence. In other words—would direct the time and space into which they would step. The veil was more or less a pivot that could spin them into any desired existence.

Which brought Peel to the matter of his own choice. Carefully he considered, weighed and balanced accounts. So far he was satisfied with the life he led. He had plenty of money, a remunerative profession as consultant engineer, a lovely house, an attractive wife. To give all this up in reliance on the vague promises of an invisible donor would be sheer idiocy. Peel had learned never to make a change without good and sufficient reason. There was neither good nor sufficient reason now.

“I am not,” Peel thought coldly, “adventurous by nature. It is not my business to be so. Romance does not attract me, nor does the unknown. I know that I like to keep what I have. Perhaps I am overly fond of keeping. The acquisitive instinct is strong in me and I am not ashamed to be a possessive man. Acquisitiveness has brought me wealth and success. Now I want to keep what I have. There can be no other decision for me. Let the others have their romance—I keep my world precisely as it is.”

He strode forward firmly, a punctilious, bald, bearded martinet, and emerged into the dungeon corridor of Sutton Castle.

A few feet before him, a little scullery maid in blue and gray was scurrying directly toward him, a tray in her hands. There was a bottle of beer and an enormous sandwich on the tray. At the sound of his step she looked up, stopped short, her eyes widening, then dropped the tray with a crash.

“What the devil—” Peel began, confounded at the sight of her.

“M-Mr. P-Peel!” she squawked. She began to scream: “Help! Murder! Help!” Peel slapped her sharply. “Will you shut up and tell me what in blazes you’re doing down here this time of night—carrying on like this?”

The girl squawked and sputtered. Exactly, Peel noted, like a decapitated hen.

Before he could slap her again he felt the hand on his shoulder. He turned

sharply and received another shock to find himself staring into the red, beefy face of a policeman. The man was in uniform and there was a rather eager expression on his heavy face. Peel gaped, then subsided. He realized quite suddenly that he was in the vortex of phenomena. No sense struggling until he

understood the tides.

“Na then, sir,” the policeman said. “No call ter strike the gel, sir.”

Peel made no answer. The sharp needles of his mind plucked at the facts. A maid and a policeman. What were they doing down here?

“If! recollect a’right, sir, I heard the gel call yer by name. Would yer give it again, sir?”

“I’m Robert Peel, you blasted idiot. I’m a guest of Lady Sutton’s. What is all this?”

“Mr. Peel!” the policeman cried. “What a piece er luck. I got to take yer into custody, Mr. Peel. Yer under arrest.”

“Arrest? You’re out of your mind, my man!” Peel stepped back and glanced over the policeman’s shoulder. The veil was gone and in its place the door to the shelter yawned wide. The entire place was turned upside down. It looked as though it had just been subjected to a spring cleaning. There was no one inside.

“I must warn yer not ta resist, Mr. Peel.”

The girl emitted a wail that verged on another scream.

“See here,” Peel snapped irritably, “who the deuce are you? What right do you’ have to break into a private home and prance around making arrests?”

The policeman waved his hand indignantly. “Name of Jenkins, sir. Sutton Township Force. And I ain’t prancin’, sir.”

“Then you’re serious?”

The policeman pointed a majestic finger up the corridor. “Come along, sir.”

“Answer me, you blithering idiot! Are you serious?”

“You oughter, know, sir,” replied the policeman with considerable dignity. “Now come along.”

Peel gave it up helplessly and went. He had learned long ago that when one is faced with an incomprehensible situation it is folly to take any action until sufficient data comes to hand. He preceded the policeman up the winding stairs and heard the whimpering scullery maid come after them. So far he still only knew two things. One: Something, somewhere, had happened. Two: The police had taken over. All this was upsetting to say the least, but he would keep his head. He prided himself that no situation ever took him at a loss.

When they emerged from the cellars, Peel received his second surprise. It was broad daylight outside—bright daylight. He glanced at his watch. It read exactly twelve forty. He dropped his wrist and blinked. The unexpected sunlight made him a little ill. The policeman touched his arm and directed him toward the library. Peel immediately marched to the high, sliding doors and pulled them open.

The library was, high, long and narrow, with a small balcony running around it just under the ceiling. There was a long trestle table filling the length of the room, and at the far end three figures were seated,

silhouetted against the light that streamed through the narrow window. Peel stepped in, vaguely conscious of a

second policeman on guard beside the door. His eyes narrowed as he tried to distinguish faces.

While he peered, he listened carefully to the tremendous hubbub of surprise and exclamations that greeted him. He judged that: One: People had been looking for him. Two: He had been missing for some time. Three: No one had ever expected to find him here in Sutton Castle. Four: How did he get back in, anyway? All this from the astonished voices. Then his eyes accommodated to the light.

One of the three was a lanky, angular man with a narrow, graying head and deep-furrowed features. He looked familiar to Peel. The second was short and stout with ridiculously fragile glasses perched on a bulbous nose. The third was a woman, and again Peel was shocked to see that it was his wife. She wore a plaid suit and held a crumpled green felt hat in her lap.

Before he could analyze the data further, the angular man quieted the others and then turned. He said: "Mr. Peel?"

Peel advanced quietly and said: "Yes?"

"I'm Inspector Hoss."

"I thought I recognized you, inspector. We've met before, I believe?"

"We have." Hoss nodded curtly, then indicated the fat man. "This is Dr. Richards."

"How d'you do, doctor—" Peel turned toward Sidra and bowed with a faint air of irony. "Sidra?"

In flat tones she said: "Hello, Robert."

"I'm afraid I'm a little confused by all this," Peel went on amiably. "Things seem to be happening—" This, he knew, was the right talk. Be cautious. Commit yourself to nothing.

"They are," Hoss said grimly.

"Before we go any further, might I inquire the time?"

Hoss was a little taken aback. He said: "It's two o'clock."

"Thank you." Peel held his watch to his ear, then adjusted the hands. "My watch seems to be running, but somewhere it's lost a little time—" While he apparently devoted himself to his wrist watch he examined their expressions minutely. He would have to navigate with exquisite care purely by the light of their countenances until he learned much more.

Then, quite abruptly, Peel forgot his watch and stared at the desk calendar before Hoss. This was like a punch in the ribs. He swallowed and said: "Is that date quite right, inspector?"

Hoss glanced at the calendar, then back at Peel, his eyes widening. "It is, Mr. Peel. Sunday the twenty-third."

His mind screamed: Three days! Impossible.

Easy—Easy—Peel stiffened and controlled himself. Very well. Somewhere he had lost three days—for he had entered the veil Thursday just past midnight. He felt himself beginning to perspire and reached out blindly for a chair. “You’ll have to excuse me,” he said faintly, and sat down.

Keep cool, you confounded idiot. There’s more at stake than three lost days. He lectured to himself in swift silence to give his nervestime to calm. You know

you’re a match for anyone. People don’t know how to think. A man with a logical mind can cope with anything. Wait for more data.

After a moment of silence, Hoss said: “The fact is, Mr. Peel, we’ve been looking for you these past three days. You disappeared quite suddenly and we thought we knew why. We’re rather surprised to find you in the castle. Rather surprised, indeed—”

“Ah? Why?” Careful now. Be careful!

“I should have thought you’d stay as far away from Sutton Castle as possible.”

“Again why?” What’s happened? Why the police—the suspicion—the guarded tone? What’s Sidra doing here sitting like an avenging fury?

“Because, Mr. Peel, you’re charged with the willful and intended murder of Lady Sutton.”

Shock! Shock! Shock! They piled on one after the other, and still Peel kept hold of himself. The data was coming in a little too explicitly now. He had hesitated in the veil for a few seconds, and those seconds amounted to three days. Lady Sutton was found dead—evidently. He was charged with murder. Still he needed more facts before he spoke. Now, more than ever, he had to steer carefully.

Peel said: “I don’t understand. You had better explain.”

“Early Friday morning,” Hoss began without preamble, “the death of Lady Sutton was reported. Immediate medical examination proved she died of shock. Witnesses’ evidence revealed that you had deliberately frightened her with full knowledge of her weak heart and with the express intent so to kill her. That is murder, Mr. Peel.”

“It certainly is,” Peel answered coldly, “if you can prove it. May I ask whom your witnesses are?”

“Digby Finchley. Christian Braugh. Theone Dubedat, and—” Hoss broke off, coughed and laid the paper aside.

“And Sidra Peel,” Peel finished dryly. Again he met his wife’s eye and read the venomous expression clearly. “How very choice!”

But the light broke and he understood at last. They had lost their nerve, those quaking swine, and selected him for the scapegoat. Perhaps because of the golden opportunity of his disappearance. Perhaps—and this was more likely—under the malicious aegis of his wife. This would be Sidra’s move to get rid of him, humiliate him, drag him through the courts and up to the executioner’s dock. This would be Sidra’s perfect revenge.

He got to his feet and before Hoss or Richards could interfere, he grasped Sidra by the arm and dragged her to a corner of the library. Over his shoulder he said:

“Don’t be alarmed, inspector, I only want a word with my wife.”

Hoss coughed and called: “It’s all right, officer—” and the menacing blue shadow retreated from Peel’s elbow and returned to its post at the door.

Sidra tore her arm free and glared up at Peel, her face suffused with passion; her lips drawn back slightly, showing the sharp white edges of her teeth.

Peel snapped: “You arranged this.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t stall, Sidra. This was your idea.”

“It was your murder,” she countered.

“It was. We saw you do it. We tried to stop you, but we couldn’t. We’ve sworn to it—the four of us.”

“And it was all your idea?” Her eyes flashed: “Yes!” “Hoss will be interested to hear that.” “He won’t.”

“What if! tell him—”

“He won’t believe you. We’re four to one.” “I can pick holes in your story.” “Try!”

“You’re well prepared, eh?”

“Braugh is a good writer,” she said. “You won’t find any flaws in our story.”

“So you’re getting rid of me, eh? I hang for the murder on your trumped-up evidence. You get the house, my fortune and, best of all, you get rid of me.”

She smiled like a cat. “You catch on fast, Robert.”

“And this is the reality you asked for? This is what you planned when you went through the veil?”

“What veil?”

“You know what I mean.”

“You’re mad.” She was confused.

“You’re lying.”

She smashed her knuckles into his face.

“Never mind,” Peel said quite loudly, a plan taking shape in his mind, “never mind, Sidra. But if you think you’re going to turn me into a scapegoat you’re quite mistaken. Yes—quite mistaken.”

“Here,” Hoss called sharply, “What’s all this?”

“He wanted me to bribe the witnesses,” Sidra said in a clear voice, walking back to her seat. “I was to offer them ten thousand pounds each.”

The doctor grunted: “Cad!”

Hoss said: “Now see here, Peel, we’ve been—”

“Please, inspector,” Peel interrupted. He sauntered up to the desk, his mind clicking rapidly. The best defense was a startling offensive. The best time to begin was now. “My wife has just told you a fantastic lie.”

“Ha?”

“More than that, inspector, your other witnesses have lied, too. I wish to charge Braugh, Finchley, Miss Dubedat and my wife with the willful murder of Lady Sutton!”

Hoss gasped and started forward, slapping the papers off the table. As the doctor bent to pick them up, Hoss stuttered: “My-my d-dear Peel! Really . . . you know!”

“Don’t believe him!” Sidra screamed. “He’s lying. He’s trying to lie out of

He let her scream, grateful for more time to whip his story into shape. It must be convincing—flawless. The truth was impossible. And who would believe the truth, anyway? What was truth for him was plainly unknown to the others.

“The murder of Lady Sutton,” Peel went on smoothly, “was planned and executed by those four persons. I was the only member of the party to demur. You will grant me, inspector, that it sounds far more logical for four persons to commit a murder against the will of one, than one against four. Four could stop one. One could not possibly stand in the way of four.”

Hoss nodded, fascinated by Peel’s cold logic.

“Moreover, it is far easier for four persons to trump up a false account and swear to it, than for one to outweigh the evidence of four.”

Again Hoss nodded.

Sidra beat at Hoss’ shoulder and cried shrilly: “He’s lying, inspector. If he’s telling the truth ask him why he ran away! Ask him where he’s been these last three days! Ask him—”

“Unfortunately there’s little love lost between my wife and myself,” Peel commented dryly. “Her

evidence is entirely wishful thinking.”

Hoss freed himself and said: “Please ... Mrs. Peel. I beg you—”

With a graceful gesture, Peel ran sensitive fingers across his crisp beard and mustache. “My story is this,” he continued, “the four whom I accuse desired to murder Lady Sutton. Motive? A craving for the ultimate in emotional sensation. They were utterly depraved and degenerate. The only reason I was part of their devilish clique was to protect my wife as much as possible. On Thursday night I learned of their plans for the first time. I refused to permit them to continue and threatened to reveal all to Lady Sutton. Evidently they were prepared for this. My wine was drugged and I was rendered unconscious. I have a faint recollection of being lifted and carried somewhere by the two men and—that’s all I know of the murder.”

“My word!” Hoss gasped. The doctor leaned over to him and whispered. Hoss nodded and murmured: “Yes, yes—the tests can come later.” He turned to Peel and said: “Please, go on.”

So far, Peel thought, so good. Add a little truth to a lie and it makes the whole seem truthful. Now for the rest, he would have to add just enough color to gloss over the rough edges.

“I came to in pitch darkness. I was lying on a stone floor. I heard no sounds, nothing but the ticking of my watch. These dungeon walls are fifteen and twenty feet thick in places so I could not possibly hear anything. When I got to my feet I found I was in a small cavity about ten feet square.

“I realized that I was in some secret cell that was as yet unknown to any but the members of the clique. After an hour’s shouting vainly for help and pounding on the wall, an accidental blow of my fist must have touched the proper spring or

lever. One section, vastly thick, swung open quite abruptly and I found myself in the passage where I was picked up—”

“He’s lying!” Sidra screamed again.

While Hoss calmed her, Peel coolly considered his position. His story was excellent so far. The evidence at hand was sufficiently strong. Sutton Castle was known for its secret passages. His clothes were still rumpled from the framework he had worn to frighten Lady Sutton. There was no known saliva or blood test to show that he had been drugged seventy-two hours previous. His beard and mustache would eliminate the shaving line of attack. So far his logic was excellent.

“That,” Peel said quietly, “is my story.”

“We note that you plead not guilty, Mr. Peel,” Hoss said, “and we note your story and accusation. I confess that your three-day disappearance seemed to incriminate you, but now—” He shrugged. “All we need do is locate this mysterious cell in which you were confined.”

Peel was even prepared for this. He said: “You may, and then again you may not. I’m an engineer, you know. I warn you that the only way we may be able to locate the cell is by blasting through the stone, which may only serve to wipe out all traces.”

“We’ll take that chance.”

“That chance may not have to be taken,” the little round doctor said.

Hoss turned slowly and gave the doctor a curious glance. Sidra exclaimed. Peel shot a sharp look toward the man. Experience warned him that fat men were always dangerous.

“It was a perfect story, Mr. Peel,” the fat doctor said pleasantly, “quite a perfect story. Most entertaining. But really, my dear sir, for an engineer you slipped up quite badly.”

“I beg your pardon?” Peel said stiffly, every nerve on guard.

“When you awoke in your cell,” the doctor went on with a childish smile, “you mentioned that you were in complete darkness and silence. The walls were so thick all you heard was the ticking of your watch. Very colorful. But, alas, proof of a lie. You awoke seventy hours later—No watch will run seventy hours without rewinding!”

He was right. Peel realized that at once. He had made a mistake, and there was no going back for alterations. The entire story depended on the wholeness of the fabric. Tear away one thread and the whole thing would unravel. The fat doctor was right—and he was trapped.

One glance at Sidra’s malevolent, triumphant face was enough for him. He decided that now was the time for action, and very quick action indeed. He arose from his chair, laughing in obvious defeat. Hoss was gaping again; the doctor chuckling like a pleased puzzle-solver; Sidra gloating. Peel sprinted to the window like a shot, crossed arms before his face, and smashed through the glass pane.

The shattering of the glass and the excited shouts behind him were only vague sounds. Peel limbered his legs as the soft earth came up at him and landed with a jarring shock. It was a fifteen-foot drop, but he took it well. He was on his feet

in a trice and running toward the rear of the castle where the cars were parked. Five seconds later he was vaulting into Sidra’s roadster. Ten seconds later he was speeding past the high iron gates to the highway outside.

Even in this crisis, Peel thought swiftly and with precision. He had driven out of the grounds too quickly for anyone to note which direction he would take. He turned toward London and sent the car roaring down the road until he came to an abrupt curve. Here he stopped and snatched a hammer from the tool kit.

He smashed every window in the car and the windshield, too. The broken glass he spread evenly across the road. It might not cause a puncture, and then again it might. The loss of time was worth the gamble. He leaped back into the car and started off again toward London. A man could lose himself in a metropolis.

But he was not a man to flee blindly, nor was there panic in his heart. Even as his eyes mechanically followed the road, his mind was sorting through facts, accurately and methodically, and inevitably drawing closer to a stern conclusion. He knew that he could never prove his innocence. The three-day hiatus was the bar to that. He knew he would be pursued as Lady Sutton’s murderer.

In war time it would be impossible to get out of the country. It would even be impossible to hide very long. What remained then was an outlaw living in miserable hiding for a few brief months only to be taken and brought to trial. Peel had no intention of giving his wife the satisfaction of watching him dragged through a murder trial.

Still cool, still in full possession of himself, Peel planned as he drove. The audacious thing would be to go straight to his home. They would never think of looking for him there—for a while. At home he would have time enough to do what had to be done. He set his mouth in a thin, straight line.

Rapidly he drove deep into London toward Chelsea Square, a frigid, bearded, bald man at the wheel of the car looking like some icy buccaneer from the past.

He approached the square from the rear, watching for the police. There were none about and the house looked quite calm and inauspicious. But, as he drove into the square and saw the front façade of his home, he was grimly amused to see that an entire wing had been demolished in a bombardment. Evidently the catastrophe had taken place some days previous, for all the rubble was neatly piled and the broken side of the building was fenced off.

So much the better, Peel decided. No doubt the house would be empty. He parked the car, unnoticed by the few people in the street, leaped out and walked briskly to the front door. Now that he had made his decision and formed his plans he was absolutely impassive.

There was no one inside. Peel went to the library, took pen and ink and seated himself at the desk. Carefully, with lawyerlike acumen, he made out a new will cutting his wife off beyond legal impeachment. While the ink was drying, he went to the front door and waited until a couple of laborers trudged by with shovels on their shoulders.

“You there!” Peel called.

They turned weary faces toward him. “Yes, sir?”

“Want to earn a flyer?”

Their faces glowed.

“Step in a moment.”

With many apologies for their muddied boots, they edged into the library, glancing around curiously. Peel sat them down and read the will to them. They listened with open mouths, then witnessed his signature. Laboriously, with much protrusion of tongues, they signed their names and received the bank note. Peel ushered them out and locked the door.

He paused grimly and took a breath. So much for Sidra. It was the old possessive instinct, he knew, that forced him to act this way. He wanted to keep his fortune, even after death. He wanted to keep his honor and dignity, even after death. He had made sure of the first. He would have to perform the second—quickly!

He thought for another moment, then nodded his head decisively and marched back to the kitchen. From the linen closet he took down an armful of sheets and towels and with them padded the windows and edges of the doors. As an afterthought, he took a large square of cardboard and on it, with shoe-blackening, printed:

DANGER! GAS! He placed it outside the kitchen door.

When the room was sealed tight, Peel went to the stove, opened the oven door and turned the gas cock over. The gas hissed out of the jets, rank and yet cooling. Peel knelt and thrust his head into the

oven, breathing with deep, even breaths. It would not, he knew, take very long. It would not be painful.

For the first time in hours, some of the tension left him, and he relaxed almost gratefully, calmly awaiting his death. Although he had lived a hard, geometrically patterned life; and traveled a rigidly realistic road—now his mind reached back toward more tender moments, He regretted nothing; he apologized for nothing; he was ashamed of nothing—and yet he thought of the days when he first met Sidra with a sense of sorrow.

What slender youth, bedewed with liquid odors, Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,
Sidra— He almost smiled. Those were the lines he wrote to her when, in the romantic

beginning, he worshiped her as a goddess of youth, of beauty and goodness. Those had been great days—the days when he had finished at Manchester College and had come to London to build a reputation, a fortune, a life. A thin-haired boy with precise habits and precise thoughts. Dreamily he sauntered through the backwash of memory as though he were recalling an entertaining play.

He came to with a start and realized that he had been kneeling before the oven for twenty minutes. There was something very much awry. He had not forgotten his chemistry and he knew that twenty minutes of illuminating gas should have been sufficient to make him lose consciousness. Perplexed, he got to his feet, rubbing his stiff knees. There was no time for analysis now. The pursuit would be on his neck at any moment.

Neck! That was an idea. Almost as painless as gas. Much quicker!

Peel shut off the oven, took a length of laundry rope from a cupboard and left the kitchen, picking up the sign en route. As he tore up the cardboard, his alert little eyes pried through the house, looking for the proper spot. Yes, there. In the stairwell. He could throw the rope over that beam and stand on the balcony above the stairs. When he leaped, he would have a ten-foot drop to the landing.

He ran up the stairs to the balcony, straddled the railing and carefully threw the rope over the beam. He caught the flying end as it whipped around the beam and swung toward him. He tied it into a loose knot and ran it up the length of the rope until it snuggled tight. After he had yanked twice to tighten the knot, he put his full weight on the rope and swung himself clear of the balcony. The rope supported his weight admirably. There was no chance of its snapping.

When he had climbed back to the railing, he shaped a hangman's noose and slipped it over his head, tightening the knot under his right ear. There was enough slack to give him a six-foot drop. He weighed one hundred fifty pounds. It was just about right to snap his neck clean and painlessly at the end of the drop. Peel poised, took a deep breath, and leaped— His only thought as he fell was a chaotic attempt to figure how much time he

had left to live. Thirty-two feet per second square divided by six gave him almost a fifth of a second. Then there was a blinding jerk that racked his entire body, a dull crack that sounded large and blunt in his ears, and a sensation of intolerable pain in his neck.

And for the first time, Peel's iron control was broken.

It took him fully five seconds to realize that he was still alive. He hung by his neck in a kind of horror and slowly understood that he was not dead. The horror crawled over his skin like a wave of chill ants,

and for a long time he hung and shuddered, refusing to believe that the impossible had happened. He shuddered while his arms flailed helplessly and the chill reached his mind numbing it with terrible trepidation.

At last he reached into his pocket and withdrew a penknife. He opened it with difficulty, for his body was slowly turning palsied and unmanageable. After much sawing he at last severed the rope and dropped the last few feet to the landing. While he still crouched, he reached up fingers and felt his neck. It was broken. His head was tilted at an angle that made everything seem topsy-turvy. He could feel the jagged edges of the broken cervical vertebrae. He shuddered again.

As Peel dragged himself up the stairs, he realized that something too ghastly to understand was taking place. There was no attempting a cool appraisal of this; there was no data to be taken, no logic to apply. He reached the top of the stairs and lurched through the bedroom to the bath. In the mirror he examined his twisted neck.

With fumbling hands he groped in the medicine cabinet until he grasped his razor. He closed the cabinet door, then opened the blade, faintly admiring the six inches of gleaming steel. There was promise in the hair-fine, hollow-ground edge. He gripped the handle firmly, tilted his chin back as far as the twisted neck would allow, and with a firm, steady stroke sliced the steel across his throat.

Instantly he was deluged with a great gout of blood, and, as he drew breath,

his windpipe was choked. He doubled over, coughing, and his throat was lathered with red foam. Still coughing and gasping, with the wind whistling madly through the ragged slit in his neck, Peel slowly crumpled to the tile floor and lay there while the blood gushed with every heartbeat and soaked him through. Yet as he lay there, gasping with little hacking, foaming coughs, he did not lose consciousness.

For the first time in all his life, Peel was afraid—desperately afraid. The agony of his twisted neck was nothing to the agony in his mind. He floundered on the bathroom floor and realized vaguely that life was clinging to him with all the possessiveness with which he had clung to life and the things he owned.

He crawled upright at last, not daring to look at his wax-white, bloodless face in the mirror, nor at the yawning red slash in his throat. The blood—what remained of it—had clotted slightly. He still could breathe normally at times. Gasping and almost completely paralyzed, Peel stumbled back into the bedroom and searched through Sidra's dresser until he found her revolver.

It took all his presence of mind to steady the muzzle at his chest and still his shaking hands. Deliberately, he pumped three shots into his heart. And when the echo of the reports died away and the sharp powder tang lifted, he was still alive, with a great ghastly hole torn in him.

It's the body, he thought crazily. Life clings to the body. So long as there's a body—the merest shell to contain a spark—then life will remain. It possesses me, this life, but there's yet a solution. I'm still enough of an engineer to work out a solution.

That solution, he knew, would have to be absolute disintegration. Let him shatter this body of his to particles—to bits—to a thousand pieces—and there would no longer be the cup of flesh to contain that persistent life. For that he needed explosives, and there was nothing in the house. Nor could he drag himself to his laboratory.

He lurched into his study and removed a deck of washable plastic playing cards from his drawer. For long minutes he cut them to pieces with his desk scissors, until he had a bowlful of minute pieces. He

carried them to the bathroom and with the little strength that was left in his shattered body he removed a section of brass pipe from the tap inlet and carried it to his study.

There was a small spirit lamp on his desk, used to keep pots of coffee hot. Peel lit the lamp, placed a dry pot over it on the gimbals and dropped a lead paper weight in. After hours, it seemed, the lead melted. He used half the molten metal to plug one end of the pipe tight.

It took all his remaining energy to return to the bathroom for the forgotten bits of playing cards, but he knew it would be the last trip he would have to make. He rammed the frayed shreds of nitrocellulose into the brass pipe, using a heavy pencil as a ramrod. When the pipe was packed solid, he put in the heads of three matches and sealed the open end with the remaining lead and then placed the end of the pipe directly in the spirit flame.

With a sigh, he drew his desk chair close and hunched before the heating bomb. Nitrocellulose—a powerful-enough explosive when ignited under pressure. It was

only a question of time, he knew, before the pipe would burst into violent explosion and scatter him around the room—scatter him in blessed death.

The agony in his chest and neck made him rock gently and sway from side to side. He began to whimper like a child as each individual nerve took up the screaming chorus of pain. The red froth at his throat burst forth anew, while the blood on his clothes caked and hardened.

Slowly the bomb heated.

Slowly the minutes passed.

Slowly the agony increased.

Peel rocked and whimpered, and when he reached out a palsied hand to push the bomb a little closer into the flame, his fingers could not feel the heat. He could see the red-caked flesh scorch and blister but he felt nothing. All the pain writhed inside him—none outside.

It made noises in his ears, that pain, but even above the blunt sounds he heard the dull tread of footsteps far out in the house. They were coming toward him, slowly and almost with the inexorable tread of fate. Panic struck him at the thought of the police and Sidra's triumph. He tried to coax the spirit flame higher.

The steps passed through the downstairs hall and then began to mount the steps of the stairway. Each steady thud sounded louder and more terrifying. Peel hunched lower and in the dim recesses of his mind began to pray. The steps reached the top of the stairs, turned and advanced on his study. There was a faint whisper as the study door was thrust open. Running hot and cold with pain and fear, Peel refused to turn.

So abruptly that it jarred him, a voice said: "Now then, Bob, what's all this?"

He neither turned nor answered.

"Bob!" the voice called hoarsely, "don't be a fool!"

Vaguely he understood that he had heard that voice somewhere.

Steps sounded again, then a figure stood at his elbow. With bloodless eyes he flicked a frightened glance up. It was Lady Sutton. She still wore the sequined evening gown.

“My hat!” she gasped, her tiny eyes goggling in their casement of flesh, “you’ve gone and messed yourself up, haven’t you!”

“Go away—” His words were cracked and whistling as half his breath hissed through the slit in his throat. “I will not be haunted.”

“Haunted?” Lady Sutton laughed shrilly. “That’s a good one, that is.”

“Go away,” Peel muttered. “You’re dead.”

“What’ve you got there?” Lady Sutton inquired in brassy tone. She hesitated for a moment. “Oh, I see; a bomb. Going to blow yourself to bits, eh, Bob?”

His lips formed soundless words. Still he hunched over the heating bomb.

“Here,” Lady Sutton said. “Let me—” She reached forward to knock the brass tube off the gimbals. With a convulsive effort Peel struggled to his feet and grasped her arm with clawing hands. She was solid for a ghost. Nevertheless he flung her back.

“Let be!” he wheezed.

“Now stop this, Bob!” Lady Sutton ordered. “I never intended this much misery for you.”

Without bothering to puzzle at her words, he struck at her feebly as she tried to get past him to the bomb. She was far too strong for him. He turned quickly and flung himself forward toward the spirit lamp, arms outstretched to infold it and protect it from interference.

Lady Sutton cried: “Bob! You damned fool!”

There was a blinding explosion. It smashed into Peel’s face with a flaring white light and a burst of shattering sound. The entire study rocked and a portion of the wall fell away. A heavy shower of books rained down from the jolted shelves. Smoke and dust filled space with a dense cloud.

As the cloud cleared, Lady Sutton still stood alongside the place where the desk had been. For the first time in many years—in many eternities, perhaps, her face wore an expression of sadness. For a long time she stood in silence. At last she shrugged and began to speak.

“Don’t you realize, Bob,” she said in a low voice, “that you can’t kill yourself? The dead only die once, my boy, and you’re dead already. You’ve all been dead for days. How is it that none of you could realize that? Perhaps it was that ego that Braugh spoke of— Perhaps— But you were all dead before you reached the shelter that night. You should have known when you saw your bombed house. That was a heavy raid last Thursday—very heavy.”

Slowly she raised her hands and began to unpeel the gown that covered her. In the dead, unnatural silence, the little sequins rustled and tinkled. They glittered as the gown dropped from her body to

reveal—nothing. Mere empty space.

“I enjoyed that little murder,” she said. “It was amusing—quite amusing to see the dead attempt to kill. That’s why I let you go on with it. It was amusing—”

She removed her shoes and stockings. She was now nothing more than arms, shoulders and a gross head in space. Nothing more. The face was still heavy and still wore the slightly sorrowful expression.

“But it was ridiculous trying to murder me,” she went on, “seeing who I was. It was even a little ridiculous producing that play. Because, Bob, Astaroth does happen to be a lady—so to speak—and I happen to be Astaroth.”

With a sudden motion, the head and arms jerked into the air and then dropped to the floor alongside the heaped-up dress. They clattered dully like waxen figures, and yet the voice continued from the smoke-filled space. Where the dusty mist swirled, it revealed a figure of emptiness—a mere outline in space—a bubble—and yet a figure horrible to behold.

“Yes,” the voice went on, softening slightly to a quiet tone, “I am Astaroth, Bob—Astaroth, as old as the ages—as old and bored as eternity itself.” It took on a pleading note. “That’s why I had to play my little joke on you back in the shelter. I had to turn the tables and have a bit of a laugh. Satan knows, you cry out for a bit of novelty and entertainment after an eternity of arranging hells for the damned! And Satan knows, there’s no hell like the hell of boredom—”

The passionate, pleading voice broke off.

And a thousand scattered bloody fragments of Robert Peel heard and understood. A thousand particles, each containing a tortured spark of life, heard the voice of Astaroth and understood.

“Of life I know nothing,” Astaroth cried out, “but death I do know—death and justice. I know that each living creature creates its own hell forevermore. What you are now, you have wrought with your own hands. Hear ye all, before I depart—if any of ye can deny this—if any one of you would argue this—if any one of you would cavil at the Justice of Astaroth—let him speak! Speak now!”

Through all the far reaches the voice echoed, and there was no answer.

A thousand pain-thomed particles of Robert Peel heard and made no answer.

Theone Dubedat heard and made no answer.

A questing doubt-crazed Christian Braugh heard and made no answer.

A rotting, self-devouring Digby Finchley heard and made no answer.

All the damned of all eternity in an infinity of self-made hells heard and understood and made no answer.

For the Justice of Astaroth is u