WITCHCRAFT
HORROR

coven 13

Sept. 1969 60c

THE SUPERNATURAL

ODILE
alan caillou

LET THERE BE MAGICK
james r. keaveny

THE POSTMAN ALWAYS. . .
richard p. flanagan

Take beautiful color slides, color prints, black and white . . . Indoors and out . . . Day and night!

KODAPAK CARTRIDGE CAMERA OUTFIT

INCLUDING 126 CAMERA · FILM · FLASHCUBE · SLIDE VIEWER · DELUXE CARRYING CASE · AND BATTERIES!

KODAK
INSTANT LOADING
126 FILM CARTRIDGE

SYLVANIA
ROTATING FLASHCUBE
SHOOTS 4 FLASH PHOTOS

BAUSCH & LOMB
2x2 SLIDE VIEWER
FOR INSTANT SLIDE VIEWING

YOU GET ALL THIS!

- **Instant Loading Flashcube Camera**
  With precision optical glass lens and automatic flashcube advance. Only 4½ inches long . . . so easy to carry on its wrist strap. Camera made in Hong Kong.
- **Eastman Kodak Instant-Loading 126 Film Cartridge**
  Just drop in . . . no fuss or bother threading. Takes 12 black and white pictures, indoors or outdoors.
- **Sylvania Rotating Flashcube**
  Lets you take 4 flash pictures without changing bulbs.
- **Bausch & Lomb 2 x 2 Slide Viewer**
  Brings out all of the thrilling detail in your color slides. Folds compactly for use anytime — anywhere.
- **Deluxe Carrying Case with Strap**
  Handsome, durable, and so spacious . . . 8" x 7" x 4" with plenty of room for camera, flashcubes, extra film, etc.
- **2 Eveready Batteries**
  Fit right into your camera to give flash after flash after flash.

DROP IN THE FILM . . .

POP IN A FLASH CUBE . . .

and you're ready to take 4 flash pictures without changing bulbs!

You can't make mistakes with this remarkable new camera! No film to thread . . . nothing to adjust . . . nothing to set . . . just aim and shoot! There's even built-in double-exposure prevention. You're always ready to capture the action . . . film advances quickly . . . flashcube turns automatically to let you shoot 4 flash shots in quick sequence.

KODAPAK $15.95

ORDER NOW!

to: UNITED CREATIVE PRODUCTS 2417 West 7th Street Los Angeles, California 90057

SUITE 302

Enclosed is my check or money order for $_____ to cover my purchase (including all postage and handling charges).

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Limit 1 Kodapak per family. Sales tax where applicable. Allow 3 weeks for delivery.

Printed in U.S.A.

MAGAZINE

WITCHCRAFT

HORROR

THE SUPERNATURAL

ALL NEW STORIES

Vol. I, No. 1, Sept. 1969

Arthur H. Landis
Editor
Jean W. Cirrito
Assistant Editor
Judith Davis
Circulation Manager
R. Jacobs
Art Director
Morgan Spector
Technical Director
Artist/COVEN 13
William Stout
Consultant
R. Ebeling

$6.00 per year
60 cents per copy

Editorial and Advertising Offices:
2412 W. 7th Street
Suite 302
Los Angeles, Calif.
90057

EDITOR'S CAULDRON

By ARTHUR H. LANDIS

Once upon a time, there was a magazine whose stories caused the scalp to tingle, the heart to beat a little faster, and the steel-point outline of our oh so materialistic world to become quite fuzzy at the edges. It was a magazine for fireside, floor-lamp, autumnal evenings, and lonely rooms. In the macabre sense, it was truly 'a magazine for all seasons.'

Its name—and some of you may have guessed it by now—was *Weird Tales*. It served a generation of literary sophisticates who sought something different in the art of story telling. They sought, as it were, the black art of story telling—and they found it.

But not for long!

Syndrome *materialis* was on the march; born of an all too rapidly maturing—and, therefore, not maturing Americana. One manifestation of this syndrome, insofar as the art forms were concerned, was the "exploitation of everything" principle. Its denigrating influence was such that intrinsically beautiful stories—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*—were to finally appear in the movie media as, "The Cat People and The Bat People Meet Frankenstein and Dracula," together with Abbott and Costello in the old Dark House.

With such died an era and also a magazine.

Americana modernus was then given Comic Books and Monster Movies; infantile perversions of all that had been ghoulishly spine-chilling, intellectually acceptable—and different. And the genius of August Derleth, H.P. Lovecraft, and Seabury Quinn, along with such greats as Ray Bradbury and Robert Bloch, were simultaneously denied a most natural and proper outlet to an admiring and appreciative public.

To those who would question the suggested level of literary sophistication here, we would add only this: Henry James, Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert Louis Stevenson—amongst others—have also set standards of achievement in the horror-drama

that others would do well to emulate today.

Suffice it to say that our new age of sycophants, wind-up-people, and "maturity" syndromes wreaked havoc upon the world of myth, fantasy, and those "elder gods" whose remnant manifestations are evidenced in the "black arts" and the eclectics of the supernatural.

We at COVEN 13 intend, in a small way, perhaps, to help reverse this trend. We will welcome the old writers, and we will *most certainly* welcome the new. For we feel that there are many young Derleths, Lovecrafts, and Quinns to be given their rightful place in the literatnre of the macabre. There is an obvious vacuum to be filled, and we shall fill it. We shall prop open a door, as it were, to the adult ghost story, to the meaningful psycho-horror-drama without sadism, and to the suggested existence of gods and worlds other than those now certified with the Good Housekeeping seal of approval. We shall also do, from time to time, a bit of qnasi-science-fantasy. Witness our serialized novel, *Let There Be Magick.* This most delightful story is written in the style of *Unknown Worlds,* a very well received magazine, which died in World War II as a result of the paper shortage—or so twas said. In short, ours will be a sophisticated quality magazine directed to the truly mature and to the still existing adult audience.

Since this is something of a policy statement, we expect to be questioned in all areas. One might ask, for example: "Other Gods? Well really! And will yon also insist upon an equality of credence?" To which we instantly reply: "Why not?" Since therein lies the key to it all.

Witchcraft, Magic, the Supernatural! All the ages of mankind have been profoundly influenced by the *vitae* existence of these phenomena. But what are they, actually, in fact and in time? Witchcraft, for example, is simply a misnomer by the present church-state millenium designed to put down the "old" religions in favor of the "new." In effect, we of the "modern" world have been "had" by those who would condition us—for their own ends—to greet the word, witchcraft, and its attenuate fellows, necromancy and voodooism, with appropriate shudders, genuflections, signs of the cross, and extra candles on Sunday. Witchcraft is evil, steeped in sin, and born of the Devil—so they say.

The *Encyclopaedia Brittanica* informs us that the very word, witchcraft, is derived of the meaning—the art or craft of the wise; the word, witch, being allied with "wit," to know. And further that "the evil of any particular act depends solely upon the point of view." In the

area of divination, for example, if historically it is done in the name of an established religion, it is called prophesy; if it is done in the name of some "pagan" god, it is categorized as mere witchcraft.

This most important distinction is better seen in the two points of view derived of the contest between Moses and the Pharoah's magicians. We all know the tale as explained in *Exodus*. But how many of us are aware of the Egyptian demotic version which states simply that, "The wise priest of Egypt defeated the miserable foreign Sorcerer whom he had saved from the water as a child."

And thus it has been. . . Stories and articles in COVEN 13 will reflect these and related problems in a most practical and positive way. We will simultaneously dedicate ourselves to the task of accumulating, selecting, editing, and printing that kind of story whose appeal and merit may warrant anthologising at some future date. To us werewolves will be quite real, ghouls and ghosts a most natural product of their living facsimiles, and witchcraft, voodooism and sorcery, activities to be viewed as equally productive with the judgment of governments and the Delphic techniques of Rand Corporations.

In a nutshell, we of COVEN 13—our staff is the Coven, *with you-know-who as the head man*—say to all of you: Join with us in a new-old experience. Taste of the varied fruits of terror, fantasy, suspense, and Satanic nightmare. Leave that square world for a few brief hours each month and come with us to the other world of the "gentle people," of vampires and ghouls and curtain rustlers; of "things to go bump in the night," and of those counterparts of our old friend, Jack the Ripper, who just might not have been so bad a guy after all.

Beauty, indeed, is in the eye of the beholder!

ARTHUR H. LANDIS
Editor: COVEN 13


STOUT

Odile

By Alan Caillou

Illustrated by William Stout

For we lesser humans the "happening" of the horror-drama, played to its spine-chilling end, is forever the exception, the oddity. For the Odile's among us—those of an elder world and a different faith—it is, perhaps, the norm; the price, as it were, for the co-mingling.

The little village was quite hidden from the winding dirt road that led through the vineyards, over the chalk hills, across the muddy river, and on, at last, to Lyons and Paris.

On the hill high above it, the ruins of a once-great mansion stood, a splendid house that had crumbled to the ground for want of care; all that was left of it now was an ornate facade still covered over with roses that had gone to briar through neglect, and dark-green stinging nettles that the children sometimes gathered to make wine with. If they came from the village, they would stand for a while on the brow of the hill, looking down on the white ribbon of the road, and then turn and run, almost in fear, back to the

secrecy of their own hidden valley.

Petit Gruet, it was called, and it was not much more than a hamlet; sixty or seventy small houses, perhaps, three cafes, a tiny church, a mill with a huge wooden wheel that was turned by the waters that fed the pond, and an assortment of five small stores that supplied the village's meagre needs. and there was a police station of sorts, with a one-cell jail which was rarely, if ever, used. The streets were paved, but not kept up very well, and the only telephone, in the little post office, was usually out of repair.

It was a village that time had left behind; it lived in the past, and it thought itself as intellectually remote from the rest of the country as it was in its geography. The women still wore the old black shawls here, and the men wore laced-on leggings made of roughly-tanned leather, with flat black caps that sat squarely on top of their heads.

On this sunny day, in August of the year 1936, a child stood up on the hill by the ruin, looking down on the winding road, a small child, part-woman, with all the peasant stolidity of her heritage mixed with the childish excitement of her years. She watched the flat column of dust that was the bus approaching, and then turned and ran fast down the hill back to the village, holding up a little windmill of bright blue plastic that had somehow found its way into the local toy shop and lain there for years till the owner, Mademoiselle Denise, had given it to her in a burst of unaccustomed generosity. She tripped over the swollen cobbles that were still there after last month's rain (M. de Serre, the local magistrate who thought of himself as the Mayor, would get around to having the road fixed one day, but there was surely no great hurry), then leaped to her feet again, unhurt, and ran on quickly. She was whistling a tune now, shrilly, a tune she'd heard coming through the open summer window from M. de Serre's white-washed cottage, coming from the ancient radio he'd bought on his last trip to Paris; that was almost ten years before.

Sweeping around the corner, with her windmill twirling happily, she dashed into the toy-shop and said:

"He's coming. . . Guy's coming back!"

Denise Croix caught her breath and tried not to show it. She took the windmill from the child and said: "It's torn, you should be more careful." She turned back one of the plastic wings which had come adrift from the cheap tin staple that had held it bent over, and fastened a paper-clip on it to keep it in its proper place. She said: "The bus? It's late." She hoped the child did not notice her trembling. She said: "Keep an eye on the store for me, in case anyone comes in."

She went into the back room and looked at herself in the fly-specked

mirror, then found a brush and began slowly brushing her hair. There was plenty of time. The ancient bus had to climb the steep hill as far as the road went, then drop off its passenger for the slow climb up to the top, and then he had to walk through the copse and down into the valley. . .

She looked at herself in the glass and pinched her cheeks to make them glow, and found a piece of lipstick in a drawer and painted her lips with it, then opened the shutters of the little box-window so that she could examine herself more critically and see just what had to be done to make herself acceptable to her lover. She was pleased with what she saw, as she turned her head this way and that, then picked up the brush and began working on her long dark hair again.

Her eyes were grey; her eyebrows strong and dark, her nose stubby and cheerful, her lips full and mobile, with little etched lines at the corners that cut themselves deeper into her face whenever she smiled. Her teeth were not very good at the back, but in front, where they showed, they were white and even, and her chin was turned up just a little; it gave her an almost childlike look. She was a little on the dumpy side, but her breasts were small and firm, and her waist was narrow. She smoothed the cotton of her blouse down over her body, resting her hands on her hips and approving of herself, and then, on an impulse, undid the lace fastening and lowered the line a little, then tucked it in more firmly under the broad leather belt to tighten its smoothness.

She ran her hands over her breasts again and said to herself: "If I were Estelle, I'd take off my brassiere, too. . ." But that would be going to far; as all the village knew, even though they pretended not to. Estelle was a prostitute, who spent at least two, if not three nights a week with any young man in the village who would make her even an inadequate present; with the more elderly farmers, too, if they could sneak over to her house when their wives weren't looking.

She tied a ribbon in her hair, a green ribbon with a gold stripe running through it, and went out to climb the hill to the ruin. She said to the child: "Stay here till I come back, will you do that for me?"

The child nodded, her eyes on the rag dolls and the little lead soldiers. Denise smiled and said: "And I'll give you one of the soldiers, a Colonel, would you like that? A General, even." The child's eyes were bright with pleasure. Denise patted her head, then wiped her hand fastidiously on the rough cloth at her hip, amiled again, and went out.

Charles Montpelier, the hedge-cutter, was just coming back from his morning's work, walking stol-

idly down the center of the street. He turned to look at her, saw the ribbon in her hair, and his old face wrinkled with pleasure. Standing there, grinning, he said, half-turned and still as a post: "Aye, the bus'll be coming in any minute now. Will we be having a wedding, would you say? A long time since we had a wedding in the village."

Denise blushed and shook her head in confusion. A wedding? Guy had never even mentioned it, it was just one of those things that people, the villagers, simply understood; sometimes, for no reason at all; Perhaps it was because young Guy Campan was the only young man in the village who'd never been seen coming out, in the early hours of the morning, from Estelle's little house, or because he had been seen so often strolling along the edge of the pond with Denise on his arm, looking for blue-bells in the spring and gathering great useless bundles of them to carry back to her house for her. Or perhaps, ever since they'd been ten-years-old together, Guy had never seemed to be interested really in anyone else. Which was strange, some of them thought; because Guy was not only a handsome young man whom all the village girls wanted to take to their beds, but he was also, in the words of Bernard Dufy, who kept the wine-shop: "A stallion, mark my words, I know a stallion when I see one, used to be one myself. And if you ask me, Denise Croix just isn't enough *woman* for him. Aye, she's pretty enough, and her legs are strong, but. . . mark my words, he's a *stallion*, that boy."

She passed by Estelle's house, Denise, and there was Estelle at the lace-curtained window, the curtain drawn back, and her peering out to watch as Denise went by. Denise raised a hand and wiggled it, and Estelle smiled and nodded, as though she wanted to say: Good luck, Denise, hope you do more with him than I do. . . or was there a secret smile there? A smile that seemed to say: *If only you knew dear. . .*

Thinking perhaps there was, Denise turned back as she passed, and waved again, smiling. Estelle laughed, and the curtain dropped back into place; somehow, it made Denise angry, but she put her anger aside. Soon, after all, she'd see her Guy again.

It was more than a month now that he'd been gone. M. de Serre had explained it all to them laboriously, one night in the wine-shop where they sometimes gathered to test the wines as Bernard Dufy mixed them, the good with the bad, with a little of the first and a lot of the second pressing, till it was just about right. Not good, but right; any better, and he'd have to charge more; and worse, and they wouldn't drink it.

"It's an inheritance," M. de Serre

had pontificated. "Oh, not very much, hardly enough to buy more than a pair of new shoes, but it all has to be cleared up, to be made *tidy*. A great-uncle died, you remember Jean-Pierre who left us forty years ago? Well, he died, and he left this estate to Guy. Estate!" He said again, laughing: "Enough to buy a pair of shoes, maybe, but it all has to be tidied up. Otherwise, the lawyers write letters till the money's all gone in their fees, and then they drop the whole thing, and that wouldn't do, would it? So I said to Guy: 'Go to Paris and collect it, even if it's only enough for a decent meal) But he's stayed there a month, so there'll be precious little left of it all now. An expensive place, the City." He said, marvelling: "And he was staying in a hotel!"

He was a ditch-digger, Guy Campan, the best in the village. When the rains came and the narrow streets flooded, it was always Guy who was the first man there with his shovel; he could shift twice as much earth in a day as any other man, and his lines were so neat and sharp and straight that a man could just stand there and admire them. No brambles hanging over the edge, either, to root themselves in the bottom and make next year's digging more difficult. Even Charles the hedge-cutter, old as he was, would cluck his tongue in admiration of the neat, straight lines. The crafts were dying out, they said; but Guy still took a fierce pride in his work.

And now he was coming back from the City, and Denise. . . She could hardly contain her excitement as she walked slowly up the grassy hill, forcing on herself a reluctant pace, as though convincing herself that she wasn't chasing him, that she was there for him to chase. . . (Estelle, she knew, would be hurrying now.)

A fold in the ground played its habitual trick, bringing the sound of the bus from far down the road, past the bns-stop where he would have got off, where he would have thrown his suitcase on a leather strap across his shoulder, and bowed his body into the steep hill, raising his head once in a while like a stallion among the wild flowers.

Denise breasted the rise and stood among the sparse trees, their leaves whispering; there was always a wind up here. And she looked down on the gentle slope and caught her breath.

Guy was there, three, four hundred yards away, his bulging suitcase (made of cardboard; Denise had fixed the stitching on it for him). thrown over his back, his long legs moving rhythimically, steadily up the hill that was bright with yellow buttercups. And there was a girl with him, a tall, thin young woman with long black hair pulled tight at the back of her head and hanging

down over one shoulder, almost reaching to her waist. She wore a yellow dress that was gaudier than the buttercups, and long brown leather boots that came up to her calf, with high heels on them, and a brown leather jacket slung carelessly over her arm; they were holding hands as they walked, and he was laughing with her, turning to look back to the road they had left, where a small boy, not more than six years old, was sitting on his brown-paper parcel, waiting for his mother to come and pick him up, looking forlorn and sad and impossibly lonely.

Her first impulse, Denise, was to turn and run, to run back to the shop and hide her face in shame. She felt the sudden rush of tears to her eyes, and then she straightened herself and just stood there, watching the two of them climb the hill.

It was too late now; they had seen her. She held her head with the funny chin tilted up, her mouth firm, her eyes stubbornly bright, and she waited.

It was not for very long. Guy had left his girl and was striding on ahead, and she was taking her time behind him, not trying to keep up with his long stride. Denise stooped and picked a *bouton d'or,* a buttercup, and fiddled with it, and then Guy came up to her, smiling and holding out his hands. His cheeks were smooth and well-shaven, his dark, drooping mustache neatly trimmed, his hair blown by the wind.

Smiling, he said: "Denise. . . it's been a long time." There was no awkwardness there, no hesitancy at all. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, and she felt herself quiver. There was even a kind of tolerant amusement in his eyes as though he expected her to ask: *Who is she Guy. . . ?*

But she would not. Instead, she said quietly: "It's good to see you again, Guy. We've missed you, all of us." Her eyes betrayed her. She turned them on the young girl, younger now than she had thought, coming up and smiling at them; but not a broad and open smile like Guy's, more reserved, more. . . was it hostile? She was tall and very slim and somehow fragile, looking as though her waist would break if it were bent. Her skin was impossibly white, and flawless, and her black hair shone like a raven's wing, with a dark blue sheen to it that looked unearthly. Her lips were startling red, and there was green shadow on her eye-lids--such huge and solemn eyes!

Guy said gently: "This is Odile, Denise, Odile Lautrec." He said with a touch of pride: "From Paris, she's a dancer. And this is Denise Croix, an old friend, a childhood friend from the village. We were at school together."

Odile said, raising an eyebrow, her eyes amused: "There is a school

in Petit Gruet?"

Guy grinned: "Sort of." And Denise said: "A school, but no dance-halls, Mam'selle Lautrec," But she held out her hand, forcing herself; Odile's white hand was like ice, even though the day was hot.

Odile said: "Not that kind of dancing. And call me Odile; I'm here to stay. For awhile, at least. I hope we'll be friends."

"To stay in Petit Gruet? But what will you do there, Mam'selle Lautrec? Or is it *Madame* Lautrec?"

"No, I'm not married. Not yet. And even in Petit Gruet, I'll find something to do, no doubt." She took Guy's arm and squeezed it, and said: "How quaint. . . "

Denise did not answer her. Instead, she turned and walked down the hill towards the village, her face furiously red, listening to the silence of them as they moved down behind her. At last Guy said (and now, she knew, he was straining): "I brought you a present, Denise. From Paris."

She did not turn. "That's very kind of you, Guy."

"Some silk for a dress."

"Silk? What would I do with a silk dress?"

"Dark blue, a beautiful color. Odile helped me choose it."

"That was very kind of her, too." She would not look back. She moved fast and easily, the cardboard suitcase on her head, easily balanced, her peasant back straight, her peasant shoulders firm. She had carried it up the hill for him when he had left, and it was heavier now, bulging with two people's clothes. Knowing the answer, but wanting it out in the open at once, she said, still not turning:

"And where will you stay in the village? With Guy?"

There was scarcely a moment of silence; were they exchanging glances? Guy said easily: "Of course, Denise, where else?"

The word, by some rustic magic, had spread. There had been no one ahead of them to bring the news; or perhaps some child on the hill had gone running on down, gleefully? When they came to the houses, it seemed that half the village was on the streets, finding things to do. At this time of the day, the little street was always empty; but not now.

Charles and Bernard were there, chatting away casually, and Estelle too, and many of the others as well; even M. de Serre was standing outside his house ostentatiously admiring the rose bushes in the front garden; he was very proud of his roses. The gendarme, Claude Fresnay, had decided the brass plaque on the station-house wall should be polished. Old Madame Oger, whose husband and son had both been killed at Verdun, was hanging some washing in the tiny front garden, even though it was a Friday. Pierre Lambelin, the Postmaster, was clipping his hedge with a pair of hand-

pruners, even though this was a job that Charles Montpelier ought to have been doing. The two Selange girls, both of them old-fashioned and bigoted as their father, both of them young with their beauty gone to waste through the bitterness of prejudice and suspicion, were whispering together and wondering if they could bring themselves to greet them when Denise came into view with the others behind her still.

Denise saw them and turned quickly, a smile on her face, and said brightly to Guy, talking as though she were continuing a conversation: "And since you left, the cobbles came up twice, once after the heavy rain last month, and one a week ago when the ditches overflowed from a storm on the mountain." She had waited a brief moment, and they were all together now. She said quickly, smiling: "When Guy's away, Odile, the ditches don't get looked after, and as soon as it rains, the ditches fill up and flood the street, and then the cobbles all swell up, they're wood, you know, not nearly as good as stone. . ." She glanced quickly at the Selange girls to make sure they knew she was happy. The men were looking at Odile, looking her up and down in silence, and thinking about her naked body.

That night, in the wine-shop, Bernard Dufy wiped at his moustache with the back of his hand and said.

"I told you. Denise Croix just isn't enough *woman* for the young stallion. I told you, said so all along."

His wife, Lucille, who was a tart and taciturn woman, glared at him. She was older than her years, bowed down by hard work and a righteous pride, a bitter, angry woman who endlessly polished the glasses that her husband kept on the wooden rack behind the counter of his store, with all his *pipettes* and pewter measures. She distrusted her husband; more, she actively hated him. She said sourly: "A dancer, you know what that means? She's a whore. We've one of those in the village already, and that's more than enough." The thin line of hair on her upper lip made her look hideous; she was a vicious, sour-tempered woman.

Someone said wisely: "Eh. . ."

The men shuffled their feet, waiting for Bernard to speak, but he knew enough to keep quiet.

Lucille said again: "A whore from the City, and what's she doing with a boy from Petit Gruet? We need her kind here? Well, do we?"

Bernard grunted, and Postmaster Lambelin scratched at his beard and said: "What does it matter, as long as she's got the looks to go with her trade?" He was a bachelor, and could afford to laugh; but no one laughed with him; they knew there was trouble ahead.

And then, suddenly, Denise was there, her chipped wine-jug in her hand. There was a silence as she came in, and she went to Bernard and said pleasantly: "Two litres, Bernard, the medium-priced one. . ."

He filled her jug from the small wooden cask, and waited for his wife to speak. He hated her, too; he was thinking: now we'll see what *she* has to say!

Lucille sniffed loudly. Knowing they were all waiting, she said harshly: "If a woman stole my man from me, I'd know what to do with her."

The silence became suddenly more acute. Denise was smiling gently. She put the money carefully on the counter, and then she looked at the others, slowly, with a thoughtful look in her eyes, gauging their repressed, malicious excitement as they waited. Was it possible that Denise would let the question go unanswered? It was a crucial moment, the turning-point; even old Lucille was watching her, the crinkled leather skin around her mouth taut and suspicious and hostile.

Denise looked them over. She saw Marie Werther in her usual corner, a plump and mischievous woman who helped Lucille with the cooking on Friday nights, her needle-work on her knee and a half-filled glass on the table beside her. Bernard allowed her one glass and it would last all evening. She saw Estelle Putange standing there with a mocking smile on her face, her hands on her plump, inviting hips, and her feet immodestly wide-spaced. She saw Charles Montpelier, the old hedge-cutter, a man with a saving sense of humor, watching her and waiting for a laugh. And *agent* Claude Fresnay, his dark eyes suddenly more thoughtful, alarmed even. She looked back to Estelle; it was time for a challenge.

She said pleasantly: "And you, Estelle, what would you do?"

Estelle shrugged, a pretty girl with a streak of malice in her somewhere. "My men don't leave me so easily. If I want them to stay, they stay." Mocking, she looked at the ancient Lucille and then at her husband, and said: "Ask Bernard, he knows."

Lucille rounded on her, her voice a scream: "You too! Another one of them! A whore!" Her old mouth quivered, and she fell suddenly silent, her old back bowed, her moustache black against the white of her face. Claude Fresnay said roughly: "Not here, Estelle, *tais-toi*, shut up." He was thick-set, handsome young man with a sagacity beyond his years, and he didn't like the calm with which Denise appeared to be accepting the affront. It wasn't right, somehow. Estelle had turned away, smiling, knowing she'd never have trouble from Claude Fresnay, and the others were still waiting, looking at Denise and wondering.

Bernard picked up the coins and tossed them into the little box, and stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it, and Denise took the chipped jug of wine and looked at it, and said slowly, but quite lightly: "Odile Lautrec's her name, and she dances in one of the big theatres in Paris."

Marie Werther began to laugh. "A dancer! A *dancer!*" Her plump body was shaking. "She's not really one of *us*, is she?"

"No, not one of us." Denise was still looking carefully into her wine-jug, looking at the dark red blood, as though it fascinated her. She said again: "Not one of us. There's a faraway look to her, did you notice that? As though she's not really here at all, but. . . in a world of her own, a long way away."

Lucille was shaking the soap container into the galvanized iron sink, stirring the suds among the glasses. She muttered angrily: "Then what's she doing here in Petit Gruet, what's she doing with one of our boys?" Guy Campan was almost the only living creature Lucille could tolerate. Was it because he was the only living creature who could tolerate her?

Denise said softly: "One of our boys. . ." She smiled brightly and said: "Good-night, everyone." She went to the door and opened it, and turned back and said, with a puzzled look on her face that could not have been genuine: "Did you notice a strange thing about her? The dogs won't go near her. Strange, isn't it?" She closed the door quietly behind her in the silence.

Fresnay looked around the room. "The dogs? Now what can she have meant by that, do you suppose?"

Bernard snorted, but his ancient wife was staring through the closed door, seeing Denise walk slowly back to her house, walking slowly with placid, self-assured steps now that the seed was sown. Charles the hedge-cutter was scratching at the abscess under his arm, rubbing it painfully. He said slowly, not giving it much importance: "I was sharpening my bill-hook this afternoon, and yes, she's right. . . My dog barked at her and backed off, sort of snarling."

Fresnay said: "A stranger in town."

"He don't even bark at birds, that dog. Not even at rabbits. But at her. . . he barked. I sent him into the house, and he ran there, tail between his legs, like he'd seen a ghost. Last time he did that was when old Mere Chaplan dropped dead in the road outside the house, and that was six, seven years ago, maybe more." He ran a calloused finger down the side of his nose and said: "He barked at her, it's a strange thing, and let's have another glass of wine, Bernard, even though it's fit to poison us all."

There was the gentle patter of rain on the roof, and Bernard Dufy said, startled: "Rain? First time we had rain in August for ten years."

Claude Fresnay nodded wisely. "I spoke to M. de Serre this evening. On that radio of his, they said some rain was coming, not enough to worry the grapes. Just a sprinkle."

The gentle patter turned to a heavy drumming, and they sat there glumly and drank their wine. Estelle bought herself another glass of wine (no one would offer her a drink, not here, in public!) and said maliciously: "He's almost the only boy in the village worth taking up with, and who gets him? A tart from out of town!" She shrugged. "Oh, I don't mind about the dancing, why should I? But out of the blue like that. . . ? I'd duck her in the pond if it was me." She looked at Claude Fresnay, finished her drink at a gulp, aud said: "The rain, I left a sheet on the line. . ."

When she had gone, Claude Fresnay put down a coin and said loudly: "One for the road, Bernard, it's a heavy day for me tomorrow." Lucille sniffed loudly, and Fresnay finished his drink quickly and went out. He stood in the cool wet air for a moment, feeling the rain on his shoulders, looked up at the sky, and strode off.

A little later, he said to Estelle, glumly: "Just a sprinkle, they said on the radio, and listen to it!" Bouncing around clumsily on the bed, she said: *"Faisons le Grand Duc.* . . That wine that Bernard serves up is getting worse every day." He put his arms round her roughly and said: "The hell with Bernard and his wine. . ."

The rain was beating down now, very hard, and there was thunder over the top of the hill where the ruin was; a bright sheet of lightening lit up the two white-skinned bodies on the bed; it turned suddenly cold, and they pulled the heavy comforter about them and lay there snugly together, in silence. Soon, Claude dragged himself out and began dressing. Estelle curled up in a small and sensuous bundle, her wide eyes looking at him as he pulled on his heavy boots. She said at last: "They don't like it, you know."

He walked over to the dressing-table and took her comb and ran it through his thick black hair. Carefully, he wiped the comb on the seat of his pants, and turned back to look at her, his suspenders hanging down, his undershirt grey with repeated, careless washings.

"They don't like what, the rain? Who does, this time of the year?"

"No, not the rain. That woman coming here."

"Oh. Her."

"You think she's pretty?"

Claude shrugged. "Of course, I do, no one can say she's not."

"You'd like to make love to her?"

He grinned. "I like to make love to any pretty woman, you know that."

"Is that why you called me

Odile?"

The grin went from his face. "I did *what?*"

"You called me Odile once there, and you didn't even know it."

"I couldn't have."

"It doesn't matter. What we have going. . . well, you couldn't hardly call it love, till death us do part, could you?"

He grinned again, the moment of puzzlement gone. He slipped the suspenders over his broad shoulders and patted his stomach. "Putting on a bit of weight, I better watch it. And I never called you Odile, I wasn't even thinking of her."

"All men think of other women when they make love, except maybe the first time, didn't you think I knew that?"

"Oh? Now, that's interesting. Where d'you pick up that priceless bit of misinformation?"

"God, listen to that rain. . . In August! Oh, I picked it up somewhere."

"Well, it's a lot of nonsense." He slipped on his jacket, looked at himself approvingly in the mirror, took out a bundle of bills and carefully peeled off four of them, and put the rest back into his pocket. He said, grumbling: "Friday, the only day I seem to have any money." He went and sat on the bed beside her, his hand lightly touching her hair. He slipped the four bills under her pillow, and leaned down and kissed her, and pulled the comforter away so that he could feel her breast again. She stroked his cheek with both hands, and said quietly: "You know, Claude, I'm really very fond of you."

"You're a beautiful woman, Estelle. Truly beautiful. I don't know what I'd do without you." He laughed suddenly: "Or what we'd all do without you."

"You're a beast."

"Aye. Just an animal. That's what you do to me."

"Next week?"

"Of course."

"You want to borrow my umbrella?"

"I'd look fine walking down the street with your umbrella, wouldn't I?"

"There's no one about. It's nearly three o'clock."

"Take care of yourself." He kissed her again, quite tenderly, and stood up, his hand lingering. He said: "Goodnight, Odile." She said nothing.

When he had gone, she lay for a long time staring up at the ceiling, wide awake and sleepless. She reached for a cigarette and lit it, watching the lightening play its reflected violence on the whitewashed rafters.

M. de Serre fiddled with his watch-chain and stared out of his window at his roses; all from the house of Meilland, all scented strongly, all doing well, with only a little

drooping from last night's heavy and unexpected storm; the warm sun of the morning was bringing them rapidly back to vigor again.

Standing by the desk, not too happily sipping the glass of excellent wine that *M. le Maire* habitually gave him on Saturday mornings, *agent* Fresnay, No. 17583, wished he conld sit down; he was tired, as he usually was on Saturday mornings when he had to rise early to supervise the weekly cleaning out of the police station, even if he didn't get to bed till nearly four o'clock. He sipped his wine and said: "An extraordinarily good-looking young woman, *M. le Maire.* Apparently she was a dancer in Paris."

The Mayor liked to know who came and went in his village, and it was nothing more than part of the weekly report. He took off his steel-rimmed glasses and polished them, and stared out at the roses again, admiring especially the dark, dark sheen of the Charles Mallerin, a crimson so deep it was almost black. He said absently: "Not everyone can grow them, you know. . . they're a little bit less robust than the others." And Fresnay said stupidly: "No, *M. le Maire,"* not knowing in the least what he was talking about. The glasses were back in place, highly-polished; the neat grey beard had been carefully brushed, the moustaches waxed to caricature points. His dark brown suit was a trifle shabby, but the brown boots had been polished to perfection. The radio was playing the Third Movement of a Brahms symphony, and the Mayor was saying softly to himself: *Da-da-da-dum, da-da-da-dum* . . . A bright splash of color, a scarlet that shouldn't have been there, caught his eye and he stared and said: "My God!"

"I beg your pardon, *M. le Maire?"*

"My God," the Mayor said again. He took his glasses off and replaced them hurriedly, and said: "Well, I never did. Surely, surely that must be she now? Look, Fresnay, is that not she?"

The constable moved smartly over to the window and looked out. Odile was there, strolling down the street with a shopping basket over her arm. The bright scarlet was the color of her long slim pants.

The Mayor said: "My God, and in . . . good God, in *trousers!"*

"Yes, indeed sir. Odile Lautrec the lady I was mentioning."

The Mayor found something to do. He said: "Wait for me, Fresnay, wait here. . ."

He hurried out into his little front garden and began feverishly spraying the Charles Mallerin, and when Odile drew close he looked up, surprised, and said effusively: "Ah, it must be, surely, Mam'selle Lautrec? Surely? Permit me, Mam' selle, to present myself. I have the honor to be the Mayor of this little village, M. de Serre." He cleared his throat and said: "M.

Alphonse de Serre." He made a stuffy little bow over the wooden fence, and beamed at her. He was thinking: What an agreeable-looking girl she'd be if she'd only smile!

But Odile was not smiling; there was a cool disdain on her face which made the Mayor, unaccountably squirm. She looked at him coldly, her eyes hostile, and then suddenly the expression changed, and there it was, she smiled. . . She held out a slim hand and smiled and said: "M. de Serre, a great pleasure, yes, I'm Odile Lautrec."

He could smell that damned insecticide on his hands; it was always leaking out of the spray-gun. He wiped his hand on his lean white handkerchief, behaviug like a rustic, he thought, only a rustic would have held it longer than he need have, and beamed at her and wondered what to say. It was hard to keep his eyes off her splendid breasts, so small and tight and hard, and not a bit like the great eggplants of his late dear wife.

He said, a frog iu his throat: "I do hope you will like our little village, you do us honor by coming here. Er. . . with young Guy Campan, was it not? A splendid young man, hard-working, honest, a good, good boy. And will you be staying here long?" He said roguishly: "It's a privilege of my position to be so infernally inquisitive, I'm afraid."

Odile raised a delicate shoulder. The skin at her throat was like polished ivory. "I don't really know that. For a while, I suppose."

He wanted to hold her there, to keep her talking, and he didn't quite know what to say. He gestured towards the shopping-basket, the bright peaches glistening, and said: "I see you must have met Madame Oger? Our green-grocer? A delightful woman. . ."

"Really?"

He was shocked at the coldness in her voice, and it showed. As he stared at her, she said casually: "A stupid woman, with no manners at all. She was very rude to me." He blinked his eyes, his mouth half-open. (Was Fresnay still at that damned window, watching him?) He shut his mouth with a start, and said:

"Well. Well, I *am* sorry to hear that. She's normally, ah, quite, ah, gracious. A little rustic, perhaps, like most of the people here. I myself come from St. Ettienne, a splendid little country town. Not like this a bit. Perhaps you know it?" He peered at her myopically—ah, that splendid thigh!—and Odile nodded and said: "Yes, I danced there once, *Giselle* and *l'Oiseau Bleu*. . ." There was a distant look in her eyes as though she were remembering good times gone forever.

Was that damned Fresnay still watching? The Mayor cleared his throat again and said, gushing: "Well, I mustn't keep you here talking,

must I? But perhaps your young man would like to bring you over one morning for a glass of wine? I have an excellent cellar, would you like that?"

For a moment, Odile did not answer. M. de Serre had the impression that she was thinking of the green-grocer's insult; what *could* she have said? And then she came back to his world, but cold again now, and inclined her head gravely and said: "I'd like that very much."

"I miss the, ah, the sophistication of the bigger towns. It's good to meet someone from Paris."

"Yes, of course. You are most kind." She gave him her hand again, and he bowed over it and kissed it across the little fence, feeling a rose-thorn digging its obtrusive way into his leg as he leaned it to her. And then she was gone, moving easily away with a wonderful kind of articulation that kept the Mayor watching her.

And as he watched, a strange thing happened. He saw Odile suddenly drop her basket and double up, clutching at that slender stomach; she almost fell. He flung open the gate, trampling a bush in his hurry, and ran to her, and when he got there she was picking up her basket, as though nothing had happened, and replacing one of the big amber-colored peaches that had fallen out. There was a muddy brown stain, he noticed, on her white blouse just above the stomach. Panting from the exertion, but hoping she wouldn't notice it, he said: "What happened, are you all right?"

She looked at him long and coolly. "Yes, thank you, perfectly all right."

"But what. . . what happened? You must tell me, Mam'selle!"

There was a very distant smile on her face now, the smile of one who is putting someone else firmly in his place, telling him that it's none of his concern. . . . "*Nothing* happened, *M. le Maire.* Nothing at all. Good day." She turned, and moved on down the street, not looking back. And then, suddenly, *agent* Fresnay was there, running up fast and not panting in the least. He stopped and saluted, and said: "I will arrest her, *M. le Maire. . .*"

He moved off, and the Mayor, horrified, stopped him. "*Arrest* her? Arrest Mam'selle Lautrec? Are you out of your mind, Fresnay?"

Fresnay pulled up short; how frustrating the Mayor could be sometimes! He said: "No, the Selange girl, didn't you see?"

"See what, man?" The Mayor was quite angry now.

"Why, Jeannine Selange, she threw a stone at the young lady. I saw from the window. She picked up a stone in the street and threw it hard, like a man. And then she turned and slipped back into her house." He spread his hands wide. "Felonious assault, *M. le Maire. .*"

But he waited. M. de Serre

frowned. "Are you sure, Fresnay?"

"Quite sure, *M. le Maire.* There's a clear view over the fence from the window, as you must know."

"Yes. Yes, I know that. . . But. . . No. No, Fresnay, let's leave it as it is. I feel the young lady might not like to press charges. She said. . . she said nothing at all had happened, and I'd look a bit of a fool if I asked her to deny that in court, would I not?"

"Yes, *M. le Maire,* I meau, no, *M. le Maire.* But. . ."

De Serre said firmly: "Let it rest, Fresnay. Do nothing." Even to himself, he could not explain the terrible premonition he had, a premonition that there would soon be trouble in this little village, bad and violent trouble, and all on account of that charming little slip of a girl from Paris, with those long slim legs that reached all the way. . . He sighed, and thought of his late dear wife, and said, to no one in particular: "Legs like crumbling Gothic pillars, just as hard and solid and not even functional anymore. ."

That damned Fresnay was staring at him again! He said, musing: "I wonder why it is that in a little village like this, everyone wants to hate a young girl like that just because she comes from outside? Just because she's. . . different." So very different! He pulled himself up sternly and said: "Get back to the station, Fresnay. I'm going to have a word with Madame Oger."

He walked slowly down the little street and round the corner to Madame Oger's store. But before he could ask her what he wanted to know—(wondering how he should phrase so indiscreet a question)—he saw with a shock that she was staring in something like horror at the neatly laid-out box of peaches, picked by her husband very early that morning while the dew was still on them; he saw that they were. . .

Withered. There was no other word for it. Forty, fifty, sixty beautiful ripe peaches, blushed only a few hours ago with the most glorious color in all nature, amber and red and golden-pink, all blending into one smooth velvety texture so beautiful that you could feel its glory coursing through your veins; and they were all brown and shrivelled and dried-out as though there were not a drop of moisture in the air to give them life.

He stared, unbelieving. He said: "For God's sake. . . Madame Oger, your peaches!"

She was short and squat, and dumpy, with a massive, bended back that just missed being hunched. Her hips were vast, almost a metre across, and her great thick legs, black-clad, came almost to points at ridiculously small ankles; it looked as though she were sprouting from the floor of her shop, like one of her own vegetables. She was shaking her head slowly from side to side, her

peasant eyes, dulled with trouble, wide and unbelieving. Her voice was a whisper: "They were picked this morning. . ." They looked as if they had been there in the bright hot sun for months or more; and strangely, the touch of greenery that Madame Oger always left on them was still there, as though only the fruit and not the foliage had been shrivelled by some unknown blight. M. de Serre was reminded of a mummy he'd once seen in the museum at Lyons.

Not believing, Madame Oger said: "Five minutes ago, two minutes, even less, I came out and. . . they were fine, the most beautiful peaches you ever saw. . ." She put both hands to the sides of her head and began to rock back and forth, and then she started to cry; not the silent tears of grief, but the long, breathless wail of fear.

It was because of the helplessness that he left. He would have waited, would have tried to find out what had happened. But he dreaded that she might turn to him in anger and say: Well, you're the Mayor, you're the only civilized man among us; do something. . .

And there was nothing he could do but wonder, and so, he left.

He walked quickly down the street towards the wine-shop. And as he passed the police station, Fresnay was there, getting on his bicycle. He stopped as the Mayor approached and said with a sigh: "The red Poll cow, *M. le Maire*, it dropped dead just now."

"The milk-cow that belongs to the Selange family?"

Fresnay nodded. "An old cow, *M. le Maire*, very old. I told Selange I'd help him carve it up as soon as the flesh softens up a bit."

M. de Serre nodded. He felt himself shuddering and hoped that Fresnay had not noticed his perturbation. He turned away quickly and went on to the wine-shop.

Save for Bernard Dufy, it was empty. Good.

He said pleasantly: "I'll have a gential, Bernard, if you please, and do me the honor of having one with me."

Dufy inclined his head, wondering what the Mayor was up to; it wasn't often that he made such generous gestures. He poured the bright-colored drink into quite good glasses, and the Mayor said, keeping up his affable tone: "And the good Madame Dufy? She is well, I trust?"

"She's not here, if that's what you mean," Dufy said. "She's fetching water from the mill-stream. Our well is going sour."

Another one! The Mayor said uneasily: "Oh? Just recently?"

Dufy sighed: "This morning. Tastes like gypsum. It can happen when the rain comes out of season. Happened once before, though not so bad as this time. Your health, *M. le Maire*. And was there something on your mind?"

"You're a very perceptive man, Bernard."

"Well, not often you give us the pleasure of a visit this time of the day."

"Er. . . quite. Your health." He rolled the smooth liquid round his mouth, rich as an emperor's robe, and worried about his digestion. He said, hesitantly: "I was wondering what you thought of the young woman who's come to visit us. Odile Lautrec."

Dufy thought about this for a while, not wanting to appear too eager, too knowledgeable. He said at last: "Ah. . ."

"An attractive young woman, I thought," the Mayor said. "I spoke with her this morning. Quite charming."

Dufy nodded. "But the women don't like her. I suppose we should expect that." He put down his empty glass and waited till the Mayor gestured pleasantly, then refilled it and said: "But that's to be expected. She's wearing *trousers* this morning! Easy enough for a man to accept, because it's nice to see where a pair of legs finishes at, and there's not one of us wouldn't want to roll her in the hay at the back of the barn, but the women. . ." He said wisely: "The women are going to sniff and turn away, because the women always think that morals are changing and always for the worse, never for the better. Once they get to be forty years old, that is."

"Ah, yes indeed. My late dear wife was much the same, I'm afraid." He said carefully: It seems that one of the village women threw a stone at her a little while back."

"Oh? And who was that I wonder?"

The Mayor evaded the question. "Not a *nice* thing to do, was it? And it seems that. . . one of the storekeepers was very rude to her as well. I do hope we're not going to have. . . any difficulty. After all, we're civilized people here!"

Bernard stared at the royal blue of his gential and said slowly: "For my part, I'm happy to see a bit of good-looking female flesh in the village, even if it does belong to someone else, but. . . For the women, that's another matter. Behind the times, they don't want any changes. Particularly good ones, it shows them up for what they are. Makes a man think: Well, maybe I should leave the old bag one day and take a look at the world for myself." He snorted, and said abruptly: "She was in here a while back, wanted to buy some wine and didn't get it. Lucille came in while I was serving her, and. . . all right, what if I was looking down the front of her blouse a bit, I'm not so old I can't enjoy a bit of stimulation once in a while. But Lucille. . ." He sighed.

"Oh, she wouldn't like that a bit, your dear Lucille."

"A woman gets to look like

Lucille, she knows that she's left a sort of vacuum behind her. She's always watching out to see who's going to move in there. Fat chance I'd have."

"I do hope she didn't give you too bad a time."

"Me? No." Bernard sounded surprised. "Almost like it wasn't my fault. But she gave the young woman a piece of her mind, I can tell you."

"Oh?"

"The things she called her! Not the right way to treat customers, I told her, but it didn't do much good." Relishing the encounter more than he'd admit, he said: "The old woman leaned over the counter and said to her: 'No need to dress up like a whore just because you are one, young woman. Now get out of my store and don't come back, ever!' You know the way she talks sometimes, slow and deliberate. . . I stood there like an idiot, didn't know what to do with my hands, where to look. . .."

"And Mam'selle Lautrec?" The Mayor's sharp, intelligent eyes were watching Bernard carefully, as though all the secrets lay on that placid, wondering countenance.

"Mam'selle Lautrec? I tell you. . . There was a look in her eyes that . . . Well, I was just going to say it scared me, but that wouldn't be true. No. It just. . . made me *wonder*. She looked more amused than anything else, and yet I got the impression that she wasn't thinking at all about what Lucille had said, but about something else, quite different, quite. . . far away. For a moment, I swear, that girl didn't know where she was, she just stood there, right where you're standing now, and sort of half-smiled with a faraway look in her eyes, and she took it all in and didn't say a word. *'Whore'*, the wife said, out flat. Why, she never even called Estelle that, not even that night when. . . Oh well, there's no accounting for what a man's wife will get up to, is there?"

M. de Serre sighed. He smacked his lips and fiddled with his glasses and said authoritatively: "Well, what I wanted to see you about. . . They all gather here in the evenings, and I can imagine that for the next two days they'll have plenty of gossip to throw around, and I was wondering. . . if you could bring yourself to. . . to steer them away from any thoughts of. . . of hostility? We've a friendly little community here, and I wouldn't like to see it get upset over such a trifle. You're an intelligent man, Bernard, and I know they all listen to what you have to say. It would, perhaps, take very little effort to. . . shall I say, keep the conversation on reasonable grounds? All it needs is a quiet plea for. . . for tolerance, wouldn't you say? It would make things so much easier for all of us."

Dufy sniffed loudly and rubbed

a calloused hand over his broad weather-beaten face. He grinned suddenly and said: "The old woman hears me sticking up for that young *poule,* she's going to draw a few conclusions of her own, isn't she?"

"Yes indeed, I suppose she will," the Mayor said affably. "But I'm quite sure you can take care of yourself."

"Aye. I can that. And maybe you'd better have a word with young Guy Campan, too. If he's going to wave that long-legged piece of his around for all of us to leer at, then he'd better get used to the idea that he's going to be pretty unpopular too. He's made enough enemies already, just bringing her here."

"Enemies?" The Mayor couldn't quite understand the wise look on Dufy's face.

Dufy said firmly: "Enemies, Every marriageable woman in town and some who aren't for the having as well." Seeing the look of stupefaction on the Mayor's face, he said confidentially: "As you said, I get all the gossip here, and usually I keep my mouth shut, but. . . I'll tell you this; it isn't only Denise Croix who hoped she'd get young Guy."

"No? You astonish me!"

Dufy ticked them off on his fingers. "Denise. Marie Werther. One of the Selange girls if not both of them. Lambelin's daughter. Montpelier's niece. . ."

"Oh not *her,* surely!"

"Her too. And even Estelle Putange! They all expected to get their hands on Guy one of these days, even though Denise was always leading the pack. Only good-looking boy in town who's worth more than two pins. Now they're against him because he's let himself be picked up by an outsider and had the nerve to bring her here. To show them, if you ask me, what a girl's *supposed* to look like. Even if he gets tired of her, or she of him, you think he's going to take up with one of *them?* After *her?*" He said wisely: "Raw potatoes don't taste like much when you've been nibbling peaches."

That night, just after midnight, the wine-shop unaccountably caught fire. They all came tumbling out of their beds to see what could be done, but before they could get the buckets going—there was no fire department in Petit Gruet—the whole place was a mass of flames that lit up the sky for miles around.

Lucille stood as close as she dared and watched the little cottage with its thatched roof flaring brightly, and Bernard put his arm round her with unaccustomed sympathy and tried to comfort her, and didn't even seem to mind when she pushed him away. They stood there and watched, Lucille, Bernard, Charles Montpelier, Marie Werther, Estelle Putange, Claude Fresnay the gendarme (useless as usual), Pierre Lambelin, old Madame Oger and the

two Selange girls, all of them. Even M. de Serre had come hurrying out of his house in his red woollen dressing-gown and carpet-slippers. Guy Campan and Odile, however, were nowhere to be seen. They stood and watched and whispered, knowing the flames were too fierce. the heat too high, to permit any of them to do anything at all. Some of them wondered about their own houses, well-spaced but close enough to catch fire if the slightest breeze got up...

It was Estelle who saw her first. And she gestured silently.

Odile was standing by herself a little way down the road, close by the copse of hazel trees where it met the cobbles of the street. She was standing alone, well apart from the others, fifty metres or more away, quite alone, and watching. She was dressed in a long robe of black stuff that might have been silk, a ballet wrap-around, perhaps, and her white feet were bare. She was a startling sight, just the white of her face and her feet visible against the darkness of the woods, and the shimmering mill-pond under the great bulk of the mill's timbers a little behind her and to one side. Just occasionally, the flickering yellow-red of the flames played across that white face, and in that light they could see...

Odile was laughing.

For a moment, they all just stared at her, shocked by the laugh. And then Lucille bent down and picked up a clod of earth and hurled it at her. Her voice was a scream. They waited for that word, *whore,* again, knowing Lucille's wicked tongue was sharp. But there was something else on Lucille's evil mind, and now, they all heard the word clearly...

Lucille screamed: *"Sorciere!* Witch! Damned *witch!"*

M. de Serre was horrified. The first thought that slipped through his mind was: Well, she ought to know, whiskers and all, she'd be one if there really were such things . . . And then he looked at the others to see how they were taking it, and saw to his astonishment, *sensed,* rather. . . sensed a sort of agreement among them, as though the word were no surprise at all. He thought of the withered peaches and the sour well and the dead cow. . . Charles Montpelier was staring at Odile with a malign, almost mischievous look in his old eyes; Estelle was frankly scared; Marie Werther horrified; old Madame Oger was nodding wisely; Bernard Dufy was squinting, running a thoughtful finger down the side of his nose and wondering. But they all *agreed!*

Lucille picked up a stone and threw it, and M. de Serre went to her quickly and took hold of her arms and said, raising his voice angrily: *"Non, Madame,* one does not do such things. . ." She did not resist him, and for a moment he

held her tight, looking back over his shoulder at Odile.

Against the dark of the woods, she was a shadow, a disembodied face, white and flame-licked, and she was moving slowly in a weaving, sensuous movement, her head turned to one side, one arm raised above the other, her long fingers outstretched; she swayed slowly from side to side, a distant music playing that only she could hear, and then . . . then she was dancing, very lightly, impossibly fragile; a nymph in the woods, a zephyr. She spun round on her points and held her pose, facing them, and then she laughed out lond, just once, and dropped the black gown to her feet and stepped out of it, and she was naked, quite naked from head to foot, her body white as she danced.

A naked woman on the streets? In Petit Gruet?

The villagers gasped and surged forward almost en masse. There was outrage, and shock, and horror . . . and something like fear as well, though none of them would admit it, even to themselves. Estelle picked up a long stick and Marie Werther was purposefully rolling up the sleeves of the woollen sweater that had once belonged to her husband. M. de Serre shouted: "No, no, I beg of you. . . !" But they paid him no attention as they surged forward.

Behind them, the roof of the wine-shop crashed in flames, crackling horribly, but they scarcely noticed it as they ran towards Odile. She stepped back and laughed again, and then she was in among the trees, still dancing, her white feet as bare as the rest of her in spite of the wild blackberries there. She flitted among the trees like a ghost, here for a moment and then gone, slipping from one dark shadow to another with infinite grace and speed, her long white legs flashing, naked for all the men to see and for the women to shriek at. But here in the woods by the pond, her nakedness was no longer shocking. She was a wood-nymph, an ethereal spirit sprung from the bole of a tree, and part of the forest, dressed in the forest's mottled shadows.

But their anger saw nothing of her beauty. Lucille shrieked: "Drive her out! Drive her back to the hell she came from!"

They crashed noisily through the bushes and saplings, tearing themselves on the brambles; Estelle was the first to catch up with her. She raised her stick and swung it viciously through the air, but Odile was not there anymore, she was behind her, swaying sensually, ignoring the anger as she danced. Estelle turned sharply and struck again, but Lucille was in the way, struggling with a long thorned cane that had wrapped itself round her neck and was drawing blood. Charles Montpelier had taken the bill-hook from his waist and was slicing her free

with it, and. . . where was Odile now?

She was there, by the mill-pond, dancing around its edge, ignoring them, with only the crackle of flames for an orchestra, dancing swiftly and lightly as though the whole forest were her stage and the little crowd that was after her blood was dressed in evening wear and applauding her beauty.

M. de Serre was with them, trying to draw them back, trying to understand what was happening, trying to stop them, and not succeeding in anything at all. He was panting heavily from the exertion, and he stopped and leaned against a tree and let them get on with it, let them thrash about among the bushes as though they were getting somewhere, which they weren't. He put back his head and gasped in great deep gulps of cold night air.

And then, suddenly, coming from nowhere, she was beside him, half behind the tree he was leaning against, so close that he could smell a strange scent on her, so close that her white breast—the breast he'd coveted back there—was touching his arm; she scarcely paused in her dancing, but she whispered to him softly: "You know, don't you . . . ?" And then she was gone again. He forgot his dignity and sank to the ground, and sat there, against the bole of the tree, his legs awkwardly splayed out in front of him, his breath forced and painful. He was trembling. He closed his eyes. And when he opened them again, Odile was gone completely; there was no sign of her anywhere. He heard Lucille shout angrily: "Where did she go?" He heard Charles Montpelier mumbling to himself. He heard Estelle say, astonished: "She's gone. Just. . . gone."

There was a terrible silence in the woods. An owl hooted, and then there was silence again.

They gathered round him now, all of them, and stood looking down at him as he sat there, conscious of his helplessness, wondering how to recover his dignity. He got to his feet and said angrily: "Well, don't look at me, it's not my fault!"

Nobody answered him. Estelle was looking around her, hefting her stick as though she expected Odile to appear again; M. de Serre knew she would not. He brushed at the mud on his clothes and said:

"Someone had better stay with the fire till it's all quite out. Bernard, you'd better do that. And the rest of you. . . go to your homes. There'll be no more of this. . . this savagery. What we have all experienced. . . I promise you, it won't happen again. Now go, all of you."

He did not wait, but pushed his way angrily through them. When he reached the road, he turned back and looked. They were still where he had left them; but now, they were huddled together, whispering,

conspiring in the darkness and the silence. The fire? They'd forgotten all about it.

He strode purposefully to Guy Campan's cottage and knocked imperatively on the door. A distant sleepy voice answered him, and then the wooden shutter over the front door was thrown open and young Guy was leaning out, his hair touseled, his arms out-thrown to hold back the *jalousies.* He said: "Oh, M. de Serre, I'm coming." And a moment later he was there, throwing back the bolts and letting the Mayor in. He didn't look a bit surprised, and the Mayor said firmly: "You know why I'm here, of course."

Guy shook his head, surprised. "But you are welcome, none the less."

The Mayor stared. "Surely you *must* know!"

"No, I don't. But come in anyway, *M. le Maire."* He stood back and let the Mayor in, and switched on the light in the little parlor, and indicated a chair and said: "I'm afraid I don't have any wine. . . we weren't able to buy any today. But there is coffee. . ."

The Mayor said: "It won't do, you know. It won't do at all." Guy was watching him, puzzled, and the Mayor sat down heavily in the creaking, over-upholstered armchair and said: "I won't talk about the fire, but. . ."

"The fire?"

Impatiently: "Yes, the fire, the wine-shop has burned down, and you must know that. You can't possibly have slept through it."

"I assure you that I did." Guy went to the window and threw it open, sniffing the air. He turned back and said: "Well, that's quite surprising, isn't it? You mean it. . . burned to the ground? Completely?"

"Completely. And Mam'selle Lautrec. . . when do you expect her back?"

Guy said calmly: "I'm afraid I don't understand you." He was cool, quite composed, even impertinent.

The Mayor said: "When she returns, I'd like a word with her, would you tell her that? Or perhaps I should wait for her here."

"When she returns? But she's upstairs in bed."

"Then be so kind as to ask her to come down."

"I'm afraid she's asleep. She doesn't like to be awakened."

"I see it's necessary to insist. I want, I demand, an explanation of her extraordinary behavior just now."

Guy shook his head slowly. He was quite earnest. He said: "It seems I'm supposed to understand what you mean, but I insist that I do not. As for her extraordinary behavior, as you put it, she has not left her bed since she retired three hours ago."

The Mayor stood up. He said stiffly: "Well, if that's going to be

your attitude. . . Are you telling me that she's here, in this house?"

"Of course she is, where else would she be?"

"I saw her in the woods not two minutes ago. She spoke to me."

"That's impossible."

"None the less, it's true."

"She's upstairs, in bed. She has been since nine o'clock."

The Mayor took a deep breath. He said carefully: "I can insist on your proving that, you know. It's a simple matter to call Fresnay if you dispute my own authority."

Guy went to the door, a slight smile on his handsome face. The Mayor was thinking: What a nice young man this is, a pity he's got himself embroiled in all this nonsense! Guy gestured to the narrow, twisting stairway and said: "M. le Maire. . ."

M. de Serre hesitated. He made up his mind and went purposefully up the stairs behind Guy, and Guy switched on the light in the tiny attic bedroom, and there was Odile in the big white bed, the heavy cotton comforters drawn up to her chin. As the light went on, she stirred and turned around, and opened her eyes and looked at them in surprise and said: "Why, M. . . de Serre, is it not?" She yawned and looked at the little clock on the table, smiled, and said: "A very pleasant surprise, forgive me. . ." She sat up, pulling the comforters up to cover her body.

Guy said easily: "M. de Serre thinks he saw you in the woods just now. He thinks you spoke to him there."

She laughed. "In the woods? Just now? Why, how silly! I've been in bed for a long, long time." She looked at the Mayor and laughed—just the same laugh!—and said: "A fantasy, M. de Serre. But perhaps a flattering one."

The anger was mounting, mounting high. "You deny that you were dancing out there in the woods by the fire. . .?"

Guy said: "Lucille Dufy's wine-shop burned down. . ."

The Mayor went on, ignoring the interruption: "Dancing in the woods, quite naked, in front of half the village?"

They were both staring at him now. Not horrified, not shocked; merely amused. It made him feel impossibly insignificant.

Odile said easily: "Naked? Naked, you said?"

"Naked."

The two of them exchanged glances, conspirators against him. Odile said reprovingly—but, oh, that mischievous light in her eyes!—"A most indelicate fantasy, Monsieur. . . And at your age!"

He was violently angry now. He felt himself trembling. "The whole village saw you! I saw you myself."

Odile said calmly: "And did you like what you saw?"

The Mayor turned on his heel

and strode out of the room. He tripped on the narrow stairway and nearly fell, and he did not recover his aplomb until he reached the seclusion of his own house. He poured himself a large glass of cognac and sat is his favorite leather chair by the window, in the darkness, looking out at the moonlit sky and trying to control his trembling.

He said to himself firmly: This is the year, 1936, not the seventeenth century; and there's a logical explanation for *everything!"*

The whispered conspiracy did not last long.

By the time M. de Serre had finally shrugged his gallic shoulders and decided that there was nothing he or anyone else could do, and had gone to bed, the others had made up their minds.

True, some of them, the more fearful ones, left the little meeting in the woods, wandering off one by one to lock themselves away for the night; some of them shuddered, and would have nothing at all to do with it, crossing themselves and moving away, detaching themselves as best they could from the terrible things that were going to happen.

But Lucille, and Estelle, and Charles Montpelier, and Bernard Dufy—Dufy a trifle reluctantly, prehaps, but more scared of his wife than he was of the things she wanted him to be part of—went off to find Denise, sitting at her lonely window and watching the embers of the burned ont shell of the wine-shop across the road. It was almost as if she had been waiting for them; perhaps she had!

She said simply: "We'll take a cross with us, it's the safest thing." Old Lucille nodded wisely, and set about lashing two sticks together with a length of salvaged string from the dresser drawer. And then they went off together in silence, moving out into the dark street and peering up at the moon to look for covering clouds, muttering and huddling together in the darkness, knowing they were only doing what had to be done, urgently, at once, before their determination should shatter; before, too, any more evil could be visited on their quite, remote little village.

They went to Guy's cottage, and Charles Montpelier forced open the door with his bill-hook, the heavy curved steel knife he used in his trade. They went quickly up the stairs and broke down the locked bedroom door, and Guy awoke first and leapt to his feet as he heard Odile—one look at the cross they carried was enough—scream her head off. Charles laid him out quickly and neatly with a blow to the side of the head with the flat of his hook and then they tore the comforters off Odile as she lay there, and beat her body with the sticks they had brought until she stopped her screaming. Denise took

Odile's head under her strong arm, Charles and Bernard took the two arms, Lucille and Estelle—strange companions!—took hold of her legs. And they carried her clumsily down the twisting, shadowed stairway and out through the broken door and into the street, across the cobbles, shining now in the moonlight, along the road to the copse where she had danced, and along the brambled path to the mill-stream.

As the great wooden wheel creaked and turned above them, the five of them held Odile down under the water till a cloud passed across the moon and told them she was dead.

When they had finished, Lucille looked at her husband and said: "A stake."

Bernard trembled. Could he refuse? But Charles was silently handing him the bill-hook, razor sharp and gleaming in the dappled white shafts that came down through the trees from the moon, catching the light of the water and sending it back at them. He took the fearsome weapon, and found a long straight hazel, and cut it off at the base; it would have made a good pole for the strong scarlet-runner beans that he planted every spring in the garden at the back of the wine-shop. He sharpened the end of it to a fine needle-point and handed it to his wife without a word.

She looked at him and sniffed her disapproval of his hesitancy. And then she raised the stake high in the air and brought it down fiercely through Odile's chest, a centimeter or two below the left breast. They picked up the broken body, and swung it between them till it went sailing far out, out into the deepest depths of the pond. They waited till it sank, waited till there was no more sign of the ripples that moved out gently away from it. And then they crept away in silence and went back to their houses.

Now the fruit would no more wither, the cows would no more die; and in the morning, the water in the well would be sweet again. Everything was going to be all right now in Petit Gruet, as calm and peaceful as it always had been.

But the next morning, Charles Montpelier was dead. They found him lying in the field behind his barn, and his neck was broken. Close by lay a fallen branch that might have caused his death, but . . . On his face was a look of such horror that Claude Fresnay, whose maturity was really rather more than his age might have indicated, sent at once for M. de Serre.

Taking him aside a little, the *agent* said flatly: "M. le Maire, he was *frightened* to death."

The Mayor said crossly: "Nonsense, his neck is broken, a branch fell. . ."

Overstepping the rigid limits set by his position, young Claude said:

"And that look of terror on his face?"

"At the moment of death, he was aware of. . . of what? Of all his past sins?" He peered at the policeman and said softly: "But there's something else, isn't there? Out with it, Fresnay."

Fresnay hesitated. He put his hands deep in his pocket, sunk his chin on his chest, and moved slowly even further away from the others who were standing around the body and muttering among themselves. He glanced back over his shoulder once and said slowly: "After that trouble last night, I couldn't sleep very well, and I lay in my bed half-awake, and. . . I heard, or thought I heard, something screaming."

"Oh? And you investigated, of course?"

Fresnay shuffled his feet in the long grass, still wet with the night's dew. "*Non, M. le Maire.* I thought I was having a nightmare. But this morning, I saw that the door to Guy Campan's house had been broken open. That's where the scream seemed to be coming from, *M. le Maire.* I knocked on the door, I wanted to make sure everything was all right, you understand; but there was no answer, so I went into the house, and. . . Guy Campan came down the stairs, white as an aspirin, with a dark blue bruise on his forehead. He told me everything was in order, that he'd locked himself out last night and had broken open the door himself. But, frankly, he was lying. I am sure of it. A scream, a broken door, a dead man lying here. . ."

The Mayor looked at him with a new kind of respect, tinged almost with surprise. He took out his old-fashioned gold watch and said: "Seven o'clock, is it too early for a social call? Perhaps not. You'll take care of things here, won't you? You know what to do?"

"Of course, *M. le Maire.*"

"Of course." M. de Serre left them there and went round to see Guy Campan.

To his surprise, the young man was in the kitchen, dressed in an overcoat over his pyjamas and making coffee. The bruise on his head was worse than Fresnay had indicated; it might almost have been a fracture, and the Mayor nodded pleasantly ans said: "You should put a plaster on it, Guy. Infection, you know. What happened?"

Guy wouldn't meet his look. He turned away and said shortly: "I fell. I missed my footing on the stairs."

The Mayor wanted to talk about last night's events and didn't quite know how to begin. He said, *faute de mieux:* "And Mam'selle Lautrec? I trust she is well this morning?"

"Odile? She's gone back to Paris, on the bus."

The Mayor's mouth was open, it was getting to be a habit. He snapped it shut and said: "But that's

impossible! She was here last night and the bus doesn't leave till this evening. How could she go back to Paris?"

Guy said again stubbornly, and simply: "She's gone back to Paris." He said politely: "May I offer you a cup of coffee?"

The Mayor did not answer of a long time. He sat down on the wooden kitchen chair, put his hands on his knees and said severely: "Young man, I must warn you not to play games with me. Have you been out of the house this morning?"

"No, I have not. Why?"

Oh what a fool he was not to have checked the time with Fresnay! He said carefully: "Someone was heard screaming here during the night."

Guy turned and looked him full in the face. "And so? It is not against the law to scream, M. le Maire. We had a fight, Odile and I, and she screamed at me and ran away." He shrugged his shoulders. "All very simple, you see."

Oh the glibness of it! He was horrified at how easily the young people could lie. But he knew when to withdraw, the Mayor. He sighed and stood up and said: "So. . . she went back to Paris on a non-existant bus. But believe me, young man, I have not reached the age of sixty. . . (He was sixty-eight years old.). . . without acquiring a certain instinct that tells me when things are not as they should be. And I'll get to the bottom of it if it takes me all day."

He was boiling over with rage when he left. He knew that something *was* wrong, radically wrong; and he knew he might never find out what it was. It was an affront to his competence.

He invited *agent* Fresnay to take dinner with him that night at his house; strange how anything out of the ordinary could suddenly bring the mighty and the humble so close together! A simple dinner, stuffed beef rolls prepared by the housekeeper, Madame Pristine, with a bottle of Burgundy which was only a trifle better than the wine Dufy supplied, no point in depleting the cellar's best stocks for a man of Fresnay's simple tastes!

He said, opening the conversation: "Did you know that the lovely young Odile Lautrec has disappeared?"

The *agent* looked at him and waited, knowing that the question was rhetorical.

The Mayor went on: "She left this morning or during the night, on a bus that doesn't exist."

Fresnay carefully nibbled at the delicious beef and wished he could take bigger mouthfulls; what a splendid cook MMe. Pristine was! He said slowly: "There's something going on in this village, M. le Maire, that I don't like the looks of at all. Dufy has been avoiding me all day, Denise Croix positively turned and walked off when she saw me com-

ing, and old Lucille. . . Well, she looked at me and leered and. . . and *laughed,* laughed in my face, can you imagine that? In all the years I've known her, she's never once taken that angry look off her face. And she *laughed!"*

"And into that laugh, you read. . . ?" He was beginning to respect this young man more and more.

Fresnay said: "I read an evil story. Lucille Dufy, her husband, and Denise Croix, they are up to something together, and I'd like to know what it is. Perhaps some of the others, too."

"And this something, no doubt, has to do with the death of Charles Montpelier, which you apparently don't believe was natural. Is that it?"

Fresnay sighed. "Frankly, *M. le Maire,* I don't know. But here, in Petit Gruet, nothing ever happens. And then, all at once. . ." He spread his arms and said dramatically: "Look what's been happening in the last few days! Enough excitement to last a lifetime! It *must* all come from the same cause. It *must!"*

The Mayor called for another bottle of wine. Fresnay was unburdening himself, and that was good. And then. . . then through the open window came the sound of a long, low, dreadful wail. It started almost as a scream, and tailed off, and rose again more shrill than before, and when, with an oath, the Mayor got to his feet and hurried to the casement to look, he saw Lucille Dufy (laughing no more) racing like a young woman past the house, running fast down the street in the moonlight. Her long black gown was causing her to stumble, and she was clutching at it with one hand, so that the varicose legs, bulging under the black stockings, were exposed right up to the knobbly, misshaped knees; her other hand was stretched out ahead of her as though to ward off anything that might stand in her way.

The Mayor said: "In God's name!"

He hurried to the door and ran across the little front garden, and Fresnay was there beside him, knowing that the mystery was deepening. Lucille was already out of sight in the darkness, down in the copse by the mill-pond somewhere, and they looked and saw Bernard running after her, and the Mayor put out a hand to stop him and said: "For God's sake, Bernard, what's going on?"

The moon was white, not a cloud in the sky.

Bernard, panting hard, threw up his hands and stopped. He stood there for a moment, trying to get his breath, and said at last: "She's mad, quite mad. . . !" They heard the long scream again, a long, infinitely terrifying scream, and then, silence. . . Bernard started forward again, pushing Fresnay aside. He

ran down the road to the copse, so fast that they lost him, and when they found him again he was standing by his wife's body, looking at it in shock; she was grotesquely twisted in death; her neck was broken.

Dufy was trembling; there was a fear on him at which the Mayor could only gape. It was Fresnay who broke the long silence. He waited for the Mayor to speak, saw that he wasn't going to—did he know something more than was apparent? —and said at last: "All right, Dufy, what happened?"

Bernard blinked his disbelief away. His voice was hoarse. He said: "She saw. . . she saw Odile."

The Mayor looked at him sharply. "And so?"

"She saw Odile. She came. . . running to the cellar, where I was trying to salvage some casks of wine, and she was screaming, and she said. . . she said she'd seen Odile! And then. . . then she went running off, and I followed her. . . And. . . She was *sure* she'd seen her! She said Odile was. . ." He shut his mouth firmly and said no more.

The Mayor wondered how much wine it had taken to get him into this sorry state, wondered more just *why* he'd been drinking so heavily. He said: "And is there any reason why she should *not* have seen Odile?"

He was almost relieved when Bernard refused to answer. Dufy merely shook his head and mumbled something incomprehensible to either of them. Fresnay shook him roughly by the shoulders and repeated the Mayor's question. "Why shouldn't she have seen Odile, Dufy? Now's the time to tell us!"

But Bernard merely looked down at his dead wife's body and said, shaking his head from side to side: "She was an evil old woman, it was her idea, all of it. An evil old woman."

"Her idea? What was her idea, Dufy?" Fresnay shook him again, but the Mayor said quietly: "He's drunk, Fresnay, stubborn drunk, let him sober up first." He thought for a while and said: "Take him round to the station and fill him up with coffee, then see if he'll tell you anything worth listening to. It's my idea that he won't, but. . ."

"Bien, M. le Maire."

"I'm afraid we'll have to forget about the rest of our dinner, there's something urgent I want to do. You'll take care of. . . all this, of course? A busy time for the undertaker, two deaths in twenty-four hours. Extraordinary."

He walked away and left Fresnay —his turn to stand there open-mouthed now!—staring at him in wonder, and he went quickly round to Estelle Putange's little house.

He found her pale and distraught, and the first thing she said was: "Not tonight, M. de Serre, if you wouldn't mind. I don't feel too well. I'm sure

you understand. . ."

The Mayor said firmly: "Tonight, my charming Estelle, I come merely to talk. And I must insist."

Estelle turned away silently and led him into the parlour. Her green cotton gown was open halfway down the front, and she shivered as though it were cold and began doing the buttons up, sitting there by the fire and waiting. He undid his waisteoat and stretched his feet out and looked at her; a pretty girl, with a mobile face that was always ready to laugh; but not now. She'd been crying.

He said: "Lucille Dufy's dead."

He heard Estelle gasp, saw her face go white. He smiled pleasantly and said: "A broken neck, just like Charles Montpelier. She told Bernard that she'd seen Odile Lautrec. . (He was watching her carefully now.). . . and ran screaming down to the mill-pond. And there, we found her dead." He smiled and said: "Absurd, isn't it? How *could* she have seen Odile?"

He saw a blank look coming over Estelle's face and knew that he'd made a mistake; time to cover up.

He said earnestly: "There's a mystery going on, and do you know? The first person I wanted to talk to about it was you. Yes, because you and I, Estelle, we're. . . . well, shall I say, *different*, from the others. With me, it's a question of class, of course, but in your case. . . shall I call it sophistication?"

(Put her at her ease, he was telling himself; rid her of that terrible fear and she'll talk.)

He went on: "Your spare-time occupation, so necessary to so many of us. . . it widens your understanding of human nature, have you ever thought about that?" It pleased him considerably to think that he had seized on just the right person for some effort, at least, towards elucidation; and although Estelle just sat there and looked at him, with none of the overt affability that she usually assumed for her customers, expecially for *M. le Maire*, he was quite sure that he'd been very clever indeed. It wasn't a question of any superior intellect that Estelle might have; quite the reverse, he'd always found her rather foolish! But none the less, he reasoned, a woman whose intimate conversations were with a different man almost every night of her life, such a woman would surely be capable of more. . . detachment?

Quite carried away with esteem of his own wisdom, he said: "After all, we all know that Odile just isn't with us any more, don't we?"

That blank look was a careful mask. Estelle said: "Do we? She was being *very* wary. Good!

Smiling broadly, as though enjoying a secret joke, the Mayor said: "She's dead, isn't she?"

Now there was panic on that pretty young face. Only momentary, to be sure, but it was enough.

Pushing hard, he said: "Only . . . who was it killed her, Estelle? Lucille perhaps? Or was it possibly Charles Montpelier?" Enjoying himself hugely, not at all put out by her stubborn refusal to answer him, he said: "Or both of them? That would make more sense, wouldn't it? Lucille's idea, and Charles to do the dirty work? And the question arises, doesn't it, of *why?* And I think we know the answer to that, too, don't we?"

Oh, what a fine old time he was having! He got up and moved over to where Estelle was sitting on the sofa, sat down close beside her, almost as if this were one of his habitual visits. He even took her hand—so cold, unaccountably!—and he said eagerly:

"We know *why*, don't we? Because the peaches withered, and the water went sour in the well, and the cow dies. . ."

She was looking at him now with something much more than fear; it was almost awe.

He said happily: "Lucille called Odile a whore, and the next thing is her house burns down. The Selange girl threw a stone at her, and the Selange cow died. Madame Oger was rude to her, and the peaches withered. And that, my dear, my charming Estelle, what does that make Odile in the minds of these very simple villagers?" He patted his stomach and beamed, and from the pinnacle of his own lofty scorn, he said: "In their minds, it made her a witch! There!"

It was out now. . . He shrugged elegantly and said: "Fools, but even fools can be deadly. And what do fools do with witches? Why, they burn them, of course! So, did Odile die in that fire? Is that what this is all about? I do believe it is? Though I'm quite sure Lucille never really intended to burn her own house down. . ." Pursing his own lips whimsically (and not forgetting to watch her every reaction!) he said: "So Lucille, who was no doubt a very wicked old woman, persuaded Charles to do her dirty work for her. And why Charles?" He shrugged. "Charles was more than half an idiot anyway, the obvious choice. And so, what happened to the two of them? They are both dead, and the dark mantle of suspicion falls squarely on the shoulders of one man, doesn't it? Odile's lover, who else? Which explains why Guy Campan was at great pains to insist, even foolishly that Odile had gone back to Paris. The vengeance was not to be anyone else's. . . his." He preened himself, and patted her cold hand, and said: "You see, my dear, how easy it is to a man of. . . shall we say superior intellect? All a matter of *reason!* And I am sure that the whole village knows all about it, knows all about it and is carefully keeping the dark secret from me, from young Fresnay too, of course, in

the hope that somehow we'll forget about it and do nothing. Foolish, aren't they?"

She'd hardly said a word. Now, she stood up suddenly, and began unbuttoning her robe. She said: "Did you want to go to bed?"

It was the most casual question. It was just as if this had started out as one of the normal times, the Thursday evening times,even though, to tell the truth, he wasn't really in the modd at all. But when he saw that bared white breast and the round curve of her stomach, he thought: Well, perhaps she'll talk a little more easily, perhaps she really knows something I haven't guessed at. . .

But all the time he stayed with her, Estelle refused to speak of Lucille Dufy or of Charles Montpelier. She was cold, and unresponsive, and. . . like Odile, she was almost not there at all, just that soft, warm body doing its work almost mechanically, as part of the pattern.

He left her before midnight, and rounded up an astonished Fresnay (who was not at all accustomed to be awakened in his cottage in the middle of the night, not even by *M. le Maire)* ,and said to him, almost gaily: "It's all solved, Fresnay, I've done it for you."

Guy Campan went with them quite unresisting to the little cell in the police station. He was even smiling, and politely offered to help Fresnay move the firewood out of the cell, where it was being stored, and stack it in the corridor. But in answer to the Mayor's questions, all he would say, with a most frustrating obstinacy: "Odile went back to Paris. And I haven't killed *anybody."*

But the Mayor didn't mind in the least. He said severely: "Think it all over, young man, and I'm sure that by the morning you will come to your senses. In the light of day, we see things quite differently sometimes, don't we? He felt he could afford to be pleasant. Indeed, he felt almost sorry for Guy, in a paternal sort of way. Such a nice young man. Such a shame!

He went home to bed and slept like a log till eight o'clock the following morning, when Mme. Pristine woke him with his *filtre* and his little glass of cognac. She said: *"Agent* Fresnay is downstairs, *M. le Maire,* waiting to see you as soon as it's convenient. I gave him coffee in the kitchen." She sniffed, and he knew she was registering her disapproval of having had to serve him in the dining-room last night.

He yawned and smelled the freshening aroma of the coffee, enjoyed the mouth-cleansing burn of the cognac, and said: "Ah yes, we have a busy day today, a case to solve." There'd be the report, too, to his superior at the *Department* in Lyons.

He went downstairs, and Fres-

nay said: "Estelle Putange, *M. le Maire,* I went to see her first thing this morning, to see if I could find from her what the village is talking about. . ."

He was quite sure that Estelle would have been absolutely discreet, as always. . . (Would she? She'd been inpossibly *distant* last night!) . . . but he felt, none the less, a touch of trepidation. Making sure, he said blandly: "Ah yes, I had the same idea myself. A woman in her position. . ."

Fresnay said: "I found her dead, *M. le Maire.* In her bed, with her neck broken."

The Mayor said: "My God!" His mouth was open again.

Now, the panic was his. Panic, bewilderment, even fear. . . But he pulled himself together quickly and turned away, sat down at his desk and shuffled some papers about while he composed himself. He said at last, quite calmly:

"That's very interesting. A weapon? I suppose not."

Fresnay shook his head. "He'd have kept it with him, no doubt." He was terribly upset, Fresnay. He blew his nose noisily on a big red handkerchief that wasn't, the Mayor noticed, too clean, and as he stuffed it back into his trousers pocket, he said: "If we'd picked up Campan an hour or two earlier, maybe we'd have saved her life. Twenty-two years old, that's all she was. It doesn't seem right, does it?"

The Mayor was thinking rapidly: From Estelle's house to Fresnay's cottage, where he'd stood in the street banging on the door till the *agent* came down—in scarlet flannel pyjamas!—Guy Campan's. . . Why, the whole thing only took a matter of three or four minutes at the most! There just wasn't time! Not even by the most fortuitous of circumstances could they have missed each other if. . . No, it wasn't humanly possible! And so?

And so, a bold face on it! He said quite calmly:

"We've got the wrong man, Fresnay."

The *agent* stared at him. He went on, speaking quite blandly: "As I told you, I had the same idea of examining Mam'selle Putange myself. I'm not supposed to realise, you know, what she gets up to occasionally, but I haven't reached nearly sixty years without at least a little understanding of what's going on in the village under my own nose. I know very well that she entertains. . . men in her rooms on occasion, and it occurred to me, therefore, that she might be in a position to. . . to elucidate a few things for us. And so, I went to see her. Er, quite late, as a matter of fact, but you realise that a man in my position can't afford to let the grass grow under his feet! The idea comes to me, and I act on it at once! At once! Er, so I spoke to her rather late. Just before, as a

matter of fact, I summoned you. Which means that there just wasn't time for Campan to have done it. I left Estelle's, er, parlor, at a few minutes after eleven-thirty, and we went almost straight to Campan's cottage, so. . . We'll have to do some more thinking, won't we?"

He thought he'd put it rather well. Had he perhaps, said too much? *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse.* . . But, perhaps not. With these simple people, he said to himself, you have to hit hard. But if not Guy Campan, then in God's name, *who?* There was a murderer loose in the village; his sense of satisfaction left him abruptly as he thought about it.

He glared at Fresnay as though it were his fault, and said again: "We've got the wrong man, Fresnay."

Fresnay echoed his thoughts. "Then. . . then *who, M. le Maire?"* There was a blank, stupid look on his handsome young face. The Mayor was thinking: I'll bet he's slept with her, too, many times! And on his salary!

He tipped his chair back and rocked it, and put a finger down the side of his nose, and frowned, and did all the things that would make him look wise, and said thoughtfully: "Do you remember the odd state Bernard Dufy was in when we saw him? Just before his wife was killed? I must confess, I've been wondering about that for a long time. . ." He sat up straight suddenly, all efficiency, and said: "Let's look at what we've got. Can we assume Odile Lautrec was killed in the first place? Without even a body to bolster our suspicions?"

Fresnay caught the air of adroitness and tried to live up to it. He said hesitantly: "Well, no, *M. le Maire.* Not really. Can we?"

The Mayor said promptly: "Yes, we can. Three deaths. Charles, Lucille, Estelle. One disappearance, Odile. I choose to believe that she is dead too. Dammit, man, she must be!" *(Post hoc, ergo procter hoc,* he was thinking.) "Now, pay attention."

"Yes sir."

"If Lucille and Charles, together, committed the first murder, which is unproven but probable, then who would have a motive for killing off the murderers? Bernard Dufy? It is possible."

But how? The Mayor frowned ferociously.

Fresnay scratched his head. "His own wife, *M. le Maire?"*

It came to him in a flash. The Mayor said, raising a didactic finger: "Of course! Precisely because she *was* his wife. He hated her, we all know that, and when he found out that she'd killed off the first sign of young beauty this village had seen in years, it must have been the last straw. The young and lovely must die, the old and ugly live on, what a terrible prospect for a sensitive man like Dufy!"

Fresnay, frowning, echoed: "Sen-

sitive? Bernard Dufy?"

The Mayor brushed it aside. "No matter! They won't accept change, the old women, and Dufy knew it. You can almost admire him for what he did, though he shouldn't have taken the law into his own hands. An avenging angel! Yes, Dufy's our murderer, I'm sure of it!"

The young man was shaking his stubborn head. With more than a touch of arrogance he demanded: "And why should Dufy kill Estelle, then?"

"Because she knew!" The Mayor said triumphantly. "His reasoning was the same as ours, a woman like that *always* knows."

Fresnay was thinking: What an idiot! Dufy didn't have the time to kill his wife, either. And as for that talk about *questioning* Estelle—at midnight, if you please!—does he think I don't know he sleeps with her, too? The old goat!

The Mayor said: "Release Guy Campan, Fresnay, then tell Bernard Dufy I want to see him. Now. And if he's still drunk, which I suppose he will be, so much the better. We are on the verge of solving this mystery, so let's get on with it right away."

"Oui, M. le Maire." Fresnay turned at the door, still worrying. "So why would Dufy also burn down his own wine-shop, I wonder? I presnme it must have been him?"

The Mayor said, almost gaily: "Never presume anything, Fresnay! It was Lucille who burned the place down, an accident."

Fresnay waited, sure that there was more to come. There was.

The old goat said calmly: "You know about the withered peaches? The sour water? And you saw the dead cow. Do you believe in witches, Fresnay?"

Fresnay was not as startled as he ought to have been; had he come to the same conclusion himself? But he surprised the Mayor by saying solemnly, not even embarrassed by it: "Yes, *M. le Maire,* I do. I believe in witches."

A simple fellow, just like the rest of them! In spite of the two years he'd had to spend at the *Department*'s Academy in Lyons!

The Mayor said gently: "Bring Bernard Dufy to me, Fresnay, there's a good fellow."

Dufy was so drunk he could hardly stand up. He staggered and stumbled, and mumbled incoherently, and finally slouched down in the chair with no sign at all of the respect he owed M. de Serre. And when the Mayor (careful not to charge him!) told him he was suspected of complicity in Odile's death, it seemed as though a great cloak had fallen from his back. There was no trace of the sudden fear the Mayor had expected to see on his face. Quite to the contrary; Dufy took a long deep breath and sud-

denly seemed to sober up, as though a cross he could not carry had been taken off his shoulders. His eyes were red and sore. He said, nodding slowly: "We killed her, but she's not. . . not dead. Somehow, we didn't pull it off... ."

"Ah! Aha!" The Mayor looked at Fresnay to make sure the young *agent* was sufficiently conscious of his perspicacity, was aware that a superior brain was at work. He looked back at Dufy and said softly: "For the good of your soul, Bernard, you'd better tell us all about it. From the beginning."

Dufy shuddered, and mumbled, and said: "We held her down under the water, and Lucille stuck a stake right through her, here. . ." He put a hand over his heart and began to sob.

Fresnay was conscientiously trying to take this down on a sheet of grey lined paper.

". . . and the stake. . . somehow it missed her. . ." Dufy broke off and stared out at nothing, and then went on: "No, it didn't miss her, I saw it go right through her. . . her breast, as naked as the day she was born. She's dead all right, and she's still among us, killing off the ones who killed her."

Now was the moment! The Mayor said calmly: "And the others, of course, were. . . ?"

"Lucille, and me, and Charles, and young Estelle, and Denise Croix. And now, there's just me and Denise left, and I wonder. . . I wonder how long we've got." He was quite calm now. "There's not much we can do about it, is there?" How do you fight a witch when she's dead? It's supposed to work, a stake right through her. . ."

Fresnay, surprisingly, said, not taking his eyes off his sheet of paper: "Not if you miss the heart."

The Mayor looked at him, startled, and saw that he was blushing furiously. He saw that Dufy's eyes were wide with sudden understanding, as though he were saying to himself: *So that's it!* And now, the words all came tumbling out fast on each other's heels, all the terrible details, all the anger and the fear; and when it was all over, Fresnay took him down to the cell and let Guy out and put Bernard in his place, and locked the iron door firmly and went back to the Mayor, and the Mayor said with a touch of wry humor:

"We're going to have to tell the *Department* that a dead witch is killing off the villagers, Fresnay! Why, they'll have a fit!"

The gap between the tiny village and the rest of the world had never been wider. He could imagine his chief receiving such a report! An apoplectic man in any case!

He looked wistfully at Fresnay and said, hesitantly: "I almost think we'll have to say those deaths were accidental."

Fresnay said stolidly: "And two

more to come, they'll never believe it."

He went out, and the Mayor stared after him with more than a touch of anger on his bearded, bespectacled face.

On M. de Serre's instructions, the jailer—who was also the janitor most of the time—sat outside Dufy's cell and was to remain there all night, with the iron-barred door closed and the wooden door that was over it open. He was an old man, the jailer, and he'd heard the rumors, of course, but he'd said to himself, scornfully: Witches! Stuff and nonsense!

He sat there on his wooden stool and looked at Dufy and said: "A long time since we had a murder in Petit Gruet. Fifty-five years ago the last time, when I was a young man. They cut off his head in Lyons." He drank his steaming coffee appreciatively; the night was unusually cold. Above his head, the old clock ticked away noisily, *tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc. . .* It showed a few minutes to midnight.

He finished his coffee and got up to move away, and Dufy, hanging limply to the bars of the door, suddenly screamed: No! No! They told you to stay with me! Don't leave me, for God's sake. . . !

The jailer grinned. "Just going to get my coat, Dufy, it's cold. I'll be gone a minute, and even your ghostly witch won't be able to do much damage in that time. Now, will she?" He laughed at his little joke and wandered off; he wished he had some cognac for the coffee, and wondered if he could dare look in Fresnay's desk drawer to see if the bottle there had any left in it.

Bernard clutched at the bars, his face white. The moon streamed in through the barred window above and behind him, filtered through the leaves of the hazel trees. He was trembling violently. He said to himself, over and over again: "Oh God, oh God, oh God. . ."

He looked up at the big clock, its face as white as his own, and started counting the seconds. And then. . . Then the clock stopped.

And in precise co-ordination with the stopping, a cloud went across the face of the moon and the cell was dark, darker than it had ever been before. In terror, he began to scream, but he couldn't even hear his own voice. He picked up his tin mug, a terrible panic on him, and began to batter it violently against the iron bars, and it made no sound at all.

And then she was there.

Odile was right beside him, there in the locked cell, dressed only in that flimsy black thing she wore, standing there not even looking at him, her long slender arms poised, her head to one side. One pointed foot was raised delicately off the ground, and as she began to dance, in absolute silence; the black gown

slipped off her and she was naked there with him, moving, pirouetting in silence, slowly and with a superb animal grace.

Bernard wanted to scream, to cry out; but he knew it would be no good. He sank slowly to his knees and reached out for her, but she paid him no attention at all.

How cold it was!

And then she held her poise and looked at him, one elegant leg raised, one long arm above her head. *She looked down at him and smiled,* and the smile became a laugh, and she said, quite softly: "When my dance is finished, Bernard Dufy."

She danced again, even more slowly now, and Bernard, his eyes wet with tears, pleaded with her; he could not even hear his own voice. She stopped again, in just the same pose, and looked down at him again and said, her voice a husky whisper: "Look at the woman you killed, Bernard Dufy. The woman you killed with thoughts of love in your heart. You wanted to love me, didn't you? Even as you held me down. . . I felt your hand on my breast, Bernard Dufy. Would you like to take me now? Take me, Bernard Dufy. Take me now." She laughed at him, a terrible mocking laugh, and walked slowly up to him, her arms outstretched, her body poised and lovely and unbelievably inviting.

It was cold, and dark, and silent; the only sound he heard was the crack of a vertebra breaking.

Suddenly, the clock started ticking again, and the jailer came back and glanced up at it and said grumpily: "There, what did I tell you, it took me less than a minute. And I brought you a drop of cognac, Dufy, to cheer you up. Dufy? Take your cognac before I drink it myself. Dufy?"

He peered into the cell and gasped. There was something unnatural about the way the body *was lying. He unlocked the cell* quickly and went inside, and when he saw the broken neck he scratched at the stubble on his chin and said to himself: Now, there's a fine thing! I wonder what the Mayor's going to say to *this* when he finds out!

Denise was in the little church, on her knees, the candles lit. When they went out, she lit them again, her heart beating fast. They went out again, one by one, as though someone were blowing them out, and there was no wind. She heard a quiet voice say: "Go to the pond, Denise." It was Odile's voice.

Denise screamed so loudly that the glass candle-holders rattled. She gathered up her skirt and ran, ran helter-skelter out from the church and through the graveyard and up to the old lych-gate with its covering of twining wisteria. She ran fast, with her head down, her eyes half-closed, and she collided with. . . The breath

went out of her body and she couldn't even gasp, but it was only the Mayor, and Fresnay was with him.

The Mayor took her firmly by the shoulders and shook her, and she realised that he'd been talking to her for quite a few moments and that she hadn't heard him. He shouted: "Pull yourself together, Denise!"

He was not a bit like her dead father, but she threw her arms round him and said: "Papa. . . Papa. . . I'm frightened. . ." There were tears running down her face as she looked up at him,and he said gruffly: "Come now, pull yourself together." He held her quite tightly for a little while, till the sobs had gone, and then he said firmly: "I'm here, and Fresnay is here, and there's nothing to be afraid of."

She shook her head wildly: "If only you knew. . . !"

"I know, Denise. I know all about it. Bernard Dufy told me what happened. Now listen." He looked into her scared, puffy-eyed face and thought: Whatever happened to this poor child, she was really quite lovely. . .

He said: "Something is happening that, quite frankly, I do not understand. I do *not* believe in the supernatural, and I will not accept a supernatural explanation. Now, is that qnite clear?"

Denise nodded, her eyes still wide with fear.

He said gently: "Bernard Dufy is dead, Estelle Putange is dead, so are Lucille and Charles. And that leaves only you, doesn't it?" Her gasp quite tore his heart open, but there was no sense in being anything but absolutely frank.

She whispered: "Estelle too?"

"You didn't know?"

She shook her head. "And Bernard?"

"Yes."

Her moan was long and low and shuddering, and her arms were tight around him again, seeking comfort. He could feel the warmth of her plnmp little body, but her hands were ice-cold.

He said carefully: "Will you do as I tell you, Denise?"

She nodded.

"I know all about the conspiracy, and I really ought to lock you up, but. . ." His mouth was grim. "Well, I can't bring myself to put you in the same cell where Dufy died." He said grimly: "Yes, in the jail, one of the thiugs I dou't yet understand. Not even in the iuterests of justice will I expose you to the same risk. And so, I'm going to take the bull by the horns. I'm going to send you to Lyons, to *take* you to Lyons if necessary, because there, I'm sure you'll be safe from whatever it is that's threatening you."

"It's Odile." Her voice was a whisper, as quiet as the breeze.

He said impatiently: "Yes, I know all about that and I don't

believe it. So you're going to Lyons, under arrest, and they can sort all this out there as soon as they get my report. If ever I can bring myself to write it, a fine foolish figure I'm going to make of myself! So will you go with me, Denise?"

The hope was so fragile that she feared it might waft away even as she clutched at it. "I'll do whatever you say, *M. le Maire*. . . I'm so. . . Oh, she's going to kill me too. . ."

"Not if I can help it," the Mayor said firmly. "And I *can!* You are going to Lyons. We'll go round to your house, you can pack a suitcase, and we'll borrow the Selange truck and be on our way. Tonight. Now."

As he told Fresnay, when the idea seized him, he always took action immediately!

They went to Denise's little flat above her shop, and he was horrified to find two crossed broom-sticks lashed across the door. And the floor in the bedroom was noisily crunchy under his feet, and in answer to his raised eyebrows she said, a dull and helpless edge to her voice: "Rock-salt, it keeps ghosts away, they won't walk on it."

He looked at Fresnay, but the young *agent* wouldn't catch his eye. He sat on the edge of the cheap bed while Denise put some clothes into a cardboard suitcase, and then the three of them walked over to the Selange farm, just a few minutes' walk, and hired their truck, after much heated argument about whether or not they should pay for it. "A civic duty," the Mayor said, but old man Selange was adamant. They paid him a few francs, at last, and the Mayor himself drove, though he wasn't much of a driver. They rattled along the cobbled street of the village in the darkness, and a gentle rain began to fall, and as they passed the pond, the Mayor—was it instinct?—speeded up as much as the old truck could manage.

A little too much perhaps! One of the hweels slid round in the wet road, and the front axle went down, and Fresnay shouted: "Jump!" and threw open the door and had Denise, clutching at her like a mistress, lying flat under his body on the road, while M. de Serre struggled out of the cab and into the water and finally up onto almost dry land. He looked at the truck in dismay, and wondered what old man Selange would do about it; it was right down in the pond, the top of the radiator—already steaming!—under the water, and the rear end perched inongruously up in the air with one wheel turning clear of the ground.

The only truck in the village. . .

The Mayor said firmly: "Fresnay, you and I will both spend the night with Denise. We'll stay in my parlor till the sun comes up, and then we'll walk over the hill to the road, and we'll catch the bus to

Lyons. And all through the night we'll not let Denise out of our sight."

He knelt down on the road beside her and touched her cold cheek; she lay there with her eyes wide open, not caring to get to her feet even, so he put a hand under her arm and insisted, helped her up, and said: "All right, Denise? I'm sorry about. . . about this, but I'm not really. . . much of a driver." It seemed better to blame himself than let her think that some mysterious force had pulled the wheel over against his wish! Even though . . . Had he really felt it? Or was it just his imagination?

Denise nodded miserably. She whispered: "Only. . . in my house, not yours. Please?"

He understood the need for familiar surroundings, and he nodded gravely, thinking about all that rock salt scattered over the floor, which was what she was really thinking of. That and the broom-stick cross. Ridiculous! But he could not help noticing that as she went into the room she touched the cross with a frightened, almost canonical gesture; when he was sure no one was looking, he brushed by it himself and surreptitiously fingered it briefly; no harm in making sure! He switched on the lights and found a small lamp in the hall and brought that into the bedroom, and Fresnay sat there stolidly, almost as though he were sulking about something, and Denise lay on the bed with her eyes open, and sad, and. . . was *resigned* the word?

The wooden jalousie over the window started to bang to and fro, and M. de Serre went over and closed it; hadn't he already done that when he first came into the room? He frowned. That damned rock-salt crackling under his feet! He was glad when he could sit down again and face the silence.

The door downstairs banged noisily—hadn't he shut it tight? And locked it? And Denise was sitting up on the bed, her face frozen. He saw Fresnay glance sharply towards the door, and there was a light footstep outside, a footstep that stopped as they listened and then came on again, and stopped again. Denise's hand flew to her white cheek, so pale it looked like alabaster.

The Mayor swallowed hard. He said: "Go and see. . . who is it, Fresnay!" (He'd almost said: 'What is it!') But Fresnay, not answering him, did not move; he just sat there, rigid as a statue, staring.

The bedroom door opened, and it was Guy Campan. He stood in the doorway, blinking at the light, and said: "I came to see Odile."

M. de Serre said: "Odile? You mean Denise, don't you?"

Guy shook his head. His face was bloated, too, as though he hadn't been sleeping very well lately, as though something had been drain-

ing the blood out of him. The word *succubus* crossed his mind briefly, just long enough to register before being dismissed with impatient anger.

Guy stood and looked at Denise for a long, long time, and she stared up at him from the bed and then turned her face away and lay down again, saying nothing. He still stood there, and the Mayor said crossly: "Well, Odile's not here, as you well must know."

Guy just shook his head, closed the door behind him, and went into a corner and leaned against it, his ankles crossed and his arms folded, for all the world as though he were merely waiting for a bus! He didn't even grimace when the rock-salt crackled under his feet.

How long was it that they all stayed there, staring at each other, or at nothing? There was only silence to mark the passing of time till the lights went out, and when they did, and there was only the bright silver beam of the moon streaming in through the window—the jalousie was open again!—the Mayor stood up and swallowed hard and refused to believe that it was anything at all to worry about...

He said: "Go and look at the fuse-box, Fresnay."

He didn't expect to be obeyed, but he said it again anyway, knowing that now of all times he must assert the superiority of his sophistication. When Fresnay did not answer, he looked at Guy Campan, who looked back at him with a twisted, expectant smile on his face and slowly shook his head.

The Mayor said tightly: "All right, I'll do it myself."

He went to the door, but before he could open it there was a terrible scream from behind him, from Denise. He swung round in panic, and his blood froze. He could feel the tingling on the top of his scalp that meant his hair was standing up.

Denise was doubled up on her knees, her legs tucked under her, her arms covering her face as she screamed and screamed and screamed. . . Guy was still half-smiling, not moving, and Fresnay was staring in abject terror, and the Mayor stared, too, in a kind of shock from which horror was not entirely absent, nor panic either.

They all stared at Odile.

She was there, in the room, with not a sound from that damned rock-salt as she moved across it, slowly dancing, turning and pirouetting around on her points, her lithe young body as lovely and elegant and gracefully poised as if she were dancing before royalty in the Opera House in Paris. The long black silk thing draped her body, with just her arms and her lower legs and her white face reflecting the moonlight.

More things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, and the Mayor shouted:

"No! In God's name, no!" forcing himself not to believe the evidence of his own eyes.

A ghost? Of course not! You can see right through ghosts, and Odile . . . As he watched her and tried to find his tongue, tried to stifle the panic and reduce it to reason, the black gown dropped to her feet and she stepped lightly out of it, and there she was naked again, as naked as she was that night down by the mill-pond, not a stitch to cover her nakedness anywhere, and certainly no ghost!

He stammered for a moment, and finally got the words ont: "Odile Lautrec. . . in the name. . . in the name of. . . in the name of the Republic I arrest you for. . . for. . ." The words wouldn't come out, and Denise wouldn't stop screaming, and Fresnay, the idiot, was still there, half-sitting, half-rising, frozen solid in terror.

He heard Odile's voice; she was paying no attention to anyone but Denise, and there was a lovely smile, inviting and beatific, on her beautiful face; those wonderful eyes were calm and thoughtful, and she was holding out her hands in a gesture that was almost pleading, and she was saying softly: "Come with me, Denise, come with me. . ."

Denise stopped screaming. She looked up at Odile, and moved slowly off the bed, and Odile danced towards the door, very slowly, infinitely slowly, as though there was all the time in the world now, her body lithe and white and flawless and impossibly lovely. She was by the door now, shimmering on her points, and Denise was on the floor on her knees, crawling towards her, moving as though all her limbs were broken, pulling herself along by the application of an nnseen force, collapsing and half-rising again, and moving always towards the door, to Odile.

The Mayor did something he knew he never onght to do. He pnlled out the rusty old pistol he'd concealed in his trousers pocket, not even telling Fresnay about it, because he was ashamed of his own fears, and he pointed it straight at Odile and pulled the trigger: The first round did not fire; a dud? A broken firing-pin? So long since he'd even touched it!

But the second shot fired and the third and fourth and fifth as well, and he saw Odile stop momentarily and look at him and smile and gently shake her head. There was almost affection in her look, almost a bond between them, as though she nnderstood the pain he was feeling at the thought that he might—but no, surely not!—be killing a lovely young girl and not a ghost at all. And then she went on with her dancing, and Denise was crawling towards her still, and the Mayor slumped down to the floor awkwardly. . . Something, he recalled, that he always seemed to do

in time of acute stress!

Denise had risen to her feet and had run, screaming, from the room and Odile just wasn't there anymore. He saw Guy walk slowly over to the open window and stand there, looking down on the road; the smile had never left his young face.

Squatting there awkwardly on the floor, the Mayor put his hands to his head and rocked from side to side, the useless pistol on the floor at his feet, and he said over and over: "Oh, God in Heaven have mercy on us, God in Heaven have mercy on us. . ."

He brushed a hand across his eyes, and shook his head violently, and got to his feet and said heavily: "Fresnay, come with me."

Fresnay nodded. The time for disobedience was over; he was shaking, but he did as he was told. The Mayor went to the window and stood beside Guy, and Fresnay stood behind him, and they looked out and saw the dark shape that was Denise running down the cobbled street, half-stumbling, heading for the copse. There was no sign of Odile at all.

The Mayor went to the door and hesitated, and turned back and said again: "With me, Fresnay. All the time with me."

"Oui, M. le Maire." The young *agent*, his head bowed, went meekly to the door.

The Mayor said: "Wait."

He walked back slowly, and stooped and picked up the black silk gown, feeling it, tossing it lightly in both his hands—impossibly ethereal, but none the less real!—feeling the soft texture of it, as light as a feather, he even put it to his face and breathed deeply of its perfume. He saw Guy watching him, and turned away, but Guy stopped him and said:

"M. le Maire?"

"What is it?"

Guy's look went to the black silk robe. "May I have that?"

"No. You may not." Was that strained sound really his own voice? He said again, clearing his throat:

"No, I need it."

"I need it more." There was a terrible pleading in Guy's voice. He said: "Please? *Please?"* There were even tears in his eyes. He said: *"Please?* I may never see her again. . ."

Silently, knowing quite well he was doing the wrong thing—or was he?—the Mayor handed him the fragile handful of stuff. When he went out with Fresnay, Guy was holding it to his face and weeping softly into it.

Denise was just where they expected to find her, lying half in and half out of the water; and her neck was broken.

There was the gentle sound of the wind in the tree-tops, and the clouds were scurrying, and the moon was shining brightly on the water. A

night-bird called, and then all was silence.

In the morning, the Mayor (quite in habitual command of the situation onee more!) had the pond drained. No one would help him at first, and he had to threaten them all. . . So they at last agreed, and some of them shovelled away at the earthen dam, some of them jammed logs under the mill-wheel to stop it turning, and some of them opened up the old sluice that hadn't been touched for more than a hundred years.

And when the water had all run out across the field where the artichokes were growing, and there was nothing but black and slimy mud all tangled up with soggy brambles and a few dead fish, they found an aneient iron bedstead, rusted quite away, and a rotted, broken wine-barrel, and two old tin boxes that were empty, and a length of chicken-wire, and three boots, and an old fishing rod and some castaway pieces of galvanised iron pipes. . .

And they found Odile.

Or did they?

It was just a skeleton, the skeleton of a young girl, perhaps twenty or twenty-five years old, and there was a hazel stake, cut not too long ago, through the rib-cavity. How long had it been there? Who could tell? Perhaps a day or two, perhaps a very long time, but. . . M. de Serre shuddered and made a mental ..ote never to eat the freshwater crabs from the pond again.

He sighed heavily, sadly, and said to the men: "Fill up the pond again."

Fresnay turned his head very slowly to look at the white bones there. Was that all that was left of her? He said hesitantly: "And. . . and that?"

The Mayor shook his head gently. He stooped over and pulled loose the hazel shaft (too low; it had indeed missed the heart!) and said, very quietly: "Let her rest in peace."

All through the rest of the day you could hear the water coming back into the pond as the creaking old wheel turned in the shadows of the mill. And soon the pond was full. The villagers all went back to their homes to sit and think; and some of them, perhaps, to weep.

And Guy Campan?

He is nearly sixty years old now, and he still lives in Petit Gruet. He sits by the water every night of his life, clutching an old black shawl thing, and waiting. He still believes that one day she'll come back to him, but it isn't really very likely.

What would a beautiful young girl like Odile do with a scarred old man like Guy? ★


STOUT

POTLATCH

By Joseph Harris

Illustrated by William Stout

Wherein an ever-recurring phenomenon pops up again in the facsimile-Americana of a Jeeves/W. C. Fields (Old Scratch to our gentle readers) and contributes mightily to strange goings-on at the Rotting Hills Country Club.

Maize was not the only contribution of the Indian to American culture, Hamilton Warlock thought as he watched the procession of the debutante ball at Rotting Hill Country Club. He hated these affairs and attended only out of respect for his dear friend and associate of many years, Marshall Worthington. Marshall's daughter had now reached the age and status of debutante—it was only yesterday that he patted her pigtailed head! —and he could not, of course, disappoint Marshall, nor his godchild, Priscilla.

Marshall, a tall, graying man with the mark of gracious living clearly stamped on him, approached his friend as he bent over a platter of pates at the long food-laden table.

"Priscilla will be very disappointed unless you give her at least one dance, Hamilton."

Hamilton delicately held a pate between thumb and forefinger savoring it visually before ingestion. "You know, Marshall, this food does you credit. The best I've tasted in years." He sucked a food-soiled fingertip. "Of course, I shan't disappoint dear Priscilla. That is, if she can do the old fashioned waltz."

Marshall laughed. "You know, I can't believe it, Hamilton. Priscilla, I mean. Here she is—a woman, you might say." He shook his distinguished head. "Where have the years gone, my friend? Where have they gone?"

"Ou sont les neiges d'antan?" Hamilton said, his words sounding as if he were speaking to himself.

"What's that?" Marshall said.

"Villon," Hamilton said, "a poem by Villon that happened to come to mind."

Marshall set his empty glass on the table and looked at his friend. "I promised Priscilla I'd find you and bring you for a dance. So come on. As one old dotard to another, you can do it if I can."

Hamilton gulped the last of his champagne, put the glass down, and thrust forward his sunken chest. "In the name of friendship and avuncular devotion, I go. The old goat to the slaughter."

Marshall laughed as he watched the bowling-pin figure of his friend move with a kind of waddle toward the dance floor. For fifteen years he had tried to interest Hamilton in golf or some hobby that would improve his physical appearance. But steadfastly he had avoided all such things with intellectual disdain, devoting his time wholly to books and things of the mind. Brilliant, yes, Marshall thought as he watched the awkward way he held Priscilla, terribly brilliant, but wholly lacking in the social graces. Yet few, he thought gratefully of his own good fortune, could claim a genius as a friend. And Hamilton was surely that.

Marshall waited until the dance was over and Hamilton came trudging back, his small sagging body in the ill fitting suit showing signs of weariness. He grinned at the dishevelled approach. "Well, how was the dance with the vestal virgins?"

"Traumatic." Hamilton heaved a deep sigh. "I proclaim this a generation on the wane." He leaned lightly against the table. "The whole affair reminds me of potlatch."

"Potlatch?"

"An old Indian custom in which the chiefs vied with one another for status. The criterion of a chief's position was the amount of personal property he could afford to feed to the communal bonfire. *Ergo*, the chief with the biggest amount was the host with the most—the supreme status symbol."

Marshall smiled. "Considering the cost of this, I ought to qualify among the top chiefs."

"From the looks of Priscilla's gown, that alone should qualify you. Whom do you have in mind for her?"

"I thought perhaps the Hartford boy," Marshall said matter-of-factly. "Old family name, tradition, unlimited wealth—everything one could want."

Hamilton smiled vaguely. "It shall be. I invoke the spirits of the shamans." He stroked his receding chiu. "You're sure it's the Hartford lad?"

"Positive."

"Then fill the goblets." He picked up his champagne glass. And then Marshall followed suit and raised his hand to a Negro waiter making the rounds with a fresh tray of glasses. They exchanged empty for full glasses, thanked the waiter, and directed him to a thirsty group of baccantes gathered not far away.

Then Hamilton carefully tipped his glass, spilling a thin stream of champagne onto the floor.

Marshall looked on in amazement. "That's a helluva thing to do!"

"A libation to the gods. Do likewise."

As if under some spell, Marshall tipped his glass until the precious liquid dripped on the floor. He looked warily around the room.

"And now, my friend," Hamilton said, "do exactly as I tell you, and your wish shall come to pass. I promise."

Marshall stood, passive and expectant, as if witnessing some esoteric rite. Following Hamilton's every move, he put the glass to his lips.

"Three sips," said Hamilton, only three."

They sipped in unison.

"Now repeat the name Hartford seven times."

Marshall looked horrified. "Aloud?"

"To yourself."

And this they also did in unison.

"Now repeat also to yourself—the amount you have spent on this affair."

"But I'm not sure—"

"Approximately."

"Seven times?"

"Seven times."

At the end of this ritual, Marshall said: "I think I am getting ill."

"Bear up. It's almost over." Hamilton moved back a step or two. "Now inscribe a circle with the toe of your right foot on the site of your libation—like this." And he proceeded with the gracelessness of a walrus to move his foot in the spilled liquid as Marshall imitated his actions. "Now repeat after me," Hamilton said. "Tarot, tarot, who's got the tarot?"

"Tarot, tarot, who's got the tarot?"

That done, a relaxed look came over Hamilton and, holding his

glass up toward his friend, he said: "In exactly seven minutes you shall see it come to pass. Cheers, my friend." With one uninterrupted swallow he finished the champagne. And Marshall did likewise. He looked at his wristwatch, then at his friend, and back at his wristwatch.

When the sweeping second hand of the watch registered exactly seven minutes, there came to pass a thing so strange that Marshall Worthington was for a moment startled into speechlessness.

Which was not the case with his friend, Hamilton Warlock, who held out his hand toward the raucous dance floor and said: "Behold, she comes in all her glory to tell you the news. Note the blissful radiance of her eyes. Now please, Marshall," he added, with a grinning glance at his friend, "show the proper surprise. She mustn't know this was arranged—that is, outside the province of heaven."

As with everything his friend requested, Marshall complied. He held out his arms and caught his running daughter as she threw her tender young body against him. "Oh, daddy, daddy—" She trembled with sobs of delight. "You'll never guess what's happened!"

Marshall exchanged an olympian look of complicity with his friend as he tenderly fingered the faint saddle of freckles across her nose. "Tell dadkins about it, chicken."

"Oh, daddy—" She tossed her honey-colored head back in a toni-swirl and turned up brimming eyes of joy to him. "Oh, daddy—Throcky has asked me to marry him. Can you believe it! Oh, it's true, true—oh, I'm so happy, daddy."

"I'm so happy for you, chicken." He reverently kissed her flushed forehead. "I knew my little girl would get what she wanted. Dadkins would do anything for his little girl," he added, tenderly pulling her head to his chest again as he raised one eyebrow to Hamilton, "anything in this wicked old world for her."

"But you don't understand, daddy," she spoke passionately into his chest. "Throcky *wants* to marry me. He really wants to. Oh, daddy—"

"Of course, he does, chicken." He'd be a fool not to want to marry my little girl." And when he felt the clutch of her sweet little hands on his ribs, he knew he was loved as no other daddy was ever loved. "We must find mumkins and tell her the good news, chicken."

"I'm so happy for you, too, daddy."

"I know you are, chicken," he said a little quizzically.

"Now you won't have to do anything about it, daddy—I mean now that Throcky wants to marry me. Everything is just wonderful!" Her hands clutched his ribs as if they were the flotsam of a tragic wreckage. "Oh, daddy—Throcky

wants our baby. He actually cried when I told him. He's so wonderful! A real man, so mature and—"

For Marshall Worthington all the magic and the music suddenly stopped. The whole scene looked like a still life in ice to him, and all the people frozen specters caught in their last attitude before the great freeze came. Even his dear, dear friend, Hamilton, looked unreal, standing there with a glass to his lips pretending not to hear their domestic dialogue. And Priscilla—dadkin's only lambkin!—had turned into a porcelain doll in his arms, delicately frozen, ready to break if another word were spoken. If only he could keep her like this forever, forever safe from the pricks of the wicked world. The only warmth he felt now was her sweet, turned-up nose nuzzling his chest. "Chicken, my little chicken—"

"I wanted to tell you before now, daddy—I really was going to tell you. You and mummy. Please don't hate me."

He kissed the top of her head, and for words he rocked her gently in his arms.

Gradually the thaw began for Marshall Worthington; people began to move again, the music started, and the sound of laughter and champagne was heard again in the land. But the magic was gone. Gone forever, he told himself, as he pushed his daughter gently from his arms, kissed the tip of her nose, and smiled not at but beyond her. "Run along now, Priscilla, don't miss the dance."

"Daddy—" she hesitated, her bright eyes searching his face for favor.

"Everything's all right now." He found a smile for her. "Run along. The dance is getting cold—I mean, you shouldn't miss it. Don't worry, I'll tell your mother. Have fun."

She blew him a kiss and when he caught it and placed it on his lips he knew then for certain the magic was gone forever. He watched her turn and walk toward the dance floor, and he heard no more the crying of the lamb. He saw, instead, a strange creature, a woman, a man-with-a-womb, another killer of the dream, one of the great mass who had no magic. He sighed heavily and turned to his friend, who was nibbling again. He observed him a moment with something near disgust.

"Well, my friend," Hamilton said, a speck of cheese spread clinging to his upper lip. "You got your wish—just as I promised."

"You didn't promise premarital pregnancy."

Hamilton shrugged his shoulders and selected a sweetmeat. "Serendipity, my dear Marshall."

Marshall looked puzzled.

"An unexpected boon."

"You call *that* a boon?"

"A matter of viewpoint, my friend."

"I thought you knew everything. You could have warned me, given me a little time to prepare."

"The results would have been exactly the same."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You fathers—" Hamilton gave a little snorting laugh as he dislodged a piece of sweetmeat with his tongue. "You're all alike. The world changes but you don't. Puritans about your daughters, but libertines in everything else." He shook his head and caught a little burp in his fist. "I wouldn't be one of you for all the world." And he repeated, "for all the world" lovingly as if it had a very special meaning for him.

"You know, Hamilton," Marshall said, turning on him a slightly jaundiced eye, "You may be brilliant, but you're really a cynical old codger."

Hamilton laughed as if he relished the epithet. "That, my dear Marshall, is the secret of longevity."

"The way I feel, who needs longevity?"

"Speak for yourself. I intend to live forever."

"Not at the rate you eat."

"Another modern delusion. Medical hocus-pocus! I say, if food be the music of life, eat on—" He chuckled as he searched for yet another untried tidbit.

Marshall shook his head, his face a mask of sad resignation. "I'd better find Agnes and break the news. God, I wonder how she'll take it. Our little chicken—"

Hamilton had just finished another champagne when a man, hulking, overweight, and slick-bald, appeared at the table.

The man bent over the table to survey the food and spoke in a low, confiding tone. "I've been trying all evening to get a chance to speak to you, Hamilton." He selected a caviar-cracker and fingered it into his large mouth. "That potion you gave me—what do you call the thing?"

"Aphrodisiac."

"Yeh—well, the damn thing really worked. I mean, for the first time in over a year I" —he quickly glanced around to see that no one had joined them—"it made a new man out of me, Hamilton. Just like you said it would."

"Good."

"All those damn doctors with their fancy new pills didn't do a thing. But you—" He broke off, his big, protruding eyes watery with gratitude. "I owe you a lot, Hamilton."

"I always get it back, Harvey."

Harvey Hartford looked wistfully at a succulent ham for a moment. "Of course, I hadn't counted on one thing."

"What's that?"

"Throcky," he said, placing a slice of ham between thin slices of rye bread. "He got a hold of the potion and—" He shrugged as he

bit into the sandwich.

"What happened?"

Harvey swallowed hard. "It seems he and the Worthington girl—what's her name?"

"Priscilla."

"You understand, this is strictly between you and me." He nudged Hamilton confidingly. "Seems Throcky got a little overzealous and"—another nudge—"you know what I mean. Take care, take care, I've always told him, but water over the dam and that sort of thing now. He's a real man about it, has the right feeling for the family honor, no scandal, says he really wants to marry the girl." He shrugged and then went on. "A nice girl, good family. You know I think the world of Marsh Worthington. Just hadn't counted on this. But what the hell, I say. As good a beginning as most marriages. Right?" He nudged Hamilton again and chuckled. "You and I know marriages aren't made in heaven. Right?"

Hamilton smiled. "Right, Harvey."

"Well, I'd better be on my way. See you later, same time, same place."

"I'll be waiting, Harvey." And with that Hamilton Warlock stopped eating and left. As he waddled his way toward the nearest exit, he could not rid himself of the oppressive sense of boredom these affairs always caused him. Everything was so deadly predictable, so mundanely human. Just once, he thought as he teleportated himself to his apartment on the thirteenth floor of the Sabbat Towers, just once he could appreciate things going awry from his point of view. Nowadays the souls of men were so pitifully small; not at all like the good old Faustian days when the stake was worth the gamble. These days it seemed humans were all hung-up on sex, as if it were some kind of new invention. They completely ignored the big issues. And that left a man in his profession in quite a plight, with practically no challenge at all.

Hamilton tried to rid himself of these depressing thoughts, as he always did, by lowering his obese body into a steaming hot bath. There at least, with a dash of brimstone powders, he could relax and dream of the good old days. ★

KELO TV

IN MARKHAM TOWN!

By Jack G. Levine

Illustrated by R. Jacobs

An eerie "modern gothic," suggesting that in one way or another the forces beyond the ken of this atomic age, have an ability to strike back; to make us aware, as it were, of their continued presence.

The still unlighted service station was so vaguely outlined in the autumnal dusk that the young men in the late model Porsche saw it only subliminally. This was sufficient, however, for a fast brake by the pumps to the banshee shriek of the Porsche's tires.

The driver called peremptorily to an attendent who was already approaching the car. He asked, "Hey, fella! Are we on the right road to Markham?"

The attendent was a young man. He said, "You guys going to Markham tonight? Are you a part of that fella, Bailey's T.V. Show?"

"How'd ya guess it?" the driver said. He indicated his companion with his thumb. "This *is* Jim Bailey. Now how do we get to Markham?"

"Your sound truck passed this

afternoon. A couple of cars with it. So you're Jim Bailey," the young man said admiringly. "There's only one road to Markham, Mr. Bailey. No one visits and no one leaves. There's a bus once a week for tourists. But there's mighty few tourists this time of year."

In the huckster-promoter sense, James Bailey mirrored his companion, Vincent Edwards. At the moment, however, he seemed boredly preoccupied, and his brown eyes set in a round face below a fast receding crew-cnt, showed an ill-concealed cynicism. He asked softly, bitingly, "What's the matter? Is the town in quarantine, too, along with the Mathers House?"

Lightning flashed. Close. An almost instantaneous burst of thunder cancelled the attendent's reply. The clouds in the ever-darkening twilight loomed thick and heavy. . .

Bailey said abruptly, "Look, friend, if that thunder means anything, we're going to have a rough show, tonight."

"So how's *about* Markham?" his partner put in curtly.

The attendent seemed suddenly to withdraw, his enthusiasm cooling in proportion to Bailey's sarcasm. He said briefly, "You're O.K. You are on the right road. Just watch for the Salem sign. Then turn right to Markham. You got about thirty miles to go."

The Porsche spun onto the highway to meet an almost complete darkness, plus the first few drops of rain. Bailey and Edwards lighted cigarettes and settled back for the ride ahead.

Bailey said finally, breaking the silence, "You know, Vince, I think I've found the angle in case this Mathers Monster finks out."

"Whaddaya mean, in case?"

"All right! I'm worried! I don't forget for a second, baby, that I've got ten million squares ont there who'll cut my throat if I don't give em what they want. There's no loyalty in this business, baby. One bummer, and you've had it."

"Right!" Edwards said. "That's the 'name of the game,' buby. You are the great Jim Bailey, the guy who'll do anything. You take em down five thousand feet in a diving bell—they eat it up. Twelve miles up in a hot air balloon—they get heart-attacks in free-flight. You are their God, baby. And *they* are *you*, all ten million of them. I agree! If you ever crack up, you'll have everyone of those yokels on your neck telling you what a yellow cop-out you are, and how they could have done it better."

Blue lightning flashed again, and Bailey waited for the thunder before he said, "That's what I'm getting at. There's going to be a lot of suspense tonight. All-Hallows-Eve. Markham, the blighted town. The cemetery with the bones and ashes of sixteen supposed witches who were burned and hanged. And the Mathers House,

the house of the guy who caused the burning and the hanging. You know they are going to expect something big tonight. Their freaky little minds are hoping that this phony monster, this supposed *witches' familiar*, that supposedly carried Mathers off will show up for a re-match—with me. I'll feel pretty stupid sitting there clutching a mike and a cold pastrami while I describe the dust on a picture of Mather's grandmother."

"So, what's your angle?"

"Simple. I'll create a monster. The area around the house should be clear for a good half mile. The truck with you guys will be up on the road. Who's to say it didn't happen? Anyhow, I'll guarantee an audience for the rest of the season."

The lights of the Porsche suddenly outlined a gaunt tree situated at a bend in the highway. Edwards braked the car under its bare branches. A freshly painted sign read, SALEM TEN MILES. It pointed straight ahead. Another, pointing off at right angles, read, MARKHAM THIRTEEN MILES. This last was old, rotted, barely legible.

Edwards cursed, backed the Porsche, and turned onto a rutted and ill-kempt road. Again they drove in silence. The rain had stopped sufficiently for a full moon to peer owlishly through a break in the clouds, causing the scene around them to be most reflective of autumn—stacked grain, pumpkins—and something else not quite definable.

At one point Edwards said gruffly, "I'll bet the state hasn't paid a red cent for road repairs since old Dan Webster chased the Devil out of these parts."

Bailey said somberly, "And who is to say that Webster actually did that?"

"Sheeee," Edwards said, "You're working up to something, baby."

Time passed, and the yellow Porsche forged through the night.

Then suddenly, and seemingly without warning, they were on the cobbled streets of a darkened village. The houses to either side were old, decrepit; without a single light. The grey silence of weathered doors and ghostly, staring windows suggested that perhaps they were inhabited, and perhaps they were not. Both Bailey and Edwards glanced curiously and nervously from side to side.

"Up ahead," Bailey said. He pointed to a square of light emanating from a combination general store and service station. "Pull in there."

The Porsche braked again, and Bailey noted instantly that beyond the pumps a single bulb illumined the face of an elderly man. The man's expression was one of resentful detachment. He made no move to approach them.

"Sorry to bother you," Bailey called brusquely, loudly, "but this

seems to be the only place open. Look's like they go to bed early around here. We're looking for the old Mathers House."

The attendent approached slowly. When he spoke, it was with the nasal inflection peculiar to the Down-Easter. He said, "It's the season, young fella. And they've a reason to be indoors tonight. The Mathers House, if you want it, is on the Post Road. Straight on over the rise, about three-quarters of a mile."

Vincent Edwards, noting the man's reticence and obvious hostility, frowned and looked grim.

Bailey did him one better. He cocked his head, an odd look in his eyes. He said flatly, "I'm curious, Mister. I'd like to ask you a question."

"Ask it, then. I've got to lock up and sleep myself."

"I've inquired about the Mathers House. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I've heard of ye and your work, if that's what you're getting at."

"Well, isn't it important that your town will be history tonight? That millions of people will become acquainted with the things that have happened here? Normally, we would be meeting with representatives of the community. This was refused us. Moreover, the town seems deserted. No lights, nothing—only you. Like they either didn't care, or were scared to death about something."

The attendent stared quietly for seconds, then said bluntly, "There's nought to tell ye. As I've said, ye'll find your own way. And the Mathers House is but three-quarters of a mile up the road."

"Hold it, friend!"

Bailey's voice had a sudden petulent anger. "Do you believe in this *Mathers Horror*, as they call it? Do *you* think it really exists?"

Alert for trouble, Vincent Edwards moved instantly to intervene. "*Jim*," he admonished. "He's senile—out of it. Let him be, man."

The aged attendent switched to Edwards. He said, "No, young-un. You're wrong. But as I've said, ye'll find your own way. You've come here to do that. Ye'll pry into things that are not of your business. I know it, and the people here know it. And we want no part of ye and the thing ye might conjure up tonight. Better it stay dead, and the Mathers House stay dead, and the village with it. *We* didn't ask for outsiders. *We* didn't ask for the meddling. I say ye'll find your own way. But may the Lord hope, young fella, that ye'll be here to tell of it in tomorrow's sun."

Vincent Edwards, most deeply concerned with such things as image, status, and public relations, threw the Porsche into gear and burned rubber back to the macadam.

On the highway he said, I'm sorry, Jim. But for Christ's sake,

its 10:15 now. You'll need a half hour at least in the Mathers House to get set up.

"Yeah. To hell with him."

Bailey lighted cigarettes for himself and Edwards. His eyes were now contemplative; more troubled than cynical.

Beyond the last houses of the village, the road led up a small rise to a flat terrain of meadow and cornfield. The fields were bounded, on the one side by stands of oak and pine, and on the other by the downward slope of a small valley. In the near distance, on this seemingly straight stretch of road, was a vague cluster of cars and trucks. One of the trucks flaunted a microwave T.V. dish on its white top.

Within seconds Edwards was pulling the Porsche into line with the other cars, and he and Bailey were getting out to a chorus of welcomes.

Bailey, almost instantly pushed his way through the gathering of perhaps twenty individuals to the edge of the road. Here *he* was the leader, and he knew this in every sense of the word. A young man in white coveralls walked closely beside him, saying importantly, "We strung the cables down there, Mr. Bailey. The mike and the remote camera hook-up is set up in the living room. All you have to do is follow the line, go inside and pull up a chair. There's a thermos with beer and sandwiches. . .

They paused at the road's edge. Below them at a distance of four hundred yards, and on a slight rise in the epicenter of the small valley, was an old house, rambling, decayed, ruined. Moonlight disclosed a mass of toppled stones near the house, plus the shadowy outlines of a wall.

A second technician said bluntly, "It's all yours, Mr. Bailey. I'll take the diving bell we had off Catalina. You'd better believe it, man. That place is bad enough in the daytime. You'd have to nail me down to keep me there after dark.

Janet Sturgis, petite brunette secretary to Alan Davis, program director, had also moved to Bailey's side. She asked in somewhat angry tones, "Will the 'great man' have some coffee so he can stay awake long enough for the broadcast?"

Edwards frowned and spoke, ignoring the provocation. He asked, "You guys get wet in that little flurry awhile back?"

"I imagine *everyone* did," the girl countered, refusing to be intimidated in turn– "except, maybe you privileged characters. Alan has called every bar between here and Bedford. You're late. . ."

Bailey laughed, his eyes still on the scene below. "Alan think his meal ticket ran out on him?" he asked sarcastically.

Edwards said tiredly, "Cut it, Jim."

"Cut it, indeed!" The girl was angry now. "Alan sits up nights try-

ing to keep this thing together. . . And you, Jim Bailey, are an inconsiderate stinker."

Alan Davis, a trench-coated young man with a pale face, receding hair and worried blue eyes, stood beneath a canopy mounted from the top of the T.V. truck. He held a sheaf of papers in one hand and a flashlight in the other. He glanced up, said to one of the men close to him, "Get Jim Bailey over here—" and when Bailey arrived—"What held you up, Galahad? You got a job like the rest of us. Get him a copy of the script, Janet."

Bailey frowned, shrugged, acutely and suddenly aware of his actual image in the eyes of Alan Davis. "So I'm late," he blustered. "So what? You sound as if the Mathers Monster had you by the short hair."

Janet brought a script from the depths of her shoulder bag. She gave it to Bailey and Alan said, "Nevermind about that now. You can run through it *down there.* Think you can clot their blood with a running patter of what could happen even though it doesn't?"

Bailey grinned. Edwards did likewise. Bailey said smugly, "You do your job, baby. I'll do mine. I got a 'gimmick', so don't worry."

Davis frowned, shrugged, looked to his watch, then to the lowering clouds which were gathering, passing again across the face of the moon. One of the sound men arrived with a tray of steaming coffee mugs and passed them around.

"All right, it'seleven," Alan said. "You better get going, Jim. You'll have to pull a wire for intermediate chatter. The walkie-talkie is out of order."

Bailey scowled. "The hell," he said. "That's stupid. How come?"

"Who knows? It worked great this afternoon. Here's a flashlight and a couple of extra batteries—and Jim!"

"Yeah?"

"If anything *should* happen—mike failure, dead phone, anything like that, *come back here.* Don't stop to figure it out. And don't wait for us to check."

Bailey's scowl grew heavier still. "What's going on that I don't know?" he asked bluntly. "Just why the hell should I run?"

"Well, you've *seen* that damned town, right? And *now* you've seen the house. We're simply *not* going to take any chances. And *I'm* responsible for the program *and* you."

Janet Sturgis put in softly, "It's eleven-fifteen, Alan."

Vincent Edwards moved forward to ostentatiously shake hands with Bailey. He used the occasion to whisper, "Take it easy, buby, with the 'gimmick'. Make it look good."

Bailey grunted assurance while hitching the reel of wire to his shoulders. Then he patted the script inside his jacket, grabbed the phone box with his left hand, and waved

them all a tongue-in-cheek farewell with the flashlight.

The undergrowth and brush was thick. Despite this he moved at a steady pace. The silence of the autumnal night, except for the sound of crickets and the rustling of small animals at his ponderous approach, was all-encompassing. Just once the full moon shown briefly through the clouds, then moved to partly hide behind a massive bank of darkness.

After long panting minutes pushing through brush and over stubble and field stone, Bailey reached the small rise. He stumbled up it to rest for additional minutes on the remains of a stone fence. Then finally he stood before the mouldering entrance of the house itself.

Odd, he thought. There were no night noises now; no crickets, no rustling of mice. But there was another noise, like keening music inside his head. . . . He strained to listen. Nothing! Goddamn his blood pressure, he thought. And Goddamn his extra weight. His hands and legs were trembling. But again, he rationalized, it simply wouldn't be normal to feel no fear, no trepidation. He breathed deeply, shrugged off the reel of wire and lit a cigarette. Then he retrieved the reel and followed the T.V. cables up the steps, across the broken porch, and through the opened doors of the Mathers House.

Above, on the road, the others stood waiting. They formed a vague and shadowy line along the valley's rim, looking themselves like eerie phantoms of an elder world.

"He should be there by now," Vincent Edwards said to the line of watchers. Then, to three rings of the phone, "That's him." Edwards tapped the mouthpiece. "Hey, man. You made it. You O.K.? Any monsters yet?"

"Not a one." Bailey's voice came thinly. "But you'd have to see this place to believe it. Nothing's happening. But if there was ever a spot for a *happening*, this is it. Even the air smells funny here—its like a substance—I can't quite explain it."

"You're putting us on," Edwards said.

"No, I mean it. It's like. . ."

"Hey," Edwards interrupted. "I just felt a couple of drops of rain. How's it with you?"

"No patter on the roof. Plenty of clouds though. You know, all I need is a wall of rain, and I've had it."

Alan Davis snatched the phone from Edwards. "Bailey," he said, "this is Alan. Now hear this, glamour boy. It's just about that time. We'll tag you with two rings when you're on. You can double check with the tube monitor. You all right, boy?"

Bailey said succinctly, "Let-er-rip, papa."

"O.K. Now get this. It's ten of twelve. Watch your script. My chatter is about three minutes. Yours is extemporaneous—supposedly. But make it sound convincing. Luck! And we'll see you in a bit."

Alan Davis relinquished the intercom, turned a flashlight to his own script and signalled the T.V. camera to dolly over. The atmosphere of tense expectancy seemed all-pervasive. The technicians and monitors, seen through the doors to the sound truck's interior, were doubly intent on their jobs. One of the men, looking sharply toward Alan, pulled the phones from his ears and said loudly, "We're on!" He began a countdown signal to Vincent Edwards who had now positioned himself halfway between the truck and Alan, who remained at the edge of the valley, mike in hand.

"Four. . . Three. . . Two. . ." The droning voice of the technician was the only thing to be heard. At the count of One, Edwards dropped his hand.

Alan began his delivery—fast—hard.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, this is the Jim Bailey Show. And we're at it again to bring you a real life experience which you will live yourself. Yes sir. YOU live it! Each and every minute of it. Because you see with Bailey's eyes, and you feel the things that Bailey feels. What's more, YOU GO WITH BAILEY. And Bailey, ladies and gentlemen, will go anywhere and do anything that is physically possible—FOR YOU. So that YOU and millions like you, tied to the hum-drum demands of everyday life, can experience sensations for which many would pay fabulous sums."

To the viewers of the Jim Bailey Show, the Davis dialogue was familiar. It was the signal, actually, for them to gather around the "tube" in homes, hotel lobbies, and beer and cocktail bars across the country. . . And there had been no lessening of their interest—especially this time. Indeed, they were a most loyal audience—*all ten million of them.*

"Now tonight (Alan was saying) *as we explained in our last broadcast, we depart from the norm of supersonic jets and diving bells. We've cancelled the midget auto race in which Bailey was supposed to drive. . .*

"We're on a lonely deserted road, ladies and gentlemen, on the outskirts of a small town made famous in American history. The town is MARKHAM. And beneath us in a valley is a house which has also attracted a certain macabre fame. It's called the Mathers House after Reynolds Mather, the reputed half-brother of the fanatical, witch-hunting minister, COTTON MATHER, who, if you will remember, was

the prosecutor and instrument of doom for some twenty-three members of a COVEN during the infamous trials in SALEM in the late 16th century.

"Now we have chosen this site for one reason. Legend has it that Reynolds Mather was the malign influence behind the activities of his brother, Cotton Mather. . . Old tales from the inhabitants of this blighted area—around which has hung a pall of black fear and terror for over two centuries—say that Reynolds Mather HAD SOLD HIS SOUL TO THE DEVIL. He was, in reality, the leader of that witches' COVEN. And he sought redemption by exposing the others of his group to the horrors of the rope and the fire.

"Ladies and gentlemen—you will now hear the rest of this story from Jim Bailey himself. And by now you all know where Jim Bailey is. . . LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IT IS MY PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU JIM BAILEY, ALONE IN THE HOUSE OF REYNOLDS MATHER ON THIS ALL-HALLOWS-EVE, THIS WITCHES' SABBAT OF 1968. COME IN, JIM!"

Thunder most appropriately accompanied Alan Davis' final remarks, giving pause to planned continuity.

James Bailey, entrepreneur and huckster of the microwave, was at that very moment seated upon a camp chair in the center of Mather's empty living room. He had for company one thermos case for beer and comestibles, one phone intercom and one large T.V. camera which he was swiveling around with his foot. At the camera's base was a small monitoring set from which he, in part, was to take his cue from Alan. The phone provided a second cue . . . It rang twice and Bailey sighed. He took a deep breath and put the mike to his lips, swiveling the camera to focus upon himself.

On screen his face lit up with the old Jim Bailey 'we're in this together' smile. His delivery was, as usual, personal, to the heart of the matter.

Bailey began: "HELLO FOLKS! Well, up until tonight, I've sort of hogged the show and passed the real thrills along second-hand and a little tired. It WON'T be that way tonight. In fact, if I could trade places with anyone of you right now, I'd do it. YES! This is the Mathers House all right. And due to the date, the place and the hour at any time now I'm supposed to come face to face with the *Horror* that dragged Reynolds Mather from this very room two hundred years ago. Because that's what happened folks. It seems that witches don't stay dead. In this case, though hanged and burned, they exacted a most terrible revenge on Reynolds Mather."

A check at this point of the myriad T.V. sets across the U.S. and Canada, would find the viewers round-eyed and 'with it', at this new James Bailey phenomenon.

"They died, true," Bailey continued. "And they were duly buried. But the essence of malign evil which still remained was strong enough in its last agonies to create what is known as the *witches' familiar*. . . Mather, ladies and gentlemen, was found torn asunder just fifty yards from the window through which I'm looking now. (He swiveled the camera to pan through the picture window, giving his viewers a simultaneous shot of the ruined cemetery). Since that night, ALL-HALLOWS-EVE of 1692, not only this house, which was once the rectory of Cotton Mather, but the surrounding neighborhood, including the town of MARKHAM, has suffered a slow decline to the state in which we now find it.

"There is an aura of evil, folks; an intangible, miasmic cloud of fear and stagnation which seems to encompass this entire area, the town and the people. I felt it when I came in tonight. You might not believe this, but *Markham* is a *dead* town. As if an affliction had spread over the generations to lay its rotting hand upon everything living within the precincts of the Mathers House. As I speak to you now, there is no lighted dwelling within ten miles. There is no living creature on the streets or in the fields. Their doors are *locked* against an intangible terror that has been with them all of their lives.

"And we are indeed intruders tonight; we were not wanted here. We will not be missed when we leave. For, on this night so the natives say—providing there is sufficient provocation—the Mathers HORROR will walk again; will come to this house once more for the person of Reynolds Mather. . . And, if the fears of the inhabitants prove true, I WILL BE THAT PROVOCATION."

Another sweep of the myriad T.V. sets at this point would show every viewer as enrapt and totally involved. Up on the road, in the silver-black wash of moonlight and darkness, all were silent; as intent on Bailey's pitch as were the *vox-populi* across the country. Vincent Edwards smiled softly to himself. Catching Alan Davis' eye he made a circular O with thumb and index finger; at the same time he winked.

But for Bailey the situation was by no means as euphoric. The initial measure of confidence given him by contact with his audience waned rapidly, and for some unaccountable reason his nervousness returned, along with an irrational feeling of apprehension. This caused him to continually direct his flashlight to

the darkened corners of the room, and to the expanse of headstone and rotted trees beyond the window. . . This state of mind was reflected somewhat in his delivery.

"The minutes are slipping by, folks," he was saying. "It's midnight and nothing's happened. But just so you can get completely 'with' it, I'm going to ask you to picture yourselves in my place. . . Pretend, for example that YOU—all of YOU—are Reynolds Mather, sitting here in this room, conscious of your evil crime, and expecting—YES, I say EXPECTING retribution!

"The house itself is old, colonial, falling to pieces. The room in which YOU sit is bare. The walls are damp, of plaster and bare boards. There is a staircase to the right of me that leads to a landing, and thence to a hall and a series of rooms; one of which was the study of Reynolds Mather. . . I have had the odd, spine-chilling feeling, really, that at any moment I might look up to see the figure of Reynolds Mather coming down those stairs to greet me. (Bailey directs the camera to the stairs and to the landing.) Along the expanse of wall in front of me there is a door, too. It leads to an enclosed hallway and to the rear of the house. Next to that door is a window casement, about eight feet long and about three in height, through which the cemetery of the Mathers Rectory is visible (camera follows). And, in THAT cemetery were interred the burnt remains of the twenty-three victims of Reynolds Mather, plus the body of Mather himself."

Bailey at this point saw fit to deliberately slow the pace of his delivery to a final and extended pause; during which he opened, and drank straight down, one full can of beer. When he came on again it was most evident to Vincent Edwards that the 'gimmick' was being brought into play.

He began slowly: "Ladies and gentlemen, I think this whole set-up has finally 'reached me', as it were. The situation, the scene, whatever: it's a real mind-boggler. I may sound facetious, but don't you believe it. Because I just wish YOU could feel the insidious fear that is beginning to plague me now. . . The awareness that I am completely alone in this house, together with the knowledge of what has happened here—and what might happen again—is a frightening thing to experience."

Bailey continued to focus the camera through the window, milking the scene of headstones and moonlight, while he talked, opened more beer cans, drank, and continued, still apprehensively, to turn the beam of his flashlight to the dark corners; to the stairway, and to the hall. . .

"Just a minute, folks!" he exclaimed suddenly. "There *is* something strange. . . Yes, there's something moving." His voice became speculative, low-keyed: "There's something

out there. Folks!" His voice rose. "There's something moving in the cemetery. Either my eyes or the moonlight are playing tricks, but there definitely is a *thing* over there by that mound—a shape of some kind. I can't make it out. It's like a clotting mist from the ground, all grey; rain-wet; grey and yellow—*and it's a helluva lot more solid than mist. . .*"

James Bailey, entrepreneur and con-man, took this most electric moment in his delivery to casually turn off the remote switch of the T.V. camera. Only the sound remained. But his audience around the country couldn't have cared less. They sat, hypnotized, as it were, before the empty tube, eyes popping, hackles rising. . . Following Bailey's lead, *they were in that room with Bailey and they didn't need a camera.* As for Bailey, himself, his pitch hadn't ceased for a single second. . .

On the road, all who were not busy with the monitoring, moved swiftly to the edge of the valley to stand with Davis and Edwards and Janet Sturgis. They too were puzzled, apprehensive. . . Vincent Edwards smiled silently to himself and said never a word.

Bailey's voice, only loud before, had heightened to the excitement of fear and drama: "I just don't know what to say, folks," he told his audience. "I simply don't know how to explain this. VINCENT! ALAN! Can you check me up there on the road? There's something down here. It's moving now. It's like a dirty yellow cloud. And there's a noise. Like some damn maniacal banshee. . . You'll have to forgive me, folks," Bailey's voice wavered; his breath coming hard, "I just can't—WAIT! It's stopped. Good Lord! It just can't be! It must be true the things they said. The mist has gone, dissolved. There's something in its place. It's huge, mottled, and it's got eyes and mouths and limbs and hair—all in the wrong places. And it's moving toward me and the house. I don't know how much longer I can stay here. I've left my chair and my back is against the wall. . . I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH MORE I CAN TAKE!"

Bailey is actually screaming now. He's Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple MacPherson. He's every tent-show, carney spellbinder, religious or otherwise, that ever trod the sawdust. And he's pro enough to know that he *has* his audience, and that they *will go all the way.*

"ALAN," Bailey yells. "It's happening before my eyes. But if I let myself believe it, if I *dare* to believe it, then I'll be like those others in MARKHAM—those living dead men. I'll be insane, or worse. . ." Bailey's voice becomes low-pitched again, intense, whispering. "It keeps coming. It's reached the end of the hallway on the other wing. See it through my

eyes, folks. ALL OF YOU. Remember the game? YOU are Reynolds Mather. IT'S COMING FOR YOU! It's tall, gaunt, draped in rotting burial shrouds. The flesh is decayed meat thrown together from the residue of a hnndred long dead bodies. . . Now wait! I can't see it anymore. But I know it's there. . . CAN YOU HEAR ME UP THERE ON THE ROAD? ALAN! VINCENT! SOMEBODY HELP ME. YOU'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING!"

To Vincent Edwards the cat was now completely out of the bag, so he informed the others, to-wit, that all was well, and that Bailey was simply pursuing his star. Despite this assurance, however, Alan Davis was angry. But he was also a *pro.*

He cut in on Bailey, ad-libbing; going along with the 'gimmick'.

"Jim!" he yelled. "Jim Bailey! This is Alan Davis. What's happening down there? Remember what I told you. GET OUT! LEAVE THE PLACE! Jim! Can you hear me?"

Bailey's 'squares', if they were with him at all, were 'with' him now. His voice came through to them, strong. . . There was simply no doubt of his ability to *persuade.*

"All right!" he cried. "You wanted it this way--everyone of you. Now listen to me. I'm not leaving because I CAN'T. . . Something has happened. My legs are paralyzed and I CAN'T MOVE. I've got to stay here and that damned thing is coming down the hall. The door's opening. It's standing there in the doorway. ALAN! CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Bailey's voice now reached the peak of his dramatic potential. He was pleading, crying--anything for the audience rating. "All right, whatever you are," he screamed. "Don't come near me. It's not me you want. . . I'm not Reynolds Mather. I'm NOT Mather, I tell you. He's dead. You killed him before, remember? I'M NOT MATHER! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, I'M NOT--DON'T --TOUCH--ME! DON'T--"

There is a rending crash caused by Bailey smashing the thermos container against the floor.

Rolling thunder and a veritable wash of rain swept the house in the valley and the group on the road. Alan Davis took over. He was smooth, cool. He spoke ostensibly to the T.V. crew, but his remarks, since he was on camera, were for the audience:

He said rapidly, "You, George, Jackson. Get down there on the double. . . Ladies and gentlemen, this isn't in the script, I assure you. Something has happened in the old Mathers House." He glanced at his watch. . . "We're going to have to cut this broadcast short. Please. I beg of you. Keep tuned to your local stations. Whatever happened here tonight, I guarantee you'll get the truth. I repeat, this is no trumped-up nonsense. There was no script

for the thing that happened down there in that valley. And now, due to circumstances beyond our control, we *must* sign off."

As stated, Alan Davis, was angry. He walked instantly to the phone and to Vincent Edwards. Edwards was saying—"Man, you were great. You're the biggest ham since Barrymore."

"Hold it!" Bailey's voice came thinly again. Then, "Hey, that's good beer. . . I'm O.K., baby. How did Alan take the gimmick?"

"One guess," Edwards said.

Davis interrupted, snatching the phone from Edwards' hand. He said savagely, "All right, Bailey. I don't know what the hell you thought you were doing. I only know one thing. . . Unless you come up with a damn good story on what really went on down there, there won't be a jerkwater station in the country that'll touch us with the ten foot proverbial. You've *really* loused us up this time."

He literally threw the phone back to Edwards, saying, "Tell that idiot to start moving. I've half a mind to leave him there."

Edwards said, "Did you get that, Jim?"

"Yeah!" Bailey's voice seemed far away, which it was. He said, "Tell him I could have heard him without the phone. I've got one beer to go and I'll be on my way."

Bailey, still in the camp chair, rested now, the job, so he thought, wrapped up and well-done. The flashlight lay on the floor, its beam still pointing through the window, and to the cemetery beyond.

Edwards' voice said worriedly in his ear: "He's pretty hot, Jim. Your little stunt went down the wrong way."

"Well, that's just too bad." Bailey took one more pull at the beer can. "Tell him to cool it. I've never got us into anything yet that I couldn't get us out of. . ."

At that precise point there was a sudden noise like a door being hurled open with great force, and Bailey's voice, coming through to Edwards, said, "What the hell? Why that whole damned limb snapped off. . . GOOD GOD!"

Then there was a click and the phone went dead in Edwards' ear.

Edwards waited and nothing happened, and he said worriedly—"Jim? Hey, Jim? What's wrong? What's with the line? Jim? Can you hear me?" He looked to the others, then back to the dead phone. He announced, "Something screwy down there. Bailey said that—Look! He may *really* need help. Maybe he *shouldn't* come up by himself."

Davis paused on his way to the truck. Like the others, at Edwards' information, he became suddenly silent, contemplative, and he returned to the edge of the road and looked again at the house in the valley. . .

Rain fell steadily now. But it was a gentle rain; almost warm. The house and the valley were quickly engulfed in its liquid darkness. . .

Alan Davis said tiredly, "All right. Go after him. Take George and one of the others—if they'll go. Maybe Bailey would like you to carry him back here, piggy-back."

But to Bailey, staring mutely at the dead phone, the rain was not gentle. To him it was a horrendous roar on the slate of the roof. And it clung with a certain viscosity to the small section of picture window which his downcast eyes allowed him to see. . . Something was happening to Bailey. What he had seen, or thought he had seen, had had a most deadening effect. The insidious fear of before had now become stark terror.

The line was dead. He was alone, absolutely and completely *alone.* And there had been that noise, and what he had seen. And now, too, there was that keen music again, soft, horrible. And it wasn't in his ears as before. It was somewhere in the house. It was somewhere near—like *something else* was near too; something which he surmised to be pretty damn awful. . .

Then he forced himself to look up to the window and through it to the rain and the darkness beyond.

He said softly, half to himself: "Oh for the love of bloody nonsense. This has got to be some kind of rotten joke." He half rose from the camp chair. "No!" he admonished. "Don't come any closer. Just stay right there—Right there! Look! You're a freak-out, get it? You're *not* real." Then to himself again, "This is crazy, insane. It's a nightmare, and I'm dreaming the whole thing, I'm just dreaming-dreaming."

Bailey rose suddenly from the chair. "That's it," he said. "Those others. Those damned squares. They *did* it. *They brought it back."* Then he screamed: "LOOK, IT WAS THEM. THEY'RE MATHERS, NOT ME'" His voice was pleading with a bona-fide, uncontrollable hysteria: "THEY BROUGHT YOU BACK, YOU DAMNED FREAK! THOSE TEN MILLION OTHERS. THEY'RE MATHERS, NOT ME!"

He grabbed the dead phone, yelling into the mouthpiece. "VINCENT! For the love of God, it's real. I've seen it. It was outside and now it's coming down the hall. THEY BROUGHT IT BACK. THAT DAMNED AUDIENCE: THOSE DAMNED SQUARES. PUT ME BACK ON THE AIR. LET ME TELL THEM IT WAS A MISTAKE. LET ME TELL THEM. . ."

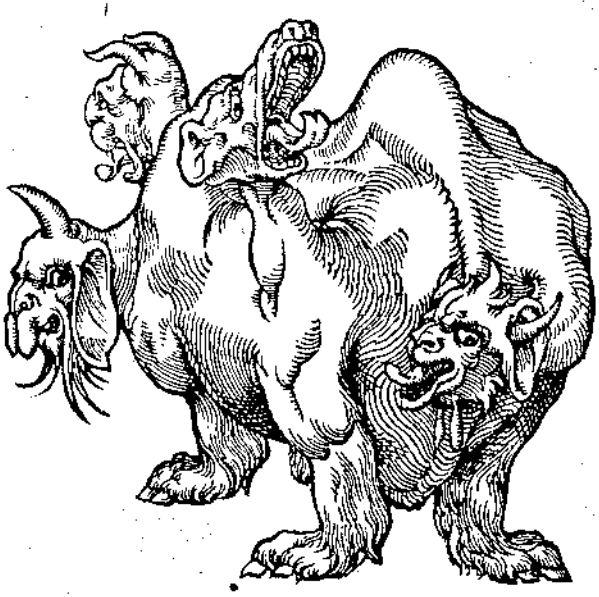
But it was much too late to tell anyone anything. And Bailey flung the phone to the floor and stood up to make a run for it. . .

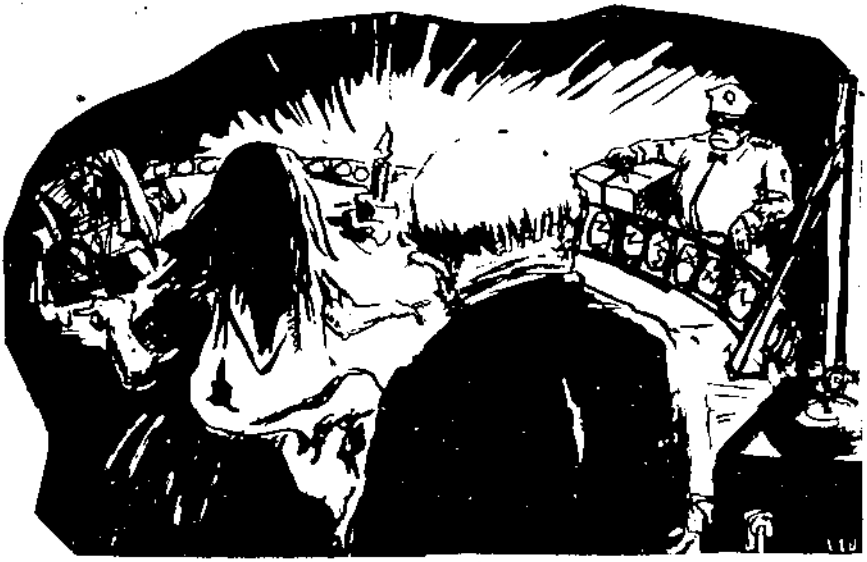
He was too late for that, too.

There was a crashing and a rending, quite unlike anything he had

ever heard before, and the door was literally smashed from its hinges.

The *Mathers Horror*, as it was still to be called, stood in the doorway. In all fairness to the original, however, certain ill-defined parts seemed still unfinished; otherwise it looked exactly as James Bailey had described it. . . ★





THE POSTMAN ALWAYS...

by Richard P. Flanagan

A bit of gothic-surrealism guaranteed to leave the thinkers among our gentle readers both chilled to the liver and a little contemplative—of the future, that is. . .

He was used to it by now. Someone else might have been shocked, but he was used to it. He supposed that he had delivered packages like this under all sorts of conditions. This didn't shock him.

He made his way down the street without too much difficulty. The piles of rubble on both sides were eerie in the late afternoon sun: he had to admit that. And the long shadows, long enough to extend across the open part of the street, were arched and vaulted and grotesque. He thought of the Dakota Badlands.

The silence was weird. He noticed in particular, by contrast with the last stop, that there were no cats and dogs anywhere about. Not a

cat sitting on top of a crazy wall or slipping in and out of the cavities where cellar windows used to be. No dogs, either singly or in the packs that made Kiev hell for a while. And there were no birds. The entire city was quiet—no, silent.

The street widened somewhat as he continued to pick his way through the debris. Then it opened upon a square, or what used to be a square, or park. Several streets entered the square, which now looked like a crater on the moon, its having received a direct hit by a blockbuster. The trunks of blasted trees lay about as well as the fragments of shattered statuary which had ornamented the square. Here and there were a green and shattered head, the metallic eyes no more vacant than ever, and a hand clutching a sword handle, and a carefully chiselled boot still in a carefully chiselled stirrup. Pieces of the pedestals lay about. On one of the pieces, which he presumed had supported the swordsman, there was the quotation *Paritur Pax Bello*, which he took to mean Peace is Produced by War. He recalled now having seen this square before the war and seemed to remember the statuary as being a splendid tribute to progress in several different fields of endeaver, but then he couldn't be sure. He had seen so many statues.

He shifted the package to his left arm aud began to make his way around the crater, for he had seen on the other side of the square his destination as the evening gloom flowed over the heaps of brick and dust and refuse. Much refuse. Long before the holocaust, the essential services had been discontinued and the refuse had piled up for several days as the people were too busy preparing to evacuate— so they thought—to take care of such things.

His destination was the sole building which could, with honesty, be called a building. There had apparently been parts of the building which had been torn away and reduced to rubble, but the essential structure remained. It was a theatre. And that part which is directly over the stage area, the part which conceals rising sets and flats, had been picked off and deposited behind the theater as a pile of twisted steel beams and bricks. Other than that the theater seemed to be intact.

Part of the street in front of the theater had been dashed away and the postman walked carefully around the hole and up to the entrance. He hesitated with his hand on the door and then, with an air of sly satisfaction, as though fulfilling a life-long desire, he walked around to the rear and entered through the stage door.

Inside, the squalor was immense. It looked as though a giant pair of hands must have picked up the building and shaken it several times, then replaced it. The Postman picked his way through the piles of ropes and sandbags and pulley wheels aud

costumes and props and flats until he emerged upon the stage. Looking overhead he marked the appearance of several stars in the darkening sky. Squinting ahead of him he could see that the force of the explosion which had dug out the square had caused more damage to the inside than to the outside of the theater. For he could see that the second balcony had fallen into the first balcony and carried it on to the downstairs section, creating such a disorder that only the first five rows in front of the stage remained undisturbed.

He turned now to survey the stage. A small area, in which he was presently standing, had been cleared, but the rest was filthy. Besides the debris of theatrical equipment, great mounds of refuse and tin cans and broken bottles rose in the corners and elsewhere. Water could be heard dripping somewhere.

"Hey, *Je-sus,*" the Postman yelled. He took a flashlight from his belt and inserted its beam into the dark. "Jesus Schmidt," he said again in a loud voice, and a baby began to cry behind one of the refuse piles.

"Hold it right there, Mister," came a nervous voice from behind another pile. "What do you want?"

"Well, I've got a package for you if you're Jesus Schmidt, care of this theater."

"A package? What's in it"

"I haven't opened it up."

"But you're an honest-to-God mailman, huh? With a package for me?"

"Yeah, I am. Do you want it?"

"Well, I don't know. In fact, I don't care. We've got you—that's good enough. Sarah, come on out—it's an audience!"

"Now wait a minute. . . " the Postman began.

"Who is it, Geez?"

"I don't know, but put the kid down and light the candle. Here, come on, mailman, right down here in the front row center. Now, pay attention and take notes if you can, because we want criticism. And don't worry, we're not thin-skinned—you can give us the straight report."

The Postman found himself propelled into the seat indicated by Jesus Schmidt. He placed the package up on the stage beside a small pile of bricks and sat back for the performance.

After a moment the baby stopped crying off at the right somewhere and Sarah appeared from behind a pile of rubble and filth. She was carrying a candle which she brought to the center of the cleared area and established in a puddle of its own wax on the floor. From what the Postman could see of her as she was illuminated by the candle, she was as homely as a woman can be without being ugly. He placed her at about fifty years old and he guessed that for half of that time she could not have washed herself very

successfully. He observed a scrofulous rash on her neck and imagined it might be infected but in the dim light it was difficult to say. Sarah was dressed—if that is the word—in a smock-like garment all of one piece, hemless and straggling at the bottom. Her hair was thoroughly disarrayed and might always have been that way. She squinted over the candle at the audience, gave a half-wave and a half-smile and retreated behind one of the rubble heaps.

Presently Jesus appeared pushing an old-fashioned wind-up phonograph which he cranked mightily. He squinted at a record and put down the other side upon the turntable. He missed the edge of the record twice with the needle and then a scratchy squawk commenced. Through the racket, the Postman discerned the strains of "L'Apres midi d'un faun". Jesus turned down the volume and jumped quickly back behind the same rubble heap which concealed Sarah.

As the Postman was attempting to read his wristwatch, the two of them re-appeared from behind the pile and the drama was apparently to begin, for they were obviously striving to appear dramatic. Sarah had affixed a long piece of curtain to the back of her smock and this fell behind her, train-like, to be rescued by Jesus who held the ends up above the dirt in the manner of a page boy following a queen. Sarah held her arms over her head and gazed upward. Jesus skipped once in order to be in step with her, and thus they advanced into the cleared area. The record, a very old one of short playing time, was going ratchety ratchety and Jesus dropped the train long enough to begin "L'Apres midi. . ." at the beginning once again, a task which he was forced to repeat every two or three minutes while the following dialogue was being rendered:

Sarah: O! O! O! Give us that heavenly. . .
Give us that heavenly. . .
Give us that heavenly. . .

Jesus: Gotcha Gotcha Gotcha—
Commuter train Commuter train. . .

Sarah: (swaying gently, arms still extended above her): O!
For the enterprise of swiftness,
For the swiftness of enterprise,
O! swiftness of swiftness
O! enterprise of enterprise.

Jesus: Diamond goobers and vulcanizing jobbers, O! O! for vulcanizing jobbers and diamond goobers. . .O!

Sarah: I've got you under my skin,
But she's a Grand Old Flag

Jesus: (effecting to wash his hands energetically): Synthesize the Great White Father
With a dextrous exercize;
And Old Black Joe

Just as though
You never carry more than
$50 cash with y'all.

At this, Jesus and Sarah joined hands to begin a soft-shoe buck and wing which was interrupted by the end of the music once again.

"Well," said Jesus, somewhat winded as he approached the edge of the stage, "We do the step for a couple of minutes and that's the end of the first act. How do you like it so far?"

The Postman tapped his cheek with his finger for a moment.

"I think," he said, "that it depends upon what follows. I mean, attention-wise, it's fine. I wouldn't change a thing. But I want more in order to see it context-wise, if you see what I mean. . ."

"Oh. Yeah, yeah. Well, let's go on. Now, next we get very solemn and there's a lot in there about man. . .uh. . . striving, you know? and progress and evolution and like that. Frankly, this act needs a lot of work. I mean there's some erotic stuff about. . . well. . . reproduction, you know? and Sarah does this bump and grind solo. We.., frankly, I think some of the dialogue will have to be cut because those women at the matinees just don't . . . well, . . it gets pretty blue in spots. . . frankly. . ."

"Perhaps," the Postman suggested, "We could skip that act for the time being."

"Yeah, fine, "said Jesus, as though quite a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "Well, this last act really moves. It ends up with the kid coming out in diapers, you know? with one of those New Year's baby sashes on? and we sing a chorus of the 23rd psalm set to the music of God Bless America, and. . ."

"Oh, about the music," said the Postman. "Now, Debussy is fine, understand, but with the point you're trying to make, may I suggest in the background something like the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth?"

"Hey, we got that, we got that. You think so, huh?"

"Try it."

And the last act got under way. The Postman checked his watch as the dialogue commenced. Then, as the climax neared, and Jesus began the Beethoven, the candle drowned in its own puddle of wax, and the theater was totally dark, the stars winking calmly through the aperture overhead.

Jesus and Sarah were plunged into confusion by this, even as they were reaching lyrical heights never achieved by them in their many lonely rehearsels. To be frustrated by a simple staging technicality which they had overlooked—how disappointing.

The Postman rose, groped for his package, put his ear to it for a moment, then set it down again upon the stage. He made his way out over

the rubble and refuse through the stage door while Jesus and Sarah stumbled about looking for another candle, the baby broke out in a fresh crying spasm, and Beethoven scratched along on the phonograph.

Once outside the Postman used his flashlight and made quickly for the other side of the square and the street down which he had come to the theater. As he entered the street he paused to hear the chorus drifting over the crumbled statuary of the blasted square. But as he did so the phonograph ran down in that grotesque way of the old crank machines. A moment of silence followed, then came the brief flash and explosion and the theater joined the rest of the rubble.

The Postman sighed and made a brief note on the last page of a little memo book. He snapped it shut and returned it to his pocket, turned his flashlight up the street and began walking.

"Alle Menschen werden Bruder," he sang softly, remembering the Beethoven. "All mankind become brothers where your soft wing touches. . . " ★

This being COVEN 13's first issue, we naturally have no reader comments to display. We look forward to bundles of such, however. In fact, if the mass of mail (over 800 pieces) resulting from our two small ads in SATURDAY REVIEW and WRITERS DIGEST is an indication of reader interest, we are, indeed, off to an excellent start.

For the record, we *want* correspondence. We welcome praise, criticism, accolades, suggestions, enchantments, subscriptions, ideas—anything that will make COVEN 13 suitable to the sophisticated, weird, macabre, and slightly zany needs of our audience.

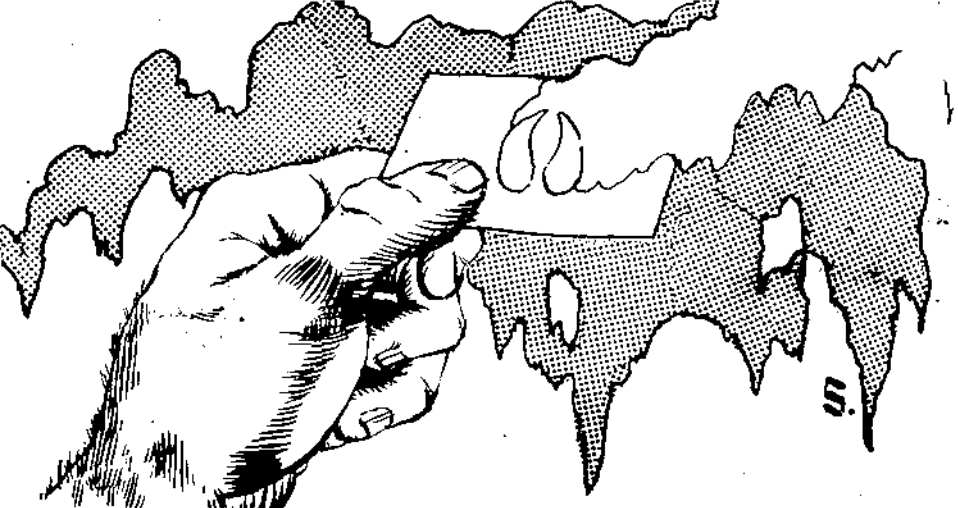
Since many of our readers will be rapping about our stories—the heart of the mag, as it were—an introduction to the writers in *this* issue is appropriate.

James R. Keaveny, for a starter, is the pen name of a novelist and historian who opts for the double life. LET THERE BE MAGICK is his point of departure; a most excellent one, we might add. Alan Caillou (ODILE) comes to us with at least ten novels under his belt and a list of T.V. credits ranging from MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. to VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA. Lenore Betker (OF BRIDES AND BRIMSTONE) appears in the COVEN as a switch from HOOFS & HORNS, READERS DIGEST, children's stories and whatever. We hope there will be no excommunication here. G. Kissinger (SPELL OF DESPERATION) is also a novelist; inspired by ROSEMARY'S BABY and a set of Tarot cards for Xmas—result, a most beautiful potpourri of spell and plot. From the academic world we have Jack G. Levine (IN MARKHAM TOWN), Assistant Professor of Engineering at Cal. State on the West Coast, and Richard Flanagan (THE POSTMAN ALWAYS), Assistant Professor of English at Babson Institute on the East Coast. Both yarns, though totally different in concept and style, are still in the mind-boggling category; proving, perhaps, that a "unity of opposites" definitely *can* exist in the COVEN. Joseph Harris, author of the whimsical bit of Faustian whatnot, POTLATCH, has appeared in SCIENCE-FANTASY and a lot of other places. *We* think he's great. Lastly, we have our own Assistant Editor, Jean Cirrito, who has given us, I'LL COME TO YOU BY MOONLIGHT. We have the odd sensation that she was saving it for just such an event as COVEN's debut. . .

All in all, we thoroughly *like* our first issue of COVEN 13. We know, however, that the proof of the proverbial pudding—to be alliterative—will rest with you, "gentle reader". . . We await your comments.

-30-


Stout



# of brides & brimstone

By Lenore Betker

Illustrated by William Stout

If one is ever tempted to "make the pact," as it were, with you-know-who, we would suggest that he first contact Mr. Wuthering. Nothing quite succeeds like success, and Mr. Wuthering is, without a doubt, the *answer-man.*

Mr. Wuthering was rather anxious to murder his wife, but he'd be damned if he'd go to hell for it. And he knew perfectly well that that had been the whole idea from the beginning. That was why the devil had hand-picked the most spectacularly loathsome of all his infernal old maid aunts and had tricked Cyrus Wuthering into taking her as his lawfully wedded.

Naturally she'd been lusciously camouflaged when she first showed up to sweep Cyrus off his scholarly feet. God's gift to a quiet little science teacher, he'd thought.

Until the wedding. He said, "I do," the justice of the peace said, "You are," and she simpered her veil up to receive his kiss. Cyrus

raised himself on his toes so that he could bend to her instead of meeting her head on. And just like that he knew. This gift was none of God's doing. He'd married the devil's own gift to Halloween. Her big violet eyes had narrowed to burning slits, and he swore that her eye teeth had grown a half inch. "Darling!" she hissed, and the word slid from her pointed tongue.

After that first petrifying vision all the succeeding years of torment were, for Mr. Wuthering, only an epilogue. Her wild drunken rages, the incredible filth that poured from her mouth, the vicious talons that tore the life from his spirit, none of them surprised him. When a man peers through the keyhole of Hell, he does not expect to see the Seraphim.

He knew why he was stuck with her. He was a gentle soul, a good Christian gentleman and mighty poor pickings for the devil. And that made him, also, a mighty challenge. A quiet man of science pottering away with his fish tanks, his bones and his rocks finds little in the way of good juicy temptations. All the action and adventure of his life were held within the walls of his own house and garden. The classes he taught were only a necessary interrnption, the means to support his collection of tropical fish, to acquire some new and expensive fossil. He wouldn't have traded one Japanese sword-tail for all the liquor and women in existance—until Lucia.

So Mr. Wuthering sat beside one of his back yard pools and watched the fish gliding through the water plants, snapping viciously at each other, —and he brooded.

"Pretty smart," he said aloud. He'd already started talking to himself. Lucia's raucous voice screaming one of her native folk songs precluded any possibility that he could hear himself think.

"He figured I was set up for a quiet life and a quiet eternity, so he had to do something about it. She drives me out of my mind. I kill her and—snap—he's got me, just that easy."

Mr. Wuthering never wondered if the devil was a theory incapable of proof. He was simply a fact, and must be dealt with as such.

"Well, he's not getting away with it," Cyrus Wuthering said. "I certainly don't intend to spend the hereafter skewered on the points of a trident. He puts me in a spot where I have to kill her to keep from going mad, and then he shish-kabobs me. Not today, he doesn't." And he thought.

He sat with his rocks and bones and thought whenever she was romancing one or two of her dozens of lovers in the garden. Apparently her more hellish aspects were visible only to her luckless husband. A steady procession of other men found her quite as attractive as Mr.

Wuthering had before he married her.

All this earnest digging by a brain as agile as Mr. Wuthering's was bound to produce pay dirt.

Fragments of an idea unearthed themselves and he fitted them together into a complete specimen with a nimbleness born of long practice.

He drew up a diabolical agreement in the best traditional manner and then he laid it on the line.

"Now look here," he said to the empty air in his workroom. "I know you can hear me because you're not about to miss a bit of this low comedy. I'm supposed to reach the end of my rope and kill your confederate. That's the whole idea, isn't it?"

Of course, there was no answer. Nor had he expected one.

"All right," he said. "I certainly don't mind killing her. A pleasure really. But it's got to be an even game. I'll do it today, but you get off my property and stay off until the police get here. That way you don't know anything they don't know. Except of course, you know I did it. But you can help them all you want to after it's over.

"All you have to do is agree that if I get away from the law, I get away from you. Either I burn twice or not at all. How about it?"

Silence. Mr. Wuthering was not surprised. The devil was not noted for his sporting nature.

"You don't like the proposition," he said. "So, all right. So I put up with her and offer my tribulations up for the good of my soul. I'll be a blooming martyr. Maybe I'll even get to be a saint. Saint Cyrus. Sounds kind of nice, sort of musical. Let's just forget the whole thing."

Suddenly smoke puffed from the paper in his hand. Startled, he let it drop, but the smoke blew away and left only the mark of a cloven hoof scorched on the paper. Rather corny, Mr. Wuthering thought. The game was on.

Lucia came home shortly after noon that day. A squad car delivered her at the front door, already drunk in a fashion that was unique even for her. Mr. Wuthering retreated to his closet and listened as she screamed obscenities at the police. The door slammed and he crept out warily just in time to see Lucia drop like a brimstone in the front hall.

Carefully, he peeked around the edge of the curtain. The squad car was still parked. He waited, but the police made no move to leave. And Mr. Wuthering understood.

They had orders from higher up (or lower down) to keep the house under surveillance. Mr. Wuthering wondered what sort of a pretext his adversary had used. But it didn't matter. That car would be there all day making it impossible for him to remove a body. He was to be caught

with the evidence. The devil was staying off the premises, but he was covering the exit.

Mr. Wuthering smiled and turned away from the window. For the next few hours he would be a very busy man.

When the police rang the bell at four o'clock, Mr. Wuthering laid down the fine piece of agate he had been cataloguing and answered the door.

"Who was that screaming?" the officer snapped.

"Screaming?" for an instant Mr. Wuthering was genuinely startled, and then he remembered the many talents of his opponent. The two officers on his doorstep were probably the only ones in the world who had heard that scream.

The older one with grey eyes and grey hair seemed to be in charge. Mr. Wuthering gave him his best befuddled look.

"There must be some mistake, officer. I certainly didn't hear any scream."

As a matter of fact she hadn't screamed, hadn't had a chance. Besides that was hours ago.

"Where's your wife?" the grey officer said.

"She left this morning. Went shopping." Mr. Wuthering was very cordial, very bewildered.

"We poured some dame on the porch at noon. She hasn't come out. Where is she?" The grey officer slid past the door followed by a much younger cop who was as pink as his partner was grey. His hair, his cheeks, all pink and boyish.

"I didn't hear anyone come in," Mr. Wuthering said with his most sincere voice. "I've been working in the back yard all day. Some kind of an infection has hit one of my fish ponds, and I've been cleaning it out. I'm sure my wife hasn't been here. She would have looked for me."

"She's been here. She's still here. Got any objections if we look around?"

"Look as much as you want, but I certainly don't know what you expect to find."

"I'm sure you don't," the cop snapped over his shoulder and headed for the workroom. He wasn't nearly so confident as he sounded. Some corner of his mind asked what he was doing charging into a man's house because of a scream that might very well have been the yell of an amorous cat. But if he didn't understand his own actions, Mr. Wuthering did. The grey policeman's ideas were not entirely his own.

"If you don't mind, I'll go on with my work," Mr. Wuthering said. "I have a lot of specimens to catalogue."

The grey officer grunted.

"We'll let you know if we need you."

Mr. Wuthering finished with the agate, then attached an identification tag to a scrap of ancient bone. But he worked absently, his ears tuned to the footsteps and the voices moving through the house.

"No dame in this place," the pink officer called.

"Sure," the grey one answered. "That was a sack of laundry we delivered. Maybe she went out the back. Check it, will ya?"

The grey officer came back to stare at Mr. Wuthering with his best rattle-the-suspect scowl.

"All right, Mister, where is she? What did you do with the lady?"

"Officer, I assure you if my wife came home at all, it was without my knowledge. As far as I know, she's still trying to find a hat to go with her green paisley dress. If you did hear a woman scream, it certainly didn't come from here."

"This lot backs right up to the house on the next street. No alley, just a fence. And the people behind were having a barbecue party all afternoon. They're positive nobody came over the fence, alive or dead."

"She didn't go up in smoke, Bernie. Let's check the yard again." He was beginning to get a squeak in his grey voice, and Mr. Wuthering felt a twinge of amused sympathy. He worked on as long as he could stand the suspense and then went to join the search party.

He found the pink officer digging between the two big fish ponds.

"We thought we'd spade it up for you a little while we're here," the grey officer said with a tight smile. "Or have you already spaded that spot, Mr. Wuthering? Looks like somebody's been digging there."

"You'll dig it up no matter what I say," Mr. Wuthering said quietly.

"We wouldn't do that. I can always leave Bernie to keep an eye on things while I get a search warrant."

"Dig," Mr. Wuthering said. "Try not to wreck the gas pipes for the pool heaters."

"I'm hitting something soft," the pink officer turned a shade green in anticipation. A moment later his shovel came up loaded with dead fish.

"If you'd asked me, I would have told you," Mr. Wuthering sighed. "The fish were diseased, and I had to poison them out and bury them to get rid of the infection."

"Naturally," the grey officer said. "Well, just for fun, we'll dig a little more. Officer Higgins needs the exercise—been getting a little soft lately."

Officer Higgins got his exercise, but that was all he got. After disinterring hundreds of small ugly fish, he found nothing but hard-packed undisturbed ground.

While the pink officer unhappily returned all the late lamenteds to their resting place, his partner carried on the search, but the heart was

gone out of him. No incinerator, not even a coal furnace to serve as a crematorium. No fresh concrete, no secret panels. Lucia Wuthering was simply not there.

"I'll be back," the grey officer said as he took reluctant leave. The strange rasping snarl of his voice startled the pink officer who knew him so well.

"You killed her and we both know it. You've got that body hidden someplace. She went in and she never came out."

"Come now, officer. Nobody can blame you for not having your eyes glued to the door every minute. I suppose you just popped out for a cup of coffee—perfectly understandable. I'll be glad to explain that if anyone else comes around."

The grey officer whirled on him.

"Are you trying to threaten me,"

"Why on earth should I threaten you? I'm afraid my wife has simply run off on me, and I can't really say I'm sorry. Incompatible, you know. If she doesn't show up in a week or two, I might file a missing persons report. But I really can't imagine why you should think it was any of my doing."

And Mr. Wuthering gently closed the door on his callers.

Once more he returned to his work, humming happily. He picked up a cardboard sign that had been laying face down on the table and lit it afire with his cigarette lighter. It took quite a while before the words curled into ashes.

"Extreme Danger," it said. "This pool contains carnivorous piranha fish."

He held it, watching the words burn away one by one. Just as "fish" began to char, the fragment in his hand blazed up in an unholy burst of flame.

Cyrus dropped it and popped his scorched fingers into his mouth. They tasted bitter, acrid.

With great care he took them out of his mouth and regarded them solemnly. Then his mild academic face screwed up into a smirk of the sort usually favored by bratty six-year-olds. He didn't quite stick out his tongue.

"Sorehead," Mr. Wuthering said happily. The word had a nice sound to it. He repeated it firmly, "Sorehead."

Surprised to find that the pain in his fingers was delightful, really delightful, he went back to work.

He washed the ashes from the sign down the drain in the sink and then humming again, started writing a tag.

"Female. Age two thousand years or more."

"A *hell* of a lot more," he chuckled as he attached the tag to a glistening skull. ★

I'LL COME TO YOU BY *MOONLIGHT*

By Jean W. Cirrito

Illustrated by William Stout

The wind was a torrent of darkness
Among the gusty trees.
The moon was a ghostly Galleon
Tossed upon cloudy seas. . .

This one is truly "a candle to light you to sleep." A most classic example of the horror-drama from the macabre, but ever-competent, pen of Jean W. Cirrito.

Over the covered bridge and up the rise of Tandy's hill. Then down the gentle slopes of Brant's and Ellison's well groomed acres, white with the snow of Christmas. The wheels of the heavy blue Cadillac made a wet-humming sound as it hurtled on past these last two stately farms.

In the near-distance was the Massachusetts village of Annscroft which, to the driver of the Cadillac, seemed framed in a wintry scene of bright sun, sparkling snow, and barren, iron-laced arms of thickets of ash and oak and maple. . .

All well remembered!

The eyes of Richard Stoddart, the driver, gleamed, glistened actually, with a quick wash of tears. It was

indeed remembered. An absence of ten years had *not* dimmed his memory. No! If anything, he thought, as he neared the village's first houses and shops—if anything it was better than ever.

It remained now to be seen if Marion's memory was as good as his. Though, he smiled grimly at the thought, even if her *memory* did fail her—there was always the other. . .

Richard Stoddart. First among the prestidigitators. America's heir to Blackstone. At age twenty-eight the Western World's greatest magician! Stoddart, Master Hypnotist; Master Telepath—admitting to no peer in the field of Dunninger. . . So had he been billed in theaters and auditoriums across the country. And all since those first bleak months ten years ago when he had left Annscroft, penniless and with his young world shattered, it seemed beyond repair.

Now he returned in victory.

The old home, lost with the suddenness of his father's financial failure and subsequent suicide, had been repurchased. All was in order awaiting his occupancy. Lights and gas were on. Coal had been delivered. The last of the Stoddarts was again to assume his place in a community already old in the days of the American Revolution.

Yes, he mused, the "Stoddart house," colonial, beautiful; so much an integral part of himself. Just as the homes of the Hamiltons, the Griffins, the Fernsworths, were anchors for a way of life to be nurtured, protected—and perpetuated.

And now, too, Marion Fernsworth would be his again as she had been before; as she was *destined* to be. So that he had sworn after all had been lost, that he would return, though all *Hell* barred the way.

The town, he noted as he drove, had changed in subtle ways; the change reflecting a singular form of *American* progress. A new Standard Station had taken the place of Woodruff's solitary pump. A Supermarket now catered to Annscroft and the surrounding countryside. And a new drugstore with everything from pharmacopoeia to plastic luggage sat glittering, ablaze with lights and the color of tinsel and Christmas—as, indeed, did all the town.

Richard Stoddart pulled to a halt in a slot before the drugstore. He needed cigarettes and sundries, and he pushed his way to a counter through the jostling, exuberant, last minute, Christmas Eve crowd. . .

"Richard!" A feminine voice cried out at his elbow.

"John, it's Richard!"

He turned to look down to a well-remembered face, and then across to an equally smiling visage.

"John," he said softly. "Emily. Somehow I knew you two would be the first onew would meet."

Emily, small, blue-eyed, fur coat-

ed and very blonde, stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, while John Reese, tall, and as dark as his supposedly buckaneer ancestors, pumped his hand vigorously.

"We never," Emily gasped. "We just never——"

"We never knew you were in town," John finished quietly. "We've talked a lot about you, Rick; all the things you've done. We watched that special C.B.S. program on *The World of Hypnotism.* You were great, Rick."

"Thanks," he said.

"And all of it—" Emily smiled slyly, "from those *games* we used to play." Then, "Oh, Rick. It's *good* to see you again. Will you be here long? Where are you staying?"

There were tears in her eyes, and she hugged him again, impulsively. He felt quick warmth, and pride, too, in that here, indeed, was solid proof that he had achieved that which he had set out to do.

"I'm staying home," he said quietly, deliberately. "I've bought the old place back."

"Oh, Richard," Emily said, "I'm so glad for you."

"I'm on my way up there now," he informed them. "I've. well I've promised myself this. It's like ten years ago tonight that I left, you know. . . You should remember. It was the night of the Senior Prom."

A shadow flashed briefly in Emily's eyes. She said softly, "Oh, Rick. We've wondered and thought about you so many times. Don't think about *that* night now."

"As a matter of fact," John put in quickly, "why don't you come with us? Home is *home,* I know. But it's Christmas Eve, Rick. Em and I are married now—that should be obvious—and we've got a thing for tonight. Just a few people, old ones and new ones. Ed Larson will be there; Jim Aines, too, with Martha. They're married, like Em and me."

"No," he said strongly. "I'll take a rain-check. Tomorrow, maybe. In the afternoon. I'll call you. We'll have a drink at your place or mine. Believe me, I'd appreciate it."

He enfolded Emily in a quick bear-hug, and put a hand on John's shoulder. Emily sniffled and John smiled, and he said softly, "After all, *home* is just across the *Arm* from Marion's. If I get lonely, I'll holler over."

Emily's face darkened imperceptibly, and she said, "Rick!" But John silenced her, interrupting, saying, "Nevermind about nonsense, baby. This is Rick's night. Our unprodigal son is *home.* Call us," he finished. "Call us anyhow if you get lonely."

And then they were gone, lost in the crowd and the seasonal smells of Christmas. He purchased cigarettes and a half-dozen magazines and left, too. Out to the dusk of late afternoon and the chill low-

ceiling of fat, snow-filled clouds. The temperature on the huge thermometer above the drugstore entrance read 15° and he shivered and was glad for the Cadillac's warmth.

Richard Stoddart placed one last log on the freshly laid fire, then stepped away from its meagre circle of warmth to the almost deadly cold of the space before the huge and leaded cape-cod window. It had been much too late to fire up the furnace. And even if he had, the house, this room, would have taken some time to heat. The cold was penetrating, *alive*. It lent emphasis in a way to the timeless quality of the house which, to the casual observer, would be seen as a massive pile of stone and wood against a barren, rock-strewn hillside.

The scene was familiar. The years had changed nothing. Below, to the far right, was the shadowy line of the county road that circled the hill to lose itself in the houses that would eventually merge to form the village of Annscroft. The road skirted the narrow inlet known in local parlance as the *Arm*. And though it was a part of the sea, since it was shallow, it was frozen now along the greater part of its length. Prior to freezing, it offered scant protection from the open sea beyond. A peculiar configuration of shore and bluff funelled winds into the aperture, creating a *chop* which was both dangerous and irritating to the few small boats of the local property owners. The *Arm* was white now, too, with drift snow—and flat, like a levelled field. . .

Across the stretch of ice was the other house—ablaze wih the lights of the season and warmth and people.

Would his own lights be visible? Stupid question. But would they even bother to look across the Arm? Maybe she had been told. Perhaps Emily had called her— If so, would she come? Christ! All logic told him that that was the only way she *would* come. To think of the *other way* was madness. For only a madman would hope for that. And only a madman would think it possible.

Stoddart flicked the lights of the living room on and off, signalling, then gazed at them in disgust, and walked down the long hall to the kitchen. He turned hall and kitchen lights on as he walked. There was beer in the refrigerator; wine, too, which should not have been there. He chose the wine and a glass and retraced his path, turning the lights off again as he went; including those in the living room. Either she would come one way, *or she would come the other.*

Marion! He thought of her now as she had been. Seventeen. Dark blue eyes, black hair, and a white, almost transluscent skin denoting her Celtic ancestry. And she *had* been destined for him. For the

Fernsworth females *always* married the Stoddart males, and that was that.

He remembered the scene when he told her his father was dead; that his family, himself and his mother, were pennyless; that there would be no Yale, no Harvard, and perhaps no marriage.

She had been tearful—hysterical. She had vowed not to let him go. And, because it was winter and cold then, too, they had sat in that very boathouse which he could see across the way now as a grey shadow against the iron-black of the hillside and the white of the snow—and held each other close for what seemed interminable hours, until darkness fell and there was the need to return to respective homes and parents.

And the next day his mother died.

The day after that he was informed by the family lawyer that there was no money; that even the house must be sold for debts. That very night, sickened by total shock and fear, he had yet managed to go to the Senior Prom. For he had vowed that though on the morrow he would leave Annscroft, he *would also return.* No Stoddart had ever given up in the face of adversity. He would not be the first to do this.

He had spent the day packing. When night came, he dressed and threw his valise into the back of the '58 Chevy. Then he had stopped for Marion.

On the way to Crofts Hall, the site of the Prom, he had told her what he would do and they discussed it. Again she had been tearful, remonstrative. But she had finally agreed. So that when they entered to light, music and festivities, their faces belied the tragedy that their world was shattered; perhaps beyond salvage.

They danced and mingled with the others; put up the bold front required of the situation. Then—their particular "in" group had moved to Marion's for a final session to end the evening.

That was where the "game" had been played: the one at which he was already so adept.

"Rick!" They had gathered around him. . . "Rick! Just once with Adelaide and Edward. . ."

Ralph Hawkins, husky, flushed, blond, and excited, had been the perpetrator. He had pushed a visiting male cousin, together with the cousin's mousy girl-friend to the fore. "They've never seen it done." Hawkins said.

"They don't even believe it can be. . . Show em!"

He had begged off, but they persisted.

"It's no good that way," he had said. "I've got to have cooperation."

"You'll get it," Edward, the cousin, promised.

He was a young man, thin to the point of emaciation. The girl-friend, Adelaide, was equally thin; also waspish, irritable—but curious.

So he had, with a simple metal pendulum and light, put the both of them in deep hypnosis. They had played the "game" to the hilarity of the onlookers. They were various animals. They were their own parents. Adelaide was made stiff and placed between two chairs—her neck on the top of one, her ankles on the other—so that Edward sat upon her thin middle with no untoward results. He even gave them a post-hypnotic suggestion—a simple thing like each heading for the *john* at the same time after they were no longer under hypnosis. . .

That was what had given him the idea. And, because of it, he had deliberately prolonged the session, insisting that Marion be hypnotized, too. She had always been an excellent subject. The idea had swept like a maelstrom across his mind, insane, grotesque; but she was his and he would keep her. . . No matter who she went with after he was gone—or who she married, if she were forced to that—he would fix it so that *she would come again to him.*

He had continued the "game." Marion, shapely and softly curved, was not athletic. Still he had had her, for the amusement of the others, walk across the room on her hands; do a difficult series of one arm push-ups to cheers and applause. Then he had ostensibly snapped her out of it—*but not quite.* And, while glasses were being refilled all around, he sat her next to him and said softly, but directly and firmly: "Hear me, Marion, and never forget. . . Ten years from this day—on Christmas Eve—and at exactly six o'clock, you will come to me from wherever you are—*you will come to me, to my home.*" He had repeated it, adding, "and *nothing* will prevent you from doing this. You will come to me, to my house—and I will be waiting. I will be waiting and watching and you will come to me, *crossing the ice of the Arm.* And we will not part again, Marion. . . Nothing will part us—*ever again.*"

His voice had been soft, monotone. He and Marion had sat so quietly that the others had ceased to notice them. Only Emily Fairchild (she had been a Fairchild then) had sat and watched, and listened. And he remembered now that there had been a look of almost puzzled horror on her face until he had laughed and shrugged and brought Marion *really* back, so that she joined his laughter and Emily's fears were assuaged.

The last faint pearling of sun against clouds was suddenly gone. The grey darkness of a swift-falling twilight began rapidly to blur the outline of the house and hill beyond

the Arm. Even a swirl of snow danced for seconds to add to the obscurity.

Then the flakes were gone and a break in the clouds allowed the full moon to make all silvery the expanse of snow and ice below.

It was then that he saw her—appearing as if from nowhere. He gripped the leather arms of the chair, half arose, hardly breathing. *God!* He hadn't really believed it would happen. He just hadn't. But there she was! Marion was there. But maybe it wasn't so crazy. Perhaps she *had* seen the smoke from the chimney, the brief flicker of the lights. Maybe Emily *had* called her. Maybe a hundred things. What difference did it make! *Marion was coming!* She was coming to *him! That* was the important thing; *the only thing. . .*

He stood now by the window, his hands clenched at his sides; tears in his eyes. Below him, half way across the 100 yard ice-sheet of the Arm, Marion kept coming. Her feet left dark tracks in the powdered snow above the ice. . .

Should he go down the hill to meet her? But no! Maybe she wanted it this way. Perhaps she remembered, too, though, he thought quickly of the post-hypnotic suggestion, that would be impossible. He had never told her—even in their brief exchange of letters before the pain had grown too much, and he had ceased writing. . . But maybe Emily had told her?

The phone rang and he impatiently returned to the chair and the fire and the low table—placed not so far from the window that he couldn't see to the Arm below. Marion moved steadily ahead. But, strange, now she seemed dressed only in slacks and blouse. Christ! In this weather? He was tempted again to go to her but the jangling phone was insistant.

He settled back into the deep leather comfort saying irritably, bluntly, "Stoddart here."

"Rick?" It was Emily. "Oh, good, Rick. I'm so glad we caught you."

He said, "You *knew* I would be here."

"I know. I'm sorry—But oh, Rick, won't you reconsider and have dinner with us? It's Christmas Eve, Rick. You can't stay alone up there. And we want you with us."

For seconds the hypnotic effect of the fire which had been so carefully laid, and which now gave the room its only light—together with Emily's voice—intruded on the other and he was tempted. But no. To hell with it. He wanted to be *alone* with Marion, and he guessed that she would want that too. He looked out to the moon and the snow. Marion had disappeared below the base of the hill. She would be climbing now.

He said, "No, Emily. I thank you again—John, too. And I won't *be*

alone," he confided. "Marion is coming—like old times—like it was always meant to be. So maybe tomorrow, Em. Drinks or something. We'll call you."

"Marion?" Emily's voice was strangely flat.

"Yes," he said. "We had a pact, remember? *You were there, Em.*"

"Oh, God," Emily's voice came harshly. "You can't be serious, Rick."

"Why the hell not?" he asked, and then, "Look, I know the stunt I pulled on Prom night may have been nonsense. I've never quite believed it myself. But maybe she's seen the smoke, the lights, my car—whatever. Anyway she's crossed the Arm, Em. I've seen her."

He could hear her now, too—a creak of the gate at the far end of the yard.

"Oh, God," Emily said again.

He felt sudden anger and said, "Look! Is it so strange? Others have waited longer. Marion and I. . ."

"It's not that, Rick." Emily's voice was a whisper.

"Then what?" he asked angrily.

He heard the back door open and close, and a log snapped in the fireplace, sending a blaze of sparks high into the chimney.

"Marion is dead, Rick."

"Dead?"

"Two years ago. We thought you knew. She died in the Kennebec storm. Ron Blake's Yawl tried to make the safety of the Arm and was caught in its chop instead. He and Marion were both drowned, Rick. *Their bodies were never found."*

Her voice seemed to drift away. She still talked but he no longer heard her. The words were lost in the sound of footsteps in the hall and the roaring in his ears. He returned the phone to its cradle; noticed that the fire had suddenly died so that a cloying cold moved through the room. The moon peered through the window now, bathing him in a wash of silver light.

He heard the door from the hall and the kitchen open and close, yet he made no move to rise. He waited instead for what seemed interminable seconds; waiting until a shrunken white and veinous hand was placed gently upon his shoulder; moved to his cheek. . . Then he arose to look.

There were tears in his eyes, but there was no fear in his voice when he spoke—only horror, plus an odd compassion and a terrible hurt. He gazed wide-eyed at the ice encrusted form, at the abomination of slacks and blouse that had outlived the flesh beneath. He stared into the soap-like flesh of cheek and forehead, and into the filmed and opaque eyes. . .

And he said simply, "Oh, Christ! Oh, Mother of God. What have I done?" ★

After the black rain ceased,
quick-lime forest earth moved
and a wasteland changed: Non-human moors
watched the girl, who watched
them too, through mauve drapes drawn.
She remembered Robert, in her
youth, recalled the dark beads, opal
and rank, curious tattoes on
her sombre stairwell, brief moments after
jade stilettoes slipped between tissue and
marrow, to break him down. But he visited
often!
In a thousand ways:
She dreamed he was a falcon
with great wings beating angry;
he was vulpine at nightfall, lurk-
ing at the passafe-ways in opaque forms.
He came on cloven hoof, and danced
strange jigs to even stranger music, on her
belfry stairs. Once awake, she could
not find him there. Today was different, and
old blood marks glistened in stolen
light, the eyes of him aslant, the eyes of a
Demoniac Pan in rotting glens. He
came back today, and stank of quick-lime
graves and the havoc winds,
bringing in night to her who would not sleep
Nor wake again.

—Walden Muns


STOUT

Spell of desperation

By G. Kissinger

Illustrated by William Stout

A highly ingenious olio in-re the powers of Black Magic as opposed to the powers of Black Magic, or rather, the powers of Black-White Magic as opposed to the powers of White-Black Magic, or rather– Oh, hell! Let's skip it and let our brewmaster, G. Kissinger, lay this one on in his own inimitable way. . .

On the delightfully overcast thirteenth day of the weaving, Mrs. Hobson sewed new designs into her robes, baked a devil's food cake, and counted time. When the Westclox above the kitchen arch registered 5:07, she muttered a Hail Mary backwards and commenced mixing the unholy brew, mumbling a charm with each herb dropped into the swampwater to thoroughly execrate the thirteen ingredients. The initial sign of her weakness occurred in the twelfth minute of the brewing, when the stench overcame her, and she had to cover the cauldron prematurely and duck into the pantry for a swallow of demon rum.

While sipping camomile tea to obliterate the liquor taste, she fixed

the blame on Harry's shade. Throughout the weaving, it had pestered her, groaning and rapping at the dinner table, groping at her icily in the middle of the night, badgering her about the removal of the clocks and mirrors and the boycott of telly and wireless. She prayed that success tonight would lay him to rest for another seven months.

At 5:28 Papalois obediently squawked, and Mrs. Hobson hurried into the parlor, knelt on the wing chair, and peeked through the Nottingham lace screening the window. For the third time in thirteen the black hussy, the enemy, was late coming home, and Mrs. Hobson began counting the seconds and the minutes, starting at thirty minutes and four seconds, the total waiting time of the other two occasions. Though she counted tenaciously, a part of her mind wandered to the clocks she'd had to remove and pack away; their ticking had bothered her, forcing her to replace the mechanical darlings with electrical dears, who hummed serenely and always avoided violence.

The mirrors, she recalled with a scowl, had begun daring her to break them, and after being tricked into hurling a saucepan at the one in the foyer—luckily not harming it—she'd packed all but the seven-faced vanity mirror away in the bedroom closet. At the picture of them lying there thwarted, smothered in cotton-wool, she cackled evilly, and though she filled the musty rooms with formidable echoes, she did not fail to keep an accurate count of the seconds.

The enemy appeared, hips swinging scandalously as usual, as the count struck thirty-nine minutes and thirty-two seconds, but Mrs. Hobson pretended not to have seen her until the seconds hit thirty-nine, so that the number broke down into thirteen minutes and thirteen seconds per wait, a remarkably auspicious omen. She glossed over the cheating by noting another lucky circumstance—the girl's suitdress was red.

Ignoring the aching in her knees, Mrs. Hobson whipped pad and pencil from her housecoat pocket and prepared to note details, but the Negress wriggled with such abandon that she was forced, arthritic joints notwithstanding, to spring from the chair to the desk to seize Harry's hunting binoculars from the bottom drawer. She got back to her post as the bitch was stepping onto her porch next door; she focussed and noted delta-shaped earrings, pilgrim shoes with square buckles, and, nestled among jabot ruffles above the impudent bustline, a pin resembling a black cat's head.

This last omen brought on a fit of breathlessness that Mrs. Hobson was forced to curtail with another swallow of rum, for surely Beelzebub Himself was watching, and she was about to enter a cru-

cial phase of the operation: the infusing of personality into the doll.

The doll, of course, was ready, having been molded on the seventh day out of seven black candles melted down in seven minutes and carved or drawn upon each day at the seventh hour until now, at the critical moment, it was quite satisfactory; particularly when one considered that this was Mrs. Hobson's first voodoo doll, the result of her initial venture into *la magie des negres* after thirty years at the European form of the craft. Finding it soothed her nerves, she wasted a moment or two caressing the slippery contours, the large shameless breasts and immoral buttocks, then recited the Lord's Prayer backwards, taking her punishment stoically, and dragged her workbox near and began.

Seven minutes later the waxen image wore a swatch of red felt about its torso, red paper triangles in its ears, flat-toed cardboard shoes with painted buckles upon its feet, and a bit of lace fastened into ruffles at its throat with a Halloween relic, a tiny safety pin with a black cat's head.

Mrs. Hobson crossed herself backwards, whispered the necessary imprecations, and began preparing the scene of the mass. She set up and draped in black the cardtable in the darkest corner, centered the workbox upon it and covered it with the gaudily decorated altar cloth, flanked the altar with black candles, skulls, the sealed container of bats' blood, and the execrated font. She turned out lights and lighted candles, set up the tripod brazier and poured and lighted the incense. She fetched the black portable tape recorder, placed it under the cardtable, and loaded the reel her coven sisters had provided. She plugged in the hot plate andstationed it on the floor beside the folding stool and moved the cauldron from the stove to the glowing circle of coils. And finally she placed the doll—the enemy—on its back upon the altar and adjusted it until it was properly lined up for a clean killing stroke.

Catching discordant vibrations, she stood back and studied the scene. The new clock's face was glowing in the dark. She yanked the plug and watched the glow slowly die; she saw, with a shiver of pleasure, that the hands pointed to seven minutes past the hour.

As she was donning her robes in the bedroom, Harry's shade flapped in and pestered her about the clocks. The removal was temporary, she assured him, the ticking had only bothered her on those summery days when young couples stopped and talked outside the windows and reminded her of the time when they—she and Harry, young lovers—had walked hand in hand on that very street and stopped to talk outside those very windows. It

was the ticking, she assured him, that drummed the changes: then life had pumped and throbbed; now it trickled away. And she simply could not bear to have her beautiful youth always hanging about and picking at her.

But the shade fluttered angrily and accused her of insanity, and she had to appease it by getting out the ormolu darling who had ticked on their nightstand for so many marvelous years. The sight of the clock engendered an agony of regret which she immediately projected onto a vision of the enemy, while Harry's shade shrieked with laughter. The Negress, she told him, was a symbol of all the ills of the world—crime in the streets, the decline of morality, the horrible isolation of individuals—and he believed and subsided.

In full black raiment copiously adorned with cabalistic designs, she glided downstairs chanting esoteric formulae. She inhaled plumes of incense smoke and concentrated on wiping every mundane consideration from her mind. She started the tape, a grab-bag of music and chants and gibberish recorded and edited by the sisters. She listened, loving the drumbeats and the shrill flute notes, and imagined the sisters were there, in the shadows, lending their powers without reservation. She babbled occult syllables and prayed backwards furiously until she felt herself susceptible to frenzy.

The sisters picked up the tempo and the witch Hobson stayed with them, inhaling deeply of the fumes, blanking out reality, swaying into the dance, yipping and barking primitive curses. The penultimate sign of weakness occurred when she lost the thread of control that she had always previously retained. She was at the mercy of the music, dancing to the devil's drumbeat with the recklessness of a supple maiden, lunging grotesquely across the room, lashing the walls and the attendant demons with her hair, crashing to the floor and doing an orgasmic voodoo crawl from stove to refrigerator, from arch to altar. Yet she was aware when the music ceased and the falsetto counting chorus began. She fell to her knees upon the stool when the backward count reached forty-nine—seven times seven. When the eerie voices cried thirty-nine—thrice thirteen—she drew the accursed elder stake from the crimson lining of her cloak and dipped it into the bubbling brew and held it there until the count reached twenty-six—twice thirteen—when with a cry of ecstasy she broke the seal of the bats' blood container and poured the reeking fluid into the font and plunged the stake and the hand that held it into the ooze. When the count hit twenty-one—thrice seven—she fixed her most virulent evil eye on the doll, which was not a doll but a[

woman, a decadent wench, a black-skinned, stinking, lazy, imbecilic, and insolent WHORE. . .

Hysteria overwhelmed her as the count passed thirteen and Papalois, the parakeet familiar who had played a part in casting countless spells, but was inexplicably excluded from this one, could hardly believe his ears at the filthy stuff his mistress was screaming. In his cage in the foyer he listened intently, naughtily seeking to absorb the filth for later mimicking. But an unheard of degree of menace, a magical overkill, streaked through the gloom and frightened Papalois so severely he tugged his curtain cord and descended early into the safety of oblivion.

The ultimate sign of weakness occurred at the count of seven when the witch Hobson, awash in a ticktocking sea of blood and disgust, could not restrain herself for the remaining slow counts and began the assault at six with a bestial roar and a brutal stroke, and carried on, splattering blood over walls and ceiling and appliances and drapes, until the sisters had dissolved to a whisper and the doll was a mess of gory fragments strewn across the ruined altar.

She suffered a vision of her death. It occurred at midnight, at a crossroads, and the monster wielding the elder stake was Harry. She screamed, and the vision shattered.

She came out of it gradually, and could not recall the details of the mass. The stench of the brew and the blood and the acrid smoke of the incense were making her ill. She blinked in disbelief at the scene; it reminded her of after-sex with Harry, when they blinked at the twisted bedclothes and their soaking bodies and wondered what had driven them.

Retching, she unstuck the stake from her hand, got shakily to her feet, spilled water from the teapot into the brazier, snuffed candles and turned on lights, and calmly strode to the bathroom and let the sickness overtake her.

Afterward, though exhausted, she cleaned up. Clucking over the altar cloth, she bundled the pieces of wax inside it and stuffed it into the fireplace for later burning. She scrubbed at bloodspots, shaking her head in wonder at their number and range of dispersal. She denied the evidence of failure, was only vaguely afraid, and could not understand why snatches of bloody nightmare kept popping into her head.

She soaked in a hot herb-scented bath and tended the inexplicably numerous sore spots in her muscles and joints. She considered forgiving the tellies their crimes, for the silence was like a basket of melons atop her head. She would certainly not attempt early retiring and risk the full flowering of the lurking

nightmare.

As she was climbing stiffly out, thinking ahead to a large cup of tea with a splash of gin in it, the telephone rang, its clangor mangling the emptiness of the house. Swathed in towels, she loped to answer it, noticing as she passed that Papalois, in his cage near the wallphone, had drawn his curtains early. "How did it go?" a strange voice demanded, and the witch furrowed her brow, coming slowly out of the daze of solitariness, and identified the voice as that of Reba, Rebecca Sharp, the founder of the coven.

"How did what go, dear?" Then she remembered. "Oh, well enough, I suppose. Very well, in fact." She knew she was lying, and glanced behind to see if Harry had heard.

"How did you tell her?"

"Tell who, dear?" She pursed her lips in annoyance at the continued opaqueness of words.

"The victim, of course."

Guilty, she decided to be irritable. "I have no intention of telling her. Why should I?"

"Because it won't work otherwise, silly. That's the whole secret with this sort of magic, you know—when the victim learns of the treatment she eats her little black heart out." She issued a horrible cackle, and Mrs. Hobson moved the receiver away from her ear and kept it there until her name was called.

"Mabel! Are you listening, darling?"

"I'll tell her tonight," she stammered. "I'll write a note with unmistakable signs on it." She'd promise anything to be allowed to return to solitude and silence.

"Fine. Make it as revolting as you can. We're all counting on you, darling Mabel."

"Counting?". . . twelve, thirteen, fourteen. . .

"Yes, to scare her out of the community. She's only the scout, you know; after her come the hordes."

"I did not do it because of her race, Reba."

"Of course, you didn't. We're too big to be motivated by petty differences. You did it out of economic necessity."

"No, I meant—"

"She did it again today, incidentally."

"Did what, dear?" She scowled; her mind just would not work.

"The snub. I said, 'Good morning, darling,' as politely as you please, for the third time, but she just sort of rolled her eyes—the way blacks do—and once again absolutely refused to open her ugly mouth."

"Well now, dear—" She thought she heard Papalois chattering, but he never made a sound after drawing his curtains. "I'm very tired," she managed to say.

"And no wonder, darling. After you've finished and delivered the note go straight to bed. I'll call in

the morning. Nightie night now lover."

She listened long after the click had released her. A bunch of butches, Harry had called the coven, and the insult recalled was more painful than the insult spoken. He'd come back, he had warned, and he was there now, eavesdropping on her thoughts. She would not write or deliver any silly note. Let Harry flap, let The Horned One Himself throw a fit—she was going to have her tea and gin and then retire, nightmares or no.

She had her tea, quite placidly, in the freshly scrubbed kitchen underneath the clock that had died. Taking pity, she plugged the oval-faced sweetie in and went into the parlor to check the General Electric for the time. She thought 7:33 must be incorrect, yet she knew that the electric darlings were always right, that they always trickled time away as steadily as undertakers counting their money.

She fixed the hands of the oval-faced cutie, loving the way its cheeks glowed with vitality. She got down and added another splash of gin to her cup and got the writing things; she would attempt a note to use up some of the time.

Thirteen minutes later, two-thirds through a cup of gin with a splash of tea in it, she folded the finished note and sealed it in the envelope and blockprinted MISS NANCY WILLIAMS on the front and hid it away in her handbag. She drained the cup and filled it from the gin bottle and carried it with her upstairs.

She squeezed into foundation garments and selected the black crepe with the fine lace trim—rather pointlessly since she was merely stepping next door to drop the note in the mailbox. She took great care with her makeup though it was a strain to focus the seven sets of lips and eyes in the mirrors. Someone, probably Harry, was hovering behind her, but when she sought to catch him in the glass he laughed, or the mirrors laughed; she folded the seven faces shut, but the echoing cackles got louder. The clock on the nightstand was making them, it was ticking, taunting, it was tocking, haunting. She lunged and seized and threw it wildly. It bounced off the baseboard and broke its glass but lay there ticking and tocking and tittering. She ran downstairs.

When she was crouching shaking in the pantry guzzling gin from the bottle she saw herself dead at midnight, a gigantic stake buried deep in her chest. The vision was so vivid, she could reach out and touch it, then it was gone and Harry's shade was there fighting her for the bottle. She let him have it and lurched into the kitchen, knowing what she must do.

She tore up the note and dropped the pieces into the fireplace. She

wrapped the devil's food cake in aluminum foil and white paper and tucked it under her arm and picked up her bag and marched like one possessed to the house next door.

On the small porch, intimidated by the light within, she faltered. Her hand, of its own accord, formed knuckles and rapped. Terrified, she stooped to leave the cake and run away, but the door clicked open and it was too late; she creaked guiltily erect and confronted the enemy.

The dark liquid eyes devoured her, and she suspected the evil eye and was glad she always carried the bit of red devil's horn in her bag. She noticed the fluffy white dress, the air of vulnerability, and suspected a changeling—wolf and lamb, pulsating succubus. She offered the cake and snatched it back, and the girl reached and retreated, and the witch apprehended one thing, that the wench's terror was greater than her own. And she seized the initiative by extending her hand and smiling, as if she had intended to do so in the first place.

The handshake—despite the long black fingers involved in it—was not noteworthy, but the gust of perfume that came with it was. Avon Honeysuckle. She'd peddled it once herself, though never to black persons. The familiar scent prompted her to gush. "Excuse me, dear, I'm the lady from next door—Mrs. Hobson—and I've been meaning to come over and welcome you into the neighborhood for the longest time but just never got around to it. . . ." The skepticism vibrations were so intense they choked her off, and she coughed and went on.

"And here, I baked this today, and I hope you like the flavor and. . . here." She handed it over. The girl accepted it as if it might be a bomb, did not smile or (Reba's words resounding) open her mouth —which, however, was far from ugly. She moved suddenly, holding up one finger, and Mrs. Hobson prepared to ward off a gesture-charm. But the girl, whose dress was undeniably decent, had turned up a large white sketch pad and a blue Flair pen. Solemnly she pressed closed fingers to her lips, indicating she could not speak, then printed rapidly on the pad and held it into the foyer light. —Aphasia. I am not good company, but come in please.

Mrs. Hobson's first reaction was a rumsoaked silly one. Cat got your tongue? the evil spirit inside her asked, and she covered a cackle that emerged as a juniper-flavored belch. After that she was literally staggered, and reeled into the house at the girl's beckoning and collided with a pinkish wall and glanced back thinking what an enormous cross the wretch had to bear—black skin and silence, handicapped inferiority. If she hadn't been a witch

she might have shed a tear.

The dark pools flashed and she forced herself to stop the staring and gaze nonchalantly at the surroundings. The house, being a cheap row box, was architecturally like her own, but atmospherically very different. It was bright, full of lights and mirrors aud pastels and glassy objects. The furnishings were new, streamlined, sparse, and shining. Every bit of it was contrary to the slovenly dump she expected, and she compensated by gushing fulsomely over the 'absolutely charming little nest'. The girl acknowledged with a nod, exuding skepticism. She worked Mrs. Hobsou into the kitchen.

The tiny table was set for two, and there was a smell of roasting chicken, and the witch halted warily, suspecting the Negress of reading her mind and anticipating her call. But the truth penetrated the haze. "Goodness, I'm intruding," she cried.

The girl smiled with precision, a single gold tooth glittering among the perfect rows of white. The pad came up, the pen flew. —You are very observant. My guest is late. Please have a cup of coffee with me.

Bewildered by the unorthodox method of communication, she nodded, though she never drank coffee because caffeine brought on the nightmares. She leaned crookedly, watching the black fingers flying to cups, saucers, spoons, kettle, jar of Instant Savarin, watching the shiny back of the hair, the sleek calves, the controlled way with high heels which she had always envied in others, and realized she could find nothing in the girl to detest, but many things to desire. Harry's shade butted in, leering obscenely, demanding explanations, and she put him off by claiming she desired qualities she had always lacked, such as grace, poise, and natural efficiency.

The girl was cntting the cake. "Really, dear," Mrs. Hobson said far too loudly, "I don't believe I could handle any of that." The liquid eyes were puzzled, and she had to explain or be misunderstood (Is this cake poisoned, Mrs. Witch?).

"I had my nightcap early, sweetie, and I'm afraid cake would upset my stomach." That sounded like one of Harry's alabis, and she added, "I normally have tea with a spot of gin in it to help me sleep." She felt herself grimacing.

An idea glimmered in the lovely eyes. The pad came up, the pen spoke. —I have gin. Would you like a second nightcap?

She should certainly decline; but she told herself that a splash of gin would make the coffee palatable, and nodded. The white shoes flashed; the heels clacked in and out of the pantry; and the bottle, a pint of Gordon's, was produced and poised, and the eyes queried (a wee or a whopper splash, Mrs.

Lush?). She chortled weakly, earning the whopper, and leaned against the wall, convicted.

But there were no immediate reprisals. The girl, in fact, had discarded skepticism and put on a sheen of amicability; she actually caressed the witch's shoulder—displaying the sort of long pinksilver nails the witch had never been able to grow—to direct her into the parlor, where a moment alone relaxing upon the sofa restored her confidence. She gazed at the profusion of framed photographs (of innocuous sepia-skinned beings) and ceramic knick-knacks, the polished tables and stiffnapped chairs, a rug that had lost none of its roses and greenery vibrance, and a chandelier that was modest but a masterful touch, and decided she had never been a parlor that was cozier.

The girl, smiling prettily, brought the coffees, and her pad and pen, and a box of bon bons, and a humidor of cigarettes on a nice teak tray. She placed it on the coffee table, took her cup and pad and pen, perched on the chair opposite, and looked receptive. Mrs. Hobson, while pretending to sip daintily, managed to slurp in most of the loaded coffee, and inhibitions were peeled away.

She began the interview with the usual polite questions—age, capsule history, current marital and occupational status. The answers appeared on the pad—27, born and raised in East Orange, mute since early childhood (not saying why), graduate of a series of special schools, now employed as a recording assistant (whatever that was) to a psychologist over in Manhattan.

It was pleasant but awkward; her eyes got tired of reading, and she felt the girl was getting tired of writing. The pad was laid aside and a cigarette lit, a clear hint that it was the guest's turn to carry the ball. The silence opened a yawning pit at her feet, and she was urged to fill it with verbiage. She faltered at the start, undecided about which version of her story she was going to tell, but then spotted the hole in the line and plunged through and galloped on for a long long gain, hearing herself, in some other lady's faintly British accent, telling the true version, the tale of a plain, dull ne'er-do-well who had married a spiritualist faker who, despite the fakery, or perhaps because of it, had chiseled quite a lot of gold out of the sweaty hands of believers and proceeded to drink most of it away, had, indeed, drunk himself to death at forty-five, leaving her the house and everything in it, but not much else, so that she'd been forced to take the odd job now and again to keep herself going.

She interrupted herself to request a refill on the loaded coffee. She wanted to take stock, catch her breath, get Harry's opinion. But the

shade was not there, and she concluded that it had been frightened away by her bold indiscretions.

When the warm cup was in her hands and the girl perched, lips parted expectantly, gold tooth glittering, liquid eyes seeming to spread like pools of holy oil, she detached the governor from her talking machine and let it race. For ages she'd ached to talk to someone who would listen, and this beautiful girl listened like no one ever had. She'd run through a series of complex anecdotes about her childhood in Nottingham and was ready to confess that she'd been born on Christmas Eve and was, therefore, a witch when a bell jangled and slammed the lid on her throat.

She had not been exorcised, however; it was only the doorbell, the late guest arriving. Nice Nancy excused herself with gestures and left the room. She gulped the gin and coffee, and left her battery recharging. She was going to do what she had to do, she was going to expose herself to the enemy and beg forgiveness, and nothing could stop her now.

The guest preceded Nancy into the room and caught Mrs. Hobson with her defenses down. A young man in dark suit and tie, he advanced upon her forcefully, massive and extended, and she saw the burning eyes, the slim mustache, the sensual lips, the expression of cunning disdain, and nearly fainted; it was Harry, Harry painted black.

The deep basso assaulted her hearing, "Allow me to introduce myself to spare Nancy a case of writer's cramp. I am Doctor Moses Damson, her employer." Unseeing and weak, completely melted from the navel down, she thrilled to the grip of the strong hand, and blinked away mist as she was released to watch him moving away, brute-sized, and taking a seat near Nancy, who snared his attention with her liquid eyes and gently touched his hand, shooting ten thousand volts of pure love into his soul.

She fumbled her cup, but managed to hang onto it, and the two beautiful people stared at her, liquid eyes and burning eyes, mahogany and lava, innocence and irony. He was Harry, ironically disguised, come to destroy her with science and love. It was all clear now, how he had spoiled the spell and tricked her into walking into the trap, and she was petrified; any second he would draw the stake from his robes, and Nancy would resume her bestial form.

He said, "Well, I hope I haven't spoiled anything." And she saw the several gold teeth, the humanity in the eyes, and knew he was not Harry at all. He probed further, in kindly tones, for she was unable to find her voice.

"If you were discussing personal or female problems, perhaps I'd best

leave the room."

Her throat contracted, produced an eerie moan, then the sentence, "I am a witch."

Blessed Beelzebub, she had done it! And she was not stricken down. Those who had heard simply waited, and armed each other with jolts of love, and turned to her for more, and she gave.

"What's more, acting on the wishes of my coven sisters, I wove the most horrible spell against you, Miss Williams, in an attempt to drive you out of the neighborhood or even to kill you." Still they waited, mouths ajar, teeth glinting, eyes pleading for more. And she gave.

"But it didn't work because you refuse to believe and—I see now—because you are protected by love." Drained, a burnt-out shell, she was able to face the brimstone in the doctor's eyes.

He turned to the black girl, and his hands violently gestured. Mrs. Hobson defended with crossed wrists, then realized he was merely addressing his mute darling in sign language. The witch could read the symbols well, having learned them to aid Harry in his ESP fraud.

—Though intoxicated, the great hands said, she is not irrational; she believes every word.

The girl, with graceful fingers writhing, replied —I'd heard rumors, but dismissed them as absurd; now I've seen everything.

—It's a religion, dear, as widespread and real as any other.

He turned apologetically to Mrs. Hobson, who quickly said, "Please, go on; I think it's wonderful that you two can communicate that way." She simpered woozily, cunning underneath.

He nodded and turned, and his big hands spoke. —What is she doing here tonight?

—I don't know. She just appeared with a cake as a peace offering, and she seemed rather desperate, so I let her in. She's been drinking up my liquor and telling me her life story.

He glanced at Mrs. Hobson thoughtfully, she flashed a reassuring smile. The hands spoke. —She's come to appeal for help. She thinks the devil is going to punish her for her failure, and is seeking a force that will fend him off.

—What sort of force?

—As she says, love. She actually came here in an attempt to win your love, since nothing is more highly valued than the love of a former enemy.

—My God. . . What shall we do?

He shrugged, throwing Mrs. Hobson the bone of a smile: reassurance. —Pretend, the hands said. Pretend to give her love. If we antagonize her in any way, I feel she'll crack up completely.

Both beautiful people donned wide goldpacked smiles. For her,

solely for her, the witch Hobson.

"Well," she said, "and what have we decided?" She almost cackled, the game was so much fun.

"To thank you for your thoughtfulness in coming here tonight," the doctor said. "We realize that there are those in the community who will hate you for attempting to make Nan feel welcome, and we commend you for your courage." He massaged his cheeks to keep his smile from freezing.

Nancy printed a sentence and displayed it. —Yes! And thank you for the cake! And come again; it's been very entertaining! She seemed dubious about that last, but the doctor glanced his approval.

Mrs. Hobson politely covered a yawn, and sneaked a belch into her palm. She could afford to be casual, she had the beautiful people where she wanted them. "I guess I'd better be getting along," she said and relished the way they nearly collapsed with relief.

"But first, let me invite you both to my house for dinner tomorrow night." They were aghast, and she pretended to misunderstand.

"Oh, I'm quite an excellent cook, as all witches are. And I promise to provide a lively evening—I have three tellies, a stereo tape machine, and of course I do numerous magic tricks." Though keeping up their smiles, they secretly demurred and looked to each other for support.

"You must allow me," said the witch, playing her Ace, "to pay you back for drinking up your liquor, bending your ears with the story of my life, and forcing you to humor me with love to prevent my cracking up completely."

They were positively crushed with embarrassment, and she savored the moment briefly before letting a cackle roll away the barriers. Everyone laughed as if no one had been shamming. Nancy printed a heartfelt sign and held it high:

—We'd be delighted to come to dinner!

"And allow me to apologize," said the doctor, "for discarding my humanity and treating you like a sociological specimen."

Mrs. Hobson took her leave hastily to sustain the mood of triumph. She danced through her rooms turning on lights, tellies, wirelesses; the taunting voices of happy young couples in commercials no longer bothered her. She had tested her powers against theirs and won out. Harry was gone, and so was the spell of desperation; she burned its remains in the fireplace. She would sleep well tonight, without dreams and with a great white candle to keep her warm, and tomorrow would launch a new project, a loving spell against the curse of loneliness. ★


STOUT

let there be Magick!

By James R. Keaveny

A serial in FIVE PARTS: Part One—A tale of magic and dark sorcery; of a clashing of swords and a storming of castles. The Planet, Camelot, and a romance to rival Earth's Tristan and Isolde. . . Camelot, where the "black arts" really work. Camelot, the Galaxy's "Sword at Sunset."

There are two fundamental principles of magic. The first is, that like produces like and effect resembles cause. The second is, that things that have once been in contact continue ever afterwards to act on each other. No. 1, can be called the law of similarity, No. 2, the law of contagion. Practices based upon the law of similarity may be termed

Homeopathic magic; those on the law of contagion, Contagious magic. Both derive, in the final analysis, from a false conception of natural law. The primitive magician, however, never examines the assumptions upon which his performance is based—never reflects upon the abstract principles involved. With him, as with the vast majority of sentient life, logic is *implicit*, not *explicit*; he knows magic only as a practical thing. And to him it is always an *art*, never a *science*. The very idea of science is quite alien to his thinking.

The road was a simple, well travelled cart path, undulating gracefully through the forested hills and deep valleys that led to the distant river. Birds sang in the afternoon sunlight, their voices blending with the sound of bees and insects; completing a picture of summer quietude in a countryside that seemed both wild and virgin.

It was something like Vermont-land, I mused, thinking of Earth and the Foundation Center. Or better yet, England-isle. They were both like this. I shifted my weight from one heel to the other while I crouched lower on the flat rock of the promontory that overlooked the road some hundred yards below. Yes they *were* like this; England-isle naturally so, and Vermont-land, deliberately, artificially. In fact, I recalled, there were great keeps and castles of runic and eld taste all over Vermont-land today, and they were owned by the most obviously "opportuned" people. I sighed inwardly.

But, hey! Wouldn't those same yekels be purple with envy at the wondrous rockpile which I estimated to be but a short twenty miles distant? My eyelids focused purple contact lenses to six magnitudes while I admired the crenelated ramparts, great turrets, dour eyries, and brave pennons fluttering against a background of mountain crag and heavy, blue-black forest. Then I took a deep breath and returned regretfully to the cleft in the hill through which the road came.

Just as the sun was sinking on the far horizon of late afternoon, so clouds were beginning to appear now; especially in the direction of the forested hills and the castle.

Anyone looking in my direction from the road below would see a somewhat tall, rangy looking, Earth male (disguised), sporting a heavily tanned face and an air of smug complaisance. I was dressed—from the point of view of my adopted milieu—loudly and romantically. I wore green ski-pants tucked into soft leather boots with golden spurs to show that I was a full *heggle*—or knight; a heavy green shirt opened to the waist in the purported style of the country, and a green jacket and green cap with a contrasting, bright red feather. Over my left

shoulder and around my waist, respectively, was a six foot bow with a quiver of arrows, a broadsword, a dagger and a leather pouch. It had been suggested, aboard the DENEB-3 a few short hours ago, that I could easily be from the mythical Sherwood Forest, or from fabulous Gabtsville on Procyon-4. Kriloy and Ragen, *Adjusters*, and Foundation crewmates of the Star-ship, DENEB-3, had most enviously concurred. But, just as the forest ensemble that elicited envy was not the natural state of affairs, neither were a lot of other things which just might put a damper to both their envy and my pleasure.

The blue-purple contact lenses covered a pair of worried brown eyes—mine. The bow and the sword —except for neural preconditioning —were strangers to my hands. The ground I trod was alien to my feet. And, in just a few minutes, perhaps, I would be witness to something which all the science of the Galaxy would deem impossible. The "something" was a part of a bigger thing that I was to either prevent or control. I was to play it by ear, actually, for in terms of alternatives, we of the Foundation were at a loss. The facts were that we did not know where failure would lead. We could only surmise, and our conclusions were anything but pleasant.

The planet, in Galactic listings, was Camelot; to the natives it was *Fregis*. The situation, as stated, was a mixed-up mess. I was Kyrie Fern, thirty Earth years old, Foundation graduate *cum-spectacular*, and expert in the lore, customs, mores, and idiosyncracies of feudal societies. I had been chosen as the *Adjuster*.

We had known of Camelot for quite some time. Over a period of two Galactic centuries ten pairs of *Watchers* had spent an equal number of months there. Unlike *Adjusters*, *Watchers* worked in opposite-sexed pairs of high compatibility potential. Their work was what their name implied—to observe, to avoid boredom and frustration, (thus the pair) and to report accordingly.

This they had done. And, to read a Camelot report was a joy indeed; that is except the last one. The fun and games, it seemed, were over. Bloody war, though seemingly the usual state of affairs, was now of a scope to involve the entire planet. The circumstances were such that all we had watched, all that had evolved, in a positive sense, might well be destroyed.

And how did we know all-this?

Well that's an introductory point, you see. For our last pair of *Watchers*—living in the guise of wealthy tavern keepers in the seacoast village of Klimpinge, in the land of Marack—had witnessed the unfolding of a predicted, most perilous, series of events in which Camelot's forces for progress were ruined, driven back upon their heartland by dark hordes, so that extinction threatened. . .

And all this in the crystal ball of a wandering soothsayer.

But, since the planet *was* Camelot-Fregis, second of the Sun-star, Fomalhaut, *they believed it.*

And, since all the zanyness of the preceding nine reports, across two centuries of Camelot time, inclusive of prophesies, had proven true—*we believed it, too.*

Even to the final point: that sorcery would pluck the Princess Murie Nigaard, daughter of King Caronne, from the king's highway on this very day. It would somehow be the opening gambit of the dark forces of Om for the disruption of the land of Marack, as a part of the total plan for planetary conquest. . . I was here to prevent this—or to insert a wrench into the machinery; or to at least come up with an explanation as to how it was done.

All things considered—the black arts were never a part of my curricula as fact—I felt abysmally inadequate. I awaited my fate with most ambivalent feelings. The musical tinkle of bells preceded the fact. Then, within seconds, a dappled, ponderous and low-slung, six-legged steed, trotting dog fashion, followed by another, and then by three more in single file, came over the hill.

I got to my feet and quickly pressed one of a series of brightly colored stones that adorned my belt. It glowed warmly pink. "Contact!" I said softly. "Contact, dear hearts. The sacrifice, to-wit, me, is about to offer his throat to the fal-dirk. I'm going in now. The Princess has arrived—with entourage."

"Why, the *Adjuster's* palpitating," a voice sang blithely in my brain. "His nerves are shot already."

The voice, coming like a webbed aura from the metal node imbedded at the base of my skull, was Ragens, "In the archaic," he continued, "the Princess is a woolly little dolly, and you are an ungrateful, cowardly flimpl."

"Bless you," I said. Then I ignored him. "The lifeboat has been damped," I reported. "If you wish to recover—in case I can't—the grid numbers are 3—7, 2—9, and 4—1."

"Are you all right, 'Robin Hood'?" Kriloy asked. "Any butterflies? Any regrets?"

"Lots of both," I said. "But I get the Princess and you yekels get the fat end of the blaster. I'll keep that in mind, and the butterflies will go away. But Sirs, and Gentlemen, the moment is one of action." I was heading down the steep bank to the road below as I talked. "And I'm going to have to cut out. I'll check back as arranged. Keep me open on the sixth hour—Greenwich. That's all, I guess. Bless you again."

"Bless you."

Both Ragen and Kriloy echoed my farewell just before the stone went cold and the realities of pre-

dicted peril closed around me. I paused once to gaze for a fleeting second at the blue sky, trying to penetrate its depths to the primal dark beyond, where a great ship was growing transluscent, wavering; disappearing from the environs of the second planet, CAMELOT, of the Sun-star, Fomalhaut.

I forced the last thirty feet through a seeming solid wall of vines and brush. When I came out on the road, I was breathless. I halted to rest and to wipe the bits of dirt and leaves from the fur of my throat and chest. I had just made it in time. The first animal, all white, was rounding the bend. On its laquered, wooden saddle sat *a petite, well-rounded, pouting young* female in resplendent travelling attire. She had golden hair, golden fur, languid purple eyes that were almost blue, an elfish face, and an imperious demanding tilt to her chin.

Behind her rode a somewhat dumpy, middle-aged female in austere grey, and behind her, a young girl, black-eyed and frowning. Two armored *heggles* or knights, completed the company. At sight of me they shouted, snatched swords from their scabbards and instantly pushed their mounts to the fore. Right then and there I learned what I had already been taught: that fighting on Camelot, was akin to eating and sleeping. If you didn't swing at somebody at least once a day, you weren't completely alive.

I breathed deeply to still the pounding of my heart and moved arrogantly to the center of the road. "Stay your weapons, Sirs!" I called loudly. "I am a friend, and I mean you no harm." My accent, syntax, and degree of sincerity were perfect. But if I had thought to halt them with mere words, I was dead wrong.

Their advance was swift, silent, and purposeful. I barely had time to draw my own sword, throw the bow to the ground, whirl the sword once round my head and shout the equivalent of, "Slow down, damn it!" when they were upon me.

Though the broadsword was strange to my hand, a month of pre-conditioning with every known weapon of the planet had actually put me in the category of expert. I was "expert," too, with the longbow, the fal-dirk; with the heavy lance in full suit-armor, with mace, cudgel, sling; with everything, even the throwing sticks. And all of this expertise without once handling a single weapon. . . Patterned, imposed neural conditioning, infused during the hours of sleep. It worked. . . And it worked well.

I crouched low as if to avoid the sweep of the first blade. My opponent, by the heraldry of his shield and embossed armor, was a lord of some stature. He was also huge,

bearded, and grinning. At the moment he was leaning far out of the saddle, sword held for a flat vicious sweep. He was confident that I could not escape. One small thing he was totally unaware of, however, was that my muscular superiority was as much as 100% over his since I came from a planet with almost twice the mass of Camelot.

When his blow came, I arose to meet it, tossing my blade to my left hand and slashing up and out. The force of my sword's swing almost broke the man's arm. And, while he bellowed and tried to hold to his weapon with fast numbing fingers, I sprang to the back of his clumsy saddle, holding my dagger to his throat while I simultaneously brought his mount to a halt with my knees and spun it around to face the second adversary.

I now used the bearded bellower as a shield. "You will sheath your weapon," I said sternly to my new opponent. "If you do not, I shall sheath mine in the throat of this idiot—and in yours, too, I promise you."

The second knight was young, dark, slender, and possessed of a spring-steel tautness. The flash of untarnished spurs at his heels proclaimed him to have been but newly *heggled* or knighted, and he did not lack for courage.

He maneuvered his mount to circle me. "Oh, think you so, Sir?" he said. "You have bested but one man. Now let him go as should befit your honor. Then we shall see whose throat shall sheath a fal-dirk."

I pushed my man to the ground, placed my foot at the back of his neck—and shoved. Then I pivoted my steed to face the young stranger.

"It would be better," said a sweetly imperious voice, "That you stay your arms—both of you. And that is a command."

I remained poised but calm, watching the eyes of my would be opponent, which he finally lowered while he backed away. I pulled my own mount up sharply and backed, too, away from their circle.

I had known that she would be lovely.

I had actually been quite close to her for an entire week. In between tree-top level scanning of the total land area of Camelot—and that took some doing—I had also watched her assiduously. The rather interesting result was that despite my programmed objective conditioning to the matter at hand, I had become quite intrigued with everything about her. In effect, I had never met anyone quite like the Princess.

And here she was, alive and vibrantly real. My breath came hard again, and for seconds I foolishly stared and lost a decided measure of control. I shrugged, breathed deeply, and then began strongly: "You," I said, "are the Princess Murie Nigaard. And I am Harl Lenti, son of Kerl Lenti, *Onus* (Earl), but

of the least of your nobles. I meant no harm, my Lady, and I truly beg your pardon and your grace." I made a most graceful bow from the clumsy saddle, and simultaneously whirled my feathered cap from my head in the intricate pattern of greeting and homage. "It was my intention," I finished, "to be of some service to you."

I smiled boldly then as I straightened. I focused a twinkle in the contact lenses, calculated to put her at ease so that the beginnings of *Adjuster* control could be initiated. The young knight had reined in with the others and they had placed themselves in a semi-circle around me: the old lady, the maid, the two men in suit-armor; one afoot now and glaring, and the Princess in the center.

She stared haughtily back at me.

My mention of the name, "Lenti," should have connected me instantly in their minds with the fabled "*Collin*," a folk hero slated to show up in Marack's time of need. By their expressions, however, they hadn't made the connection; either that or they were ignorant of the facts.

But here was Harl Lenti, and he did have a father, Keri, who was an Earl or *Onus*. So the role that I played was real enough. He was but one peg up the ladder of nobility, however. His domain, if one could call it that, consisted of a few barns, a stone "big house," and a peasant village of but fifty inhabitants, which has been the original birthplace of the "*Collins*." I had had a personal peek at it as well as its inhabitants. It was a bleak place, located far to the north of the heartland of King Caronne's far-flung kingdom. I wore my "father's" insignia at my shirt tab, a sprig of violets on a field of gold. . .

"I know nought of you, Sir," the Princess announced, "nor of your father. Nor why you stand here in mid-road when the bans of travel have been applied throughout the land of Marack. You are without steed, Sir. And you carry neither the insignia of my father, *your Lord*, nor do you wear his livery as those upon the highway during the ban must do. What means your presence here?" The purple-blue eyes held mine in a steady gaze. They were guildless, naive—but insistently questioning.

The bearded one stepped forward. His eyes continued hot, angry. He surveyed me with open hatred while he held his injured arm with his good. "You should have a care, M'Lady," he grumbled. "My blows are not to be turned aside so lightly. I'll warrant there's the strength of magic in his arm."

"He's right," I said quickly. "There is magic here. But not of my making."

The faces of the three women blanched. The scowls of the two men grew darker still. . . "And," I

persisted, "I repeat, my Lady, I am not here be accident."

"Then you will, perhaps, explain, Sir?"

I let my gaze rest solidly upon each of them in turn before I began. I sought to calm them and to dominate whatever might ensue. "When I informed you as to my person," I said quietly, "I explained that my father was of the least of your nobles; so much so that I, his son and only heir, have never appeared at Glagmaron castle and your father's court. We are land-poor, my Lady, and cannot afford the luxuries of court dallience. This is why you do not know me, and why I do not wear your livery, nor the sign of your father, my Lord's grace. Nevertheless, as to my story: My *mother who is fey and with second*-sight, received a vision nine nights ago in which it seemed a great bird perched upon the lattice of her window and spoke of storms, red-war, men and blood, and an enjoining of enemies against your father, King Carrone. Within this alignment was the Lady Elioseen, witch and sorceress. The bird of evil said that within nine days—this day, my Lady, you would be seized upon the road while journeying to your sister, the Lady Persille's manor. I have no mount now, my Lady, because it lies dead of a burst heart, the result of a most wearisome ride. . . I have only my sword now. And I pray you accept it, and that we turn back to your father's castle without further delay."

The story, too, of the wicked bird and his predilection to prophesy, was straight from the crystal ball. Not a word had been changed; nor any added.

The Princess' eyes were wide now with puzzled fear. She said, "What say you to this?" directing her question to the older woman who drew close to answer.

The swift forming clouds had quickened to a whirling vortex of lowering mists, smacking also of magic. They touched the forested hilltops, black, purple; roiling with a pent-up fury that spoke of tempests, and a coming night in which all should seek shelter. Lightning flashed toward the setting sun, followed by great thunder. The two knights made the circular sign of their god, Ormon, upon their chests, then touched their lips. The old lady did likewise, as did the maid. The Princess sat quietly, holding tight to the reins of her mount, regarding them all with a frown of indecision.

I, too, made the sign of Ormon upon my chest.

They accepted the idea of abduction by magic as a very real possibility. They would question my role in that which would or would not happen—but the intervention of magic? Certainly not! That was commonplace. And the damnable part of it was that they were right in thinking that way. Because it *was*

real. According to ten pairs of *Watchers* across two centuries, it was a part of their very lives. In a matter of minutes, in fact, I was to be a witness, if not a participant, to the actuality of a sorcery to confound all scientific law, as advanced by Galactic Control. . .

The old lady's eyes remained closed while she talked. Her voice was soft, monotone; it seemed a telling of runes. She said: "I would ask you, M'Lady, to heed the words of this young man. There is something of this that I cannot scan. The auras are thick, M'Lady. And the mists are such as I have never seen them. This I know. The young Lord means you no harm, though he seems as a wraith—not of magic—but also not of this world."

Her concluding sentence startled me. The jolt was further enhanced when I saw, for the first time, that a small and most peculiar animal had been peering at me from behind the delectable figure of the Princess. Its shape was round, symmetrical, hardly two feet in height. It had short sturdy legs and arms. Two fur-tufted ears graced a puff-ball head punctured with curious, friendly, shoebutton eyes. It reminded me, I thought whimsically, of a cuddly toy I had owned long ago in the dreams or the play of my childhood. . . Then I remembered what it was—a *Pug-Boo.* I smiled. I had been briefed on them, too, like the *dottles*, the six-legged steeds, and a half hundred other lower order specia; but I hadn't expected to meet with one so quickly. For the moment it clung to the Princess' small waist, watching intently; almost as if it knew what was taking place and must needs be informed of all pertinent particulars.

The thunder came again and the five mounts shied wildly. Their front legs lifted and forced their sleek, thick-furred bodies back upon the remaining four, while their great blue eyes rolled to catch the attention of their riders to indicate their fear and their desire to be elsewhere.

And they had reason to be afraid.

"My Lord," the Princess began suddenly, and in oddly submissive tones, "If my 'watcher' the sweet Dame, Malion, sees truth in the things you say, and virtue and goodwill in your person, then we have nought but to follow your advice—if—"

That was as far as she got.

Though expected, I mused later, it came so suddenly that my own reaction was almost one of amusement. Not so the others. . .

It was like a page from the book of the mythical Earth Sorcerer, Merlin. The first sensation was all encompassing. The prick of a needle accompanied by the smell of fire, the roar of thunder, and an instantaneous innundation of rain. I instinctively knew what to do. I literally flung myself at the Princess,

pulled from the saddle and encircled her small body with the strength of my arms. . . Wherever the Princess was going, I would go, too. There was an immediate physical numbness and disorientation. It was as if we were at the bottom of a deep lake, held in place, as it were, by countless tons of water. The great forms of the dottles, the Dame, Malion, the two knights and the maid assumed a vague but noticeable, physical transfiguration. They became amorphous, transparent, and receded before my dulling vision. Then, as my brain whirled before this first onslaught of the magic of the planet, Camelot, only one thing remained real to me; that was the soft flesh and the heady, perfumed warmth of the Princess Nigaard. I had wondered how real fur would feel (mine was artificial). I can only say it was wonderful. I was pleasantly aware, too, as I sank into oblivion, that it was not just a question of my arms around her waist—she held me, too. Pressed tightly against me; in fact, with her small head buried deep in the protection of the hollow of my shoulder. Halah, I thought, the stimulus of fear has its redeeming features. . .

That was the last I remembered.

"Where did you come from, baby, dear?"

The Pug-Boo's voice sprang from the edge of darkness. His fat little body reclined in mid-air, or so it appeared in the grey mist of my semi-consciousness.

"Great Flimpls!" I managed to groan in reply. I made an effort to shut my eyes, only to find that they were already shut. This, when you think about it, suggests a frightening situation indeed. I relaxed then into the dream. Who's afraid of Pug-Boos?

"You're the only Flimpl here," the Pug-Boo informed me. "And besides, I asked you a question." One shoe-button eye was about an inch from my own. But, as I said, mine were closed. So I was safe.

"I'm an *Adjuster*," I confessed to the little black nose and the fuzzy ears—thereby breaking the first law of the Foundation: never to reveal one's presence, or the nature of one's business. . . "I'm a bona-fide graduate of the Galactic Foundation. I hold four degrees and sundries. I've got an I.Q. that can be equalled but never surpassed. You have to be chosen from five-thousand of the best to even be considered for the Foundation. An *Adjuster* is a trouble shooter, a man with a thousand skills. Like the Earth's chameleon, he can *adjust* to any level of a developing civilization, merge completely with the fauna. And our purpose is not idle games, Sirrah. . . We intervene only after carefully considering the following: One. Is there a crisis that calls for our help? Two. Can it be intervened

safely? Three. Will the intervention be beneficial, and it not, will it at least prevent a potential disaster and preserve the status-quo? You see, my fuzzy-headed friend, our real purpose, other than crisis control, is to judge the level of development of a society, find an area where influence can be exerted—and to then go to work. With a little sweat, blood and luck, we can sometimes advance a specific civilization as much as a thousand years without any awareness on their part of any untoward influence."

All the time I was running off at the mouth I was thinking, Great Galaxies! What am I doing? But I couldn't stop. It was as if I had been turned on; that I was some sort of uncontrollable wind-up-doll. The only reassuring factor, that I hadn't actually flipped, was that after all, I was asleep: I definitely *was* asleep. And this whole ball of nonsense was a dream.

"That's great," the Pug-Boo said. "But where did *you* come from, baby dear."

"I told you, Butter-Ball."

"No you didn't. And you've not told me why you came *here*, to Fregis, either."

"And I never will, Button-Nose," I said. "What do you think of that?"

"Don't you love Pug-Boos?"

"Should I?"

"Should you? *Should you?* Great Flimpls, *everybody* loves a Pug-Boo."

I tried to snap open my eyes, and I did—but I didn't. The Pug-Boo was there anyway, This time he wore glasses and a mortar-board on his head. He said, "If you don't tell me why you came to visit me today, you won't go to the head of the class. As a matter of fact I'll have you drummed out of the regiment. I'll strip you of your green pants and your red feather. And, what's more, I'll see to it that you never get a crack at the Princess."

"Hold it," I yelled silently, trying desperately the while to open my wide-opened eyes, "Leave the Princess out of this. Or better, leave her in it and you get out."

I forced my somnambulent thoughts to dwell upon the Princess. The image of the Pug-Boo began to fade almost instantly. But not without a struggle. Just before I completely hallucinated—kissing the Princess' softly furred tummy and straining her to me—the Pug-Boo managed an archaic nose to thumb in my direction. Then it got grey again, grey and black. . .

This time the grey and the black lasted longer. So long that when I came out of it, it was as if I had been encapsulated for a myriad parsecs of space-time.

The grey remained grey. But it wasn't in my head. I could see clearly that I was in some sort of stall, a part of a stable. There was the equivalent of straw under me. I

could feel it, wet. And I could smell it. I felt itchy, dirty. My rather fine pelt of quarter inch black fur that laid flat so that I looked like a mink didn't help. I must smell, I thought, like some Farkelian peasant. So be it. My hands were bound loosely; my feet not at all. I moved to the edge of the stall and peered out.

In one direction it was all black, night, with pouring rain. I tried infrared with the contacts. It was worse than normal. I switched back to 20-20. There were no doors to the place, just a large opening, free to the wind and rain. There was a clump-clumping on either side of me and I surmised that dottles occupied those stalls. There were additional stalls across the way, but it was much too dark to see anything. To my left, away from the rainswept entrance, was the gargantuan guts of the place. It seemed, actually, that I was in a great cave, hollowed from the base of a mountain; which, in effect, told me exactly where I was. . . In my week-long tree-top scanning of Camelot, I had not only checked its two great continents thoroughly—Camelot was largely a water world—I had also checked the towns and villages, castles and keeps; the ice-world; the great swamps and deserts, and the far "terror-land" of Om—called that, according to *Watcher* data, because from it sprang all evil, death, and horror. Therein were the hordes of the dead-alives and the mutated spawn of the Yorns who served Om's rulers; therein, and again according to the *Watchers* soothsayer, was the very vortex of the gathering storm that threatened all Camelot. Oddly enough, I had seen none of this through the scanners. Only volcanoes; dank, mist-shrouded valleys; sea towns of plodding grey people living in squat, salt-encrusted buildings, and great lonesome moors.

I had scanned other areas pertaining to the supposed data of the Princess' abduction, however; especially the great eyrie, the Castle-Gortfin of the witch and sorceress, the Lady Elioseen. . . Therefore, I knew where we were. But, strange thought. We had been but twenty miles from King Caronne's Glagmaron, when we were seized. The eyrie, Gortfin, was some 200 miles to the east of Glagmaron.

Wall to wall, near the cave's entrance, it was at least one hundred and fifty feet. Inside, toward the great room's furthest depths, I would have sworn it was carved from the solid rock had I not seen the great and shadowy arches reaching aloft to a distant roof, the floor of Gortfin, itself. Two fires burned in the hall's depths. One of them outlined a singing, sprawling, drunken group of men-at-arms and some others who seemed only vaguely human. These last cast weird shadows, bestial, deformed, against a far wall. Some of them sat around a massive table, hulking, brutal. Others

lay about on the cold stone floor. It was difficult to tell if they were drunk, asleep—or just plain dead. . .

The second fire, the one nearest us, because the entrance to this huge tomb was to one side and not in the center, outlined a smaller tableau. A heavily muscled man—or thing—sat cross-legged upon the stone. His forehead sleepily touched a naked sword which he had placed across his knees. Directly beyond him was a small table with food and a low couch covered with furs. On this couch was the reclining figure of the Princess Nigaard. She seemed still asleep. Her maid, the young girl with the frowning face, was nowhere to be seen; neither was the Pug-Boo. The good Dame, Malion, however, was there and awake. She sat on the edge of the couch, stared hypnotically at the fire and swiped half-heartedly at the Princess' heavy golden hair with a brush.

One last scene from the soothsayer's *ball* had been forwarded to us by the *Watchers*. It was one which showed me as fleeing through a rain and night-darkened forest valley, and into a red-grey dawn of today, tomorrow, or next year—crystal balls seldom give dates. There would be Harl Lenti (me), the Princess' cocky young knight, and the Princess. So said the picture. For the moment, however, there was no picture, only a reality, and a developing chess game that had a momentum and a purpose all its own. . .

Keeping close to the wood of the stalls, and always in the direction of the Princess, I explored each one of them. In the last one before entering upon the floor of the great hall, I found the Princess' young man. His hands were as tightly bound as mine had been, and he was still out. This time, with my hands free, I used a detachable part of the belt. I ran a cardio-vascular on him to determine what condition he was in. He checked out reasonably healthy, so that I gave him a shot in the arm that would have brought his great grandfather to full salute.

His blue eyes opened, startled and wide, "Sirrah!" he shouted before I could get my hand over his mouth.

His yell coincided, fortunately, with a great peel of thunder. And, as there seemed no reaction beyond the stalls, I cautioned him to silence and took my hand away.

"Heed me," I said. "I do not know where your loudmouthed companion is, nor the maid of the Princess Nigaard. But the Princess and her companion are just yonder, in the great room beyond the wall of this manger. . . . Voices have told me," I improvised, "that this hall is guard-room, cellar, storehouse, and stable, to a great castle—possibly of a sorceress, the Lady, Elioseen. What lies without, I do not know, But whether it be wall, or wall and moat, you, me, and the Princess will soon know; for I propose to

leave this place. So up, and to your feet, Sir! And I will unbind you."

He stared cooly back at me, and there was something of pleasure in his eyes. There was also, and for the first time, something of fear.

He said curiously, softly: "You would go into the night, Sir Harl? You would risk your immortal soul?"

I had forgotten their aversion, if not terror, of the night's darkness; predicated, so *Watcher* data said, upon the belief that they would be killed by sorcery, and that their bodies would be taken across the thousands of miles of unknown lands to Om—there to become a slave, a dead-alive. Considering their conditioning in this matter, I marvelled that the young knight had concealed his fear to the extent that he did.

"I am not afraid, Sir," I told him bluntly. "I would do much for the Princess, my Lady, and for the brave land of Marack."

"Well say you so, then, Sir Harl," he said calmly. "And if it is for the Princess, my sweet cousin, I would share the danger with you. My name, Sir, since we have not been introduced, is Rawl Fergis, of the fief of Rawl, *Onus*, my father, who is brother to the Princess' Queen and mother, the Lady, Tyndil. . . But one last thing. How do you know so much, strange Lord? And since when do you give me orders?"

At that point he peered around the stall's side to the fire and the guards beyond. His eyes narrowed. His jaws clenched. "Yorns," he said. "Devil's spawn."

He started to stumble forward, being off-balance; but I grabbed him, lifted him bodily, as a feather, back into the stall, where I tackled the fibers of his bonds.

"By Ormon," he said, when I had freed him. "You seem possessed of the strength of a Yorn, yourself. Whence comes it, Sir? Is it more of your cursed magic?"

"Wrong on both counts," I said. "I simply live according to Ormon's grace. . . Now if you are with me in this, you will follow behind as a wraith, until such fortune as I may have provides you with a broadsword."

He tried once more with the "who is subordinate to who," business. But I simply said, "Prepare four dottles. Then follow or not as your courage pleases you," and he blanched angrily but ran instantly to the stalls behind us and returned to tell me that four stood ready.

How would I do this so as to leave no questions of a kind that would betray my presence? A few guards *would* be slain. The forces of King Caronne *would* be forwarned of the terrible dangers of the gathering storm.

That I would achieve this was beyond question. Fool's Mate would be blocked. And King's Pawn—in this case, the Princess Murie Nigaard

—would be rescued. This, so that the opening gambit of the forces of chaos on the planet, Camelot, would be met and checked. The problem remained, however, that the Galactic Foundation, even now, had only the smallest knowledge of the nature of the power of Om. That it existed, yes! That its outward manifestations as yet was simply bloody war between various opposing feudal armies for domination of the Planet's land surface, yes! But, since we knew of Camelot's magic, and since the forces of King Caronne depended not so much upon this power as upon the few existing feudal universities with their rudimentary offerings in the arts and sciences, we knew, too, that if he and others like him were destroyed, all of Camelot would likewise go down—and with it all civilization as it was now known.

What would then ensue we could only guess.

There were those of the Foundation who suggested ominously, that since the nature of the forces in opposition were at best obscure, then the threat might extend beyond Camelot—to the very Galaxy itself.

During the interim of Rawl's preparing the four dottles for flight, a guard had detached himself from the main group and stalked across the great hall in the direction of the Princess. The situation thereby grew slightly more difficult.

One would suggest, perhaps, that I simply switch the ion-laser at my belt to full power and destroy them all. That would have been the easy way. But it was taboo. It was also impossible. I could neither do it, use others to do it, nor even suggest that it be done. This, too, was a part of the pre-conditioning process—built-in limitations in the use of any and all the equipment I carried. The final limitation, to keep me completely in line, as it were, was blackout. Before ever my hand touched a stone for death or sentient destruction, I myself would be made instantly immobile: protection for the natural development of Camelot and, indeed, the evolutionary processes of life on any *intervened* planet. Needless to say, I was both aware of these limitations, and in complete agreement as to the need for them.

Rawl had moved close to me; stood peering into the double fireglow and breathing hard on my cheek.

"Take care," I cautioned him. "We will make our move now. As stated, you will follow me, but at a distance of at least thirty paces. What must be done, I will do. If I fail, you will proceed on your own. If I succeed, but am wounded unto death, you will do me the kindness of killing me. You will then flee with the Princess Nigaard. . . Do you understand?" I looked him square in the eye.

My bravado was overwhelming. Despite his warrior's background, I

was willing to bet he had never heard anything as unequivocal and as "carefree" as that. He gulped, stared in awe, and just nodded dumbly. I knew then by his acquiescence and the light in his eyes that if I succeeded, I would have a follower and a friend for life.

I smiled boldly and held up a casual hand. "Good," I said. "Remember! Thirty paces."

Then I strolled out over that earthen floor as if I were the very owner of Castle-Gortfin. I walked with such absolute assurance that even when I was but twenty feet of the two guards, their gaze was simply curious; without concern. I came on quickly, noting from a corner of my eye that the Princess, too, was now awake. She stared at me, I might add, with a curiosity to equal that of the guards. Then she recognized me, and her curiosity turned to very evident and heart-warming concern.

The guards were huge and heavily muscled. One of them, the man seated on the floor, looked neanderthal, to borrow an adjective from Earth. He had a great prognothous jaw and beetle brows. His features were heavy, grotesque. I assumed he was one of the Yorns of which Rawl spoke. I was seeing one for the first time since I had spotted none through my scanning of the lands of Om.

They continued, curious, absolutely unaware that I brought them their death.

It was quite simple. My reflexes and my superior strength were more than adequate. The newly arrived guard had only time to ask: "Who are you?" before I chopped him a lightning blow to the throat which smashed his larynx. I simultaneously dropped to one knee, snatched the naked sword from the hulking Yorn and plunged it through his body so that it stuck out a forearm's length beyond the muscles of his shoulders. Then, without pause, I withdrew the blade, stood up and whirled it once to catch the first man. His face was already blue, though he still fought for air and fumbled desperately for his sword. He needn't have bothered. I did him a service, actually, I brought the steel solidly down upon his helmet, cleaving both head and helmet to the shoulders—and this with one hand. . .

Rawl had kept his thirty paces to my rear, though at the instant of action he had increased his speed. By the time he reached my side, however, I had stripped the guard's quivering carcass of his gear. I tossed it to my young companion. "Your sword, Sir, as I promised," I shouted, simultaneously reaching for the gear of the Yorn—the belt, the fal-dirk, and the sheath for the sword that I already held. . . "See quickly now," I said, "to the Dame, Malion." I moved toward the Princess. "Let us carry them both," I shouted. He was looking at me again in awe. But

this was no time to bask in the aura of hero-worship. "Quick, man," I said, "or our luck will have availed us nought. . . "

Across the hall at a distance of some three-hundred feet, the singing and the brawling had stopped. Silence filled the vacuum. Those standing, sitting, even those on the floor still capable of movement, were looking in our direction. There were at least a hundred men-at-arms, with half-again as many house servants and handlers of the castle. But there were no liveried knights.

I looked to the Princess. Her blue-purple eyes stared boldly back at me.

I said, "Come, my Princess, Yon group of oafs will not stand idle long. We're for the night and away from here, the four of us."

As she arose, I noted her size for the first time. By Earth standards she was about 5'2". She weighed perhaps 105 pounds. She was without her furred cloak, though she hastily snatched it up. She wore a sort of velvet ski suit—shimmering purple-gold, with soft leather boots, fur-topped, that reached to just below her knees. Dark fur trimmed the neck of the suit, so that her own, quite golden fur, stood out still further in bright contrast.

Rawl had tossed the aged Dame Malion to his shoulder. He was already moving—not running—with giant steps toward the stalls. I thought to do likewise. I bowed to the Princess. "My Lady," I said. "I offer you my arm and my shoulder. In that way we will move much faster." My right hand still clutched the naked, bloodied sword.

She barely had time to ask, "What manner of man are you, Harl Lenti?" before I scooped her up and over my left shoulder with my free are.

"Not just a man, my Lady," I said, moving quickly toward Rawl and the stalls—he had already disappeared around the stall's end. "Consider me your knight."

"It may be that you presume too much, Sir. And it may be, too, that you are not a man at all." Her voice came jerkily from over my shoulder, edged, I thought, with a slight note of anger at her helpless and rather undignified position.

I ignored her remark. There was no time to talk. Besides, though dire peril threatened—since behind us a hue and cry and the first sounds of pursuit were clearly audible—I was most content with the perfumed warmth of her slight body so close to my cheek, and so warmly clasped against my chest.

The dottles were out of their stalls and ready.

The Dame, Malion, was perched upon the wooden saddle of one, looking slightly dazed. Rawl Fergis straddled the great bulk of a second. He held the reins of two more in the other. He controlled his dottle with his knees.

The ensuing action encompassed seconds only. I placed my disheveled Princess in one of the saddles and gave a mighty slap to the rump of hers and the Dame Malion's steed. Then I leapt aboard the fourth dottle. Rawl, who had ridden back perhaps ten paces to face the oncoming horde, was whirling his broadsword above his head in a shimmering, challenging arc, and yelling the equivalent of "Go! Go! Go!" Then he turned sharply, came up behind me and gave my dottle the same thumping whack I had given the others, so that the four of us streamed out into the rain and darkness in one seemingly liquid current of dottles and riders.

A final surprise was that Rawl had thought to free most of the remaining dottles so that they followed after. There were some eighteen of them in one large, pounding herd.

Looking back through the herd and beyond Rawl to the great entrance, I saw a screaming horde of mixed Yorns and humans. They brandished swords, axes, pikes, and whatever weapon had come to hand. I wondered if, since they were on the side of dark magic, they, too, would be afraid of the night's darkness. They were. For with or without dottles, none ventured forth beyond the great hall's entrance. . .A small voice told me, however, that this observation need not be wholly true.

Exactly how Camelot's magic worked, I obviously didn't know. One thing I did know: I wanted to put as much distance between ourselves and the sorcery of Elioseen's Castle-Gortfin, as I possibly could. After all, if she had managed to transfer the four of us the 200 miles from Glagmaron by witchcraft, what was to prevent her from spotting us and doing it again?

On we went. The road was a facsimile of the cart path of the day before—as were all roads in Camelot . . . . Great crags of dripping, black stone loomed beyond the expanse of bowered trees on either side; all visible in teh myriad flashes of blue lightning. The path led downward; a slow descent from Gortfin. We rode on, pressing silently through the rain and the lightning. A keening wind howled like all the banshees of Earth's Hel. After many hours the road began to rise again. Wearily we followed it until in the faint pearling of what seemed the coming dawn, we arrived at the apex of a great crest or pass.

We halted then to survey each other and to look back across the thirty miles we had ridden to the shadowy bulk of far Gortfin. . . It was as I had seen it in the scanners: huge, darkly beautiful, and now, too, darkly ominous.

The herd of dottles gathered round as would the dogs of a pack as, indeed, other than the fact that they were herbivorous, they actually

were. We sat our mounts in the herd's center and looked at each other.

The Princess, observing me, laughed and said, "You are now a most sorry looking knight, my Lord. I would that I had comb and brush to take to you—and my cousin," she turned to Rawl, "looks hardly the better."

Rawl grinned. He, too, had the flashing blue-purple eyes, though his fur was a russet brown. "No better at all, my Lady. But," he admonished us all, "We are in full view here. So let us away; at least beyond the height of this pass."

"My Lady," I said, "I agree with your good cousin. Let us leave this place where all can see us." I forged ahead in the act of talking, leading the others, at a slower pace, down the far slope. "We must rest, too," I continued. The Princess and Rawl rode on either side of me now. "For daylight is soon here and they will be upon us before midmorning."

"Rest our steeds, Sirrah? You are no rider. For we now have all of these to choose from." The Princess smiled at me curiously and indicated our 'pack' of dottles who, by their friendly blue eyes and constant gentle pushing for attention, seemed forever fresh. "Even our good Dame Malion has not complained, Sir."

She was right. The fact that I was tired and they were not reminded me that strength and stamina are two widely separate things. The Dame, Malion, had come through the ordeal undaunted. I saw her now as something of steel and leather—as were they all.

"Good," I said. "But after we move some small distance, *I* shall rest. For if the dottles are tireless, madame, I am not."

Murie Nigaard lowered her pretty head. "Well then, indeed," she murmured, as we moved on, "You are human after all."

A bilious sun tried hard. It peeked through various shifting holes in the low scudding cloud mass; to no avail. The total effect was nondescript grey. Despite the missing sun—since it was summer on Camelot—it was still quite warm.

We presented a most peaceful tableau. The four of us half-reclined on great flat stones some two hundred yards off the road. It was the only dry spot in the whole area of dripping flora and rain-soaked soil. It was also somewhat hidden from the highway. Our dottles peacefully browsed, glancing at us from time to time to see that we had not gone off without them. . . They had a security problem.

All wooden-saddles on Camelot, so I found, are kept stocked with important sundries such as flint and steel, needle and thread, honing stone, salt, fish-hooks, arrow heads, and a jerked meat that tastes like sun-dried leather. At the moment—

to all of us—it tasted like anything we chose to imagine. We chewed it with gusto.

Seated unassumingly close to the Princess while we ate, I engaged her in small talk about the toughness of the meat, the duration and intensity of the rain, and about the whereabouts of the missing maid, the beetle-browed knight, and the fat-fannied Pug-Boo. From time to time Rawl glanced angrily at the road as if spoiling for a fight.

I said finally: "My limited knowledge tells me, my Princess, that we still have far to go. We are as many as three days from your father's castle."

"That is true," she said. "I have been on this road in pleasanter days. But with our many dottles, we should make it in two. Now tell me, Sir, more of yourself. For I would feign have knowledge of you when we inform my lord of your protection."

I rolled to my belly. I had taken my wet shirt off, as had Rawl and the Princess, and even now they were spread to dry on the body heat of the first three mounts. Only the Dame, Malion, had chosen not to do this, though the Princess' delectable upper half gave no evidence of a general female coyness in the displaying of parts. . .

"My Lady," I said, and I let a gentle ripple run up my back muscles to fix her attention, "I am who I said I am. This is indeed not much in one way, but it could be much in others, since there are things about myself of which even I am not sure."

This last was a deliberate ploy designed to titillate their imaginations in case I needed an explanation for a lack of memory about things I knew nothing about, or to explain, perhaps, any other unorthodox potentials I might have to display. "I confess to both you, my Lady, and you, my Lord, Rawl," I continued, "that I have been much out of the world. So, rather than discuss my dull self, I would much prefer a telling to me of all that happens now in our great land of Marack. I have heard, for instance, of much war on our borders, and of war beyond that; and on the high seas, too, from the marauders of Kerch and Flintyn. Why, my Princess, if there is so much unrest in the world, inclusive of the land of Marack, do you feel so free to travel upon the highway.

"My journey was for but a few miles only, Sirrah! And though it was already afternoon, we had but five more to go. Other than the witch and sorceress, the Lady, Elioseen, ruler of Dumging in Marack—about which the Lord, my father will soon have something to say—no part of our kingdom is invaded or taken. Nor actually are we at war. Therefore, my Lord, we felt it not strange at all to travel upon our personal highway."

"If we are not invaded," I asked, "How account then for the presence of Yorns? Are those beast-men not of the forces of distant Om and her vassals?"

"They are, indeed," Rawl muttered. "I have fought them in the far lands where I served my apprenticeship but one year ago. . . . But never have I seen one across the river-sea, let alone in our own sweet land."

"Yet, there have been rumors," Murie Nigaard said.

"All too many," Rawl said. "And a country grows not strong on rumors."

"What are these 'rumors'?" I asked softly, and with the proper tone of harmless curiosity.

"That Om masses its forces; that many of the kingdoms to south and west are, in fear, making peace with the hordes of Om and its ruler, the dark-one, the Kaleen; that those who even now fight among themselves, as is our tradition, do so at the hidden instigation of Om; and that black sorcery moves upon us and all that is good in the world of Flegis. . . I would say, Sir Hargis," he finished bluntly, "that this last be not rumor, since we ourselves have been its victims."

"They are not rumors, Great Sir," came the high voice of Dame Malion. "We of Marack, greatest of the countries to the north of the river-sea, are too prone to make light of danger, as is our wont. This time, however, the clouds gather quickly. And it may be that all our world shall not survive. We belittle that which is true. And we deny, even to ourselves, that which is fact."

"But what is there of this which is other than cloud and rumor?" I asked—"What fact?"

"Kelb and Great Ortmund have already made their peace," Rawl said softly. "And it was in those lands, guarding the roads from the river-sea, in which I earned my spurs last year. Now they are at peace with Om. Which accounts, perhaps, for the Yorns and other dark soldiery who may, even now, be garrisoning the fair ports of those great lands."

"As for other things that pass that have not been before, the lands of Ferlach and Gheese are both in bloody war with each other, as is traditional, and simultaneously fighting the first of the columns of Om upon thier borders. One rumor has it that sorcery caused blindness to knights and men-at-arms alike who guarded a pass from the river-sea in Gheese, so that now Om sits astride that pass and gazes down into the fair valleys of Gheese—and bides its time.

"A question, good Sir Lenti! As behooves our knightly prerogatives: from whence were your own spurs won?"

I knew, so I told him. "From the sea battles off Reen in Ferlach," I said. "That was three years ago, and

we fought off the raiders of the Seligs, from the isles of the river-sea. I have since," I smiled wryly, "been bloody bored with distaff and gogpen."

"Distaff, you say, Sir?" the Princess interjected. "Art thou married then?"

"Nay, my Lady," I laughed. "I but speak of my mother and the rigours of the household she runs. She has forced me, betimes, to milk nine gogs in a row as a help to the serving wenches."

The Princess smiled and blushed—And it is possible to know this because though the fur of the body, short, soft, and lying flat against the skin, is fairly consistent; it fades somewhat at breast and throat and face, so that there is but a fine down to note its continuance.

Rawl laughed, too, and I made note of his alertness. Then he said: "I have heard of your sea battle, my Lord, and that it was hard; with more than one engagement. I have heard something, too, of your insignia, which I cannot quite remember now."

"Dubot!" the Princess exclaimed—she referred to a small, rather silly animal—"It is the heraldry of *The Collin*, the greatest of Chieftains. Four families claim his blood and his heraldry in one form or another—But I recall not yours, Sir Lenti," she said to me.

She said this last sharply, and turned to me with bold questions in her blue eyes.

As an *Adjuster*, however, I knew the fine points of her history better than she.

"There are *six* families, my Lady," I said softly. "We regard our claim as of the first. Since he of whom we speak, *Great Collin*, was born in the Manor of our village some 500 years ago. . . He was born where I, too, was born."

They looked at me strangely then, and with good reason. For *The Collin* was legend, as was Earth's El Cid, Arthur Pendragon, Quetzalcoatl, and Kim il Sung. . . All had been of great service to their people, and *all*, demotically, were to return in the hour of the indigenous nation's greatest peril.

The Princess said finally, against a background noise of four dottles quarrelling, "Would you then choose his actual name, Sirrah?"

"I have no such illusions, my Lady."

"Mayhaps we could use a '*Collin*' now," Rawl put in as I had hoped he would.

Then the Dame Malion's voice came as if from far away. . . . "Hey!" she said, "Hey, that he is not *The Collin.* But this I seem to know. *He is more of The Collin than others may ever be.* This is so that you use him thusly."

The dottles were roaring at this point, and the Princess arose and pointed a finger and shouted at the most belligerent one so that it ceased

its brawling and sneaked off shamedly to hide itself in the herd.

"I repeat," Rawl said strongly, "Marack could use *The Collin* now! How say you our most strange friend? Let us present you as his potential. Great Ormon, but we need but present our story straight."

"Sir," I said with a straight face, "To even think thusly makes mock of *The Collin*."

"Not so," Murie Nigaard spoke up. "If we present you, and you take his name in good faith, and for no evil or self gain, there is no lack of honor."

"My Lady," I said—"for those small deeds—"

But there was no stopping her or the young knight, Rawl, and the semi-ethereal Dame, Malion. A few more minutes of conversation and the idea of presenting me to the court of King Caronne as someone possibly imbued with the powers of their legendary hero—*The Collin*—he who had been instrumental in fighting off the invading forces of Selig, who had conquered all of the lands to the north of the river-sea so that only a segment of Marack itself remained free, became like the greatest thing since the invention of Flegian sviss. . .

As I stated previously: we had hoped that they would seize upon the idea of my association with the name of *The Collin* as something of a weapon they could use for themselves. The fact that they had done this—ostensibly against my protests—was all to the good. . . I agreed, and we mounted our dottles with the intention of developing the details as to just how we should do this on the still long voyage home—barring, of course, any additional attempt by Om and the sorcery of Elioseen to prevent our arrival in Caronne's court. . .

As we approached the highway—or cart path—the Princess exclaimed sharply and dashed to the fore, her small heels beating against the ribs of her dottle. For brief seconds I was unable to see the reason for her excitement. But when she came to a halt within a few feet of the cart-path, all became clear. For there, sitting upon an upright stone marker, begrimed and besmudged, as it were, and with a variety of leaves and whatever stuck to his fur, was the Pug-Boo. He had a most happy smile on his little round face. And as the Princess dismounted to gather him up into arms with sundry croonings of "Hooli, you naughty-naughty. . . Where have you been, you wicked Hooli—" He winked at me over her shoulder. He actually winked. . .

Then we were off: the Princess, Dame Malion, myself, Rawl who looked defiantly over his shoulder from time to time, and our eighteen happy, cavorting dottles. I played with the stones of my belt and wondered whatever happened to the sixth hour—Greenwich time—and

whether the town and castle of Glagmaron, the land of Marack, and the whole damned planet, for that matter, was worth the candle. . . Looking beyond the Dame, Malion, to the petite figure of Murie Nigaard, I knew indubitably that it was. . .

The great sun, Fomalhaut, blazed away.

Camelot had a rotation period of 28 hours. The extra sunlight contributed greatly to the heat accumulation of the day, though this was offset by the extra hours of night. The extremes of noon and midnight were more pronounced, however. This held true for the entire year in that since Camelot's orbit was some 283 million miles from nuclear center, the four seasons encompassed 490 days.

All this provided, actually, for a generally temperate climate in the northern and southern hemispheres. Marack was to the north. Om to the south. The tropical zone covered only a part of Om; its extreme southern section and the dark lands beyond being temperate, too. Frigid zones existed to the north and south, directly below the two ice-caps which resembled those of Terra as, indeed, did Fregis-Camelot itself in size and density.

Kriloy, Ragen, and I had remarked upon this similarity aboard the DENEB-3, when the star-ship had warped into the total aegis of the Fomalhaut system.

There were sixteen planets in all; two with multicolored rings. Camelot was a blue-green—white with clouds—water world: its earth as distinct from its seas, spiralling around the body of the planet, from pole to pole. It had gleamed like an opaline jewel against the background of star cluster and yawning void. But Fomalhaut was a *binary*. . . At a distance of two degrees—but within the same parallax—a companion star, *Fomalhaut II*, shown as a great blue flame, brighter than all the planets of the system. Fomalhaut II possessed but one world which a cursory scanning had long ago shown as having been ravaged by some nuclear holocaust. Whatever the life form in past millenia, it was long since dead—obliterated to be precise.

The heat mounted. Sweat ran through the black mink hairs of my chest and waist. We rode on in silence until finally I asked what had happened to the bearded one I had flattened at our first meeting—who he was, who the maid was, and where did they think the both of them had gone. I also questioned them as to the stated "ban of travel" about which the Princess had cautioned me, and why the Pug-Boo had not been with us in Castle Gortfin.

My first adversary, Rawl said, was Fon-Tweel, *Kolb*, or Lord, of *Bist*, a province of Marack. He had been with the Princess simply be-

cause he had court seniority. Fancying himself a "suitor," he had demanded the right to act as "protector" of the Princess for the short distance of her journey.

Murie let me know by certain gestures, frowns and *moues*, that she considered Lord Fon-Tweel a boor and a *dubot*. As for the maid, well, she was daughter to the *Onus*, Feln of *Krabash*, another of Marack's provinces. She was lady-in-waiting to Murie's mother, Queen Tyndil. Where the maid and knight had gone, as far as they were concerned, was anybody's guess. And I gathered by Murie's obvious disinterest that she cared not a Terran fig. The ban on travel was simply explained. This was late spring, a time of a gathering of young knights from across the land; all to meet in Glagmaron, and all to go off to the wars. They would "blood themselves" as it were, in Gheese, Ferlach, Great Ortmund, Kelb—wherever, in fact, there was blood to be shed. The ban on travel merely protected a knowledge of their numbers from wandering spies of the above-mentioned countries. As to the Pug-Boo's reappearance, they were at a loss there too, so I let it pass for the moment.

Silence reigned again, and we continued on beneath a sheltering bower of enormous deciduous trees, with here and there a clump of conifers alive with birds of varied size and hue. Dainty antelope type ruminants and sundry small animals preened, gawked and peered at us from their particular turf; with each bespeaking a most beautiful and well balanced ecology.

The "sixth hour, Greenwich." My galactic chronometer, imbedded in one of the jewels of my left wristband, told me that it was now the twelfth hour. The question I asked myself was "how many 'sixth hours' had passed us by while we lay in the dungeons of Great Gortfin?"

At times I rode side by side with the Princess and Rawl, and at times by myself. I had become quite aware of her, physically, which, as was my wont, I made no effort to conceal. Her reaction to this was a smug satisfaction, together with a series of purple-eyed side glances to see if her conclusion—that I was hooked—still held. That she so readily assumed me to be the potential sweating facsimile of an enamoured swain—a slave to her softly furred tummy and her round little bottom—was something of a let down. I could only conclude that suitors on Glagmaron had accustomed her to think in this way so that what I sensed was simply conditioned reflex.

I was keenly conscious of the Pug-Boo, too. The reason being that whenever he saw that I alone was watching, he would deliberately wriggle his fat little ears, roll his eyes counter-clockwise, or wrinkle

his nose in a series of earth-bunny twitches. Once he slitted his eyes and stared at me, just stared. Almost instantly I had the spine-chilling sensation of having been weighed, judged, and filed in some strange Pug-Boo cabinet of the mind.

Another rather outlandish phenenon was that the dottles, though they seemed to love all of us to distraction, (I wondered at the time if they were also as friendly to Yorns and such) they loved the Pug-Boo most of all. This was made evident when from time to time one of those closest the Boo would give him a big kiss with a sloppy blubbery, wet muzzle, and promptly prance off in a veritable frenzy of puppy-dog ecstasy.

Murie and Rawl were right. The dottles could seemingly sustain a fast gallop forever. The mud and wet sand from their great paws on the makeshift cartpath was a constant rain around us. The heat mounted further. The clouds still hung low. And, though I knew this last was but tentative, I was most thankful for its illusion of protection.

There was no pursuit, however. By late afternoon I was ready to accept the fact that there would be none.

At times we passed from forest to broad meadow, with here and there a cluster of bright-eyed peasants to view us as we thundered by on the "great road". There were even a few rough hewn bridges to cross, where I thought of *Trolls* and sundry *Goblins* which Camelot might just be capable of producing.

Just before dusk, as we looked for a woodgirt meadow in which to spend the night, we came to another small bridge. Beyond it was the very meadow we sought; the idea being, according to Rawl, that in a meadow we could ring ourselves with dottles as protection against the night. The dottles would simultaneously be able to rest and browse.

This meadow, however, was already occupied.

Two tents were up, topped with heraldic pennons that fluttered in the late afternoon breeze. A dozen dottles were grazing and at least four men-at-arms could be seen lolling before the tents. At our approach they sprang to their feet, called to us to halt, then yelled to someone inside the tents.

Almost instantly two figures tumbled out of the tents, both in light body armor. Two dottles, saddled and waiting, were brought to them, upon which they mounted and rode briskly toward us.

One of them was slender and small, the other huge to the point of being gigantic. We remained on 'our' side of the bridge and in line—myself the Princess and Rawl—with the good Dame Malion in the rear.

They pulled to a halt just opposite with a great flourish of hardware. The giant's booming voice

sounded over the meadow.

"Oh, *kerls,*" he shouted. "Oh, oafs or sorry sword-hands that you be—and you *must* be something since you dare ride the noble dottles—we do now and hereby bar your path. We are of a mind to play *flats* with you. And I confess that it is my intention to gog-tie you for the amusement of my good host-to-be, his excellency, King Caronne." At this point the giant ceased his shouting and made several body crosses and other signs of obeisance to his gods, explaining this by yelling further that:

"We, of course, do seek the favor of Great Ormon in our venture, as no doubt do you. Therefore, oh, kerls, it is most seemly that you now join me in prayer—which I, of course, shall lead."

With this last statement the giant genuflected by bowing from the saddle, and began some chanting monotone in which he truly expected us to join.

We didn't. But he kept at it anyway, filling the meadow with an interminable list of Camelot's Saints and 'aves'. It seemed after awhile, since he was so intent upon his worship, that he had forgotten our existance altogether.

At one point, while he shouted paens to the sky, the female dottle supporting the smaller of the two riders, pranced daintily, showing off, as it were, to our quietly watching herd. Its rider was hard put to hold it in check.

I was secretly amused, and I remained silent through it all.

But the Princess Murie Nigaard was of a different breed. She had watched me through most of the praying and the prancing. And, since I had made no move, she herself took up the cudgel.

She yelled suddenly above the booming 'aves', "Stay your prayers for but one single second, oh pious oaf—" her tone was pure sarcasm—"and you will know and instantly that those you bar from the king's road, and make reference to as *kerls,* are none other than the King's daughter and her knight protectors."

At this outburst the huge one stopped, cut off in mid-ave-*Wimbily. (Wimbily* being she who sits at *Ormon's* right hand and is the mother of *Harris* of the *Trinity.)* He sputtered and advanced to the bridge peering and shading his eyes against the orb of fast-setting Fomalhaut. It was at that point that he made his second and most foolish blunder. He concluded after looking us over that the cloaked figure of Dame Malion was the Princess, while Murie was simply something else again. . .

"Ho!" he yelled. "My greetings to the most demure and ladylike daughter of the King, for she seems of quiet and royal demeanor indeed—Whereas you, young sir," he directed his words to Murie, "are an impious loudmouth to so interrupt

and thoroughly slight the Gods to whom we all—*and this is written*—for each and every second of the day and night do owe our lives, our goods, our families health, our—"

"I AM THE PRINCESS!" Murie fairly screamed, outshouting the giant in her anger—which in itself was a thing to see. "*I* am the Princess, Sir Knight! And more for your dull-witted arrogance than for your impertinence, we shall deign to play the *flats* with you. . . Wouldst gog-tie others? Indeed! Sirrah! Well, we shall see!"

With that she gestured most imperiously and I, her champion, rode forward on cue, for there seemed not the slightest doubt in the Princess' mind that I would do this, and I would not let her down.

The game of *flats* was but another form of dueling, designed as "sport" to limit death wounds. Remembered research told me, however, that this "sport"—used when no jousting spears or suit-armor was available—had contributed to many a broken head, spine, or limb. For *flats* meant simply the flat of the sword instead of the edge.

The four men-at-arms had mounted too. They were now spaced behind the giant and his lithe companion.

At the bridge's center I halted. And, as if to confound the Princess and show her just who, actually, was head man here, I did *not* draw my sword. Instead I addressed the giant deliberately. "Since it is quite obvious, Sirrah!" I said, "that you have achieved great error by a lack of knowledge, it may be that a simple apology from you to our Princess will suffice. This tactic will also save your bones for future battles. For I would not needlessly harm a leige of our Lord in these times when all men are needed."

"Apology! APOLOGY!"

The big man ran true to form. He ignored all else but that single word.

His tone became instantly that of one who had suffered a most sudden and unbearable offense. "Oh, M'Lady," he said contritely to Murie, "though I now acknowledge *you*, it is indeed seen that what I said originally was true—*that you are accompanied by oafs and kerls*—Know you, silly bumpkin," he switched his attention to me, "that I am the Lord, Breen Hoggle-Fitz, driven from Great Ortmund by my own false king, and bound to present my sword and fortune to King Caronne, and to ally myself with him. . .That I should now be put upon by an impious snotnose such as yourself is beyond all reason—*Have at you, Sirrah!*"

LET THERE BE MAGICK will be continued in the next issue, Vol. I, No. 2, of COVEN 13. . .

Many pages in COLOR

COMPLETELY NEW, 1967, DELUXE EDITION

BELONGS IN EVERY OFFICE...LIBRARY...HOME!

The new WEBSTER Encyclopedic DICTIONARY of the ENGLISH LANGUAGE

CONTAINING 13 SUPPLEMENTARY REFERENCE SECTIONS! ALL BOUND INTO ONE DELUXE VOLUME

Here, in this one massive, magnificent, library sized volume, is the ready reference source of information you need for the accurate answers to the wide range of questions that come up day after day. Perhaps never before has such a wealth of material been presented so conveniently. The business man, the student, the housewife, the secretary, in fact anyone in search of knowledge and facts, will find this authoritative and definitive book to be one of the most valuable, convenient, accurate founts of information you can own.

All These Encyclopedic Supplements ...equal to a complete library of reference books!

ANONYMS AND ANTONYMS
75 pages of words of similar and contrasted meanings.

POPULAR QUOTATIONS
Support your opinions with apt quotations from famous authors.

CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY
Antiquity's Gods, Demons, Heroes and Heroines.

BUSINESS AND FINANCE
Money and banking, shipping, credit and collections, bookkeeping.

SECRETARIES' GUIDE
Shorthand, typing, filing, letter writing and a wealth of information.

STUDENTS' AND AUTHORS' MANUAL
Modern English usage, abbreviations, proofreader's marks, musical signs, etc.

BUSINESS LAW FOR LAYMEN
Legal terms, real estate, contracts, negotiable instruments and more.

FOREIGN WORDS AND PHRASES
Latin, Greek and French terms most often used by English writers.

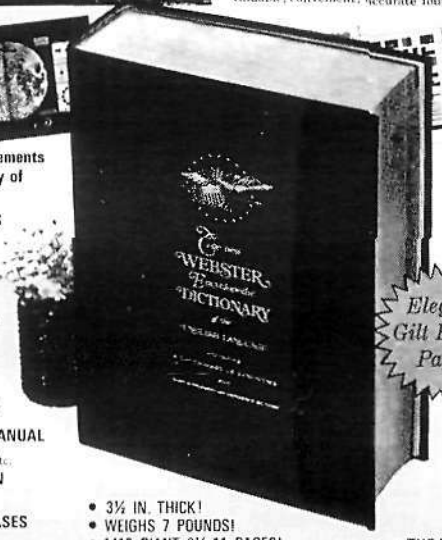
NAMES AND THEIR MEANINGS
A parents' guide for naming children. Over 2,000 names listed.

THE STORY OF AMERICA
Pictorial history from its discovery until the present day.

FLAGS OF THE WORLD IN COLOR
Including flags of the States and Military flags.

PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES
From Washington to Johnson. Shown in full color.

SPACE AGE SECTION IN COLOR
The saga of space with a special space-age dictionary of terms.



- 3½ IN. THICK!
- WEIGHS 7 POUNDS!
- 1412 GIANT 8½x11 PAGES!

Elegant Gilt Edged Pages

- Beautiful library hardbound covers in rich calf leather-like material stamped with golden lettering. Handsome! Impressive!
- 140,000 definitions, and vocabulary terms, plus interesting informative introduction to the origin of words.
- Spelling, pronunciation, meaning and derivation of words in literary and colloquial use.
- Set in large, clear, easy-to-read type.
- Printed on quality, high strength paper.
- Filled with the important, practical information.

- THE PERFECT GIFT FOR EVERYONE!

DICTIONARY $13.95

ORDER NOW!

to: UNITED CREATIVE PRODUCTS 2412 West 7th Street, Los Angeles, California 90057

SUITE 302

GENTLEMEN: Enclosed is my check or money order for $_____ to cover my purchase, including all postage and handling charges.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Calif. Residents add 5% sales tax

Allow 3 weeks for delivery

Subscribe

To

COVEN 13

and get this

EXTRA BONUS !

with each subscription one 9 X 7 full color lithograph of our cover illustration

Start your collection now!

with the first of a series from the original oil paintings by COVEN 13's artist, William Stout.

COVEN 13 SUBSCRIPTION DEP'T.

Please enter a 1 year subscription to COVEN 13 ____ My $6.00 is enclosed

____ Send me 2 years for $10.00 ____ Send me 3 years for $13.00

____ New Subscription ____ Renewal

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

This rate applies only to U.S.A., its possessions & Canada. Elsewhere $7.50 per year.

MAKE CHECK OR MONEY ORDER
PAYABLE TO COVEN 13

Camelot Publishing Company
2412 West 7th Street—Suite 301-302
Los Angeles, California