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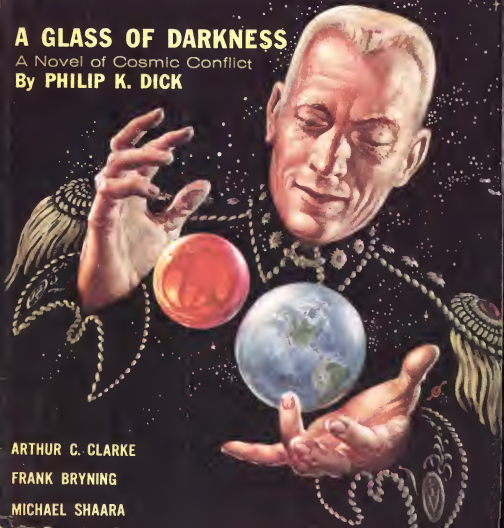
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A GLASS OF DARKNESS

A Novel of Cosmic Conflict

By PHILIP K. DICK



ARTHUR C. CLARKE

FRANK BRYNING

MICHAEL SHAARA

SATELLITE

science fiction

DECEMBER, 1956

Vol. 1, No. 2

A COMPLETE NOVEL

A GLASS OF DARKNESS

by PHILIP K. DICK

The Virginia town in which Ted Barton was born had vanished. In its place was a strange new community where golems walked and Wanderers shone by night, a strange battleground of cosmic forces that spanned time and the galaxy!

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Flashing through the star-studded heavens, her outer shell brilliantly burnished for easy recognition by Kelly Freas, the bulk of Satellite #2's instruments will be focussed upon the tiny mountain town of Millgate, Virginia, where recent strange manifestations have been reported at book length by Ground Observer Philip K. Dick.

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A GLASS OF DARKNESS



A COMPLETE SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

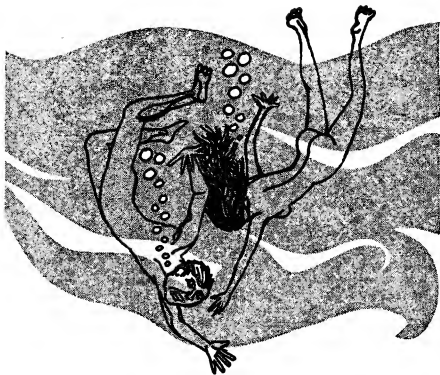
When a man finds himself listed as dead in his own home town, something must be very wrong—what Barton had to learn was that the entire galaxy was out of order!

by PHILIP K. DICK

IT WAS A hot day. Mirages flickered ahead atop every rise in the road, to vanish with the tar that flowed softly, noisily, beneath the wheels of the car. Broiling summer sun streamed down on the hilly farms, on the dark green acres of wild brush and tall pines, on the

upjutting cedars, on the softer laurels and youthfully erect poplars.

Ted and Peggy Barton were rapidly leaving Patrick County behind them. They were close to the border of Carroll, and the thrusting projection of Beaver Knob. The road itself was in bad repair. The



sleek yellow Packard coughed and hesitated, as it pushed up the steep Virginia hills.

"Ted, let's go back!" Peggy Barton groaned. "I've had all I can take." She twisted awkwardly to rummage for a can of beer on the area behind the seat. The metal of the can she picked up was warm. She dropped it back in the sack and settled sullenly against the door. Beads of perspiration sparkled on her cheeks, forehead and

upper lip. She folded her arms angrily.

"Later," Ted Barton murmured.

He had rolled down the window and hung as far out to the left as he could, a dazed, excited look on his face. His wife's voice made no impression on him—his complete attention was focussed on the road ahead, and upon what lay beyond the next rise of hills.

"Not much farther," he added, presently.

"You and your damned home town!"

"I wonder how the old place will look. You know, Peg, it's been eighteen years since I saw Millgate. I was only nine when the family moved away to Richmond. I wonder if anybody will remember me. Some of them should—my old teacher, Miss Baines—and Freddy, the Negro gardener who took care of our place. And Doctor Dolan. Maybe a few others."

"They're probably all dead by now." Peg pulled herself up in the seat and tugged fretfully at the open collar of her blouse. Her dark hair hung damply against her neck. Drops of perspiration slid down over her breasts beneath her clothing and over her pale skin. She had taken off her shoes and stockings and rolled up her sleeves, but, even so, she felt stifled with clothes. Her skirt was wrinkled and grimy with dust. Flies buzzed around inside the car. One landed on her gleaming arm and she slapped at it irritably.

"What a hell of a lousy way to spend a vacation!" she exclaimed. "We might as well have stayed in New York and enjoyed air-conditioning. At least in New York, there is something to drink."

Ahead of them, the hills lifted sharply. The Packard stuttered, then pushed on as Barton shifted into second gear. Immense peaks shouldered up against the sky's pale afternoon blue. They were

getting into the Appalachian massif. Barton's eyes widened with awe, as the familiar forests and mountains drew nearer, at sight of familiar peaks and valleys and twists of contour he had never expected to see again.

"Millgate lies on the floor of a small valley," he mused aloud, "with mountains on all sides. Only this one road goes in there, unless they've built more since I left. It's a small town, honey. Sleepy and ordinary—like a thousand other small towns. It has two hardware stores, a drugstore, a blacksmith shop—"

"Any bars?" asked Peggy. "Please say it has one good bar!"

"Not more than a few thousand people," Barton mused on, unhearing. "Not many cars come this way. The farms aren't much good around here—too many rocks. The soil's not much good. It snows a lot in the winter, and gets hot as hell in the summer."

"No kidding!" Peg muttered with calculated sarcasm. Her face had turned pale, and she looked almost green around the lips. "Ted, I think I'm going to be car-sick."

"We'll be there soon," Barton answered, unheeding. He hung farther out the window as if distrustful of the windshield, craning his neck and trying to make out the scenery ahead. "By golly, there's the old Morris farmhouse! How well I remember that! And

this cutoff." He turned from the main highway onto a narrow, tarred, high-crowned road. "Millgate is just over this ridge. We're almost there."

The Packard picked up speed under the eager pressure of his foot on the accelerator. It raced between dry fields and sagging fences. The tarred road was cracked and weed-covered, broken and in bad repair, narrow and sharp-turning.

Barton pulled his head back inside. "I *knew* I'd find my way back here," he said. He fumbled in his coat pocket and got out his lucky compass. "It led me back home, Peg! My dad gave me this when I was eight—got it at Berg's Jewelry Store, on Central Street, the only jewelry store in Millgate. I can always depend on it. I've carried this little compass around with me, and—"

"I know," Peg groaned wearily. "I've heard about it a million times."

Lovingly, Barton put the little silver compass away. He gripped the wheel tightly and peered ahead, his excitement growing as the car neared Millgate. "I know every inch of this road. You know, Peg, I remember once when—"

"You *remember!*" Peg exploded. "My God, I wish you'd forget at least *something!* I'm so tired of hearing all the details of your childhood, all the lovely facts about Millgate, Virginia—some-

times I feel as if I were married to Bridey Murphy!"

The road plunged around a steep curve, into a thick bank of haze. With his foot on the brake, Barton turned the nose of the Packard down, and they began to descend the farside of the hills.

"There she is," he said softly. "Look!"

Below them, lay a small valley, lost in the blue haze of afternoon. A stream thread its silver way through the dark green foliage, miraculously avoiding the spider web of dirt roads. Houses, a cluster in the center of the green valley, a church spire, Millgate itself—nestled securely in the somber bowl of mountains that surrounded the valley on all sides.

Barton's heart thudded with almost painful excitement. This was *his town*—the town where he was born, where he was raised and spent his childhood. He had never expected to see it again. While he and Peg were vacationing, driving through Baltimore, the idea had suddenly come upon him. Merely a quick cutoff at Richmond, and now he was about to see it again, see how it had changed—

Millgate loomed ahead. Clumps of dusty brown houses and stores lined the road—signs—a filling station—a café—a roadhouse with cars parked in the lot—a neon sign that announced GOLDEN GLOW BEER. The Packard swept past a drugstore, a dingy

post office, emerged abruptly in the center of the town.

Here were side streets, old houses, parked cars, a row of stores and a cheap hotel. People moved slowly along the sidewalks—farmers in blue-jeans, with, here and there, the white shirts of store owners and, everywhere, the gay prints of women's dresses. Here were a tea room, a furniture store, two grocery stores, a large market for fruits and vegetables.

Barton slowed down at a traffic light. He turned onto a side street and passed a small red-brick grammar school. A hot-looking cluster of boys was playing basketball on a dusty field. Beyond, were more houses, larger and better built. A fat middle-aged woman in a shapeless dress was watering her garden. They passed a team of horses.

"Well?" Peg demanded. "Say something! How does it look to you?"

Barton didn't answer. He couldn't. He gripped the wheel with one hand. He was again leaning out the window, his face intense, disbelieving. At the next cross-street, he turned to the right and emerged again on the highway. A moment later, the Packard was moving slowly back among the drugstores, markets and filling stations.

Peg felt a chill of uneasiness. There was something unreadable in her husband's face that fright-

ened her—an expression she had never seen before. "What's wrong?" she demanded. "Has it all changed? Doesn't it look familiar?"

Barton's lips moved. "It must be," he muttered. "I took the right turn. I remember the ridge and the hills."

Peg caught his arm. "Ted, what's wrong?"

Barton's face was waxen. "I've never seen *this* town before," he muttered huskily, almost inaudibly. "It's completely different." He turned to his wife, bewildered and scared. "This isn't the Millgate I remember. This isn't the town I grew up in!"

II

BARTON BROUGHT the car to a halt. With shaking hands, he pushed the door open and moved out onto the hot concrete.

Nothing was familiar. All was strange—alien. This town was not the Millgate he had known. He could *feel* the difference. He had never been here in his life.

The hardware store, next to the bar, was old, an ancient wood building, its frame leaning and sagging, its yellow paint all but peeled away. Through the dusty window, he could make out a dim interior, stocked with harnesses, farm equipment, tools and cans of paint, with faded calendars on the walls. In front, was a display of

fertilizers and chemical sprays. Dead insects lay in heaps in the corners. Here were spider webs and warped, cardboard signs. It was an old store—almost as old as humanity in the valley.

He pulled the rusty screen door open and entered. A little, dried-up old man sat behind the counter, like a wrinkled spider, crouched in the shadows on his stool. He wore steel-rimmed glasses, a soup-stained vest, red suspenders. A litter of papers and pencil stubs surrounded him. The interior of the store was chill and dim and incredibly cluttered. Barton made his way through the rows of dusty merchandise, up to the old man. His heart was hammering wildly.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, his voice strangely dry.

The old man looked up nearsightedly. "You want something?"

"How long have you been here?"

The old man raised a curious eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"This store! This place! How long have you been here?"

The old man was silent a moment. Then he lifted a gnarled hand and pointed to a plate on the ancient brass cash-register. On it, was inscribed the date 1927. The store had first opened for business twenty-nine years before.

Twenty-nine years ago, Barton had been a year old. This store had been here while he grew up, during his early years, as a child,

growing up in Millgate. But he had never seen this store before. And he had never seen this spidery old man.

"How long have you lived in Millgate?" Barton demanded.

"Forty years—a little more."

"Do you know me?"

The old man was emphatic. "Never seen you before in my life," he asserted. He lapsed into sulken silence and ignored Barton.

"I'm Ted Barton—Joe Barton's kid. Remember Joe Barton? Big guy, broad shoulders, black hair? Used to live on Pine Street. We had a house there. Don't you remember me?" Something close to terror knifed through him.

"The old park—where is it? I used to play there. The old Civil War cannon. The Douglas Street school—when did they tear it down? Stazy's Meat Market—what happened to Mrs. Stazy? Is she dead?"

The little old man got slowly up from his stool. "You must have sunstroke, young fellow. There ain't any Pine Street, not around here."

Barton sagged. "They changed the name?"

The old man rested his yellowed hands on the counter and faced Barton defiantly. "I been here more than forty years—longer than you been born. There never was any Pine Street around here, and no Douglas Street neither. There's a little park, but it

don't amount to much. Maybe you been out in the sun too long. Maybe you better go lie down, someplace." He eyed Barton with suspicion—underlaid with fear. "You go see Doc Meade, young fellow. You're kinda mixed up."

Dazed, Barton left the store. Blazing sunlight engulfed him as he reached the sidewalk. He wandered aimlessly along the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets. He eyed the old grocery store across the street. He strained to remember. What had been there? Something else—not a grocery store. What was it . . .

A shoe store—boots, saddles, leather goods! That was it. DOYLE'S LEATHER GOODS—*Hides tanned—luggage*. He had got a belt there, a present for his father, when he was seven.

He crossed the street and entered the grocery store. Flies buzzed around the piles of fruit and vegetables. Dusty canned goods lined the sagging shelves. There was a wheezing refrigerator in the back. A wire basket of eggs stood at the near end of the counter.

A fat middle-aged woman nodded pleasantly to him. "Afternoon," she said. "What can I do for you?"

Her smile was sympathetic. Barton said, almost abjectly, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I used to live here, in this town. I'm looking for something—a place."

"What place?" the woman asked.

"A store." His lips almost refused to frame the words. "Doyle's Leather Goods. Does the name mean anything to you?"

Perplexity crossed the woman's broad face. "Where was it? On Jefferson Street?"

"No," Barton muttered. "Right here on Central. Right where I'm standing."

Fear replaced perplexity. "I don't understand, mister. We've been here since I was a child. My family built this store in eighteen eighty-nine. I've been here all my life."

Barton moved back toward the door. "I see," he said, not seeing at all.

The woman moved anxiously after him. "Maybe you're in the wrong place," she offered. "Maybe you're looking for some other town. How long ago did you say . . . ?"

Her voice faded, as Barton pushed out onto the street. He came to a sign post and read it without comprehension—JEFFERSON STREET.

This wasn't Central. He was on the wrong street. Renewed hope flickered where hope had vanished. He had somehow got on the wrong street. Doyle's was on Central—and this was Jefferson. He looked quickly around. Which way was Central? He began to walk, slowly at first, then faster. He turned a corner and emerged on a

small side street. Here were a drab bar, a run-down hotel, a smoke shop.

He stopped a passer-by. "Where's Central?" he demanded. "I'm looking for Central Street. I must have got lost."

The man eyed him with half-hostile suspicion. "Go on!" he said derisively, and then hurried off. A drunk, lounging against the weather-beaten side of the bar, laughed loudly.

Barton felt close to terror. He stopped the next person, a young girl hurrying by with a package under her arm. "Central!" he gasped. "Where's Central Street?"

Giggling, the girl ran off. A few yards away, she halted and called back, "There isn't any Central Street!"

"No Central Street," an old woman muttered, shaking her head as she passed Barton.

The drunk laughed again, then belched. "No Central," he muttered. "They'll all tell you that, mister. Everybody knows there's no such street."

"There must be," Barton answered desperately. "*There must be!*"

A few minutes later he stood in front of the house he had been born in—only, it wasn't his house any more. It was a long rambling hotel, instead of the small white and red bungalow he vividly remembered. And the street wasn't Pine Street—it was Fairmount.

He came to the newspaper office. It wasn't the *Millgate Weekly* any more. Now it was the *Millgate Times*. And it wasn't a square grey concrete structure. It was a yellowed, uncertain-looking two-story edifice of boards and tar-paper, a converted apartment-house.

Barton entered.

"Can I help you?" the young man behind the counter asked pleasantly. "You wish to place an ad?" He fumbled for a pad. "Or is it a subscription?"

"I want information," Barton answered. "I want to see some old papers. For June, nineteen twenty-six."

The young man blinked. He was plump and soft-looking, wore a white shirt, open at the neck, neatly pressed charcoal slacks and carefully cut fingernails. "Nineteen twenty-six? I'm afraid anything older than a year is stored down in the—"

"*Get it!*" Barton ordered. He tossed a ten-dollar bill on the counter. "And hurry it up!"

The youth swallowed, hesitated, then scuttled through a doorway like a frightened rat.

Barton threw himself down at a table and lit a cigarette. As he was stubbing out the first butt and lighting a second, the youth reappeared, red faced and panting, lugging a massive board-bound book.

"Here it is." He dropped it on the table with a crash and straight-

ened up in relief. "Anything else you want to see, just—"

"Okay," Barton grunted. With shaking fingers, he began turning the ancient, yellowed sheets until he reached the issue of June 16, 1926, the day of his birth. He let it lie flat and turned to the *Births and Deaths* page, tracing the columns rapidly.

There it was, in black type on the yellow paper. His fingers touched it, his lips moved silently. But they had his father as Donald, not Joseph, Barton. And the address was wrong. 1386 Fairmount—instead of 1724 Pine. His mother's name was given as Sarah Barton, instead of Ruth. But the important part was there. Theodore Barton, weight six pounds, eleven ounces had been born at the County Hospital. But that was wrong, too. It was twisted, distorted. All garbled.

He closed the book and carried it over to the counter. "One more request," he told the neatly pressed youth. "Give me the papers for October, nineteen thirty-five."

"Sure," the youth answered. He hurried through the doorway. In a few moments, he was back with another album.

October 1935—this was the month when he and his family had sold their house and pulled out to move to Richmond. Barton sat down at the table and turned the pages slowly. October 9—there was his name. He scanned the col-

umn rapidly . . . and his heart seemed to stop beating. Life came to a complete standstill. There was no time, no motion. He read, in total disbelief—

SCARLET FEVER STRIKES AGAIN

Theodore Barton, 9, son of Donald and Sarah Barton, 1386 Fairmount Street, died at his home at seven o'clock this morning. This makes the second fatality reported, and the sixth victim in this area for a period of . . .

Mindlessly, Barton got to his feet. He didn't even remember leaving the newspaper office. The next thing he knew, he was outside on the blinding hot street. People moved past him unnoticed, as did buildings. He was walking. He turned a corner, passed unfamiliar stores. He stumbled, half-fell against a startled stranger, then moved blindly on.

Finally, he found himself approaching the yellow Packard. Peg emerged into sharp focus from the swirling haze around him. She gave a cry of wild relief.

"Ted!" She ran excitedly toward him, her breasts heaving beneath her sweat-stained blouse. "Good Lord, darling, what's the idea of running off and leaving me? You nearly scared me out of my wits!"

Barton got numbly behind the wheel. Silently, he inserted the key and started the motor.

Peg slid quickly in beside him.

"Ted, what *is* it? You're so *pale!* Are you—sick?"

He drove aimlessly out into the street. He didn't see the people and cars. The Packard gained speed rapidly, much too rapidly. Vague shapes seemed to swarm about him.

"Where are we going?" Peg demanded. "Are we getting out of this place?"

"Yes." He nodded slowly. "Out of this place."

Peg almost collapsed with relief. "Thank God! Will I be *glad* to get back to civilization!" She touched his arm, concerned by his manner and appearance. "Do you want me to drive? Maybe you'd better rest a little. You look as if something dreadful had happened. Can't you tell me about it?"

Barton didn't answer. He didn't even hear her. The headline seemed to hang a few feet in front of his face, the black type, yellow paper.

SCARLET FEVER STRIKES AGAIN

Theodore Barton . . . died . . . this morning . . .

Ted Barton hadn't moved out of Millgate, on October 9, 1935. He had died of scarlet fever. But it wasn't possible! He was alive. Sitting here in his Packard beside his grimy, perspiring wife. *Ergo sum.*

But maybe he wasn't Ted Barton. Maybe he was a victim of false memories, even to his name,

to his identity. The whole contents of his mind—everything. Falsified, by someone or something. His hands gripped the wheel desperately. But if he wasn't Ted Barton—*then who was he?*

He reached for his lucky compass. He needed the familiar to dispel this nightmare. His compass—where was it? Even that was gone! No—*Not gone.* There was something else in his pocket.

His hand brought out a tiny bit of dry bread, hard and stale—a wad of dry bread instead of his silver compass!

III

PETER TRILLING WATCHED quietly, as the other children played in the dust by the side of the porch. They were intent on their game. Mary was carefully kneading and shaping brown lumps of clay into vague shapes. Noaks sweated furiously to keep up with her. Dave and Walter had already finished theirs and were resting. Abruptly, Mary tossed her black hair, arched her slim body, and set down a clay goat.

"See?" she demanded. "Where's yours?"

Noaks hung his head. His hands were too slow and clumsy to keep up with the girl's flying fingers. Mary had already swept up her clay goat and was rapidly reshaping it into a horse.

"Look at mine," Noaks mut-

tered. He stood a clumsily-formed airplane on its tail and gave it an accompanying noise with wet lips. "See? Pretty good, huh?"

Dave snorted. "That's lousy—look at this!" He pushed his clay sheep forward, close to Walter's dog.

Peter Trilling watched silently. Aloof from the other children, he sat curled up on the bottom step of the porch, his arms folded, his dark brown eyes liquid and huge. His tousled, sandy hair hung in a ragged fringe around his wide forehead. His cheeks were deeply tanned from the hot, midsummer sun. He was a small child, thin and long of limb. His neck was bony, and his ears were strangely shaped. He was not a child who talked much—he liked to sit and watch the others.

"What's that?" Noaks demanded.

"A cow." Mary shaped the legs of her little animal and set it on the ground, beside Noaks' airplane.

Noaks regarded it with awe; then drew back unhappily, one hand on his airplane. Then he lifted it and, hesitantly, tossed it through the air. It fell heavily to the grass, knocking one of its wings loose in the process.

Doctor Meade and Mrs. Trilling came down the stairs of the boardinghouse together. Peter drew aside, out of the Doctor's way. He carefully avoided contact with the

doctor's blue pinstriped trouser leg, with his black shiny shoes.

"Okay," Doctor Meade said briskly to his daughter, as he glanced at his gold pocket watch. "Time to go back up to Shady House."

Mary got reluctantly to her feet. "Can't I stay?" she asked eagerly.

Doctor Meade put an affectionate arm around his daughter. "Get going, you little Wanderer," he said with mock-sternness. "Into the car with you."

He turned back to Mrs. Trilling, again the professional physician. "There's nothing to worry about," he told her. "Your trouble is probably pollen from the broom plants. They're flowering, now."

"Those yellow things?" Mrs. Trilling dabbed at her streaming eyes. Her plump face was swollen and red, eyes half-closed. "They didn't do it last year!"

"Allergies are strange things," Doctor Meade said vaguely. He chewed meditatively on the stump of his cigar. Then, more sharply, "Mary, I told you to get in the car." He opened the door and slid in behind the wheel. "Give me a call, Mrs. Trilling, if those anti-histamine pills don't do the trick. I'll probably be over tonight for dinner, anyhow."

Nodding and wiping her eyes, Mrs. Trilling disappeared inside the boardinghouse, moving resignedly toward the hot kitchen and the piles of unwashed dishes, left

over from lunch. Mary moved sullenly toward the station wagon, hands deep in the pockets of her jeans.

"That ruins the game," she muttered.

Peter slid off his step. "I'll play," he said quietly. He squatted down and picked up Mary's discarded clay. Rapidly, he pushed the cow into a shapeless mass, then began skilfully to reform it. Noaks and Dave and Walter regarded him with outraged incredulity.

"Who said *you* could play?" Dave demanded angrily.

"It's my yard," Peter answered mildly.

His clay statuette was all but finished. He set it down in the dust beside Dave's sheep and the crude dog Walter had formed. Noaks continued to fuss with his airplane, ignoring Peter's creation.

"What is it?" Walter demanded angrily. "Doesn't look like anything."

"It's a man."

"A man—that's a *man*?"

"Go *on*!" Dave said scornfully. "You're too young to play. Go on inside, and your mother'll give you a cookie."

Peter didn't answer. He was concentrating on his clay man, his brown eyes large and intense. His small body was utterly rigid. He leaned forward, his face down, his lips moving faintly.

For a moment nothing happened. Then . . .

Dave suddenly shrieked and scrambled away. Walter cursed loudly, his face turning white. Noaks stopped fussing with his airplane. His mouth fell open, and he sat there, frozen.

The little clay man had stirred. Slowly, at first, then more energetically, he moved one foot awkwardly after the other. He flexed his arms, examined his body—and then, without warning, dashed away from the boys.

Peter laughed, a pure, high-pitched trill. He reached out quickly and snatched back the desperately fleeing clay figure. It struggled and wriggled frantically, as he drew it close to him.

"*Gosh!*" Dave whispered.

Peter rolled the little man briskly between his palms. Then he kneaded the soft clay in a shapeless lump. Satisfied, he pulled it apart. Rapidly, expertly, he formed two clay figures, two little clay men, each half the size of the first. He set them down, leaned calmly back to wait.

First one, then the other, stirred. They got up, tested their arms and legs, began rapidly to move. One ran off in one direction; the other hesitated, then darted after his companion, finally reversed his course, past Noaks, toward the street.

"*Get him!*" Peter ordered sharply. He snatched up the first manikin, leaped quickly to his feet, and hurried after the other. It ran

desperately, its tiny clay legs churning—straight toward Doctor Meade's station wagon.

As the station wagon moved away, the miniature figure made a frantic, final leap. Its tiny arms windmilled wildly, as it tried, in desperation, to find purchase on the smooth metal fender. The station wagon picked up speed, as it moved out into traffic, and the tiny figure was left behind, still waving its arms in futility, seeking to catch hold of a surface already gone.

Peter overtook it. His foot came down hard, and the clay man was squashed into a shapeless blob of moist clay.

Walter and Dave and Noaks came slowly over—they approached in a wide, cautious circle. "You got him?" Noaks demanded uncertainly.

"Sure, I got him," said Peter. He was already scraping the clay off his shoe, his small face serene and smooth. "Of course, I got him. He belonged to me, didn't he?"

The boys were silent in the face of unanswerable logic. Peter could sense their fear. He could all but smell it, and this puzzled him. What was there to be afraid of? He opened his mouth to speak to them—but, at that moment, a dusty yellow Packard braked to a stop on the street beyond, and he turned his attention to it, the clay figures forgotten.

The motor clicked into silence,

and the door opened. Peter watched a man climb slowly out. To the boy's eyes, he was rather good-looking, with black, wind-tossed hair, heavy eyebrows and white teeth. Lines of strain and fatigue showed at the corners of his mouth and eyes. His grey, double-breasted suit was rumpled and stained, his brown shoes were scuffed, his tie was twisted to one side of his collar vent. His eyes were swollen and road-bleary. He came slowly toward the boys, focussed his attention on them with an effort and said, with a nod toward the dwelling behind them, "Is this the boardinghouse?"

None of the youngsters gave him an answer. They could see that the man was a stranger. Everybody in town knew Mrs. Trilling's boardinghouse—therefore, this man was from Somewhere Else. His car had New York license plates—therefore, he was from New York. None of them had ever seen him before. He talked with a strange accent, a rapid, clipped diction that sounded harsh and vaguely unpleasant to ears attuned to the friendlier, softer Virginia speech.

Peter stirred slightly. "What do you want?"

"A place—a room." The stranger dug into a pocket and produced a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He lit up shakily—once, the cigarette almost got away from him. All this the boys

saw with mild interest—and mild distaste.

"I'll go tell my mother," Peter said, at last.

He turned his back on the man and strolled deliberately to the front porch. Without looking back, he entered the cool, dim house, turned his steps toward the sounds of dish-washing that came from the big kitchen in back.

Mrs. Trilling peered around peevishly at her son. "What do you want?" she asked irritably. "Keep out of the ice-box. You can't have anything until dinner time—I told you that!"

"There's a man outside. He wants a room." Peter added, "He's a stranger."

Mabel Trilling dried her hands quickly, her pollen-swollen face suddenly animated. "Don't just stand there!" she said excitedly. "Go tell him to come in! Is he alone?"

"Just him."

Mabel Trilling hurried past her son, outside onto the porch and down the sagging steps. The man was still there, to her relief. She breathed a silent prayer of thanks. People just didn't seem to come through Millgate, any more. The boardinghouse was only half-filled, its only paying guests a few retired old men, the town librarian, and a clerk. "What can I do for you?" she demanded breathlessly.

"I want a room," Ted Barton answered wearily. "Just a room.

I don't care what it's like, or how much it costs."

"Do you want meals? If you eat with us, you'll save fifty per cent over what you'd have to pay down at the *Steak House*, and my meals are every bit as good as those tough little dry things they try to push off on you, especially a gentleman from out of town. You're from New York?"

"Yes, I'm from New York." His voice was hoarse with fatigue.

"I hope you'll like Millgate," Mrs. Trilling babbled nervously on, drying her hands on her apron. "It's a quiet little town, we don't ever have any trouble of any kind. Are you in business, Mr. . . ."

"Ted Barton."

"You're in business, Mr. Barton? I suppose you're down here for a rest. A lot of New York people leave their places in the summer, don't they? I guess it gets pretty awful, up there. You don't mind telling me what line you're in, do you? Are you all by yourself? Nobody else with you?" Her fluttering fingers brushed his coat sleeve. "Come on inside, and I'll show you your room. How long did you figure to stay?"

Barton followed her, up the steps and onto the porch. He said, "I don't know. Maybe quite a while—maybe not long."

"You're alone?"

"My wife may join me later—if I stay here very long. I left her back in Martinsville."

"Your business?" Mrs. Trilling repeated, as they climbed the worn-carpeted stairs to the second floor.

"Insurance." Silence was easy with Mrs. Trilling.

"This is your room—facing the hills," she continued nervously. "You'll get a nice view. Aren't the hills lovely?" She pulled aside the plain white curtains, washed many times. "Ever seen such lovely hills in your life?"

"Yes," Barton said patiently, wondering if the torrent of words would ever cease. "They're nice." He moved aimlessly around the room, touching the shabby iron bed, the tall white dresser, the picture on the wall. "This will be all right. How much?" he asked diffidently.

Mrs. Trilling's eyes darted craftily past him. "You're going to eat with us, of course. Two meals a day—lunch and dinner." She licked her lips. "Forty dollars a week—in advance."

Barton fumbled in his pocket for his wallet. He didn't seem disposed to argue. He peeled some bills from his wallet and handed them to her without a word.

"Thank you," Mrs. Trilling breathed ecstatically. She backed quickly out of the room. "Dinner's at seven. You missed lunch, but, if you want, I can—"

"Don't bother." Barton shook his head. "It won't be necessary. I've already had lunch, thank

you." He turned his back on her and gazed moodily out the window.

Mrs. Trilling's footsteps faded down the hall.

IV

BARTON LIT a cigarette. He felt vaguely sick at his stomach, and his head throbbed dully from the driving. After leaving Peg at the hotel in Martinsville, he had sped back to Millgate as fast as the Packard would carry him. He had had to come back. He had to stay here, even if it took years. He had to find out who he was—and this was the only place there was any chance of learning the truth of his identity.

Barton smiled ironically. Even here, there didn't seem to be much of a chance. A boy had died of scarlet fever twenty years ago. Nobody remembered him. A minor incident—hundreds of kids died, people came and went. One death, one name out of many . . .

The door of the room opened.

Barton turned quickly. A boy stood there, small and thin, regarding him with immense, questioning brown eyes. With a start, Barton recognized him as the landlady's son.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "What's the idea of coming in here without knocking?" For some reason, Barton felt oddly on the defensive.

The boy closed the door after him. For a moment, he hesitated, then abruptly asked, "Who are you?"

Barton stiffened in anger. "Barton," he said curtly. "Ted Barton."

The boy seemed satisfied. He walked all around Barton, examining him from every side. "How did you get through?" he demanded. "Most people don't get through. There must be a reason."

"Through?" Barton was bewildered. "Through what?"

"Through the barrier." Suddenly the boy withdrew inwardly. His eyes appeared actually to film over. Barton realized his young visitor had let something slip, something he hadn't meant to tell.

"What barrier? Where?" he asked sharply.

The boy shrugged, then said, "The mountains, of course. It's a long way. The road's bad. Why did you come here? What are you doing?"

It might have been just childish curiosity. Or was it more? Barton was unable to decide. The boy was odd-looking, thin and bony, with huge eyes, a shock of sandy hair falling in unkempt disorder over his unusually wide forehead. It was an intelligent face, sensitive—for a boy living in an out-of-the-way town in southwestern Virginia.

"Maybe," Barton said slowly,

"I have ways to get past the barrier."

The reaction came quickly. The boy's body grew suddenly tensed. His eyes lost their dull film and began to gleam nervously. He moved back from Barton, uneasy and apparently shaken.

"Oh yeah?" he muttered. But his voice lacked conviction. "What sort of ways? You must have crawled through a weak place."

"I drove down the road," said Barton. "On the main highway."

The oversized brown eyes flickered uncertainly. The childish treble said, "Sometimes the barrier isn't there. You must have come through when it wasn't there."

Barton was beginning to feel uneasy. He was bluffing, and his bluff had been called. The boy knew what the barrier was, but Barton didn't. Fear touched him with fingers of ice. Come to think of it, he *hadn't* seen any other cars either coming or going from Millgate. The road was so run-down as to be almost unusable. Weeds covered it with a dull-green carpet—the surface was dry and cracked, and there was no traffic at all. Just hills and fields and sagging fences. Maybe, he thought, he could learn something from this boy.

"How long," he asked cautiously, "have you known about the barrier?"

The boy shrugged again, said,

"What do you mean? I've always known about it."

"Does everybody else around here know about it?"

The boy laughed his scorn. "Of course not!" he said contemptuously. "If they knew—" He broke off, the veil again slipping over his big brown eyes.

Barton had lost his momentary advantage. The boy was on safe ground again, answering questions instead of asking them. He knew more than Barton, and they both realized it.

"You're a pretty smart youngster," said Barton. "How old are you?"

"Ten."

"What's your name?"

"Peter."

"You've always lived here—in Millgate?"

"Sure." His small chest swelled. "Where else?"

Barton hesitated. "Have you ever been outside of town—on the other side of the barrier?"

The boy frowned. His face worked. Barton sensed he had struck some sensitive nerve. Peter began to pace restlessly around the room, his hands in the pockets of his faded blue jeans.

"Sure," he said, without conviction. "Sure I have—lots of times."

"How do you get across?" Barton felt close to victory in this strange duel.

"I have ways." The lad looked stubborn.

"Let's compare ways," Barton said promptly. But there was no bite. His gambit was noted and warily declined.

"Let's see your watch," the boy asked. "How many jewels does it have?"

Barton removed his wristwatch cautiously and passed it over. "Twenty-one jewels," he said.

"It's nice." Peter turned it over and around. He ran his delicate fingers over the surface, then passed it back. "Does everybody in New York have a watch like that?"

"Everybody who can afford one."

After a moment, Peter said, "I can stop time. Not very long—maybe four hours at the outside, someday, it will be a whole day, though. What do you think of that?"

Barton didn't know what to think of it. He said, "What else can you do? Stopping time's not so much."

"I have power over *its* creatures."

"Over whose creatures?" Barton's puzzlement grew apace.

Peter shrugged, replied, "*It's* creatures. You know, the one on this side—the one with its hands stuck out. Not the one with the bright hair, like metal—the other one. Didn't you see it?"

"No." Barton was wondering which of them was sane.

Peter appeared puzzled. "You

must have seen it," he insisted. "You must have seen both of them. They're there all the time. Sometimes, I go up the road and sit on a ledge I have. From there, I can see them good."

"Maybe you'll take me along, some time."

"It's nice." The boy's cheeks grew pinker. In his enthusiasm, he had lost his suspicion. "On a clear day, you can see both of them easily. Especially *him*—at the far end." Unexpectedly, he giggled, then said, "It's a funny thing—at first, seeing him like that gave me the willies. But I got used to it."

"Do you know their names?" Barton asked hopefully.

"No." Peter's blush deepened. "But sometime, I'm going to find out. There *must* be a way. I've asked some of the first-level things, but they don't seem to know. I even made up a special golem with an extra-large brain, but it couldn't tell me anything.

"Maybe you can help me with that. How are you on the clay? Are you experienced?" He came close to Barton and lowered his voice, added, "Nobody around here knows *anything*. There's actual opposition. I have to work completely alone. If I had some help . . ."

"Yes?" Barton asked when the boy paused.

"I'd like to trace one of the Wanderers—see where they come from and how they do it. If I had

help, maybe I could learn to do it, too."

Barton was paralyzed. What had he stumbled on? What were *Wanderers*—and what did they do to arouse a small boy's intense curiosity. He said, "Right. When two of us work together . . ." he began weakly, but Peter cut him off.

"Let's see your hand." Peter took hold of Barton's wrist and examined his palm carefully. Abruptly, he backed away. The color died from his cheeks. "You were lying!" he said in a sudden burst of fury. "You don't know anything!" Panic flashed across his face. "You don't know anything at all!"

"Sure I do," said Barton, but there was no conviction in his tone or manner. On his young visitor's face, surprise and fear had turned to disgust and—hostility. He turned and pulled open the hall door.

"You don't know anything," he repeated, half in anger, half with contempt. He paused briefly to add, "But I know something."

"What sort of thing?"

"Something you don't know." A veiled, secretive smile flitted across the smooth young face—an evasive, cunning look.

"What is it?" Barton demanded hoarsely. "What do you know that I don't know?"

He didn't expect the answer he got. Before he could react, the

door had shut with a bang, and the boy was racing away down the corridor. Barton stood unmoving, hearing the echoing clatter of heels against the worn steps.

The boy ran outside, onto the porch. Under Barton's window, he cupped his hands and shouted at the top of his lungs, in a shrill, penetrating yell, that broke against Barton's ears, a shattering repetition of the same words, spoken in exactly the same way.

"I know who you are," the words came harshly. "I know who you *really* are!"

Certain that the man wasn't following him, and mildly satisfied with the effect of his words, Peter Trilling made his way through the rubble and debris behind the house. He passed the pigpens, opened the gate to the back field, closed it carefully after him, then headed toward the barn.

The barn smelled of hay and manure. It was hot. The air was stale and dead, a vast blanket of buzzing afternoon heat. He climbed the loft ladder cautiously, one eye on the blazing doorway—there was still a chance the stranger might have followed him.

In the loft, he perched expertly athwart a beam and waited for a time, recovering his breath and going over, in his mind, what had happened.

He had made a mistake—a bad mistake. The stranger had learned plenty from him—and he had

learned nothing. At least, he hadn't learned anything *much*. The stranger was an enigma, in many ways. Peter would have to be careful, to watch his step, to go slow. But the newcomer *might* turn out to be valuable.

Peter got to his feet and found the flashlight hanging from its rusty nail, above his head, where two huge beams crossed. He turned it on—its yellow light cut a path into the depths and crannies of the loft.

They were still there, exactly as he had left them. Nobody ever came here—it was his work chamber, his laboratory, his study. He sat down on the moldy hay and laid the light beside him. Then he reached out and carefully lifted the first cage.

The rat's eyes glittered, red and tiny, peering out through its thick pelt of matted grey fur. It shifted its paws uneasily and pulled away, as he slid aside the door of the cage and reached in for it with quick, grubby fingers.

"Come on," he whispered, almost crooning. "Don't be afraid."

Gently, he drew the rat out and held its quivering body in his hands, while he stroked its fur soothingly. The long whiskers twitched—the never-ceasing movements of its nose grew intense, as it sniffed his fingers and sleeve.

"Nothing to eat, not right now," Peter informed it. "I just want to see how big you're getting."

He pushed the rat back into its cage and closed the wire door. Then he turned the light from one cage to the next, focussing its circle of light on each of the quivering grey forms that huddled against the wire, their eyes red, their noses twitching constantly. They were all there, all in good shape, all fat and healthy. Far back into the depths of the loft, row after row of the cages extended—heaped and stacked and piled on one another.

He got up, dusted hay from his shorts and examined the spider jars, aligned in even, precise rows on the overhead shelves. The insides of the jars were thick with webs, in tangled heaps, like the matted grey hair of old women. He could see the spiders inside moving sluggishly, their quickness dulled by the heat. The fat globes of their hairy bodies reflected the beam of the flashlight. He dipped into the moth-box and withdrew a handful of little, dead insect bodies. Expertly, he fed each jar, taking care that no spider escaped.

Everything appeared to be in order. Peter clicked off the flashlight, hung it up on its nail. He paused for a moment to study the blazing doorway, then climbed back down the ladder.

At the workbench below, he picked up a pair of pliers and continued work on the glass-windowed snake box. It was coming along pretty well, he thought, con-

sidering that it was his first effort in this direction. Later on, when he had more experience, he wouldn't take so long.

He measured the frame and computed the size of the pane of glass he would need. Where, he wondered, could he find a window no one would miss? He thought of the smokehouse—it had been abandoned since the roof developed a leak, only last spring. He put down his pencil, picked up the yardstick and hurried out of the barn, into the bright sunlight.

As he raced across the field, his heart thumped with excitement. Things were coming along beautifully. Slowly, surely, he was gaining an edge. Of course, this stranger might upset the balance adversely. Peter would have to make sure his weight wasn't thrown on the wrong side of the Scale. How much that weight would count for, there was no way of telling—yet. Offhand, Peter guessed, it would count for very little.

But what was a stranger doing in Millgate—and at just this time? Vague tendrils of doubt plucked at the boy's mind. Ted Barton must have come for a reason. Peter would have to make inquiries. If necessary, the stranger could be neutralized. But it might be possible to get him on the—

Something buzzed close to his ear. The boy suddenly shrieked and threw himself to one side. A

blinding pain stabbed his neck, another seared his arm. He rolled over and over on the hot grass, screaming and flailing his arms desperately. Waves of terror beat at him—he tried frantically to bury himself in the hard soil. As suddenly as it had come, the buzzing faded, then ceased. Once again, there was only the sound of the wind. He was alone. He was safe.

Trembling with terror, Peter raised his head and opened his eyes. His whole body shuddered. Shock waves rolled up and down his spine, through his body. His arm and neck burned horribly. The enemy had got him in two places.

But, thank God—they were on their own! They were still unorganized.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, looked around warily. There were no others. Peter cursed wildly in his childish treble—what a fool he had been to come blundering out in the open, offguard! Suppose a whole swarm of the stinging monsters had found him—not merely two!

He decided to let the window go for the moment, and headed back toward the barn. It had been a close call. Maybe, next time, he wouldn't get off so lightly. The two that attacked him had got away—he hadn't managed to crush them. They'd carry back word—*she* would know. *She*

would have something to gloat about. An easy victory. *She* would get pleasure out of it. For a moment, Peter was close to tears.

He was gaining the edge, but it wasn't safe, not yet. He still had to be careful. He could easily overplay his hand—he could lose everything he had built up so laboriously, lose it in a single second.

Worse—if he lost, it would send the Scales tipping back, like a file of falling dominoes, all along the line. The entire fabric was so interwoven . . .

He began to search for some mud, to put on the bee-stings.

V

"WHAT'S THE MATTER, Mr. Barton?" a genial voice asked, close to Ted's ear. "Sinus trouble? Most people who hold onto their nose like that have sinus trouble."

Barton roused himself. He had almost fallen asleep over his plate at the table. His coffee had cooled to a scummy brown—the greasy home-fried potatoes were hardening fast.

"Beg pardon?" he muttered, still only half awake.

The man sitting next to him pushed his chair back and wiped his mouth with his napkin. He was plump and well-dressed, a middle-aged man in a dark blue pinstripe suit and white shirt. He wore an attractive foulard tie, and

a heavy ring gleamed on one of his thick white fingers.

"My name's Meade—Ernest Meade," he went on. "It's the way you hold your head." He smiled a gold-toothed professional smile. "I'm a doctor—maybe I can help."

"I'm just tired," Barton said, covering a yawn.

"You only just arrived here, didn't you?" Dr. Meade asked amiably. "This is a good place you're staying in. I eat here once in a while—when I'm too lazy to cook my own meals. Mrs. Trilling doesn't mind serving me, do you, Mrs. T.?"

At the far end of the table, Mrs. Trilling nodded vague agreement. Her face was less swollen than it had been that afternoon. With nightfall and the dying breezes, the pollen didn't carry as far. Most of the other boarders had left their places and ambled out onto the screened-in porch, there to sit in the cool darkness and chat and observe until bedtime.

"What brings you to Millgate, Mr. Barton?" the doctor asked politely. He fumbled in his coat pocket and pulled out a slim, brown cigar. "Not very many people come this way, any more. It's a strange thing—we used to get a lot of traffic—but now it's died to nothing." He paused to ponder the oddity. "Come to think of it, you're

about the first new face I've seen in quite a spell."

Barton digested this information. A flicker of interest warmed and wakened him. Meade was a physician. It was possible that he might know something. Barton finished his coffee, put down his thick china cup and asked cautiously, "Have you been practicing here long, Doctor?"

"All my life." Dr. Meade made a faint, pointing gesture with his thumb. "I have a private hospital, at the top of the rise—Shady House, it's called." He lowered his voice. "The town doesn't provide any sort of decent medical care for its citizens. So I try to help out as best I can—I built my own hospital and operate it at my own expense."

Barton chose his words carefully. "There were some relatives of mine who lived here—a long time ago," he said.

"Barton?" Meade sounded reflective. "How long ago was that?"

"Oh—say twenty years ago." Covertly watching the doctor's florid, serenely competent face, Barton continued, "Donald and Sarah Barton were their names. They had a son—he was born in nineteen twenty-six."

"A son?" Meade looked interested. "I seem to recall something about it. Twenty-six, you say? I probably brought him into this world. I was practicing, then. Of course. I was a lot younger, in

those days. But weren't we all . . . ?"

"The boy died," Barton said slowly. "He died in nineteen thirty-five—from scarlet fever. Something about a contaminated water hole."

The physician's florid face lost some of its serenity to recollection of evil. "By God! I remember that. Why, I had that well closed—closing it was my idea. I forced them to seal it up. *Those* Bartons were relatives of yours? That boy was related to you?" He puffed angrily on his cigar, a man who hated illness and its causes as other men hate Germans, or Negroes, or Japanese, or just foreigners.

"I remember it all too well—that was a bad time here. Three or four kids died, before it was over. Your boy's name was Barton? It seems to me I recall him—related to you, you say?" Almost visibly he culled his memory for keys to the past. "There was one little shaver—rather a sweet boy. He had dark hair—like yours—the same general physiognomy. Come to think of it, I knew you reminded me of someone."

Barton's breath caught in his throat. "You *remember* him?" He leaned toward the doctor intently. "You *actually* saw him die?"

"I sam them *all* die," said Dr. Meade, his anger returning. "That was before Shady House was built—over at the old County Hospi-

tal. Christ, what a pest-hole! No wonder they died. Filthy, incompetent—it was on account of that epidemic that I built my own place." He shook his head. "We could have saved them all, nowadays—easily. But it's too late now." He touched Barton briefly on the arm. "I'm sorry. But you couldn't have been very old then, yourself. What relation were you to the boy?"

A good question, Barton thought to himself. Oh, an excellent question! He would have given no more than his right arm for the answer.

"Come to think of it," Doctor Meade said slowly, as much to himself as to Barton, "it seems to me that child's name was the same as yours. Isn't your Christian name Theodore?"

Barton nodded. "That's right."

The florid brow wrinkled in perplexity. "The same as yours! I'll be damned! I *knew* I'd heard the name, when Mrs. Trilling told me."

Barton's hands tightened their grip upon the edge of the table. "Doctor," he said hoarsely, "is Theodore Barton buried here in town? Is his grave still here?"

Dr. Meade nodded slowly. "Sure," he said. "It's over in the regular City Cemetery." He shot Barton a shrewd glance. "You want to visit it? You'll have no trouble doing that. Is that what

you came here for—to visit his grave?”

“Not exactly,” Barton answered woodenly.

At the end of the table, beside his mother, sat Peter Trilling. His neck was swollen and angry red above his open collar. His right arm was bandaged with a strip of dirty gauze. He looked sullen and unhappy.

An accident? Barton wondered. Or had something bitten or stung him? Barton watched the boy's thin fingers pluck idly at a piece of bread. *I know who you are*, the boy had shouted. *I know who you really are*. Did Peter know—or was it just a boy's boast? A conceited threat, empty and meaningless?

“Look here Barton,” Doctor Meade said heartily. “I don't mean to pry into your affairs—that's not my right. But there's something bothering you. It sticks out all over you. You didn't come here for a rest.”

“You're right, of course,” Barton told him.

“You want to tell me what it is?” The physician asked gently. “I'm a lot older than you—and I've lived in this town a long time now. I was born here, grew up here—I know everybody around. I brought a lot of them into this world.”

Was this a person he could talk to, safely and with reasonable expectation of being understood?

Was this a possible friend? “Doctor,” Barton said slowly, “that boy who died was related to me—but I don't know just how.” He rubbed his forehead wearily. “I don't understand any of it—but I've got to find out what I am, or was, to that boy.”

“Why?” The question was probing, but not insistent.

“I can't tell you that.” Barton sighed and shook his dark head.

Doctor Meade produced a silver toothpick from a little engraved box and began thoughtfully to remove fragments of Mrs. Trilling's fare from his molars. “Did you go down to the newspaper office?” he asked. “Nat Tate might be able to give you some help—old records, pictures, newspapers. And at the police station, you can go over a lot of city records—taxes and duns, assessments and fines. Of course, if you're trying to trace a family relationship, the best place is the County Courthouse.”

“What I'm after is here in Millgate,” said Barton. “Not at the County Courthouse.” After a moment, he added, “It has to do with the whole town, I'm afraid—not just with Ted Barton. I have to know about *all* of this.” He moved his hand in a tired circle. “It's all involved, somehow—tied in with Ted Barton—the *other* Ted Barton, I mean.”

Doctor Meade pondered the remark. Then, abruptly, he put his silver toothpick away and got to

his feet. "Come on out on the porch with me, Barton. You haven't met Miss James, have you?"

Something plucked at the strings of Barton's memory. His weariness fled. He glanced quickly up at Dr. Meade. "I know that name," he said. "I've heard it before."

Doctor Meade was watching him oddly. "Quite probably," he agreed. "She was sitting across from us, during dinner." He held the porch door open. "She's the librarian over at the Free Library. She knows all about Millgate."

The porch was dark. It took a couple of minutes for Barton to get adjusted. Several human shapes, barely thus recognizable in the evening darkness, were sitting around in old-fashioned wicker chairs and rockers, or sharing a long sagging couch. They were smoking, dozing, talking softly, enjoying the evening coolness in the quiet fashion of well-fed, elderly folk anywhere. The porch was protected by wire screens. No insects were allowed entry to immolate themselves on the single electric bulb that glowed faintly in a far corner.

"Miss James," Doctor Meade said, "This is Ted Barton. I think maybe you can be of help to him. Mr. Barton seems to have a few problems."

Miss James smiled up at Barton through thick, rimless glasses that reflected the dim light like twin moons. "I'm glad to meet you,"

she said in a soft voice. "You're new around here, aren't you?"

Barton seated himself on the arm of the couch. "I'm from New York," he answered.

"You're the first person to come through here in years," Doctor Meade observed. He blew a vast cloud of cigar smoke into the porch darkness. The red glow of his cigar lit up the gloom rhythmically. "The road's practically ready to fall apart," Doctor Meade went on. "Nobody comes this way any more. We see the same old faces, month after month, year after year. But we have our work. I have the hospital—I like to learn new things, experiment, work with my patients. I have about ten fairly dependent people up there. Once in awhile, we get in a few of the town wives to help. Right now, though, it's pretty quiet."

"Do you know anything about a—barrier?" Barton asked Miss James abruptly.

"A 'barrier'?" Doctor Meade demanded. He sounded puzzled. "What kind of a barrier, son?"

"You've never heard of it?" Barton asked.

Doctor Meade shook his head slowly, thoughtfully. "No, not that I can think of."

"Nor I, either," Miss James echoed in awkwardly proper librarian English. "In what connection?"

No one else was listening to them. The others were dozing and murmuring together at the far end

of the porch. Mrs. Trilling, the remaining boarders, Peter, Doctor Meade's daughter Mary, a thin larding of neighbors.

"What do you know about the Trilling boy?" Barton asked.

Meade grunted. "Seems to be healthy enough," he said. "Bright enough, too."

"Have you ever examined him?" Barton couldn't give up at this point.

"Of course," Meade answered, a trifle testily. "I've examined everybody in this town. He has a high IQ—seems to be an alert little jackanapes. Plays a lot by himself." He paused, added, "Frankly, I never cared much for precocious children."

"But he's not interested in books," Miss James protested. "He never comes to the library."

Barton was silent for a time, seeking a new line of attack. Then he asked, "What would it mean if somebody said, 'The one on the far side—the one with his hands out.' Does that mean anything to you?"

Miss James and Dr. Meade appeared genuinely baffled. "Sounds like a game," Dr. Meade muttered.

"No," Barton answered. "Not a game." He meant it. "Let it go. Please forget I said anything."

Miss James leaned toward him. "Mr. Barton, I may be wrong, but I receive the distinct impression that you think there's something

odd around here—something very important, right here in Millgate. Am I right?"

Barton's lips twisted. "There's something going on," he said. "Something beyond human awareness."

"Here—in Millgate?" Her disbelief lay patent in her voice.

Words forced their way out of Barton—he had blocked them off too long. "I've got to find out!" he said, almost fiercely. "I can't go on like this. Somebody in this town must know. You can't all sit around and pretend everything is perfectly ordinary. *Somebody* in this town knows the real story."

"The real story about what?" Dr. Meade rumbled, sounding perplexed, a little uneasy.

"About me!" Barton was emphatic.

Now they were both agitated. "What do you mean?" Miss James faltered. "Is there somebody here who knows you?"

"There's somebody here who knows everything—the *why* and *how*—the something I don't understand. It's something ominous and alien. Yet you all sit around and enjoy yourselves as if it didn't exist." He got abruptly to his feet. "I'm sorry—I'm exhausted, I guess. I'll see you later."

"Where are you going?" Dr. Meade demanded.

"Up to my room," Barton told him. "To try and get some sleep."

"Look here, Barton," said Dr.

Meade heartily, solicitously. "I'll give you a few phenobarbitals. They'll help calm you. If you want, drop up to the hospital, tomorrow. I'll be glad to give you a check-up. It seems to me you're under a hell of a strain of some kind. In a young man like you, that's somewhat—"

"Mr. Barton," Miss James interrupted softly, insistently, with a fixed smile on her face, "I assure you, there's *nothing* strange about Millgate. I only wish there were! It's the most ordinary town you could find. If I thought there was anything going on here of any interest whatsoever, I'd be the first to want to learn more."

Barton opened his mouth to answer—but the words never came. What he saw made even the memory of them dissolve into nothingness.

Two shapes, faintly luminous, emerged from one end of the porch. They appeared to be a man and a woman, walking together, hand in hand. From the motions of their lips, they appeared to be talking, but no sound of speech was audible. They moved silently, serenely, across the porch toward the opposite wall.

They passed within a foot of Barton—he could see their faces clearly. They were young. The woman had long, blonde hair, that fell in heavy twisted braids to cover much of her neck and shoulders. She had a thin, sharp, beauti-

fully cut face, with pale skin, smooth and perfect. She had exquisite lips and teeth—and the young man beside her was equally handsome.

Neither of them appeared to notice Barton or the boarders, sitting in their chairs. Their eyes were shut tight. They passed through chairs, couch, through the reclining boarders, as though they did not exist—through Doctor Meade, and then through Miss James, and then through the far wall. Abruptly, they were gone. The two half-luminous shapes had vanished as unaccountably as they had appeared and without a sound.

"Good God!" Barton managed to blurt, at last. "*Did you see them?*" For, amazingly, no one had stirred. Some of the boarders had stopped their conversation momentarily, but now they resumed the low murmurs of casual chatter, as if nothing whatever had happened.

"Didn't you *see* them?" Barton demanded again, wondering if he hadn't gone stark, staring mad.

Miss James seemed puzzled by his excitement. "Of course," she replied matter-of-factly. "We all saw them. They come through here about this time, each evening. They're taking a walk. An attractive couple, don't you think?"

"But—*who . . . ? What . . . ?*" Barton gasped, totally at a loss for words.

"Is this the first time you've seen

Wanderers?" Meade asked. His calm was suddenly shaken. "You mean, you don't *have* Wanderers where you come from?"

"No," Barton said, still stunned. "No—we don't have Wanderers." He realized, suddenly, that everyone was watching him in amazement. He blurted, because he had to, "What *are* they? They—*walked through the walls!* Through the furniture! *Through you!*"

"Of course," Miss James said, almost patronizingly. "That's why they're called Wanderers. They can go anywhere—through anything. Didn't you know that?"

"How long has it been going on?" Barton demanded.

The answer didn't really surprise him. But the calmness of its delivery did. "Always," Miss James said, patting a dainty yawn. "As long as I can recall, at any rate."

"It seems to me there have always been Wanderers," Doctor Meade agreed, puffing on his cigar. "But, after all, they're perfectly natural. What's so strange about them?"

VI

THE MORNING was warm and sunny. The dew hadn't been baked off the weeds and grass as yet. The sky was a mild, hazy turquoise blue; it had not yet been parboiled into blazing incandescence. This would come later, as the sun attained its zenith. A faint breeze

stirred the cedars that grew in a line along the slope, behind the immense stone building. The cedars cast pools of shade—it was they who were responsible for the name Shady House.

The Shady House windows and verandah overlooked the town proper. A single road twisted up the rise, to the level plateau where the hospital expanded within its grounds. The grounds themselves were carefully tended, clipped, mowed, watered and pruned. Flowers and trees, carefully planted and groomed, lined a long wood fence that formed a protective barricade between Shady House and the outer world. Patients could be seen lounging about, sitting on benches or chairs, or even stretched out on the warm ground, resting.

There was an air of peace and quietude about Dr. Meade's hospital. Somewhere within its depths, Doctor Meade was at work in his littered office, with his microscope and slides and X-rays and chemicals.

Mary Meade crouched in a concealed hollow, just beyond the shadow-line of the towering cedars. The hard, hill top soil had there been scooped out by workmen's shovels, where Shady House was built. In this tiny, artificial ravine, Mary could not be seen by anyone at the House.

The cedars, and the wall of rock and earth, cut off the view sharply.

Spread out beneath her, and around her on three sides, lay the smoky, green valley. Beyond the valley, rose the eternal ring of towering mountains, in their wraps of blue and green, tipped with faint hazy white cloud—silent and ever-moving, yet always there.

"Please go on," Mary said. She shifted her child's body a little, tucked her slim legs under her and made herself more comfortable. She was listening intently, trying not to miss a single word.

"It was pure chance," the bee continued. Its voice was thin and faint, a hum almost lost in the stir and rustle of the early-morning breeze that stirred softly through the cedars. The bee was perched on the leaf of a flower, close to the girl's ear to make itself audible and understood. "We happened to be scouting in that area. Neither of us saw him go in. All at once, he came out of the smokehouse, and we dived on him. I wish there had been more than two of us—he doesn't often come so far this way. He was actually over the line."

Mary remained deep in thought. The sunlight glinted in blue highlights on her black hair, which fell in shiny and heavy coils around her neck. Her dark eyes sparkled as she asked, "Have you been able to find out what he's doing in there?"

"Not really." The bee's hum faded in brief distress. "He's set up a wall of interference around

the whole place. We can't get close. We have to depend on secondary information which is unreliable, as you know."

"You think he's assembling defensive units, or . . . ?"

"Or worse!" The hum strengthened emphatically. "We fear he may be nearing some form of overt status. He has built a great many containers—of various sizes. There's a certain irony in this. The scouts we have sent in have died in the interference zone. He collects their corpses every day and used them for feed. This amuses him."

Automatically. Mary thrust out a small, saddle-shod foot and crushed a black grass-spider that went hurrying by. "I know," she said slowly. "After I left the game, yesterday, he golemed the clay I was using. That's a bad sign. He must feel that he's gaining—or he wouldn't dare try it on *my* clay. He knows the risk—clay gathered by others is unstable. I must have left some kind of imprint."

"It's probably true that he has a minor advantage—at present," the bee replied. "He's a tireless worker. Nevertheless, he displayed fear, when we attacked him. This means he is still vulnerable—and he knows it."

Mary pulled a blade of grass loose and thoughtfully chewed it between her gleaming white teeth. She said, ruminatively, "Both his figures attempted to escape. One

of them came very close to making it. It ran directly toward me, in the station wagon. But I didn't dare have Daddy stop."

"Who is this new man?" the bee inquired, "this person from outside. It's unique, someone coming through the barrier. You think he might be imitation? Perhaps something projected outside, then brought within the barrier to appear as an external factor? So far, he doesn't seem to have made any real difference."

Mary raised her dark eyes. "No, not so far," she said quietly. "But I believe he will."

"Really?"

"I'm fairly sure of it. If . . ."

"If what?" The bee was interested.

Mary ignored it—she was deep in thought. "He's in a curious situation," she murmured. "He's already faced with the fact that his memories don't agree with the situation."

"They don't?" There was a hum of surprise.

"Of course not!" said Mary emphatically. "He has become aware of major discrepancies. Essentially, he remembers a completely different town, with totally different people." She killed another small spider that was moving cautiously up. For a time she studied its inert body, frowning a little. "And he's the kind of person who won't be satisfied until he understands the situation fully."

"He makes things confusing," the bee complained.

"For whom? For me?" Mary got up slowly and brushed grass from her jeans. "For Peter, perhaps. Peter has made so many careful plans. Any new factor disturbs them."

The bee flew up from its leaf and landed on the girl's collar. "Perhaps he'll try to learn something from this man."

Mary laughed a merry, little-girl laugh. "He'd like to, of course. But there's not much the man can tell him. He's still much too confused and uncertain."

"Peter will try," the bee hummed on. "He's tireless. He explores every possibility for knowledge—almost like a bee."

Mary agreed, as she walked back up the slope toward the cedars. "Yes, Peter's tireless—but he's growing a little too confident. He may wind up by doing himself more harm than good. In trying to find out things, he may reveal more than he learns. The new man, Theodore Barton, I think, is clever. And he *must* find out about himself. He'll probably come out ahead—that's been the shape of the pattern, so far."

BARTON checked carefully to be sure no one was within earshot. He stood close to the old-fashioned telephone and pivoted so that he could look up and down the hall, at all the doors, at the stairs at the

far end. Only then did he drop a dime into the coin slot.

"Number please?" a tinny voice said in his ear.

He asked for the Calhoun Hotel in Martinsville. After three more dimes and a series of clicks and waits, there was a distant buzzing.

"Calhoun Hotel," a far-off voice uttered in a sleepy, masculine drawl.

"Let me talk to Mrs. Barton, please—in two-o-four."

Another pause, more clicks, then—

"Ted!" Peg's voice sounded wild with impatience, with alarm. "Is that you?"

"It's me—I suppose."

"Where *are* you, darling? In the name of heaven, are you going to leave me buried here in this ghastly hotel?" Her voice rose in shrill near-hysteria. "Ted, I've had it! I can't stand this any more. You've got the car—and I can't do anything, go anywhere. You're acting like a crazy person!"

Barton spoke close to the mouth piece, his voice muted. "I tried to explain it to you—this town" he said patiently. "It's not what I remember. My mind's been tampered with, I think. Something I found in the newspaper office makes me unsure even of my identity. I must—"

"Good God!" Peg exclaimed. "We haven't got time to waste in looking up all your childhood illusions! You'd better see a psychi-

atrist. How long are you going to keep this up?"

"I don't know," Barton answered with stubborn helplessness. "There's so much I still don't understand. If I knew anymore, I'd tell you."

There was a long moment of silence. Then, "Ted," Peg said, with iceberg coolness, "if you don't come back and get me in the next twenty-four hours, I'm taking off. I have enough money to get back to Washington on my own. You know I've got friends there. You won't see me again—except, perhaps, in court."

"Are you serious?" He couldn't believe his ears.

"Yes, Ted—I was never more serious in my life."

Barton licked his lips. "But, Peg, I've *got* to stay here! I've learned a few things—not much, but a little. Enough to tell me I'm on the right track. If I stay here long enough, I'll be able to crack this whole crazy business. There are forces operating here, powers that don't seem bound by—"

There was a sudden, sharp click. Peg had hung up on him.

Barton replaced the receiver on its hook. His mind was momentarily blank. He moved aimlessly away from the phone, his hands in his pockets. Well, he told himself, that was that. Peg meant it, every damn word of it. He would have to show up in Martinsville in

twenty-four hours, or she wouldn't be there.

A quick, small shape detached itself from the wall, where it had been lurking behind a table and potted fern. "Hello," Peter Trilling said calmly. His tiny hands toyed with a cluster of squirming objects, tiny black lumps that crawled up his wrist and over his hands.

"What's that?" Barton demanded, his skin crawling.

"These?" Peter blinked. "These are spiders." He captured the entire cluster, thrust it into a pocket of his shorts. "Are you going driving?" he asked eagerly. "I thought maybe I could ride in your car with you."

The boy had been there all the time he was calling Peg—hidden behind the fern. Strange, Barton thought, that he hadn't seen him. He distinctly recalled passing by the fern on his way to the phone.

"Why?" Barton asked the boy bluntly.

Peter Trilling fidgeted. His smooth face twisted hopefully. "I've decided to let you see my ledge," he stated.

"Oh?" Barton managed to look indifferent, but, deep inside, his pulse-rate abruptly speeded. Maybe, he thought, he could learn something from his landlady's remarkable child. "It might be arranged," he said casually. "How far is this ledge of yours?"

"Not far." Peter hurried to the

front door and pushed it open. "I'll show you the way. It won't take long."

Barton followed slowly after him. The front porch was now deserted. The empty chairs and couches looked drab and worn and terribly old in the morning sunlight. Their very ordinariness caused him an uneasy chill. Had not the two Wanderers come through here only last night?

He touched the wall of the porch experimentally. It was solid. Yet, the two youthful, half-luminous figures had passed serenely through it, as they had passed through the chairs and reclining boarders alike.

Could they pass through *him* as easily? Barton shuddered at the thought.

"Come on!" Peter shrieked. He stood by the dusty yellow Packard, tugging impatiently at the door handle.

Barton climbed behind the wheel, and the boy slid quickly in beside him. As he started the motor, he found the boy carefully examining the corners of the car, lifting the seat cushions, even squatting down on the floor to peer under the front seat.

"What are you looking for?" Barton demanded.

"Bees," said Peter, emerging a trifle breathlessly. "Can't we keep the windows rolled up? They try to fly in, along the way, sometimes."

Barton released the brake, and

the car glided out onto the main street. "What's wrong with bees?" he asked. "Are you *afraid* of them? You're not afraid of spiders."

Peter touched his still-swollen neck, by way of answer. "Turn to the right," he ordered. He leaned back contentedly, his feet out, his hands in his pockets. "Make a complete circle up Jefferson and head back the other way."

They were on their way—with young Peter Trilling in command.

VII

THE LEDGE PROVIDED a vast panoramic view of the valley and the hills that ringed it on all sides. Barton seated himself on the rocky ground and dug out a pack of cigarettes. He took a deep lungful of the warm, midday air.

The ledge was partly shaded by bushes and shrubs. It was cool and quiet on the ledge—with the entire panorama of the valley spread out below. The sun shone down through the thick blanket of blue haze that had collected around the distant peaks. Nothing stirred—air, trees, fields, farms, roads and houses, all were utterly without signs of life.

Peter came back from the edge and squatted beside him. "Nice up here, isn't it?" he said.

"I guess so." Barton was deliberately non-committal.

"What were you and Doctor Meade talking about, last night?"

Peter asked. "I couldn't get close enough to hear."

"Maybe," Barton said firmly, "it was none of your business."

The boy reddened, and his normally full, rather sullen lips set in a thin line. "I can't stand him and his smelly cigars—and his silver toothpick!" he blurted. He got some of his spiders out of his pants pocket and let them run over his hands and down his sleeves. Barton moved a little way away and pretended to ignore the repulsive spectacle.

After a moment, Peter asked, "Can I have a cigarette?"

"No. You're too young."

The boy's face fell. "All right for you!" he said bitterly—but he brightened, almost at once. "What did you think of the two Wanderers, last night?" he asked. "Weren't they something?"

"Oh, I don't know," Barton answered warily. "You must see them fairly often around here."

"I'd sure like to know how they do it," Peter said feelingly. Abruptly, he appeared to regret this open expression of emotion. He gathered up his spiders and tossed them down the slope. They scrambled off excitedly, and he pretended to watch them.

A thought struck Barton. He said, "Aren't you afraid of bees, out here? If one flew after you on this ledge, there wouldn't be any place to hide."

Peter laughed with regained con-

tempt. "Bees don't come here. It's too far in," he said scornfully.

"In?" Barton let smoke drift from his nostrils.

"In fact," Peter continued, with cutting superiority, "this is just about the safest place from bees in the world."

Barton couldn't make anything out of the boy's words. After a brief period of silence, he observed cautiously, "The haze is pretty thick, today."

"The what?"

"The haze." Barton indicated the pools of silent blue mist that obscured the far peaks. "It's from the heat."

Peter's face managed to show even deeper contempt. "That's not haze," he almost sputtered. "That's *him!*"

"Oh?" Barton tensed with anticipation. Maybe he was finally going to learn something concrete, he thought—if he played it carefully. "Who do you mean?" he asked with all the casualness he could muster.

Peter pointed. "Don't you see him?" he asked. "He's sure big—just about the biggest there is! And old—he's older than everything else put together! He's even older than the world!"

Barton could see nothing—only the haze, the mountains, the blue sky.

Peter dug in his pocket and pulled out what looked like a cheap, nickel-plated magnifying

glass. With a patronizing air, he handed it to Barton. Barton turned it around foolishly, seeking its use. Defeated, he moved to give it back, but Peter stopped him.

"Look through it!" the boy insisted. "At the mountains!"

Barton looked—and saw it. The glass was a lens-filter of some kind. It cut through the haze, made the outlines clear and sharp.

He had calculated wrong—he had expected him to be part of the scene. It had not occurred to him that he *was* the scene. He was the whole far side of the world, the edge of the valley, the mountains, the sky, everything—the whole distant rim of the universe swept up in a massive column, a cosmic tower of being, which gained shape and substance as he focussed the filter-lens.

It was a man, beyond question. His feet were planted on the floor of the valley—the valley itself became his toes at its farthest edge. His legs were the mountains—or the mountains were his legs. Barton couldn't be sure which. They were twin columns, spread far apart, wide and solid, firmly planted and balanced. His body was the mass of blue-grey haze—or what he had thought was haze. Where the mountains joined the sky, the immense torso of the man came into being.

His arms extended over the valley, were poised above it, above the distant half. His hands spanned

the sky in an opaque double-curtain, which Barton had mistaken for a layer of dust and haze. The massive figure was bent slightly forward. It was as if he were leaning intently over his half of the valley. He was gazing down, his face obscured. He was utterly motionless.

Motionless—but alive. This was no stone image, no frozen statue. This was life, but life outside of time. There was no change, no motion for him, as men comprehended change and motion. He was eternal. The averted head was his most striking feature. It seemed to glow. It was a clearly radiant orb, a pulse with life and brilliance.

His head was the sun.

"What's his name?" Barton asked, lowering the lens-filter after awhile. Now that he saw the figure, he couldn't lose it. It was like one of those game-puzzles—in which, once the hidden shape became visible it was impossible not to see it.

"I told you, I don't know his name," Peter retorted, a trifle peevishly. "Maybe *she* knows. She probably knows both their names. If I knew his name, I'd have power over him. I'd sure *like* to have it. *He's* the one I don't go for—this one doesn't bother me at all. That's why I have my ledge on this side."

"*This* one?" Barton echoed, puzzled. He twisted his neck and followed Peter's gaze straight up, peering once more through the tiny circle of glass.

It made him feel exceedingly

strange inside to realize that he was part of this second incredible figure. As the other was the distant side of the valley, so this figure was the near side. Barton was sitting on this side.

The figure encompassed him. He couldn't exactly see it—rather he could sense it vaguely, no more. It seemed to flow upward all about him. It flowed from the rocks, from the fields, from the tumbled lesser growths of shrubs and vines. This one, also, formed itself from the valley and mountains, from the sky and haze.

But this one didn't glow. Barton couldn't see its head, or envisage clearly its ultimate dimensions. An icy chill stirred through him, accompanied by a distinct, sharp, sudden intuition. This one didn't culminate in the bright orb of the sun. This one culminated in something else.

Was it—darkness?

He got unsteadily to his feet. "That's enough for me," he said. "I'm going back now."

He began to make his way down the side of the hill. Well, he thought, he had asked for it. He found that he was still holding numbly to Peter's magnifying glass. He tossed it up on the ledge and continued toward the floor of the valley.

No matter where he was, no matter where he sat or stood or slept or walked, as long as he was in the valley, he was part of one or

the other figure. Each made up one side of the valley, one hemisphere. He could move from one to the other—but he was always contained by one of them. In the center of the valley was an invisible line. On the other side of that line, he would merge with the other figure.

"Where are you going?" Peter called after him.

"Out of this place," Barton shouted back.

Peter's face darkened ominously. "You can't get out—you can't leave."

"Why not?"

"You'll find out why not." It was a threat.

Barton ignored it and continued picking his way down the hill, toward the road, toward his parked car. He reached it without incident.

He headed the Packard up the road, away from Millgate. Cedars and pines grew in massive profusion above and about him. The road was a narrow ribbon gouged through the forest. It was in bad shape. The tarred surface was potholed, cracked, interlaced with lines and splits. Through them, green weeds jutted up. Nobody drove along here anymore. That much was clear.

He turned a sharp curve, and abruptly jammed on the brakes. The car screeched to a halt, its tires sizzling in protest.

There it was, spread across the

road ahead of him. The sight completely floored him. He had driven this road three times in forty-eight hours—once out and twice in. On these occasions, he had seen nothing untoward. But now, here it was. It had finally appeared, just as he had made up his mind to leave the valley forever and forget the entire pattern of strangeness, to attempt to continue his vacation as if nothing had happened.

He would have been less disturbed by something weird, something vast and macabre, an ominous wall of some sort, mysterious and cosmic, a supraterrrestrial layer barring the road.

But this was the most prosaic sort of a road-block—it was nothing more than a stalled lumber truck. It was an ancient truck, with iron wheels and outside gear shift. Its heavy, round headlights were old-fashioned brass acetylene lamps. Its load of logs lay spilled all across the highway, the wires that bound them broken. The truck had careened at an angle and stopped dead, the logs spilling off in all directions.

Barton climbed warily out of the car. Around him, all was silence. Then somewhere, far away, a crow squawked dismally. He heard the cedars rustle as he approached the welter of logs, with the archaic truck thrusting up through their center. Not bad, for a barrier, he thought. No car could get through it. Logs lay everywhere, and they

were big logs. Some were tossed carelessly athwart others. They added up to a dangerous, unsteady mass of twisted lumber, ready to spill and roll at any moment. And the road itself was steep.

There was no one in the truck, of course. God only knew, he thought, how long the barrier had been there—or how often. Apparently, judging by his own experience, it was selective. He lit a cigarette and took off his coat—the day was beginning to heat up. How, he wondered, was he going to set about getting past it? He had got through it before, but this time it wasn't going to cooperate.

Maybe, he thought, he could go around it.

The higher side was out of the question. He would never be able to scramble up the almost perpendicular bank—and, if he lost his grip on the smooth rock, he would be pitched down into the twisted mass of logs. The lower side, perhaps—between the road and the slope lay a ditch. If he once could get across the ditch, he could easily scramble among the slanted pines, climb from one to the next, bypass the log jam completely and hop the ditch back to the road.

One close look at the ditch finished that idea. Barton closed his eyes and hung on tight.

It was not that the ditch was so wide—he *might* be able to vault it. But there was no bottom to it. He was standing over a bottomless

gulf. Barton stepped quickly back from its edge and stood there, breathing quickly and clutching his cigarette. Looking down into the ditch was like looking up at the sky. It was without limit—an endless drop that finally faded into dim, ominous darkness.

He forced thought of the ditch from his mind and turned his attention back to the logs. A car stood no chance of getting through, but a man on foot might be able to negotiate his way to the other side. At the halfway point, he could scramble into the truck cabin and rest, thus divide passage into two separate jobs.

He approached the logs gingerly. The first wasn't so bad—it was small and fairly steady. He stepped aboard, caught hold with his hands. jumped to the next. Beneath his weight, the mass of logs shuddered ominously.

Barton quickly scrambled to the next and hung on tight. So far, so good—ahead rose a big baby, old and dry and cracked. It jutted up at a steep angle, piled upon three lesser logs beneath. They reminded Barton of matches spilled by a giant.

He jumped. The log split under him, and he leaped frantically off again. Desperately, he clutched for purchase. His fingers slipped, he fell back. He dug in wildly, trying to draw his body up onto a flat surface.

He made it . . .

Gasping, panting for breath, Barton lay stretched out on the big log, with waves of relief flooding over him. Finally, he pulled himself up to a sitting position. If he could go a little farther, he should be able to catch hold of the truck itself, to pull himself aboard. Then he would be halfway over. Then he could rest . . .

But he was as far from the truck as before, not one inch closer. For a moment, he doubted his sanity, and then understanding came. Somehow he had got turned around. The logs were a maze. He had set off in the wrong direction, had ceased moving toward the truck. He had moved in a closed circle.

VIII

ALL BARTON wanted now was to get back to his car, get back where he had started from. Logs lay on all sides of him, in piles and heaps and jutting snouts. It didn't seem that he could have worked himself this far into the roadblock. It was not possible he could have got so deep. He found himself yards from the edge, inexplicably. So, how to get out?

He tried crawling back, the way he had come. The logs swayed and tilted dangerously under him. Fear made him nervous, he lost his grip, skidded and fell between two of the cylindrical monsters. For a blinding, terrifying instant he was

underneath in the heart of the jam. The sunlight was cut off, and he was in a closing cave of clamorous darkness.

He pushed up with all his strength, and miraculously, one of the logs above him shifted to give clearance. He scrambled wildly out of the trap, emerged into blinding sunlight, and lay outstretched on the lumber, gasping and shuddering, afraid to stir.

He lay there for an indefinite period, it might have been minutes or hours. Barton had lost track of time. The next thing he became aware of was a voice, speaking to him, calling, "Mr. Barton! Mr. Barton! Can you hear me?"

He managed to raise his whirling head. Standing on the road, just beyond the logs, was Peter Trilling. He grinned at Barton, his hands on his hips, his face gleaming and tanned in the bright sunlight. He didn't seem especially worried. In fact, he looked rather pleased.

"Help me!" Barton gasped. "Help me out of here!"

"What are you doing way in there?" Peter asked innocently.

"I tried to get across." With great effort, Barton pulled himself to a sitting position. "How the hell am I going to get back?" he asked.

Then he noticed something. It was no longer the middle of the day—it was early evening. The sun was just setting over the far hills, over the giant figure that loomed up at the opposite end of the valley.

Barton examined his wristwatch. It was six-thirty. He had been battling the logs for seven hours.

"You shouldn't have tried to get across," Peter told him, as he approached cautiously. "If they don't want you to get out, you shouldn't try."

"I got *into* this damn valley," Barton said stubbornly.

"They must have *wanted* you in," Peter told him. "But they don't want you out. You better be careful—you might get stuck in there and die of starvation."

Peter was all too obviously enjoying the spectacle of Barton's debacle. After a moment, he leaped lightly atop the first log and picked his way easily to the older man.

Barton got unsteadily to his feet. He was scared to the marrow. Gratefully, he took hold of Peter's small, grimy hand, allowed the boy to lead him back to the edge of the road-block. Oddly, it took a mere matter of seconds.

"Thank *God!*" He wiped his forehead and picked up his coat, where he had tossed it on the grass. The air was turning chilly with the fall of the sun. He added shakily, "I won't try *that* again, for awhile."

"You better not try it again, *ever*," Peter said quietly.

Something in the boy's voice made Barton regard him narrowly. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Just what I say—you were there seven hours." Peter's confi-

dent smile broadened. "I was the one who kept you there that long," he added proudly. "I twisted you up in time."

Barton absorbed this unexpected piece of information slowly. "It was you?" he countered finally. "But you finally got me out."

"Sure," Peter said easily, his hands in his pockets. "I kept you in, and I got you out—when it pleased me. I only wanted you to know who was boss."

This time, there was a long silence. The boy's confident smile widened. He was obviously pleased with himself. In his own estimation, he had done a good job.

"I saw you from my ledge," he explained. "I knew where you were going—I figured you'd try to walk across." His chest seemed to swell with pride. "Nobody can do that, except me—I'm the only one." A look of almost animal cunning made his eyes glitter. "I have ways," he concluded.

"Drop dead, you little bastard!" Barton said with cold fury.

He strode past the boy and climbed into the Packard. As he gunned the motor and released the brake, he saw Peter's infuriatingly confident smile falter. By the time he had the car turned around toward Millgate, the grin had become a nervous grimace.

"Aren't you going to ride me back?" Peter demanded, running to the car window. His face had turned a sickly white. "A swarm

of death's-head moths, they're down at the foot of the hill. It's almost night. Please!"

"Too bad!" Barton said pitilessly. He sent the car racing down the road. Lethal hatred flashed explosively over Peter's child-face. Then he was lost behind, a dwindling column of furious animosity.

Barton found himself sweating. He had a feeling that he had made a serious mistake. Yet he had endured a wretched, even horrifying, experience trapped in the maze of logs, crawling around and around, like a bug in a water glass. Unquestionably, Peter Trilling had strange powers, and was mad enough to use them. *Bad Seed* stuff, Barton thought. *Bad Seed* and poltergeist combined. On top of that, there were all his own other troubles—he was stuck in the valley whether he liked it or not.

For the next day or so he had a strong hunch that it was going to be close going.

Millgate was dissolving into gloomy twilight as Barton swung the Packard into Jefferson Street. Most of the shops were closed for the night—drugstores, hardware stores, grocery stores, the scattering of sad cafés and cheap bars.

He parked in front of the *Magnolia Club*, a rundown saloon that looked ready to collapse any minute. A few bucolic toughs lounged around the front. Stubble-chinned and shiftless, their eyes glittered at him, bloodshot and dull, yet oddly,

keenly penetrating, as he locked the Packard and pushed through the swinging doors.

Only a pair of men were at the bar. The tables were empty, the chairs still piled upon them, their legs sticking up, forlornly like the legs of dead Arab horses. He seated himself at the rear of the bar, where nobody would be apt to bother him, and ordered three quick bourbons—one, two, three.

He was just beginning to realize that he was in one hell of a mess. Foolishly, he had come into the valley—and now he couldn't get out. He was stuck fast—caught by a load of spilled lumber. How long had it been there? That wasn't what bothered him as much as how long it might remain. For all he knew, it might stay there forever. Not to mention his cosmic enemy, whoever it was that had manipulated his memories—and Peter, his absurdly precocious earthly enemy, apparently thrown in for good measure.

The bourbons made him calmer. They—he—it—the cosmic power—must want him there for some reason. Perhaps, he was *supposed* to find out who he was. Perhaps it had all been planned from the outset, his coming back to the valley, his returning to Millgate, after so many years. Perhaps his every move, everything he had ever done, his whole life . . .

Barton ordered another trio of bourbons. After all, he had plenty

to forget. As he drank them, more men filed into the saloon—hunched-over men in leather jackets, brooding over their beer, not talking or moving, prepared to spend the evening in semi-sociable silence. Barton ignored them and concentrated on his own drinking.

He was just moving to toss down the sixth bourbon, when he realized that one of the men was watching him. He pretended not to notice. Good God, he thought, didn't he have enough troubles without involving himself in bar-side conversation?

The man had turned on his stool to stare full at Barton. He was a grimy-faced old drunk, tall and stooped, clad in a torn, seedy-looking coat and filthy denim trousers. His hands were large and dark, his fingers creased with countless cuts, his nails filthy. His drink-befuddled eyes were fixed intently on Barton, watching his every move. He didn't look away, not even when Barton returned his glare with chilled hostility.

The old creep slid from his stool and approached Barton unsteadily. Barton braced himself. He knew what was coming—he was going to get touched for a drink. The man sat down on the next stool, with a sigh, and folded his hands on the bar.

"Hi," he said with a snaggle-toothed grin, enveloping Barton in a cloud of alcohol. He pushed damp, pale, straggling hair back

out of bloodshot eyes—thin hair, oddly as moist and limp as corn silk. His irises were a cloudy blue, like a child's. "How are you?" he asked politely.

"What do you want?" Barton demanded bluntly, driven to the edge of drunken despair.

"Scotch and water will do," the invader of privacy replied gravely.

Barton was taken aback. "Look here, buddy," he began, but the man cut him off with his mild, gentle voice.

"I guess you don't remember me," he said.

Barton blinked. "Remember you? From where?"

"You were running down the street—yesterday. You were looking for Central, remember?"

Barton finally placed him. This was the drunk who had laughed. "That's right," he said slowly.

The man beamed. "See?" he said proudly. "You *do* remember me." He put out a grimy, seamed paw. "My name's Christopher—William Christopher." He added, "I'm just a poor old Swede."

Barton declined the hand. "I can do without your company," he said rudely.

Christopher grinned. "I believe you." He chuckled. "Maybe, if I get the Scotch and water, the exhilaration will be too much for me, and I'll have to leave."

Barton beckoned the bartender. "Scotch and water," he ordered, adding, "For *him*."

"Did you ever find Central?" Christopher asked.

"No."

Christopher giggled in a shrill, high-pitched key. "I'm not surprised," he said. "I could have told you that."

"Unless memory fails me," Barton said coldly, "you did."

The drink came, and Christopher accepted it gratefully. "Good stuff," he observed, taking a big swallow and then a gulp of air for a chaser. "You're from out of town, aren't you?"

"You guessed it."

"Why did you come to Millgate? A little town like this. Nobody ever comes here."

Barton raised his head moodily. "I came here to find myself."

For some reason, this struck Christopher as funny. He laughed, loud and shrill, causing the others at the bar to turn in annoyance.

"What's eating you?" Barton demanded angrily. "What's so all-be-damned funny about that?"

Christopher managed to calm himself. "Find yourself? You got any clues? Will you know yourself when you find yourself? What do you look like?" He burst into laughter again, in spite of visible effort to control his mirth. Barton sank down further on his stool, hunched miserably over his glass.

"Cut it out," he muttered. "I have enough trouble, already."

"Trouble? Trouble here in Mill-

gate?" He seemed honestly surprised. "What sort of trouble?"

"Every sort!" said Barton. "Every damn sort of trouble in the world." The bourbon was really beginning to work its enchantment within him. "Lord! I might as well be dead! First I find out I *am* dead, that I never lived to grow up . . ."

Christopher shook his head sympathetically. "That's bad," he said.

"Then those two crazy luminous people come walking through the porch."

"Wanderers? Yeah, they give you a start, the first time. But you get used to them," the old man offered.

"Then that lunatic kid Peter Trilling goes around looking for bees. Then he shows me a guy fifty miles high—with his head made out of an electric-light bulb."

Barton sighed.

A change came over Christopher. Through his wheezy drunkenness, something of awareness gleamed—an intent core of awareness. "Oh?" he said. "What guy is that?"

"Biggest goddam guy you ever saw!" Barton made a wild sweep with his arms. "A million miles high. Just looking at him is enough to knock the living daylights out of you. Made out of daylight, himself."

Christopher sipped his drink more slowly. "What else happened to you, Mr. —"

"Barton—Ted Barton. Then I

fell off a log—or fell into one.”

“You *what?*”

“I went log-rolling.” Barton shook himself wretchedly. “I got lost in a big pile of logs for seven hours. That little punk Peter finally led me out again.” He stared miserably at the backs of his hands. “And I never found Central Street—or Pine Street.” His voice rose with wild despair. Damn it, I was *born* on Pine Street! There *must* be such a place!”

For a long moment Christopher said nothing. Deliberately, he finished his drink, turned the glass upside down on the counter, spun it thoughtfully, then pushed it abruptly aside.

“No, you won’t find Pine Street,” he said, “or Central. At least, not any more.”

The words penetrated. Barton sat up, his brain suddenly ice-cold, even through the alcoholic mist that enveloped it. “What do you mean, *not any more?*” he asked.

“It’s all been gone a long time—for years and years.” The old man rubbed his wrinkled forehead wearily. “I haven’t heard Pine Street mentioned for a long, long time.” His baby-blue eyes fixed themselves intently on Barton, as he tried to concentrate through the haze of whisky and time. “Funny, to hear that old name again—I’d almost forgotten. You know, Barton, there *must* be something wrong.”

“Yes,” Barton agreed tensely.

“There’s something wrong, all right. But *what is it?*”

Christopher rubbed his lined forehead, trying to bring his thoughts together. “I don’t know,” he muttered, “something big.” He glanced around almost fearfully. “Maybe I’m out of my mind,” he added. “Pine Street was a nice place—a lot nicer than Fairmount. That’s what they have there, now—Fairmount. Not the same houses at all—not the same street. And nobody remembers.”

Tears filled his blue eyes, and he wiped them miserably away. “Nobody remembers, except you and me. Nobody in the whole world. *What are we going to do about it?*”

IX

BARTON WAS BREATHING quickly. “Listen to me!” he said fiercely. “Stop whimpering and *listen!*”

Christopher shuddered down a sob. “Sorry, Barton,” he said. “This whole thing has—”

Barton grabbed him by the arm, hard. “Then it really *was* the way I remember. Pine Street—Central—the old park—my memories aren’t false!”

Christopher mopped his eyes with a filthy, crumpled handkerchief. “The old park! You remember that? Lord—what’s been happening around here?” All the color had drained from his face, leaving it a sickly yellow. “What’s wrong with them? Why don’t *they* remem-

ber?" He shivered, added, "Because they're not the *same people!* The old ones are gone—like the places—everyone but you and me."

"I left," said Barton, "when I was nine." Abruptly, he got to his feet. "Let's get out of here, fellow. Where can we talk?"

Christopher assembled himself slowly. "My place, I guess," he said. "We can talk there." He slid off his stool and reeled rapidly toward the door. Barton followed him.

Outside, the street was cool and dark. Occasional streetlights shone wanly at irregular intervals. A few people were strolling the sidewalks, most of them men between bars.

Christopher hurried down a side street, so rapidly that Barton had trouble keeping up with him. "I've waited eighteen years for this," Christopher gasped. "I thought I was crazy. I didn't tell anybody. I didn't dare. Eighteen years—and it was true!"

"When did the Change come?" Barton asked.

"Eighteen years ago."

"Slowly—did it come gradually?"

"Suddenly—it came overnight," said Christopher. "I woke up one morning, and it was all different. I couldn't find my way around. I stayed inside and hid. I thought I was nuts."

"Nobody else remembered?" Barton asked in disbelief.

"Everyone else was gone!" was the unexpected reply.

Barton was stunned. "You mean—"

"How could *they* remember? They were gone, too. Everything was changed—even the people. It was a whole new town."

"Did you know about the barrier?" said Barton.

"I knew nobody could get out or in," Christopher told him. "There's something across the road. But *they* don't care—there's something wrong with them."

"Who are the Wanderers?" Barton demanded.

"I don't know."

"When did they appear—before the Change?" Barton prodded.

"No," replied the old man. "After the Change. I never saw them, before that. Everyone around now seems to think they're perfectly natural."

"Who are the two giants?"

Christopher shook his head. "I don't know," he said helplessly. "Once, I *thought* I saw something. I had gone up the road, looking for a way out. I had to stop—there was a stalled lumber truck."

"That's the barrier. It's still there."

Christopher swore vehemently, then said, "Still there! But that was years ago! And you say it's still there . . ."

They had traveled several blocks. Darkness lay close about them, relieved by the vague shape

of an occasional house, by an occasional light. The houses themselves appeared run-down and shabby. Barton noticed, with increasing surprise, how down-at-heel they were—he didn't remember this part of town as being so bad.

"Everything is worse!" he said suddenly.

"That's right." Christopher nodded. "This wasn't nearly so bad, before the Change. It looked pretty good, in fact. My place was a nice little three-room cabin. I built it myself—wired it, put in plumbing, fixed the roof up fine. That morning, I woke up, and what was I living in?"

The old man halted and fumbled for his key. "A stinking packing crate! Wasn't nothing more than a packing crate. Not even a foundation—and I remember pouring that foundation myself. Took me a whole week to get it set right. Now it's nothing but a mud sill."

He found the key and, in the darkness, located the handle of the door. He fumbled around, muttering and fumbling. Finally, the door squeaked back, and he and Barton entered.

Christopher lit an oil lamp. "No electricity—what do you think of that?" he asked. "After all my work! I tell you, Barton, this thing is diabolical when you think about it. All the hard work I did—all the things I had—everything

I built up—all wiped out overnight. Now, I'm nothing. I didn't drink before—get that?—not a drop!"

The place was a hovel, a shack, nothing more. It consisted of a single room, with stove and sink at one end, bed at the other. Junk lay littered everywhere—dirty dishes, cans and boxes of food, bags of eggshells and garbage, moldy bread, old newspapers, torn magazines, dirty clothes, empty bottles, endless pieces of wrecked old furniture crowded aimlessly. And wiring . . .

"Yeah," Christopher said, nodding toward the cords and cables, "I've been trying for eighteen years to wire the damn place together again." There was fear on his face, naked, hopeless fear. "I used to be a real good electrician. I serviced radios—I ran a little radio shop."

"Sure," Barton said, remembering. "Will's Sales and Service."

"Gone—completely gone!" was the despairing reply. "There's a hand laundry there, now. On Jefferson street, as it's called, these days. They do a terrible job—mangle your shirts. But there was nothing left of my radio shop. I woke up, that morning, and started off to work. I thought something was odd. But I didn't really get it until I got there and found a lousy laundry where my shop should have been. Steam irons and pants pressers!"

Barton picked up a portable B-battery. He spotted pliers, solder, a soldering iron, paste, spaghetti, a signal generator, radio tubes, bottles of condensers, resistors, schematics—everything a home electrician needed. "And you can't get this place wired?" he asked.

"I try." Christopher examined his hands miserably. "It's gone. I fumble around—break things—drop things. I even forget what I'm doing. I mislay my wire. I step on my tools and break them."

"Why?" Barton scowled at him.

Christopher's eyes glowed with terror. "They don't want me to bring it back!" he cried. "They don't want me to make it like it was. I was supposed to be changed—like the others. I was changed, partly. I wasn't all run-down, like this. I was hard-working. I had my shop—and my craft. I led a good clean life. Barton, they stop me from fixing it up. They practically take the soldering iron out of my hands."

Barton pushed aside a litter of cables and insulation and sat down on the edge of the work bench. "They got part of you," he said thoughtfully. "Then they have some power over you."

Christopher rummaged excitedly in a cluttered cupboard. He said, "This thing—this curse—hangs over Millgate like a black fog! A filthy black fog, creeping in all the windows and doors. It's destroyed this town. These people

today are only imitation people. The real ones are gone—swept aside overnight."

He got out a dusty wine-bottle and waved it in front of Barton. "By God, I'm going to celebrate!" he exclaimed. "Join me, Barton. I've been keeping this bottle for years."

Barton examined the wine bottle. He blew dust from its label and held it up to the oil lamp. It was old, very old, imported muscatel. "I don't know," he said doubtfully. He was already beginning to feel sick from the bourbon. "I don't like to mix my drinks."

"This is a celebration." Christopher upset a heap of rubbish onto the floor and found a corkscrew beneath. With the bottle between his knees, he expertly speared the cork and began twisting it out. "A celebration, for you and me finding each other."

The wine wasn't too good. Barton sipped a little from his glass and studied the aged, seamed face of the old man. Christopher sat slumped over in his chair, brooding. He drank rapidly, automatically, from his not-quite-clean glass.

"No," he said, looking about him with disgust, "they don't want all this changed back. They did this to us—took away our town, our friends." His face hardened. "The bastards won't let us lift a finger to fix things up, again, ei-

ther. They think they're so damn big!"

"But I got in here," Barton murmured. He was growing lethargic. The bourbon and wine, mixed together, were making him sleepy. "Got past the barrier, somehow," he added, puzzled.

"They're not perfect." Christopher lurched to his feet and put down his glass. "Missed most of me, and let you in. Asleep at the switch maybe, like anybody else."

He pried open the bottom drawer of a dresser, tossed out clothing and parcels. At the bottom, was a sealed box, an old silverware chest. Grunting and perspiring, Christopher lugged it out and dumped it on the table.

"I'm not hungry," Barton muttered. "I just want to sit here and—"

"Watch!" Christopher drew a tiny key from his wallet. With extreme care, he fitted it in the microscopic lock of the chest and pushed up the lid. "I'm going to show it to you, Barton. You're my only friend—only person in the world I can trust."

He eyed Barton hopefully.

It wasn't silverware—what lay within was far more intricate. It was made of wires and struts, of complicated meters and switches. Over all, it resembled a cone of metal, carefully soldered together. Christopher lifted it out and pushed braces into the proper catches. He ran the cables over to

the B-battery and screwed the terminal caps into place.

"The shades," he ordered. "Pull them down! We don't want them to see this. They'd give a lot to get hold of this. Think they're smart—got everybody under their thumb. Well, not quite everybody."

He threw a switch, and the cone hummed ominously. The hum became a whine, as he tinkered with the controls. Barton edged away uneasily. "What is it—a bomb?" he asked. "Are you going to blow them all up?"

A crafty expression appeared on the old man's face. "I'll tell you later," he said. "I got to be careful." He ran around the room, pulling down the shades. He locked the door and came carefully back to his whining cone. By then, Barton was down on his hands and knees, peering into its works. It was a maze of intricate wiring, a regular web of glowing metal. Across the front was lettered—

S. R.

— Do Not Touch
Property of Will Christopher

Christopher assumed a solemn pose. He squatted down beside Barton, his legs tucked under him, Turkish fashion. Carefully, almost reverently, he lifted the cone, held it in his hands a long moment, then fitted it over his head like a

fools-cap. He gazed out from under it at Barton, his blue eyes unblinking, his weathered face engraved with the solemn importance of the occasion. His expression sagged a little, as the whine of the cone dropped again to a hum, then to silence.

"Damn!" He struggled to his feet and groped for his soldering iron. "Loose connection," he said, with feeling.

Barton leaned against the wall and waited sleepily, while Christopher resoldered the wires. Presently, the hum sounded again, a little ragged, but loud. It rose again to a whine, louder than before.

"Barton." Christopher grated. "You ready?"

"Sure," Barton muttered. He opened one eye and focussed his wandering wits on what was happening.

Christopher got down the old wine bottle from the table. He placed it carefully on the floor and seated himself beside it, the cone on his head. It came down almost to his eyebrows, and it was obviously heavy. He adjusted it a little, then folded his arms and concentrated on the wine bottle.

"What's . . . ?" Barton began, but the old man cut him off abruptly.

"Don't talk!" he commanded, "have to summon all my faculties." His eyes half-closed—his jaw locked—his brow wrinkled.

He took a deep breath and held it. Silence . . .

X

BARTON FOUND HIMSELF nodding off to sleep. He tried to concentrate on the wine bottle, but its slender, dusty shape seemed to waver and grow dim. He stifled a yawn—and then belched.

Christopher shot him a furious look and quickly returned to his own mental efforts. Barton mumbled an apology. He really yawned, then—loud and long. The room, the old man, the wine bottle, receded and blurred. The droning headgear lulled him like a swarm of bees—its sound was constant and penetrating.

He found that he could hardly see the bottle. It had become the vaguest of phantom shapes. He summoned his attention, but it rapidly leaked away. Then he discovered that he couldn't see the bottle at all.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Can't make out the damn thing, anymore."

Christopher didn't answer. His face was so flushed that he looked ready to explode. His whole being was concentrated on the vacuum the wine bottle had filled—straining and glowering, breathing hoarsely between his teeth, his fists clenched, his body rigid . . .

The bottle was beginning to

come back—first as a shadow, then as a dark cube. The cube solidified, gained color and form, became opaque. Barton sighed with relief.

Only one problem needed Barton, made him vaguely uncomfortable. The object forming itself on the floor, in front of Christopher, was not the dusty old bottle of muscatel. It looked like an old-fashioned coffee-grinder.

At last, Christopher pulled the cone from his head with a sigh of triumph. "I did it, Barton!" he said simply. "There it is."

Barton said, now fully awake, "I don't understand. Where's the bottle? What happened to the wine bottle?"

"There never was a wine bottle," Christopher said.

"But I—"

"It was a fake—a distortion." Christopher spat with disgust. "That's my old coffee-grinder. My grandmother brought it over from Sweden. I told you I didn't drink liquor before the Change."

Understanding came to Barton. "This coffee-grinder turned into a wine bottle—when the Change came. But . . ."

"But underneath, it was still a coffee-grinder." Christopher rose unsteadily to his feet. He looked spent, exhausted, victorious. He added, "You see, Barton?"

Barton saw. "You mean, the old town's still here?"

"Right! It wasn't destroyed. It

was—buried. There's a layer over it—a dark fog of illusion. They came and laid this black cloud over everything! But the real town's still underneath. *And it can be brought back.*"

"S.R.—Spell Remover," said Barton, comprehending the initials on the cone.

"That's right." Christopher patted the instrument proudly. "That's my Spell Remover. Built it myself. Nobody knows about it but me and you."

Barton picked up the coffee-grinder. It was firm and hard. It smelled of coffee. He turned the wheel a little, and the mechanism whirred. A few grains of coffee fell from it.

"So it's still here!" he said softly.

"Yes. It's still here."

"How did you find out?"

Christopher pulled out his pipe and filled it slowly. "I was pretty discouraged at first," he said, "finding everything changed, everybody different. I began going down to the Magnolia Club nights—nothing else to do, without my radio shop. Came home pretty blind, once, and sat down, right where I'm sitting now. Began remembering the old days—the old places and people—my little house as it used to be. While I was thinking about it, this shack began to fade out—and my sweet little house faded in."

He lit his pipe and sucked at it solemnly, then said, "I ran around

like a lunatic. I was happy as a goat. But, the minute I let up, it faded out again, and this damned hovel reappeared. When I think of how it was . . .”

“You remember Berg’s Jewelry Store?” Barton asked.

“Sure—over on Central Street. It’s gone, of course. There’s a cheap run-down hash-house, in its place—a joint.”

Barton got the bit of stale bread from his pocket. “That explains it—why my compass turned into *this* when I entered the valley. It came from Berg’s Jewelry Store.” He tossed the bread away. “And the Spell Remover?”

“Took me fifteen years to build it. They made my hands so damned clumsy. I had to repeat the same process again and again. It focusses my mind—my memories—so I can direct my thoughts. It’s like a lens. With it, I can bring a thing all the way up to the surface. The fog lifts, and it’s there again—like it was before.”

Barton lifted his wine glass. It had been half full, but now it was empty. The undrunk wine had vanished, with the bottle. He sniffed it—the glass smelled faintly of coffee.

“You’ve done okay,” Barton said. “You’re going on, of course.”

“On?” Christopher blinked at him.

“With this, what can stop you? Good Lord, man—you can bring it *all* back!”

Christopher shook his head wearily, said, “Barton, I’ve got something to tell you.”

But he didn’t have to. Warm wine spilled down Barton’s sleeve, over his fingers and wrist. At the same time, the coffee-grinder faded out, and the wine-bottle reappeared, dusty, slim-necked and half-full.

“It doesn’t last,” Christopher said sadly. “Not more than ten minutes. I can’t keep it going.”

Barton washed his hands at the sink. “It always does that?”

“Always! It never completely—sets. I can’t quite lock the reality into place. I guess I’m just not strong enough. They’re pretty big, whoever they are.”

Barton dried his hands on a filthy towel. He was deep in thought. He said, “Have you tried the Spell Remover on anything else?”

Christopher stood up and went to the dresser. He rummaged in the top drawer and brought out a small cardboard box. He carried it back, sat down on the floor with it.

“Look at this.” He opened the box and lifted something out. With trembling fingers he removed tissue paper wrapping, while Barton peered over his shoulder.

The wrapping contained a ball of brown string. It was knotted and frazzled, wound around a wooden stick.

“I’ve tried it on this,” he said

sadly, "many times. Every week or so I try. I'd give anything if I could bring this back. But I can't even get a flicker."

Barton took the string from the old man's hand. "What the hell was it?" he asked.

"Barton," said the old man, "that was Aaron Northrup's tire iron."

Barton raised his eyes unbelievably. "Good Lord!" he said.

"Yes—it's true. I stole it. Nobody else knew what it was. I had to search for it. Remember, the tire iron was over the door of the Millgate Merchants' Bank."

"Yes." Barton nodded. "The mayor put it up there. I remember that day. I was just a little kid, then."

"That was a long time ago. The bank's gone now, of course. There's a ladies' tea shoppe in its place. This ball of string was over the door. I stole it, one night. It didn't mean a thing to anyone else." Christopher shook his head sadly. "Nobody else remembers Aaron Northrup's tire iron."

Barton's own eyes were moist. "I was only seven years old, when it happened."

"Did you see it?"

"I saw it. Bob O'Neill ran yelling down Central at the top of his lungs. I was in the candy shop."

Christopher nodded eagerly. "I was fixing an old Atwater Kent. I heard him. He was yelling like a stuck pig."

Barton's face lighted with recollection. "Then I saw the crook run past," he said. "His car wouldn't start."

"No, he was too damn nervous. O'Neill yelled, and the crook just ran straight down the middle of the street."

"With the money in that paper sack, in his arms—like a sack of groceries," said Barton, nodding.

"He was from Chicago—one of those racketeers."

"That's right. I saw him run past the candy store. Dan O'Neill was standing there in front of the bank, shouting his head off. The crook ran down Fulton Street. And there was old Northrup, changing the tire on his Model-T Ford."

"Yeah, he was sitting there on the curb with his jack and tire iron." Christopher took the ball of string back and held it gently in his hand. "The crook tried to run past him—"

"—and old Northrup leaped up and hit him over the head."

"He was a tall old geezer," said Christopher slowly.

"Over six feet—thin, though," said Barton. "A rangy old farmer. He really cracked that crook a mean one."

"He had a good wrist—from cranking his old Ford. I guess it just about killed the fellow."

"Multiple concussion. A tire iron's pretty heavy." Barton took back the ball of string and touched

it gently. "So this is it—Aaron Northrup's tire iron. The bank paid him five hundred dollars for it—and Major Clayton nailed it up over the door of the bank."

"Everybody was there," said the old man.

Barton smiled. "I held the ladder." He paused, added, "Christopher, I had hold of that tire iron! As Jack Wakeley was climbing up with the hammer and nails, they gave it to me, and I passed it on up. I touched it."

"You're touching it now," said Christopher grimly. "That's it—that hunk of string."

Barton got to his feet. He laid the ball of string carefully on the table. He removed his coat and put it over the back of a chair.

"What are you going to do?" Christopher demanded anxiously.

There was a strange expression on Barton's face—resolve, mixed with dreamy recollection. He said slowly, purposefully, "I'm going to remove the spell—I'm going to bring back that tire iron."

Christopher turned down the oil lamp until the room was almost dark. He set the lamp next to the ball of string, then moved back, into the corner.

Barton stood close to the table, his eyes on the string. He had never tried to lift a spell before—it was a new experience for him. But he *remembered* Aaron Northrup's tire iron. He remembered how it had felt, how it had looked.

He remembered the sights and sounds—even the smells—of the robbery itself . . .

He concentrated. He summoned all his memories and focussed them on the limp ball of brown string, knotted and frayed, on the table beside the lamp. He imagined the iron there, instead of the string—long, black and metallic—and heavy.

Neither man moved. Barton held his body rigid—he put his entire being into it. He thought of the old town, the real town, the town that still lived. It was *here*, around him, under him, on all sides, beneath the blanket of illusion.

Within the ball of string was Aaron Northrup's tire iron.

XI

TIME PASSED—the room became cold. Somewhere, far away in the night, a clock struck the hour. Christopher's pipe went out, unnoticed. Barton shivered briefly, then went on with his grim act of recall. He thought of every aspect of the object as it had been before the Change—every sensation, visual, tactile, audible . . .

Suddenly, Christopher gasped, "It wavered!"

The ball of string had altered. A certain insubstantiality crept through it. Barton strained with all of his inner power. Everything began to flicker—the floor, the bu-

reau, the gloomy shadows beyond the lamp, the whole room.

"Again!" Christopher whispered hoarsely. "Keep on. *Don't stop!*"

Barton didn't stop. Presently, silently, the ball of string faded. The wall became visible behind it, and he could see the table beneath. For a moment, there was nothing but a misty shadow, a vague presence—a something, left behind.

"I never got *this* far!" Christopher whispered, in awe. "I never could do it."

Barton didn't reply. He kept his full attention focussed on the spot where the string had lain. The tire iron—it had to come back. He drew it out, demanded it to come forth. It *had* to come—it was *there*, underneath the illusion.

A long shadow flickered—a shadow longer than the ball of string—a shadow a foot-and-a-half long. It wavered, then grew more distinct.

"There it *is!*" Christopher gasped. "It's *coming!*"

It was coming, beyond question. Barton concentrated until black spots danced sambas in front of his eyes. The tire iron was on its way. It turned black, became opaque. It glittered momentarily, in the light of the oil lamp. And then . . .

With a sudden, shattering clang, the tire iron crashed to the floor and lay there.

Christopher ran forward and scooped it up. He was trembling

and wiping his eyes. "Barton, you *did* it!" he cried, almost sobbing. "You made it come back!"

Barton sagged with weariness. "Yes—that's it," he murmured, passing a hand over his eyes. "Exactly the way I remember it."

Christopher ran his hands up and down the metal bar. "Aaron Northrup's old tire iron!" he cried. "I haven't seen it in eighteen years—not since the Change. I couldn't make it come back, Barton. But you did it."

"I remembered it," Barton told him. He mopped his sweating forehead shakily. He felt extraordinarily weak. "Maybe I remembered better than you. I actually held it—and my memory always was good."

"And you weren't here," said the old man.

"No." Barton shook his head. "I wasn't touched by the Change. I'm not distorted at all."

Christopher's weathered old face glowed. "Now we can go on, Barton," he said exultantly. "There's nothing to stop us. We can bring the whole town back, piece by piece. Everything we remember."

"I don't remember it all." Barton shook his head. "There were places I never saw."

"Maybe I remember them," said Christopher. "Between us, we probably remember the whole town."

"Maybe we can find somebody else. Maybe we can get a complete

map of the old town," said Barton. "We could reconstruct it scientifically."

Christopher put down the tire iron. "I'll build a Spell Remover for you," he offered. "I'll build hundreds of them—all sizes and shapes. With both of us wearing them . . ." His voice faded and died. A haunted look clouded his baby-blue eyes.

"What's the matter?" Barton asked, suddenly apprehensive. "What's wrong?"

"The Spell Remover." Abruptly, Christopher sat down at the table. He picked up the intricate head-piece numbly and looked at Barton almost accusingly. "You didn't have it on," he said in disbelief.

Christopher turned up the lamp. "It wasn't the Spell Remover at all," he said thoughtfully. He looked old and broken. "All these years." He gestured his futility. "All these years, and it wasn't any good."

"No," Barton said quietly. "I guess it wasn't."

"But *why*?" Christopher appealed to him. "How did you *do* it?"

Abruptly, Barton got to his feet. "That's what we've got to find out," he said.

Christopher nodded and looked down at the tire iron. Then, suddenly, he held it out to Barton. "Here!" he said.

"What?"

"It's yours, Barton—not mine. It never really belonged to me."

After a moment, Barton accepted it. "All right," he said, "I'll take it. Thanks. I know what has to be done." He began to pace restlessly back and forth, gripping the tire iron like an embattled taxi driver. "We've got to get moving. This is only the beginning. We've got a whole town to reconstruct."

Barton pulled the door open, and the chill night wind billowed into the shack. "Come on!" he said. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

Barton was already outside. "We're going to make a real attempt," he called back. "Something big—something important!"

Christopher trotted after him. "You're right," he said more buoyantly. "The Spell Remover doesn't matter. It's *doing* it that's important."

"What'll we try?" Barton strode impatiently along the dark street, still holding the tire iron. "We have to know what it was—before the Change."

"I've had time to figure out most of this neighborhood. I've been able to map this part of town. That over there"—Christopher indicated a tall house—"that was a garage and auto-repair shop. And down there—all those old deserted stores—"

"What were they?" Barton increased his pace. "They look awful. What's underneath them?"

"Don't you remember?" Christopher said softly.

It took Barton a moment. He had to look up at the dark night-silhouettes of the hills to get his bearings. "I'm not certain . . ." he began.

Then it came back to him. Eighteen years can be a long time—but he had never forgotten the old park, with its Civil War cannon. He had played there hundreds of times. He had picnicked there, on summer holidays, with his mother and father. Using the landscaped shrubbery for cover, he had played cowboys and Indians with the other kids of the town on the clipped, emerald turf.

Now, in the faint light, he could make out a row of drooping, decayed old shacks. Ancient stores, no longer used, with missing clapboards and windows broken, adorned with tattered rags that fluttered in the night wind. Shabby, rotting shapes in which birds nested, through which rats and mice scampered unheeded.

"They look old," Christopher said softly. "They look a hundred years old. But they weren't here before the Change. This was the park."

Barton crossed the street. "It began over here," he said, "at this corner. What's it called now?"

"Dudley Street is the new name." Christopher sounded excited. "The cannon was in the center. There was a stack of cemented

cannon balls beside it—it was an old iron cannon from the War Between the States. Lee dragged that cannon around Richmond!"

The two of them stood together, remembering how it had been—the park and the cannon, the old town, the real town that had existed until the Change. For a while, neither of them spoke—each was wrapped in the silent cloak of his own thoughts.

Then Barton moved away. "I'll go down to this end," he said. "It started at Milton and Jones."

"Now it's Dudley and Rutledge." Christopher shook himself back to reality. "I'll take this end."

Barton reached the corner and halted. In the gloom, he could barely make out the figure of Will Christopher. The old man was waving at him and shouting, "tell me when to begin!"

"*Now!*" Impatience filled Barton. Enough time had been wasted—eighteen years. He called, "Concentrate on that end. I'll work on this one."

XII

MARY MEADE WAS curled up on her bed, reading a magazine, when the Wanderer appeared. It came through the wall and crossed the room slowly, its eyes closed, its lips moving. Mary put down her magazine at once and got to her feet.

This was a Wanderer she had never seen before. She was an

older woman, perhaps forty. She was tall and stout, with grey hair and heavy breasts under her rough single-piece garment. Her stern face was twisted in a deadly serious expression. Her lips continued to move as she crossed the room, passed through the big chair, then disappeared through the far wall without a sound.

Mary's heart thudded alarmingly. This Wanderer was looking for her, but had overreached the mark. It was hard for a Wanderer to measure distance exactly without being able to open her eyes. She was counting her paces, trying to locate Mary's bedroom.

Mary ran softly, swiftly, down the hall and outside, around the side of the house, to the place opposite her room. There she waited for the Wanderer to emerge.

Something gleamed from the wall of the hospital. The Wanderer was coming out, moving slowly and cautiously, getting ready to open her eyes.

"Here I am," Mary said quickly, hurrying to her.

The Wanderer sank down on a stone. "Thank God!" she said simply. "I was afraid I'd open my eyes inside the wall." She looked nervously around. "I *did* go too far, didn't I?" she added. "We're outside."

"It's all right," said Mary. "What do you want?"

The Wanderer relaxed a little. "It's a nice night, but cold. Should-

n't you have a sweater on?" After a moment she added, "I'm Hilda. You've never seen me before."

"No," Mary agreed. "But I know who you are."

Mary sat down close to the Wanderer. Now that she had opened her eyes, Hilda looked like anyone else. She had lost her faintly luminous quality—she was substantial. Mary extended a small hand and touched the Wanderer's arm. It was firm and solid—and warm. She smiled, and the Wanderer smiled back at her.

"How old are you, Mary?" she asked.

"Thirteen."

The Wanderer rumbled the girl's thick black hair. "You're a lovely child," she said. "I would think you had plenty of fellows—although maybe you're still too young for that."

"You wanted to see me, didn't you?" Mary asked politely. She was a little impatient. Somebody might come, and, in addition, her every instinct sang with assurance that something important was happening somewhere not far away. "What was it about?"

"We need information," Hilda said simply.

Mary repressed a sigh. "What sort of information?"

"As you know, we've made progress. Everything has been carefully mapped and synthesized. We've drawn up a detailed original

—accurate in every respect. But . . .”

“But it means nothing.”

The Wanderer disagreed. “It means a great deal,” she insisted. “But somehow, we’ve failed to develop sufficient potential. Our model is static, without energy. To bridge the gap, to make it leap across, we need more power.”

Mary smiled politely. “Yes—I think so,” she agreed.

The Wanderer’s eyes remained fixed on her hungrily. She said, “Such power exists. I know *you* don’t have it—but someone does. We’re sure of it now. It exists here in the valley, and we have to have it.”

Mary shrugged. “What do you expect me to do?”

Grey eyes glittered. “Tell us how to get control of Peter Trilling,” Hilda said.

Mary started in amazement. “Peter? *He* won’t do you any good!”

“He has the right kind of power.”

“True—but not for your purposes. If you knew the whole story you’d understand why not.” Mary was patient.

“Where does he get his power?” Hilda demanded.

“From the same level I do,” the girl replied.

“That’s no answer!” Hilda sounded angry. “Where does *your* power come from?”

“You people have asked me that before,” Mary answered.

“Can’t you tell us?”

“No!” An unequivocal reply.

There was silence. The Wanderer drummed on the stone with hard, blunt nails. “It would be of considerable help to us,” she went on. “You know a lot about Peter Trilling. Why can’t you tell us?”

“Don’t worry,” Mary said. “I’ll take care of Peter, when the time comes. Leave him to me. Actually, that part of it is none of your business.”

The Wanderer recoiled. “How *dare* you!” she exclaimed.

Mary laughed. “I’m sorry, but it’s the truth,” she said. “I don’t believe it would make your program any easier, if I told you about myself and Peter. It might even make it more difficult.”

“What do you know about our program? Just what we’ve told you!”

Mary smiled again. “Perhaps.”

There was sudden doubt on the Wanderer’s face. “You *couldn’t* know any more,” she insisted.

Mary rose to her feet. “Is there anything else you want to ask me?” she said.

The Wanderer’s grey eyes hardened. “Have you any idea what we could do to you?”

Mary moved impatiently away. “This is no time for nonsense,” she said crisply. “Things of great importance are happening on all sides. Instead of asking me about

Peter Trilling, you ought to be asking about Ted Barton."

The Wanderer appeared puzzled. "Who is Ted Barton?" she asked.

Mary pressed her small hands together and concentrated on the pattern they made. "Theodore Barton is the only person to pass through the barrier in eighteen years. Except for Peter, of course. Peter comes and goes when the spirit moves him. Barton is from New York—an outsider."

"Really?" The Wanderer sounded indifferent. "I don't understand the—"

Mary dived at the tiny figure moving furtively through the grass. It evaded her and scuttled wildly off. The Wanderer, sensing trouble, quickly shut her eyes, extended her hands and disappeared through the wall of the house. She was gone in an instant, utterly silent, leaving Mary all alone in the darkness.

Breathing quickly, the girl scrambled through the brush, groping desperately for the tiny running figure. It couldn't go very fast—it was only three inches high. She had noticed it by merest chance. A sudden movement, a glint of starlight as it changed position . . .

She froze, rigid and alert, waiting for it to show itself again. Once it was past the wall, out among the trees, she wouldn't have a chance of catching it. She held her breath.

The golems were small and

agile, but stupid—not much brighter than a mouse. But they had good memories, which mice lacked. They were excellent observers, even better than bees. They could go almost anywhere, they could listen and watch and carry back letter-perfect reports. Best of all, they could be shaped in any form or any size.

That was one thing she envied Peter—she had no power over clay. Her control was limited to bees, moths, cats and flies. Peter's golems were invaluable—he used them with increasing effectiveness.

There was a faint sound from the pile of rotted hay against the wall. Mary saw the golem peeping out, seeking her whereabouts. What a stupid golem!—she thought. Like all clay creatures, its span of attention was incredibly short. It grew restless, impatient, too easily. Already, it was stirring around in the hay.

Mary didn't move. She remained silent, crouched, with her palms on the ground, her knees bent, a coiled spring.

Peter had finally overreached himself. He had sent a golem too far over the line, deep into *her* side. Peter was afraid—Barton had made him uncertain. The man from outside had upset Peter's plans—he was a new element, a factor Peter didn't understand. She smiled coldly. Poor Peter, she thought. He had a surprise coming. If she was careful . . .

The golem came out. It was a male—Peter liked to form male golems. It blinked uncertainly, moved to the right—and then she had it.

It squirmed frantically within her fist, but she didn't let it go. She jumped to her feet and raced down the path, around the side of Shady House, to the door.

No one saw her. The hall was empty. Her father was with some of his patients, making his eternal studies—learning new things all the time, devoting his life to keeping Millgate healthy.

She entered her room and bolted the door carefully. The golem's struggles were getting weaker. She relaxed the muscles of her fist a little and carried it to the table. Making certain it didn't get away, she emptied a vase of flowers into the wastebasket, then popped the vase over it. That was that. The first part was over—now for the rest. It had to be executed perfectly. Mary had waited a long time for this opportunity. It might never come again.

XIII

THE FIRST THING Mary did was to take off her clothes. She piled them neatly at the foot of the bed, as if she were in the bathroom, taking a shower. Then she took the jar of suntan oil from the medicine cabinet and carefully rubbed oil all over her naked body.

It was vital that she look as much like the golem as possible. There were limitations, of course. It was a man, and she wasn't. But her body was young and unformed—she was slim and lithe, very much like a youth. She would do.

Thoroughly oiled, she tied up her long, black hair in a knot, tight against her neck. Actually, she should have cut it—but she didn't dare. It would take too long to grow back—there would be questions. Anyways, she liked it long.

From the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, she got the three bottles and single package she needed. Rapidly, expertly, she made a dough of the powder and gums and pungent liquids, gathered it up between her fingers, then molded an imitation golem.

Inside its vase, the real golem watched with evident mounting alarm. Mary laughed and rapidly shaped the arms and legs. The result was close enough—it didn't have to be *too* exact. She finished the feet and hands, smoothed down a few rough places—then ate it.

The dough burned her throat. She choked, and tears filled her eyes as her stomach turned over, forcing her to catch hold of the edge of the table. The room seemed to be spinning slowly around her.

She closed her eyes and hung on tight to her consciousness, while the world rolled and billowed. Once, she groaned. Then, at last,

she managed to take a few, uncertain steps . . .

The double perspective bewildered her—as did the double set of sensations she felt. It was long moments before she dared move either body even a trifle. In one perspective, she saw the room as it had always been—this was through her own eyes, through her own body. The other perspective was utterly alien—immense, bloated, distorted by the curved glass wall of the vase.

She realized that she was going to have trouble getting used to more than one body—her own, and the golem's, three inches high. Tentatively, she moved the smaller set of arms, then the miniature legs. She stumbled and fell—rather, the little body stumbled and fell. Her larger, usual self stood foolishly in the center of the room, watching the whole process.

She forced her smaller body to stand again. The wall of the vase was slippery and unpleasant. She restored her consciousness to her normal self and crossed the room to the table. Carefully, she removed the vase and freed her smaller self.

For the first time in her life, Mary was able to see her own body from outside.

She stood still, in front of the table, while her tiny incarnation studied each inch of her. How immense she was!—huge and lumbering, a dark glowing tan giantess,

with great thick arms and neck, an incredible moon of a face. With staring black eyes, red lips, wet white teeth . . .

She found it less confusing to operate each body alternately. First, she concentrated on dressing her regular body. While she put on jeans and shirt, the little three-inch figure remained stationary. She donned jacket and shoes, unfastened her hair and wiped the oil from her face and hands, then picked up the three-inch figure and placed it carefully in her breast pocket.

It was strange, to be carrying herself in her own pocket. As she left the room and hurried down the hall, she was uncomfortably aware of the rough fabric of her pocket—it almost suffocated her—and of the organ-booming of her heart beneath. Her flat breast rose and fell against her smaller self, as she breathed, tossing it about like a chip on a swelling sea.

The night was cool. Mary ran swiftly, silently, through the gate and down the winding road. It was a good half mile from Shady House to town. Peter was undoubtedly at the barn, in his work chamber. Below her, Millgate stretched out, its dark patterns of buildings and streets relieved only by occasional lights. When she reached the outskirts, she hurried down a deserted side street, panting only slightly. Mrs. Trilling's boardinghouse was

on Jefferson, in the center of town. The barn lay just behind it.

She reached Dudley—and halted. Something was happening ahead of her.

Mary advanced with caution. Ahead, rose a double line of old, abandoned stores. They had stood rotting there for as long as she could remember. Few residents passed this way, anymore. The neighborhood was long deserted—at least, it was *usually* deserted.

But now—two men stood in the center of the street, about a block apart. They were waving their arms and shouting back and forth at one another. Drunks, she thought, from one of the bars along Jefferson Street. Their voices were thick—they stumbled around clumsily. Mary had seen drunks thus wandering through the streets before—but their drunkenness wasn't what interested her.

She approached, warily, for a better view.

They weren't just standing there, yelling and waving, she saw. They were doing something. So intent were they on what they were doing that they failed to notice Mary as she came up silently behind them. One of them was a blond-haired old man she didn't recognize—the other was Ted Barton. Recognition shocked her. What, she wondered, was Ted Barton doing, standing in the middle of the dark street, waving his arms and shouting at the top of his lungs?

The line of rotting, deserted stores across from them looked oddly unreal. There was an eerie, insubstantial cast to the filthy old structures. A faint glow enveloped the sagging roofs and porches—the broken windows were lit by an interior light. These manifestations seemed to excite the two men to frenzy. They ran back and forth, faster and faster, jumping and cursing and shouting.

The light increased in brightness. The old store fronts seemed to waver, then to fade, like buildings in an old print. They grew more and more dim, even as she watched.

"*Now!*" the old man shouted suddenly, shattering the darkness.

The rotting stores began to fade more rapidly—to fade out of existence. As she watched, fascinated, something else took rapid form in their places. The outlines of the stores shifted, then dwindled rapidly. Mary could see the new shapes that were emerging instead.

They weren't stores. They—it, rather, was a flat surface, of grass, with a small building rising from it—and something else, a vague, uncertain form in the very center. Barton and his companion ran toward this manifestation in wild excitement.

"*There it is!*" the old man shouted.

"You got it wrong," Ted Barton cried. "The barrel—it's longer!"

"No it isn't. Come over here and

concentrate on the carriage—over here!”

“What’s the matter with the barrel?” Barton asked. “It doesn’t look right!”

“Of course it’s right,” the old man retorted. “Help me with the carriage—and there’s supposed to be a pyramid of cannon balls here.”

“That’s right—I remember. Fourteen of them. I used to count them.”

“And a brass plate,” the old man reminded him.

“Yes, a plate—with the name of the battery,” said Barton. “We can’t bring it back unless we have it right!”

As the two men concentrated on the rapidly-forming cannon, the far edges of the park began to fade out, and the dim shapes of the stores reappeared faintly. Barton noticed the reversion. With a shout, he pivoted and appeared to concentrate on the borders of the park. The stores wavered and were gone again—and the extremities of the park hardened firmly.

“The path!” the old man called. “Remember the path.”

“How about the benches?” Barton called back.

“You take care of the benches. I’ll hold onto the cannon.”

“Don’t forget the cannonballs!” Barton moved off to concentrate on a bench. He strode up and down the block, forming one after another. In a few moments, he had

activated a half dozen faded green benches, that looked gloomy black in the starlight. “How about the flagpole?” he called.

“What about it?” the old man countered.

“Where was it? I can’t remember!”

“It’s over this way—by the bandstand.”

“No it isn’t—it’s near the fountain,” Barton insisted. “We’ve got to remember.”

The two of them turned their attention on another part of the park. After a moment, a vague circular shape began to emerge. An ancient iron-and-concrete fountain. The two activators shouted their delight. Mary gasped—water was calmly running in the fountain.

“There it is!” Barton called happily, brandishing a long, thin piece of metal triumphantly. “I used to wade there. Remember?”

The park was almost complete. At the far edges, it still wavered and faded back into the drab line of rotting old stores. But, in the center, it was beautifully firm and solid. The gun, the fountain, the bandstand, the benches, the paths—all were real and complete.

“We did it!” the old man shouted. He pounded Barton on the back. “We did it!”

The two men collapsed on one of the green benches they had summoned into being. Exhausted, they lay back, their legs extended, their

arms limp. They were obviously enjoying the satisfaction of a job well done.

Mary stepped out of the shadows and moved slowly toward them. It was time that she made her presence known to them.

XIV

BARTON SAW her first. He sat up, suddenly alert, the tire iron drawn back. "Who are you?" he asked, peering at her through the darkness. Then he recognized her, added, "I saw you at the boarding-house—you're Dr. Meade's daughter."

"That's right." Mary sat down cautiously on a bench across the path from them. "May I sit on one of your benches?" she asked in courteous afterthought.

"They're not ours," Barton answered. He appeared to be beginning to sober up. He added, "They don't belong to us."

"You created them, didn't you?" Mary asked. "No one else here can do that. How did you manage?"

"We didn't create them." Barton shakily got out his cigarettes and lit one. He and Christopher exchanged a glance of numbed disbelief. He appeared to be overwhelmed by the reality of what they had accomplished in bringing back the old park.

Barton reached down and touched the bench under him, as if to reassure himself that it was real,

that he was sitting on it, as was Will Christopher.

"Well, what do you know?" Christopher muttered. "What do you think of that?"

Barton grinned shakily and shook his head, then said, "I didn't expect such results on any scale like this."

The old man's eyes were wide. He eyed Barton with increased respect. "You really know how to do it, Ted," he said. "You cut right through—right to the core of the real town."

"It took two of us," Barton replied. He appeared to be cold sober, now—and close to total exhaustion.

Mary was fascinated. "How did you do it? I've never seen something created out of nothing. Only Omazd can do that—and even he doesn't do it any more."

Barton shook his head wearily. He was too tired to want to talk much about it. "Not out of nothing," he said. "It was all there. We merely made it emerge."

"Emerge?" The girl's black eyes sparkled. "You mean those old stores were nothing but distortions?"

"They weren't really there at all." Barton thumped the bench beneath him. "This is the real thing—the real town. The other Millgate was fake."

"What's that metal rod you're holding so tight?" Mary asked.

"This?" Barton turned the tire

iron around. "I brought this back first. It has been a ball of string."

Mary studied him intently. "*Is that why you came here? To bring things back?*" she asked, inquisitive as a kitten, wise as a cat.

It was a good question. Barton got unsteadily to his feet. "I'm going," he said hoarsely. "I've had enough for tonight."

"Going where?" Christopher demanded.

"To my room. I've got to rest—I must have time to think." He moved unsteadily toward the sidewalk.

Mary became instantly alert. "You can't go near the boarding-house," she said.

Barton turned on her. "Why not?"

"Peter's there." She leaped up and hurried to him. "You should be as far away from him as possible."

Barton laughed, without mirth. "I'm not afraid of that punk kid," he said. "Not any more." He waved his tire iron menacingly.

Mary put her hand firmly on Barton's arm. "No, it would be a dreadful mistake to go back there now. You *must* go somewhere else, until I have this worked out exactly."

She frowned, deep in thought. "You go up to Shady House—you'll be safe up there. My father will take you in. Go straight to him—don't talk to anyone else. Peter

won't enter that area. It's past the line."

"The line? You mean—" Barton was wavering before her intense sincerity.

"It's on Ormazd's side. You'll be safe there, until I can figure this out and decide what to do. There are some factors I just don't understand yet." She turned Barton around and almost pushed him the other way. "Get going—please, Mr. Barton," she said. "You don't want to spoil everything now."

She watched until she was sure they were safely across the line, on their way up the slope to Shady House. Then she hurried back toward the center of town.

She *had* to move fast—time was running out. Peter was undoubtedly suspicious, already looking for his golem and wondering why it hadn't returned.

She patted her pocket gently—and, at the same time, felt the great rough cloth billow against her. She still hadn't got used to being in two places at once. As soon as the golem had done its work, she intended to leave it as she had found it.

Jefferson Street lay immediately ahead. She ran rapidly along it, her black hair streaming behind her, her breast heaving. With one hand, she held onto her pocket. It would be a pity to let her little-self fall out and be destroyed.

In front of her, loomed the boardinghouse. A few of the guests

still sat on the porch, enjoying the cool darkness after the burning heat of the day. Mary turned into the driveway and scampered around in back, across the brief meadow, toward the barn. She slowed, as she saw the vast, ominous shape, rising against the night sky. She slipped into the darker shadows behind a shrub, to get her breath and size up the situation.

Peter was inside—she could sense his presence, up in his work-chamber, with his cages, his jars and his urns of moist clay. She looked hopefully around, seeking a night-flying moth she could send in as a scout. She saw none, and decided that, anyhow, a single moth wouldn't have a chance against Peter's creatures.

Carefully, with gentle fingers, Mary opened her pocket and retrieved her three-inch self. Sudden, double vision took the place of endless rough fabric against one pair of eyes. She closed her regular eyes and put her being, as much as possible, into the golem. Now, she grew aware of her own massive hand, of giant fingers touching her—a mite too roughly, too.

By alternating from one body to the other, she was able to manipulate her golem-self onto the ground and move it several feet in the direction of the bar. Almost at once, it was in the interference zone.

She forced her regular body to

sit in the shadows, its knees drawn up, its head down, its arms clasped around its ankles. In that way, she could concentrate her full attention on the golem.

The golem passed through the interference zone unnoticed. Warily, it approached the barn. It sought a little golem-ladder that Peter had rigged. It peered about, trying to find it. The side of the barn reared its immense, rough boards, towering upward to lose themselves in the star-studded, black sky.

Mary's golem-self found the ladder. Several spiders passed beneath her, as, awkwardly, she climbed it. They were leaving the barn in a rush. Once, a host of grey rats scurried by, their feet pattering on the ground like horses' hoofs.

She made the ascent cautiously. Below, among the bushes and vines, snakes rustled. Peter had all his creatures out tonight. The situation, she decided, must really have disturbed him. She found the entrance steps and left the ladder. A hole, a long, black tunnel, lay ahead—and, beyond it, a light. Then she was there—she was inside! The night-flyers had never penetrated this far. The golem-Mary was in Peter's work chamber. At last . . . !

For a moment, the tiny clay-creature paused. Mary let it stand at the entrance of the tunnel, while she returned her consciousness

briefly to her regular body. Already, the regular body was growing stiff and chill. It was a cold night—she couldn't sit there forever on the ground, in the shadows.

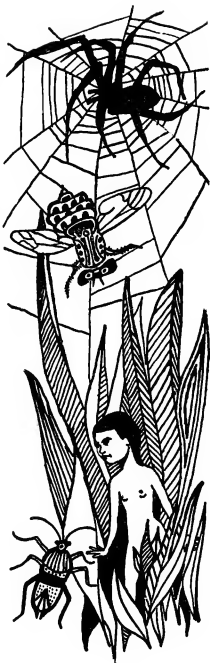
She stretched her arms and legs, unknotted her muscles. The golem might be inside the barn for a long time. Mary would have to find a convenient place to await its return—perhaps, in one of the all-night cafés on Jefferson Street. There, she could drink hot coffee until the golem had completed its business. She could eat hot-cakes and syrup, read a discarded newspaper, listen to the jukebox until the vigil was done.

She retreated cautiously through the bushes, toward the field. The cold made her shiver, caused her to pull her jacket close around her. Having two bodies was fun, but it was really too much trouble to be worth—

Something dropped on her. She brushed it quickly off. A spider, from the tree above.

More spiders fell. A sharp pain stung her cheek. Mary twisted frantically and slapped at it. A whole torrent of grey horrors swarmed through the bushes and across her feet, up her jeans, inundating her body.

They were rats—armies of rats! Spiders fell on her neck and shoulders in swarms, ran into her hair and inside the front of her shirt. She shrieked and struggled in vain. More rats attacked her, silently



sinking their yellow fangs into her flesh.

Mary began to run, blindly, in aimless panic. The rats followed—they clung to her with tooth and claw. More leaped to catch hold. Spiders scurried over her face, between her thighs, into her armpits.

Mary stumbled and fell. Even the vines seemed to attack her. Another army of rats threw itself upon her. Other swarms of spiders fell soundlessly, on all sides. She writhed and fought—her whole body was ablaze with pain. Gummy webs were flung across her face and eyes, choking and blinding her.

She struggled to her knees, crawled a few feet, then sank beneath the carpet of biting, gnawing creatures that covered her. Fangs burrowed into her, dug for her bones, sliced through her skin and flesh. They were eating her body away! She screamed and screamed—but the web-stuff choked off her voice. Spiders swarmed into her mouth, into her nose, her ears.

She heard rustling sounds from the dark bushes. She felt, rather than saw, the glittery twisting bodies come slithering toward her. By that time, she had no eyes to see with, and no way to scream. It was the end, and she knew it.

She was already dead, as the copperheads glided moistly over her prone body, and sank their fangs into the remnants of her unresisting flesh.

XV

"STAND STILL!" Dr. Meade ordered sharply. "And don't make any noise."

He emerged from the shadows, a grim, menacing figure in his long overcoat and hat. Barton and Christopher halted warily, as he came up behind them, a massive .45 automatic clutched in his fist. Barton let the tire iron hang loosely at his side, ready for a desperate move if necessary.

Shady House loomed before them. The front door was open. Many windows were yellow squares from which light flooded. The patients were still awake. The large fenced-in yard was dark and gloomy. The cedars at the edge of the hill swayed and rustled in the chill night wind.

"I was in my station wagon," Dr. Meade said. "I saw you coming up the slope." He shone his flashlight in Barton's face. "I remember you—you're the man from New York. What are you doing here?"

Barton found his voice. "Your daughter told us to come here."

Meade instantly stiffened. "Mary? *Where is she?* I was out looking for her. She left almost an hour ago. There's something going on." He hesitated, then decided. "Come inside," he ordered, putting his gun away.

They followed him along a lighted corridor, down a flight of stairs to his office. Meade locked

the door and pulled the blinds. He pushed aside a microscope and a heap of charts and papers, then seated himself on the corner of a coffee-stained, oak desk.

"I was driving around, looking for Mary. I passed along Dudley." Meade's shrewd eyes rested on Barton. "I saw a park on Dudley. It wasn't there before—it wasn't there this morning. Where did it come from? What happened to the old stores?"

"You're wrong," Barton said. "The park was there before—eighteen years ago."

Dr. Meade raised an eyebrow. "Interesting," he said. "Do you know where my daughter is?"

"Not now. She sent us up here and went on."

There was silence. Dr. Meade peeled off overcoat and hat, tossed them over a chair. "So you brought the park back, did you?" he said finally. "One of you must have a good memory. The Wanderers have tried repeatedly—and failed."

Barton inhaled heavily. "You mean . . . ?"

"They know there's something wrong—they've mapped out the whole town. They go out every night, with their eyes shut. Back and forth—seeking every detail of the understratum. But no dice so far—they're lacking something vital."

"They go out with their eyes shut? *Why?*" Barton asked.

"So the distortion won't affect

them," said Dr. Meade. "They can bypass the distortion that way. But as soon as they open their eyes, it's all back—the fake town. They know it's only an illusion—an imposed layer. But they can't get rid of it."

"Why not?"

Meade smiled. "*Because they're distorted themselves.* They were all here, when the Change came."

"Who *are* the Wanderers?" Barton demanded.

"People of the old town," was the reply.

"I thought so." Barton nodded.

"They're people who weren't completely altered by the Change," the doctor explained further. "It missed a number of them. The Change came and left them more or less unaffected. It varies."

"Like me," Christopher suggested.

Meade eyed him and nodded. "Yes, fundamentally, you're a Wanderer. With a little practice, you could learn to bypass the distortion, and night-walk, like the others. But that would be all. You couldn't bring the old town back. You're distorted to some degree, every one of you." His eyes were on Barton as he continued slowly, "None of you has a perfect memory."

"I have," Barton said, understanding his look. "I wasn't here. I left before the Change."

Dr. Meade said nothing. But his expression was enough.

"Where can I find the Wanderers?" Barton asked tersely.

"They're everywhere," Meade answered evasively. "Haven't you seen them?"

"They must start from somewhere. They must have gathered together in some particular location."

The doctor's heavy, kindly face twisted in indecision. A struggle was obviously going on within him. "What happens when you find them?" he demanded.

"Then we reconstruct the old town—as it was. As it still is, underneath," said Barton firmly.

"You'll plan to wipe out the distortion?" the physician asked.

"If we can," Barton told him.

Meade nodded slowly. "You can, Barton. *Your* memory is unimpaired. Once you have the Wanderers' maps, you'll be able to correct—" He broke off. "Let me ask you this. *Why* do you want to bring back the old town?"

Barton was appalled. "Because it's the *real* town!" he said. "All these people, all these houses and stores, are illusions. The real town lies buried underneath."

"Did it ever occur to you that perhaps some of these people prefer the illusion?"

For a moment Barton didn't understand. Then it came to him. "Good Lord!" he whispered softly.

Dr. Meade turned away. "That's right," he said. "I'm one of the distortions—not a Wanderer. I didn't

exist before the Change—not as I am now. And I don't want to go back."

The whole matter was rapidly clearing for Barton. "And not just you," he said. "Your daughter, Mary—she was born after the Change. Then there's Peter—and his mother—and Miss James—and the man in the hardware store. All of them—they're all distortions."

"Just you and me," Christopher said. "We're the only real ones."

"Don't forget the Wanderers," Barton reminded the old man. Then, to Dr. Meade, "I see your point, sir. But you did exist *in some form* before the Change. There must have been something—you didn't emerge out of nothing."

Dr. Meade's features were grey. "Of course. But out of *what*? Barton, I've known for years about this. I've known that this town, that all these people, were imitations—fakes if you like. But, dammit—I'm part of this distortion, myself. And I'm afraid. I *like* it this way. I have my work, my hospital here, my daughter. I get along well with these people."

"These *imitation* people." Barton's voice cut like a knife.

Dr. Meade's lips twitched. He said, "As it says in the Bible, 'we see as through a glass, darkly.' But how does it hurt me? Maybe I was worse off, before. Dammit—I *don't* know!"

"You don't know anything about

your life before the Change?" Barton was puzzled. "Can't the Wanderers tell you anything?"

"They don't know. There's a lot they don't remember." Meade raised his eyes imploringly. "I've tried to find some clue—but there's nothing. Not a trace!"

"There'll be others like him," Christopher said. "A lot of them won't want to go back."

"What caused it?" Barton demanded. "Why did the Change come?"

"I don't understand much about it," Dr. Meade replied. "It was a contest, a struggle of some kind. *With* rules—one hand tied behind the back. Then *something got in* and forced *Its* way into this valley. Eighteen years ago, *It* found a weak place, a crack in the continuum through which *It* could enter. *It* has always tried eternally. The two of them are in eternal conflict.

Ormazd built all this—this world. And then *It* took advantage of the rules—came through and changed everything. Don't ask me why Millgate? Perhaps a trick of time, of the Earth's rotation at the moment of impact. It's beyond human knowledge—it happened, that's all."

"You know their names?" Barton demanded.

"I have an idea." Dr. Meade crossed to the window and raised up the blind. "If you'll look out, you can see them. They're always

there—they never move—one at each end of the valley. Ormazd is over this way, and, at the other end—*It*."

Barton looked out. The shapes were still there, as Meade said, clear against the night sky—exactly as he had seen them from Peter's ledge.

"Ormazd comes from the sun," Meade said.

Barton nodded. "I saw him at midday. His head was one vast ball of shining light."

"*It* comes from cold and darkness," Dr. Meade explained. "They've always existed. I've pieced things together, here and there. But there's so much I don't know . . . This struggle, here, is only a microscopic fraction of the whole war. They fight everywhere—all over the universe. That's what the universe is for—so they'll have a place to do battle."

"A battleground!" Barton murmured. The window faced the side of darkness. *Its* side was bleak and frigid. Barton could see it standing there, immense, without limit, its head lost in the numbing emptiness of deep space. Out there was no life, no being, no existence—only silence and eternal wastes.

And Ormazd—Mary had first called the name—Ormazd from boiling suns, filling the emptiness with hot sound and motion. An eternal struggle, with sterile darkness, silence, cold, immobility, death, on one hand. And, on the

other, the flaming heat of life, blinding suns—birth and generation—awareness and being.

The cosmic polarities, Barton thought, the Manichæan Dualism.

"He is Ormazd," Dr. Meade said.

"And It?"

"Out of darkness, filth and death, out of chaos and evil, seeking to destroy Ormazd's law, his order and truth. Its ancient name is Ahriman."

Barton was silent a long moment. Then, "I suppose Ormazd will win, eventually."

"According to the legend, Ormazd will triumph and absorb Ahriman. The struggle has endured for billions of years. It will certainly endure several billions more."

"Ormazd the builder," Barton mused. "Ahriman the wrecker. The old town is Ormazd's. Ahriman laid over it this layer of black fog, this distortion and illusion."

Dr. Meade hesitated, then nodded. Barton hesitated. It was now or never. "Where can we make contact with the Wanderers?" he asked.

"I . . ." Dr. Meade began to answer, then changed his mind. His face sagged into grim decision. "I can't tell you, Barton," he said tonelessly. "If there were some way I could stay as I am, keep my daughter as she is—"

There was a brisk knock on the door. "Doctor, let me in," a wom-

an's voice said sharply. "I bring important news."

Dr. Meade scowled, then shrugged. "One of my patients," he explained. He unbolted the door and slid it aside a crack. "What is it?" he asked.

A young woman pushed her way quickly into the room. She was blonde-haired, thin-faced, her pale cheeks flushed. "Doctor, your daughter is dead," she said rapidly. "We were informed by a night-flying death's-head. Mary was caught and destroyed on the other side of the line, just beyond the neutral zone near Peter Trilling's work-chamber."

Dr. Meade shuddered. Both Barton and Christopher reacted violently. Barton felt his heart come almost to a complete stop. The girl was dead—Peter had murdered her. But it was something else that made Barton move quickly to the door, and slam it shut. The last piece in the puzzle had just been fitted into place—and he wanted to waste no time.

The young woman, Dr. Meade's patient, was one of the pair of Wanderers who had moved through the porch of the Trilling boardinghouse. He had finally found them—and it was, he thought, about time.

XVI

PETER TRILLING kicked at the torn, bloody remains of Mary

Meade with his foot. The rats were feeding noisily—quarreling and fighting and snapping at each other greedily. Peter pondered their savagery, dazed by the suddenness, the unexpectedness, of what had happened. But nothing remained to be done—his creatures had done it all. So, after a time, he wandered aimlessly back to the barn, his arms folded, his childish brow furrowed in thought.

The golems were excited—and the spiders refused to go back to their jars. They scurried around him, gathered on his face and hands, raced after him. Countless faint whines pierced his ears, the growing chatter of golem, snake, and rat restlessness. They sensed that a major victory had been achieved—and they were eager for more.

He picked up a copperhead and stroked its sleek sides. *She was dead—Mary had been destroyed!* By a single swift stroke, the whole balance of power had been altered. He dropped the snake and increased his pace. He was approaching Jefferson Street and the central part of Millgate. His mind raced in wild turmoil—his thoughts rolled faster and faster. Was this really the time? He wondered had the moment of ultimate triumph finally come?

He faced the far wall of the valley, the towering ring of mountains, black against the night sky.

There It was—arms out, feet apart, its head an infinite expanse of black emptiness that stretched eternally upward, itself a universe of silence and quietude.

The sight of It quelled his last traces of doubt. He turned back toward his work-chamber, suddenly eager and impatient.

A group of golems hurried excitedly toward him, clamoring for his attention. More streaked up from the center of town. They were terribly excited, their piping voices echoed as they swarmed up his clothing.

They pleaded with him to follow them. They seemed to be afraid. Half-angry at being thus sidetracked, Peter followed them back into the center of town—down dark streets, past rows of silent houses. What did they want? He wondered. What were they trying to show him?

At Dudley Street, they halted. Ahead, something glimmered and glowed in the darkness. For a time, Peter couldn't see what it was. Something was happening—but what? A lambent light, low but intense, played over buildings and stores, over telephone poles, upon the pavement itself. Curious, he made his way forward.

A small, shapeless mass lay on the pavement. Pete bent down uneasily to touch it. It was clay—an inert lump of clay. There were others, all dead and unmoving—cold. He picked up one of them.

It was a golem—or what had recently been a golem. It was no longer alive. Incredibly, it had been returned to its primordial state of non-existence. It was dead clay once again, returned from which it had been formed. It had been ungolemed.

Such a thing had never happened before. His still-living golems retreated in horror. They were terrified by the sight of their inert brethren. This was what they had pleaded with him to see.

Peter moved forward, perplexed. The low light flickered ahead, like lapping fire that crept and crawled from building to building, spreading silently—a growing circle that widened each moment. There was a strange intensity about it, a determination, a purpose. It missed nothing—like burning water, it advanced and absorbed everything.

In its center was a park, complete with paths, benches, an ancient gun, a flagpole, a bandstand.

Peter had never seen the park before. He stood on its edge seeking understanding of what it meant. What, he wondered, had become of the rows of deserted stores?

He gathered up all the still-living golems and squeezed their struggling, piping bodies together into a common mass. The ball of living clay twisted, as, rapidly, he reformed it. From the mass, he fashioned a head, without a body. Deftly, he modeled eyes, a nose,

then mouth, tongue, teeth, palate, lips. He set it on the pavement and pressed down upon the neck until it remained firmly upright.

"When did this begin?" he demanded.

The lips moved, as the several golem minds within it summoned their memories. "An hour ago," it croaked finally.

"Those who were ungolemed! How did it happen? Who did it?" Peter asked.

"They entered the park," replied the head of clay. "They tried to pass through the area of light."

"And it ungolemed them?"

"They came out slowly. They were weak. Then they lay down and died. We were afraid to go near."

It was true, then. The spreading circle of alien light had destroyed them. He pushed the features of the head back into shapelessness, then stuffed the ball of clay into a pants pocket. He could feel it squirm against his hip.

Peter got cautiously to his feet. Even as he watched it, the circle of light had expanded. It was engulfing more and more buildings. Peter sensed that it was highly unstable, a menace to everything he knew.

Then, with thunderclap suddenness, he understood.

The light wasn't destroying—it was transforming whatever it touched. As the familiar buildings

and houses sank down into the fire, alien shapes emerged to take their places. Other forms rising up from the lapping glow—objects he had never seen before—shapes utterly unfamiliar and foreign to his memories.

For a long time, he stood watching, while his surviving golems jittered about him, plucking at his clothing, trying to make him leave. The rim of the circle of light drew near. Warily, Peter took a few backward steps.

He was shaken by what he saw. Yet, at the same time, exhilaration burst forth within him. The time had come at last, heralded first by Mary's death—and now *this*. The balance had swung—the line no longer signified a border of opposing powers.

This light was the restorer, causing primordial shapes, to rise from beneath, to spring back into being, from the depths below. It was the ultimate element—the final piece in the puzzle.

Peter made his decision. Quickly, he emptied his pockets of the squirming clay, took a deep, shuddering breath, crouched like a sprinter awaiting the starter's gun. For a last time, he glanced back and up, up at the towering shape of darkness jutting against the starlit sky. The sight filled him with strength—the strength he would soon need.

Then—Peter ran straight into the lapping tongues of light.

XVII

THE WANDERERS WATCHED intently, as Barton corrected the last of the maps.

"This is wrong," he muttered. He struck out a whole street with his pencil. "This was Lawton Avenue. And you've got most of the houses fouled up." He frowned. "A small bakery was here—with a green sign over it—owned by a man named Oliver." He pulled the name-chart over and ran his finger along it. "You've missed it here, too."

Christopher stood behind him, peering over his shoulder. "Wasn't there a young girl working there? I seem to remember a heavy-set girl with glasses and thick legs. A niece or something—Julia Oliver."

"That's right." Barton made the correction. "At least twenty percent of your reconstruction schematics is inaccurate. Our work with the park showed us we had to be letter-perfect."

"Don't forget the big, old, brown house," Christopher put in excitedly. "There was a dog there, a little short-haired terrier. The mutt bit me on the ankle once." He reached down and felt his lower leg. "The scar vanished the day of the Change." A strange look crossed his face. "I'm sure I was bit there, though. Maybe—"

"You probably were," Barton said. "I remember a short-haired spitz on that street. I'll put it in."

Dr. Meade stood in the corner of the room, grief-stricken and dazed. Wanderers swarmed around the long drafting table, bearing charts and maps and data sheets. The whole building hummed with activity. All the Wanderers were there, in bathrobes and slippers or two-piece grey pajamas. All were excited and alert, now that the time had finally come.

Barton stood up and approached Dr. Meade. "You knew all the time," he said gently. "That's why you collected them here."

Dr. Meade nodded. "As many as I could locate," he replied. "I missed Christopher, though."

"What made you do it?"

Dr. Meade's features twisted in agony. "They don't belong down there," he said. "And . . ." He paused, unable to continue.

"And what?" Barton prodded.

"And I knew they were the original inhabitants. I found them wandering aimlessly around Millgate at random—lost, thinking they were lunatics. I brought them together up here."

"But that's all." There was quiet accusation in Barton's tone. "You won't do any more."

Dr. Meade stood there, helplessly. "I should have acted," he said, obviously miserable. "I should have thrown my weight against the boy. He's going to suffer, Barton. I'll *make* him suffer, in ways he knows nothing about."

Barton returned to the draft-

ing table. Hilda, the leader of the Wanderers, summoned him urgently from her desk. "We've got the errors fairly well corrected," she said. "You're sure about these alterations? You're not in any doubt?"

"I'm sure."

"You *must* understand," she went on. "Our own memories are impaired. They're not sharp, like yours. At best, we remember only dim snatches of Millgate before the Change."

"You were lucky to get out," a young woman murmured, studying Barton intently.

"We saw the park," another said, a grey-haired man with thick, gold-rimmed bi-focals. "We were never able to do that."

Another tapped his cigarette thoughtfully. He said, "Not one of us has a really clear memory. Only you, Barton—you're the only one."

There was tension in the room. All the Wanderers had stopped work. They had drawn around Barton in a close ring—men and women—earnest, deadly-serious.

One whole side of the room was stacked with files. There were heaps of charts and reports, endless piles of data and records. There were typewriters, pencils, reams of paper, cards, reference photographs tacked on the walls. There were graphs and detailed studies, bound and well-thumbed, tables of ceramic materials. There

was the actual three-dimensional model of Millgate. There were paints, brushes, pigments, glues and drawing equipment. There were slide-rules, measuring tape, cutting pliers, hack saws.

The Wanderers had been working a long time. There weren't many of them. Out of what had been the total population, they were a pitifully small group of survivors. But their faces revealed their determination. They had staked their lives on their work. They weren't going to let anything jeopardize it now, so close to success.

"I'm going to ask you a question," Hilda said to Barton. "You say you left Millgate in nineteen-thirty-five—when you were still a child. Is that right?"

Barton nodded. "That's right."

"And you've been gone all this time?"

"Yes."

A low murmur raced through the room. Barton felt uneasy. He tightened his hold on the tire iron and waited.

"You know," Hilda continued, choosing her words carefully, "that a barrier has been put across the highway, two miles outside of town."

"I know," Barton said.

All eyes were on Barton as Hilda continued calmly, "Then how did you get back into the valley? The barrier seals us all in

here—and it seals everyone else out."

"That's right," Barton admitted.

"You must have had help getting in." Abruptly, Hilda stubbed out her cigarette. "Somebody with superior power. *Who was it?*"

"I don't know."

A Wanderer got to his feet. "Throw him out. Or, better yet—"

"Wait!" Hilda raised her hand. "Barton, we've worked years to build all this. We can't take chances now. You may have been sent here to help us—or you may not. We know only one thing for sure—you're not on your own. You had help, assistance, from someone. And you're still under superior control."

"Yes," Barton agreed wearily. "I had help. I was brought here, let through the barrier. I'm probably still being manipulated. But I don't know any more than that."

"Kill him!" a slim brown-haired Wanderer said. "It's the only way to be sure. If he can't tell us whose agent he is—"

"Nonsense!" a plump middle-aged man stated. "He brought back the park, didn't he? And he corrected our maps."

"Corrected?" Hilda's eyes were bleak. "Changed, perhaps. How do we know they were *corrected?*"

Barton shook his head helplessly. "What am I supposed to say?" he asked. "If I don't know who brought me here I sure as hell can't tell you."

Dr. Meade moved between Barton and Hilda. "Shut up and listen to me," he said sharply. "Both of you. Barton can't tell anybody anything. Maybe he's a plant, sent here to break you. It's possible. He may be merely a creation, a super-golem. There's no way of telling—not now. Later on, when reconstruction begins, we'll know the answer. But not now."

"Then," the slim brown-haired girl observed, "it will be too late."

Dr. Meade agreed grimly. "Yes, much too late," he said. "Once you begin, the fat is in the fire. You won't be able to back out. If Barton is a plant, you're finished." He smiled without humor. "Even Barton doesn't know what he's going to do, when the time comes."

"What are you driving at, Doc?" a thin, sallow-faced Wanderer demanded.

Dr. Meade's answer was to the point. "You'll have to take a chance on him, whether you like it or not," he said firmly. "You have no choice. He's the only one who's been able to reconstruct. He brought back a whole park in half an hour. You haven't been able to do a damned thing—not in eighteen years."

There was stunned silence.

"You're impotent," Dr. Meade continued. "All of you. You were all here. You're like me—distorted. *But he's not.* You'll have to trust him. Either take a chance,

or sit here with your useless maps until you die of old age."

For a long time, no one said anything. The Wanderers appeared stunned by Dr. Meade's remorseless logic.

The slim brown-haired girl pushed her coffee cup aside and leaned back in her chair. "He's right," she said finally. "We don't have a choice."

Hilda looked around the circle of gray-clad men and women. She saw the same look on all their faces—a look of hopeless resignation.

"All right," she said matter-of-factly. "Then let's get moving. The sooner the better. I doubt if we have much time." Rolled map under one arm, she led the procession outside with firm steps.

The board fence around the hospital grounds was quickly knocked down. The surface of the rise was cleared, the cedars cut down, the shrubbery cleared away. In an hour, the Wanderers had an unobstructed view of the valley, and of the town of Millgate below.

Barton moved uneasily among them, swinging his tire iron. Maps and charts were carefully laid out—detailed, letter-perfect schematics of the old town. Every factor had been added and entered in its proper place.

The Wanderers organized themselves in a circle around the charts, a closed ring facing inward. Up and down the slope fluttered night-

flyers, huge grey moths bringing news from the valley, carrying messages as needed.

"We're limited at night," Hilda said to Barton. "The bees are no good after dark, and the flies are dulled and stupefied."

"You mean, you can't be certain what's going on down there?" Barton asked.

"Frankly, no. Moths are unreliable. As soon as the sun comes up, we'll have the bees."

"What do the moths say about Peter?"

"Nothing—we've had no reports on him at all. They've lost him." She looked worried. "They say he's disappeared. All at once, without warning."

"Would they know if he crossed over here?"

"If he comes, he'll be protected—with spinners to handle the night-flyers spread out in advance. The moths are terrified of the spinners. And he's bred hundreds of them in his work-chamber. Bottles of them, just for this."

"What else can we count on?" inquired Barton.

"Some cats may turn up—but there's absolutely no organization, among them. Whatever they feel like—no more. If they want to, they'll come. Otherwise, we can't force them. Only the bees can really be counted on. And they won't be about for another couple of hours."

Below, the lights of Millgate

flickered dully in the darkness. Barton examined his wristwatch. It was three-thirty already. It was cold and dark, and the sky was overcast with a moist layer of ominous mist. He didn't like the look of things. The night-flyers had lost Peter—which meant that Peter was on the move. He had already killed the girl. Peter was damnably clever, to be able to shake the night-flyers at a time like this. And Peter was after Barton's hide.

"How does he fit into all this?" Barton demanded.

"Peter?" Hilda shook her head. "We don't know. He has tremendous power, but we've never been able to approach him. Mary handled him for us—she had power, too. We never understood either of them. We Wanderers are just ordinary people, doing the best we can to get our town back."

XVIII

THE WANDERER'S CIRCLE was about to begin the first attempt to lift the distortion-layer. Barton took his place in the ring. All faces were turned toward the maps spread out on the ground, faintly moist with dew. Starlight filtered down upon them, filtered by the billowing mist.

"These maps," Hilda said, "are to be considered adequate symbols of the territory below. For this attempt, we must use the basic principle of M-kinetics—the *symbolic*

representation is identical with the object represented. If the symbol is accurate, it can be considered the object itself. Any difference between them is merely a matter of logic."

M-kinetics, Barton thought, the correct term for the archaic, timeless processes of magic—the manipulation of real objects, through symbolic or verbal representations. The charts of Millgate were related to the town itself, because they were perfectly drawn. Any force affecting the charts would affect the town. Like a wax doll, molded to resemble a person, the charts had been constructed to resemble the town. If the facsimile was perfect, failure was impossible.

"Here we go," Hilda said quietly. She motioned, and the model team entered the first three-dimensional section on the schematic map.

Barton sat moodily, tapping his tire iron against the ground, watching the teams building up the schematics into a perfect miniature of the old town. Rapidly, one house after another was constructed, painted and finished, then pushed into place. But his heart wasn't in it. He was thinking about Mary—and wondering, with growing uneasiness, what Peter Trilling was up to.

Reports from night-flyers continued to filter in. As Hilda listened to the ring of moths, dancing

and fluttering around her, the harsh lines of her mouth hardened.

"Not so good," she said to Barton.

"What's wrong?"

"We're not getting the results we should."

An uneasy murmur moved through the circle of Wanderers. More and more buildings, streets, stores, houses, miniature men and women, were pushed into place, in an accelerating program of nervous activity.

"We'll bypass the Dudley Street area," Hilda ordered. "Barton's recreation has spread over three or four blocks, now. Most of that region is already restored."

Barton blinked. "How come?"

"As people see the old park, it recalls awareness of the old town. By cracking the distortion layer in a single place, you started a chain reaction that should eventually spread through the whole imitation town."

"Maybe that will be enough," he suggested hopefully.

"Normally, it should be—but something's wrong." Hilda turned her head to hear a new series of reports being brought up the slope by relay night-flyers. Her expression of concern deepened. "This is bad," she murmured.

"What is?" Barton demanded.

"According to the late information, your circle of recreation has ceased growing. It's been neutralized."

Barton was appalled. "You mean, we're being stopped? Something's working against us?"

Hilda didn't answer. A flock of excited grey moths was fluttering around her head. She turned away from Barton, to catch what they were saying.

"It's getting worse," she said gravely, when the moths had fluttered off once more.

Barton felt ill. He said, "Then we might as well quit. If it's that bad . . ."

Christopher hurried over. "What's happening?" he asked. "Isn't it working?"

"We're meeting opposition," Barton answered. "They've succeeded in neutralizing our zone of reconstruction."

"It's worse than that," Hilda said calmly. "The zone has begun to shrink." A faint smile, ironic and mirthless, touched her lips briefly. "We took a chance. We gambled on you, Barton—and we lost. Your lovely park isn't holding its own. It's nice, but it isn't permanent. They're rolling us back."

Barton got unsteadily to his feet and moved away from the circle. Moths fluttered around him, as he felt his way through the half-darkness, along the side of the slope, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his rumpled grey suit.

Far off, at the other end of the valley, he could make out the great, bleak figure of Ahriman—a giant shape against the night sky,

its arms outstretched over all—the cosmic wrecker. Where, he wondered, was Ormazd?

Barton craned his neck and tried to look straight up. Ormazd was supposed to be *here*—the top of the ridge was about even with his kneecap. Barton asked desperately what was holding Ormazd back?

Below, the lights of the town glowed—lights of the fake town, the distortion Ahriman had cast, eighteen years ago, the day of the Change. That was the day Ormazd's original great plan had been tampered with—while the god of light did nothing. Why had he let Ahriman get away with it? Didn't he care what happened to his design? Didn't it interest him? Barton was without answers.

"It's an old problem," Dr. Meade said, from the shadows. "If God made the world, where did Evil come from?"

"He just stands there," Barton said furiously, "like a big carved rock. While we beat our brains out trying to fix things up the way he wants them. You'd think he'd give us a hand."

"His ways are strange," Dr. Meade said. "Then, it isn't going well."

"I know," Barton replied. "We're washed up. I guess I didn't turn out to be much help. The crisis has come, and I can't do a damned thing."

"Why not?"

"Not enough power," Barton said bitterly. "Somebody's moving between our model and the object—cutting us off, rolling back the reconstructed area."

"Who?" Dr. Meade inquired.

"You know." Barton indicated the slope and the town below. "He's down there, somewhere—with his rats and spiders and snakes."

Meade's face twisted. "If I could only get my hands on him . . ." he said savagely.

"You had your chance," Barton told him. "You were happy with things as they are."

"Barton, I was afraid. I didn't want to go back to my old form." Dr. Meade's eyes pleaded for understanding. "I'm *still* afraid. I know this is all wrong—don't you think I understand that? But I can't do it—I can't face going back. I don't know why—I don't even know what I was. Barton, I'm actually *glad* it's failing. Do you understand? I'm *glad* it's going to stay the way it is. I wish I was dead!"

Barton wasn't listening. He was watching something halfway down the side of the slope.

In the gloom, a grey cloud was moving slowly upward. It heaved and surged, a billowing mass that grew larger with each moment. What was it? He couldn't make it out, in the half-light of pre-dawn. Nearer and nearer, the cloud came. Some of the Wanderers had

broken away from the circle and were hurrying uneasily to the edge of the slope. From the cloud, a low murmur rose—a distant thrumming.

Moths!

A few grey shapes fluttered wildly past Barton toward Hilda. They were the vanguard of a vast solid mass of death's-head moths, pushing, in panic, up the slope toward the Wanderers. Thousands of them—all were there, the whole swarm from the valley floor—returning in a mass.

Then Barton saw what had caused the moths' panic. A spider web blew against his face. He tore it quickly away. Now the spiders themselves were visible, hopping and hurrying through the brush, up the side of the slope, like rising grey water, a furry tide, lapping its way from rock to rock. They were gaining speed as they came.

After the spiders, came the rats—scurrying shapes that rustled through the grass, with countless, glittering, red eyes, their yellow fangs bared. Barton couldn't see past them. But he knew that, somewhere behind the rats, were the snakes. Perhaps, he thought fearfully, the snakes were creeping and slithering up from behind. Such a maneuver made sense.

A Wanderer shrieked, stumbled back and collapsed. A figure, tiny and energetic, leaped from it and moved on to the attack. The next Wanderer shook it off, then

stepped down hard. A golem—Peter had armed his golems.

Barton retreated with the other Wanderers, away from the edge of the plateau. The golems had come from the flanks—nobody had seen their approach. The moths feared the spiders, nothing else—they hadn't even noticed the running, leaping figures of animated clay. A whole pack of golems dashed toward Hilda. She fought them off wildly, trod on some, tore others apart with her hands, smashed another as it sought to scale her body and attack her face.

Barton crushed a squad of golems with his tire iron, and the others attacking him scurried off. Hilda shuddered and half-fell—he caught hold and supported her. Needles were protruding from her arms and legs, microscopic spears the golems had stabbed her with. "They're all around us," Barton said bitterly. "We don't have a chance."

"Where'll we go? To the valley floor?" Hilda asked.

Barton looked quickly around. Something crunched under his foot—the cold body of a snake, slithering toward Hilda.

They had to keep moving—back toward the house. Wanderers were fighting on all sides, kicking and stepping and struggling with the ever-closing rings of yellow-toothed shadows and leaping, three-inch figures with glittering needle-swords. The spiders weren't really

a peril—but they had scared off the moths, which was their tactical function.

A Wanderer went down under a pile of gnawing grey—a squirming, deadly mass of rats and golems together. Something stabbed Barton in the leg. He slashed the golem in two with his tire iron and retreated. The creatures were everywhere. Rats clung to his trouser cuffs. Furry spiders scrambled up and down his arms, trying to spin webs around him.

A new, larger shape appeared on the slope. At first, Barton thought it was one of the Wanderers. Then he saw that it had come up the slope with the horde.

He had been expecting Peter, of course, wondering when he would show up. But Peter had been formed after the Change. What Barton had known was only his distorted shape. The creature weaving and quivering in front of him had been Peter. That was its false shape—but now, the false shape was gone. This was Peter's true shape.

Peter was Ahriman.

XIX

EVERYONE WAS SCATTERING. The Wanderers were fleeing toward Shady House in crazed panic. Hilda disappeared from sight, cut off by a slithering carpet of grey. Christopher was fighting his way free, with a group of Wanderers,

near the door of the House. Dr. Meade had forced a way to his car and was trying to get the door open. Some of the others had fought through to Shady House and were barricading themselves in their rooms, to be torn apart, one by one.

Barton crushed golems and rats underfoot as he retreated, his tire iron swinging furiously. Ahriman was huge. In the shape of a human boy it had been small, held to scale. Now there was no holding it. Even as Barton watched, the figure grew.

Ahriman took in life and breathed out the numbing, barren chill of deep space, the blight of death and emptiness, of decay, and corruption, and death. It continued to grow. Soon it would be too big for the valley—too big for the world!

Barton fled. He leaped over a double line of golems and raced between trees, giant cedars growing by the side of Shady House. Behind him, the towering shape of Ahriman grew. It was no longer advancing. It had stopped at the edge of the slope and anchored itself. And as it grew, its cold chill settled over everything.

Barton halted, gasping for breath. He was in a hollow beyond the cedars, just above the world. The valley, clad in its early-morning beauty, was emerging from darkness beneath him. But over field, and farm, and house, a vast shadow was falling, the shadow of

Ahriman. And this shadow would never lift.

A shiny-backed body lashed at Barton. He twisted away frantically. The copperhead missed, drew back to strike again. Barton hurled his tire iron. It caught the snake dead center and crushed its back to a pulp.

He groped for his tire iron, and his fingers touched something soft. String—ball of string! The tire iron had reverted to its distortion-shape. To Barton, this was the final symbol of his failure. He let the string fall.

A golem leaped on his shoulder. He saw the flash of a needle, poised an inch from his eyeball. His arms rose feebly, to be enmeshed in a tangle of spider web. He closed his eyes hopelessly. The battle was over. He stood waiting for the thrust into his brain.

"Barton!" the golem shrilled.

He opened his eyes. The golem was busily slashing spider webs with its needle. It speared a couple of spiders, drove the others off, then hopped back to his shoulder, close to his ear.

"Damn you!" it piped. *"I told you not to talk to anybody. This was the wrong time—too much opposition."*

Barton blinked foolishly. His mouth opened and shut. *"Who . . . ?"*

"Be still—there's only a few seconds. Your reconstruction was

premature. You almost ruined everything."

Barton said, "But I don't—"

"Hurry! With Ahriman free, there's no condition to be kept. It's no-holds-barred, from here on. He agreed to subject himself to the Change, but that's over with."

Incredulous, Barton identified the voice. It was shrill, high-pitched, familiar. "Mary!" he cried, dumbfounded. "But how ever did you . . . ?"

The tip of her needle-sword pricked his cheek. "Barton, you can do what has to be done. Your work lies ahead."

"Ahead?"

"He's trying to get away, in his station wagon. He doesn't want to regain his real self back. But he *must* regain it! It's the only way—he's the only one with enough power."

"No," Barton said quietly. "Not Meade—not *him!*"

The golem's sword was lifted to his eye and held there. "My father must be released," Mary said doggedly. "You have the ability."

"Not Doctor Meade," Barton repeated. "I can't—" He shook his head numbly. "That's where he's been . . . ?"

"It's up to you—you've seen his real shape." Her final words cut deep into Barton. "This is why I brought you to Shady House—not for civic reconstruction!"

A snake slithered over Barton's foot. The golem hopped off his

shoulder and set after it. A swarm of bees appeared—day was coming. More and more bees appeared. They would take care of the golems and the rats.

In a daze, Barton stumbled down the steep slope to the road. Dr. Meade had managed to get his station wagon going. When Barton reached the road, the car was gaining speed.

Barton pushed hard at a boulder. There was no other way—the car would be past him in a matter of seconds. As it came directly toward him he crouched, got his weight under the big stone and rolled it into the road, blocking it.

The station wagon veered crazily—and came to a grinding halt with its front bumper inches short of the boulder. Dr. Meade scrambled out. Barton hardly recognized him. The physician's face was a mask of terror. He ran wildly away from the station wagon, around the boulder and on down the center of the road. He didn't see Barton, until he crashed head-on into him.

"Meade!" Barton snapped. He grasped the frightened doctor by the collar and shook him like a terrier. "Look at me!"

"Barton," Meade croaked. "For God's sake, let go of me!" He struggled to get away. "They'll kill us. We—"

"Meade." Barton's eyes were fixed on Meade's quivering face. "I know who you are. *I know who you really are.*"

The effect was instantaneous. Meade's body jerked. His mouth flew open. "Who I—*am*?"

Barton concentrated with all his power. Holding tightly to Meade's collar, he summoned each detail of the great figure, as he had first seen it, from the ledge, that morning—The majestic giant, cosmic in its silence, with arms outstretched, its head lost in the blazing orb of the full sun.

"Yes?" Dr. Meade asked quietly. "You do?"

"Meade!" Barton said sharply. "You understand? You *know* who you are? Do you realize—"

Meade pulled violently away from him. He turned awkwardly and stumbled off, down the road. His arms flailed out, his body jerked and danced like a puppet on a wire. His face quivered, then seemed to melt and fall inward, like a shapeless pool of wax.

"*Meade!*" Barton shouted. He gripped the doctor's shoulder. Barton spun Meade around and seized him by the collar . . .

It wasn't Meade any longer.

It wasn't anybody Barton had ever seen—or *anything* he had ever seen. Dr. Meade's face was gone. What had replaced it was strong and harsh. Barton saw it for only an instant—a sudden glimpse of hawklike beak, of thin lips, of wild grey eyes, dilated nostrils, long sharp teeth . . .

Then came a shattering roar, a cataclysmic burst of sound that

knocked Barton flat. He was blinded—deafened. The whole world burst asunder in front of him.

The void was everywhere. He was falling—or was *falling* the proper word for what he felt. Luminous globes drifted past him. *Globes*. He caught at them foolishly—they evaded his grasp and went on drifting. They passed through what had been his body and calmly out the other side.

A group of them seemed familiar. After measureless time and much thought, he managed to place them. They were the Pleiades!

The luminous globes were suns, drifting around and through him. He felt mild alarm and tried to pull himself together. But it was no use. He was spread out too thin, over trillions of miles. He was gaseous and vague—and slightly luminous, like an extra-galactic nebula spanning numerous star clusters, infinite systems. He wondered what kept him from . . .

He discovered that he was dangling by one foot. He hung head downward, spinning slowly in a billowing sea of luminous particles, of swarms of suns that grew smaller each moment.

More and more suns swept past him. He was outside of the universe, still hanging by his right foot. He twisted and tried to look up, saw a form, a presence holding him.

It was Ormazd, power of light! Barton's terror was so great that he couldn't speak. It was a long way down—there was no end to distance. And there was no time—he would never cease falling, if Ormazd let him go. Dull anger stirred within him. He had released Ormazd. Somehow, he had been swept up in Ormazd's parabola. As Ormazd ascended, he had been absorbed.

Ormazd! His thought echoed through the void. *Ormazd, put me back!*

It had no effect.

"*Ormazd!*" he shouted mentally. "*Remember Millgate!*"

There was silence—and then the presence dissolved. He fell again—endlessly—down and down. Once more, luminous dots drifted through him. His being collected itself, grew denser with loss of immensity.

And then he struck.

The impact was terrific. He bounced, howling with pain—and was held. He felt heat—a blinding white flame. Then he saw the sky, the trees, dark and gloomy in the early-morning light, yet strangely illuminated by dancing fire.

He was flat on his back in the road. No time had passed. Dr. Meade's empty husk still tottered in front of him. As Barton struggled to his feet, it slowly collapsed, a bit of charred ash. Like everywhere else for yards around, it had been scorched dry, when the

smoldering shaft of pure energy released itself.

Barton looked upward—and held his breath. In the sky, the god Ormazd raced to give battle. Even as he watched, the great shapes closed, in time too brief to be felt by man, over distances too vast for human understanding.

The expanding fragment, glimpsed by Barton's mortal eyes, indicated it was going to be quite a battle.

XX

THE OUTLINES OF the two gods were still dimly visible, as the sun left the mountains and began to illuminate the world. They had grown fast. In one brief flash, like a billion suns exploding, they had swept beyond the limits of the Earth. There was a momentary pause—then the impact of their collision, as the whole universe shuddered. They met head on, body to body, in cosmic encounter.

It would be a long time before this battle was over, Barton thought. As Dr. Meade had said, it would probably be billions of years.

Bees were arriving in vast swarms. But that didn't matter much, anymore. The valley—the whole Earth—had been bypassed. The battleground had widened. Rats streaked wildly off, covered with stinging hornets. Spiders fled.

for cover, and even the golems were returning to lifeless clay.

The snakes were the worst. Here and there, the few remaining Wanderers were stoning them and crushing them underfoot. It did him good to see the blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl grinding a copperhead under a sharp heel. The world of the valley was back in its proper orbit, at long last.

"*Barton!*" a piping voice cried, close to his foot. "I see you were successful. Here, behind the stone—I don't want to come out until it's safe."

"It's safe, now," Barton said. He crouched, and held out his hand. "Hop aboard."

The golem came out. There had been a change, even in the brief minutes since Barton had last seen her. He lifted her high, to get a good look at her. The morning sunlight sparkled on her bare limbs, on a slim, lithe, woman's body that even in miniature, took his breath away.

"It's hard to believe you're only thirteen," he said slowly.

"I'm not," was the prompt reply. She turned her supple body this way and that, to reflect the light better. "I'm ageless, Teddy dear. But I'm going to need a little outside help. There's still a strong impression made by Ahriman on this material. Of course, that's rapidly fading, but . . ."

Barton summoned Christopher.

The old man limped painfully toward him.

"*Barton!*" he cried. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. But we have a small problem here."

Mary was emerging, reshaping the clay that made up her present body. But it was going to take time. Her figure was definitely a woman's—not a girl's, as he remembered. He had to remind himself that the Mary Meade he had known was a distortion, not the real thing.

"You're the daughter of Ormazd," Barton said with sudden inspiration.

"I'm Armaiti," the little figure answered. "His *only* daughter." She yawned, arched her slim torso, stretched slender arms. Then, abruptly, she leapt from Barton's hand to his shoulder. "Now, if you two will help, I'll try to regain my regular shape."

"Like Ormazd?" Barton was appalled. "As large as that?"

She laughed, a pure silvery bell-tone. "No. Ormazd lives out there—in the universe. I live here. Didn't you know that? He sent his only daughter to live on Earth. This is my home."

"So you were the one who brought me here—through the barrier," said Barton.

"I did much more than that," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"It was I who sent you out of

here—before the Change,” she told him. “I’m responsible for your vacation—for every turn your car took—even for the flat you had when you tried to keep on the main highway to Raleigh.”

Barton grimaced. “It took me two hours to fix that flat,” he complained. “We were between service stations, and there was something wrong with the jack. Then it was too late to go on. We had to turn back to Richmond and spend the night.”

Armaiti’s silvery laugh sounded again. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but it was the best thing I could think of, at the time. I manipulated you all the way to the valley. I withdrew the barrier so you could pass in.”

“And, when I tried to get out . . . ?”

“It was back, of course,” she replied. “It’s always there, unless one or the other of us wished it removed. Peter had power to come and go. So did I—but Peter never knew that.”

“You *knew* the Wanderers wouldn’t be successful,” he said accusingly. “You knew their reconstruction work, all their maps and models and charts, would fail.”

“Yes. I knew even before the Change.” Armaiti’s voice was soft. “I’m sorry, Teddy. They worked for years—they built and planned and slaved. But there was only one way. As long as Ahriman was here, as long as the agreement was kept,

and Ormazd subjected himself to its terms—”

“Millgate was really small stuff in all this,” Barton broke in. “You weren’t particularly concerned with it, were you?”

“Don’t feel that way.” Armaiti reproved him gently. “Millgate was small—compared to the greater picture. But it’s a *part* of the greater picture. The struggle is vast—much greater than you can hope to comprehend. I, myself, have never seen its true extent. Only the two of *them* understand it, as it’s really waged. But Millgate *is* important. It was *never* forgotten. Only—”

“Only it had to wait its turn.” Barton was silent for a moment. “Anyway,” he said finally, “now I know *why* I was brought here.” He grinned a little. “It’s a good thing Peter was obliging enough to lend me his filter. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have had a memory to work from.”

“You did your job very well,” Armaiti said.

“Now what?” Barton asked. “Ormazd is back—they’re both out there, somewhere. The distortion-layer is beginning to weaken. What about you?”

“I can’t stay,” Armaiti said, “if that’s what you’re thinking—and I know perfectly well it is.”

Barton cleared his throat, embarrassed. “You were in human shape *once*. Couldn’t you just add a few years to—”

“I’m sorry, Teddy.”

"Don't call me Teddy, *please!*"

Armaiti laughed. "All right, Mr. Barton." For a moment she touched his wrist with her tiny fingers. "Well?" she said suddenly. "Are you ready?"

"I guess so." Barton reluctantly set her down. He and Christopher seated themselves on either side of her. "What are we supposed to do? We don't know your real shape."

There was a faint trace of sadness, almost of weariness, in the tiny voice, as Armaiti answered, "I've been through many forms in my time—in every possible shape and size. Whatever you think would be the most appropriate."

"I'm ready," Christopher muttered.

"All right," Barton agreed. They went into concentration, their faces intent, their bodies rigid. The old man's eyes bulged, and his cheeks turned violet. Barton ignored him, and focussed his own mind with what strength he had left.

For a time, nothing happened. Barton exhaled, took a deep breath and recommenced. The scene in front of him, Christopher, the tiny three-inch golem, wavered and blurred.

Then slowly, imperceptibly, it began.

Perhaps Christopher's imagination was superior to Barton's just then. He was a lot older and had probably far more experience and, therefore, memories to draw on. In

any case, what emerged between them utterly floored Barton. Armaiti was exquisite—incredibly beautiful. He stopped concentrating and just gaped.

For a moment, she remained between them, her hands on her hips, her chin high, her cascades of blue-black hair tossed back over bare white shoulders. Her flashing, sleek body, glistened in the morning sunlight. A woman of immense dark eyes, of rippling, satin skin, of glowing breasts, as firm and ripe as spring.

Barton closed his eyes and thought that here was the very essence of generation—the bursting power of woman—the source of all life. He was seeing the lovely, vital energy behind all growing things, all creativity. He reopened his eyes to drink in the unbelievably potent *aliveness* that vibrated from her in radiant, shimmering waves.

That was the last he saw of her—already, she was going. Once, he heard her laugh, rich and mellow. It lingered, but she was dissolving rapidly. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and for a moment turned away.

When he looked again, she was gone.

XXI

IT WAS EVENING. Barton slowly maneuvered his dusty yellow Packard through the streets of Millgate. He still wore the rumpled grey suit

—but he had shaved, bathed and rested after the unusually strenuous night. All things considered, he felt rather well.

As he passed the park, he slowed almost to a stop. A warm glow of satisfaction arose inside of him. There it was—just as it was intended to be—part of the original plan, back again, after all the years. And it was he, Ted Barton, that had arranged its restoration.

Children were romping up and down the gravel paths. One toddler was sitting on the rim of the fountain, carefully putting his shoes back on. Here were baby carriages—old men, their legs extended, with rolled-up newspapers protruding from their pockets. The sight of them looked even better to Barton than the archaic Civil War cannon and the flag pole—with its Confederate stars and bars.

These were the real people of Millgate. The reconstruction zone, after Ahriman left, had resumed its expansion. More and more people, places, buildings, streets, were being drawn in. In a few days, the recovery would be complete in the valley.

Barton drove slowly back along the main street. At one end, the sign still said JEFFERSON STREET. But at the other, the first wavery signpost reading CENTRAL STREET had already begun to fade into place.

There was the bank—the old brick and concrete Millgate Mer-

chants' Bank—just as it had been in Barton's boyhood. The ladies' tea room was gone—forever, if things went well, out in deep space. Already, pompous or anxious-looking men were passing in and out, through the wide doorway. Over the door, glittering in the evening sunlight, hung Aaron Northrup's tire iron.

Barton drove on along Central. Occasionally, the transition had produced strange results. The grocery store was only half there—its right side was Doyle's Leather Goods. A few puzzled people stood around, lost in perplexity. The Change was being rolled back—it probably felt odd to walk into a store that partook of two separate worlds, one at each end.

"*Barton!*" a familiar voice shouted.

Barton braked to a halt. Will Christopher burst out of the Magnolia Club, a mug of beer in one hand, a cheery grin on his weathered face.

"Hold on!" he called excitedly. "My shop's coming up any second now. Keep your fingers crossed!"

The old man was right. The hand laundry was beginning to blur. The lapping tongues were almost to it. Next door, the ancient, corroded Magnolia Club had already begun to fade. Within its dying outline, a different shape, a cleaner shape, was forming. Christopher watched this with mixed feelings.

"I'm going to miss that joint," he said. "After you been hanging out in one place eighteen years . . ."

His beer mug vanished. At the same time, the last, slatternly boards of the Magnolia Club ceased to be. Gradually, a respectable-looking shoe store wavered and began to firm into being, where the run-down bar had been.

Christopher cursed his dismay. Abruptly, he found himself gripping a woman's high-heeled slipper by its strap.

"You're next," Barton said, amused. "There goes the hand laundry. It won't be long now."

He could already see the change emerging from within. Beside him, the old man was also changing. Christopher was intent on his store—he did not seem aware of his own alteration. His body straightened and lost its drooping sag. His skin cleared and gained a glowing flush Barton had never before seen. His eyes brightened and cleared. His hands grew steady. His dirty coat and trousers were replaced by a blue-checked work-shirt, slacks and a leather apron.

The last traces of the hand laundry faded out. It was gone—Will's Sales and Service had arrived to replace it.

Television sets sparkled in the clean, modern windows. It was a bright, up-to-date shop with a neon sign and glistening new fixtures. Passers-by were already stopping

to gaze happily at the displays. A couple of them had come back along with the store. Will's Sales and Service stood out. Thus far, it was the most attractive shop on Central Street.

Christopher grew impatient. He was eager to get inside, to his work. Restlessly, he fingered a screwdriver in his service belt. "I've got a TV chassis on the bench," he explained to Barton. "Waiting for the picture tube to start acting up."

"All right," Barton said, grinning. "You go back inside. I wouldn't want to keep you from your work."

Christopher eyed Barton with a friendly smile—but there was a faint shadow of doubt beginning to twitch across his good-natured features. "Okay," he boomed heartily. "I'll be seeing you, mister."

"*Mister!*" Barton echoed, stunned.

"I know you," Christopher murmured with a thoughtful frown, "but I just can't quite place you."

Sadness filled Barton. "I'll be damned!" he murmured.

"I guess I've done work for you. Christopher shook his head. "Know your face, but can't quite place the circumstances."

"I used to live here," Barton told him drily.

"You moved away, didn't you?"

"My family moved to Richmond. That was a long time ago—

when I was a kid. I was born here, though."

"Sure! I used to see you around. Let's see—what's your name?" Christopher frowned. "Ted something. You've grown up. You were just a little tacker, in those days. Ted . . ."

"Ted Barton."

"That's it." Christopher stuck his hand over the door, and they shook gravely. "Glad to see you back, Barton. You going to stay here awhile?"

"No." Barton shook his head. "I have to be going."

"Through here on vacation?"

"That's right."

"A lot of people come through here." Christopher indicated the road where cars were already beginning to appear. "Millgate's an up-and-coming community."

"Live-wire," Barton said.

"Notice how my store's arranged to attract the passing motorist. I figure there's going to be more out-of-town traffic through here all the time." Christopher spoke proudly.

"Seems like a safe bet," Barton admitted. He was thinking of the ruined road, of the weeds, of the stalled lumber truck. There would be more traffic from now on. Millgate had been cut off eighteen years—it had plenty to make up for.

"Funny," Christopher said slowly. "You know, I'm sure something happened, not so very long

ago. Something you and I were both involved in."

"Oh . . . ?" Barton said hopefully.

"Had to do with a lot of people—and a doctor. A Dr. Morris—or was it Meade. But there's no Dr. Meade in Millgate. Just old Doc Dolan. And there were animals!"

"Don't worry about it," Barton said, grinning a little. He started the Packard. "So long, Christopher."

"Drop by, when you're through this way again."

"I will," Barton answered, picking up speed. Behind him, Christopher waved. Barton waved back.

After a moment, Christopher turned and hurried eagerly back inside his radio shop, glad to get back on the job. The spreading pool of light had finished its work with him—Will Christopher was fully restored.

Barton drove slowly on. The hardware store, with its crotchety, elderly owner, was gone. That pleased him—Millgate was better off without either of them.

His Packard passed by Mrs. Trilling's boardinghouse—or, rather, what had once been Mrs. Trilling's boardinghouse. Now it was an automobile sales shop. Bright new Fords gleamed in a huge display window. Fine, he thought. This, too, was improvement.

Here was Millgate as it would have been, had Ahriman never

broken through. The struggle still continued throughout the universe—but in this one spot, the God of Light's victory appeared clean-cut.

He picked up speed as the Packard left town and began the long climb up the side of the mountain, toward the pass and the highway beyond. The road was still cracked and weed-covered. A sudden thought struck him—what about the barrier? Was it still there?

It was gone. The lumber truck and its spilled cargo of logs was no more. Only a few bent weeds marked the spot where it had been. Its disappearance made him wonder what sort of laws were binding for gods? He had never thought on the subject before but, obviously, there were certain rules gods had to obey, once they had made an agreement.

As he followed the twisting, turning road on the other side of the mountains, it occurred to Barton that Peg's twenty-four-hour deadline had run out. She was probably on her way to Richmond, by now. He knew Peg—she meant every word she had said. The next time they met would be in a New York court of law.

Barton settled back and made himself comfortable against the warm upholstery. It would have been out of the question for him to return to his old life, the way it was. Peg was out. All *that* was finished and done with, he thought. He might as well face it.

Come to think of it, Peg seemed a little dull to him now, everything considered. So, perhaps, it was just as well she had broken with him.

He found himself recalling a sleek, vital, glowing body, a lithe, dark-haired beauty laughing, and then dissolving, in the soft light of early morning.

Yet, Armaiti wasn't gone. She was everywhere—in all the trees, in all green fields and lakes and forest lands—in the fertile valleys and mountains on all sides of him. She filled up the whole world.

Two swelling mountains rose on either side of the road ahead. Barton drove slowly between them—firm hills, rich and full, identical peaks glowing warmly in the late-afternoon sun.

Barton sighed. He'd be seeing reminders of her just about everywhere.

POOR, HUNGRY PEOPLE

As archeologists, the visitors had open minds. But money was too much for them.

by FRANK BRYNING

THERE ARE TIMES, my dear Yknal, when the reiteration of your one and only hypothesis becomes intolerably tedious!"

Yknal's antennae came erect like the three prongs of a pitchfork as he received the telepathed complaint. The central prong began to vibrate faintly as he transmitted his reply.

"There are times, my dear Ytrohs, when I think you carry your estimable scientific scepticism to absurd lengths. Has anyone yet offered a better 'hypothesis,' as you call it?"

"No—that I admit. But yours is surely oversimplified and, until it is proved correct . . ."

"Search as you will amongst the rubble of this planet. Open all the vaults you may find. From the treasures these self-destroyed peoples did most to protect and preserve, you can deduce no other

explanation than the one I have given you."

Ytrohs dropped the two pens, the straight-edge, and the calipers he was using. He released the four corners of the map, which rolled itself up on the bench in front of him. Coiling the eight tentacles thus disengaged, he turned to confront Yknal.

"You would have us, then, give up our searching? Must we conclude that it is no use going on—that the great Yknal had given us the answer before we started? Living creatures, intelligent or otherwise, fight basically for one thing only? That whatever else may appear to cause their disputes, it is merely the symbol for one thing—food?"

"By no means give up! Continue to search as long as you are unconvinced. Continue until you have found all the various symbols there

may be—until your discoveries confirm my diagnosis so often that you—even you—must recognize its correctness.”

A closed mind is a grievous affliction, mused Ytrohs.

“Agreed!” transmitted Yknal. “And an open thought screen makes unwilling eavesdroppers!”

“I beg your pardon, my dear Yknal! I did not intend to think abroad. You admonish me justly.”

“My apologies to you, my dear Ytrohs. It was unmannerly of me to take cognizance of a private thought, and unpardonably conceited to think it must necessarily refer to me. Here comes Ynniks, full of excitement and information.”

Ynniks carried his sausage-like body canted at an angle of about thirty degrees as he raced towards the spaceship on his six long locomotion-tentacles. His eight manipulators lay coiled in two rows along the forward half of his underbelly. In size and shape and yellow-green color—in every observable detail—his appearance was identical with that of Ytrohs, Yknal and all the others of his race.

“We have found two big vaults in a building bearing the usual hieroglyphs,” he reported before he entered the ship. He visualized the symbols *B*, *A*, *N* and *K*. “In another building, there are several still larger vaults. Part of this building has crumbled long since, but we could make out the sym-

bols *T*, *R*, *E*, *A* and *S*, in that order. There are small fragments of others, but they are impossible to visualize in their complete forms.”

“Are the buildings ruined?” enquired Ytrohs. “Have they been disrupted by explosives?”

“No. The few which are damaged appear to have fallen away through the effluxion of time. This city’s inhabitants were poisoned by radioactive dust. It was not blasted, as were the rubble cities.”

“Do the vaults show signs of being forced—or attacked in any way?”

“None whatever—not a mark.”

“So, once again, the inhabitants died, but their best guarded treasures remain inviolate,” mused Ytrohs.

“They were a poor lot, anyway,” commented Yknal. “What kind of minds could you expect in creatures of only four limbs? Mental range and complexity must go with manipulative and locomotive versatility. With our fourteen limbs, for example . . .”

“Take care you do not underestimate them,” warned the sceptical Ytrohs. “If you count the five digits they had on each main limb, they had more than we!”

“And all beautifully adapted for twiddling!” said Yknal with a snicker.

“Let us not depart from our main problem,” admonished Ytrohs. “Whatever is in those vaults, they must have valued more

than life itself, for they protected it better. Since they valued it more than life, they must have valued it more than the means of life—such," he added mischievously, "as food, or—"

From Yknal there came a thrumming mental impulse of such intensity that it was painful to receive. The two others saw that his central antenna had become invisible in a blur of vibration.

"*Nothing* can be so valued above survival itself, or above the sustenance which is the means of survival!" thrummed Yknal. "In the last analysis, survival is a matter of food—for communities, as well as individuals—and that is what they fight about.

"They may appear to dispute over such abstractions as power, sovereignty over territory, or such tangibles as particular metals or minerals or artifacts. But all these things, in the end, are simply the control of the food supply, the ownership of sources of food, the means of producing food or of appropriating it. You will find no other answer."

"Nevertheless, we must try," responded Ytrohs. "Ynniks—can we land the ship close to the larger of the two buildings you describe?"

The disk-like space-ship lowered itself into the small forest which had overgrown the square before the Treasury building. From it, sallied a small work party, carrying a camera-like device and

riding on a miniature tractor with caterpillar treads. The tractor climbed the stone stairs in front of the building and carried its mixed cargo inside.

Before one of the great strong-room doors Ynniks and his two companions dismounted. One of them, Yttaf by name, set up the camera-like box on a tripod and sighted through it. A circular patch of pale violet light appeared across the full width of the door. After a few seconds, several sparkling points of red appeared—then, rapidly, more and more until the entire patch of light was a scintillating scarlet disk.

"Withdraw your eyes!" Yttaf warned them, somewhat unnecessarily, for each had drawn in his three eye-stalks as the light steadily intensified.

After twenty seconds, the intolerable brilliance snapped off and, almost as one, the three creatures extended their eye-stalks again. Through the heavy armoured door, where the circle of light had played, there was now nothing. On the floor beneath, was a heap of red dust.

"Come," invited Ynniks. "Let us investigate."

Ytrohs, Yknal and the rest looked with little favor upon the tractor's load of samples from the seven Treasury vaults.

"The same ingots of yellow metal," Yknal communicated mockingly. "The same disks of

yellow and white metal, stamped and patterned. The same elaborately inscribed documents with intricate designs and patterns upon them. Forgive me, please, if I remind you that I 'pathed you so!"

"We forgive you—once again—my dear Yknal," responded Ytrohs with immense dignity. "We acknowledge once more that what we have here tells us no more than we knew already. In some way, these poor objects were the most valued treasures of the race that built these cities and fought one another to extinction. What *can* there be about them so precious that they preserved them better than life itself? There *must* be an answer."

Yknal sighed, his whole body inflating like a balloon.

"Must I, forever, repeat the obvious? They did *not* destroy one another over these intrinsically worthless objects. This was yet another civilization that solved the riddle of atomic power before it

solved its own riddle of economics—the struggle for food! But what is the use? It was well 'pathed that, 'There is none so blind as he who will not extend an eye-stalk.' "

There followed the mental silence of screened minds in private contemplation. The central antennae of all three began to droop as transmission ceased.

At length Yttaf rose and climbed aboard the tractor. "I'd better throw out this junk," he vibrated. Then he paused. "What was that, Ytrohs?"

Ytrohs deactivated his thought screen completely. "I was wondering," he telepathed abroad, "whether—whether even the people of this planet themselves really knew what they fought about."

Expectantly, both Yttaf and Ynniks slewed an eye-stalk around towards Yknal.

But Yknal was not to be provoked. His central antenna remained down upon his forehead, tightly coiled.





FOUR-BILLION DOLLAR DOOR

Old Sam Button devoted his life to being first man on the Moon—in one way, he was.

by MICHAEL SHAARA

I SEE, BY THE latest history books my boy brings home from school, that they are already beginning to rewrite the incredible tale of Sam Button and the door. And I can see their point. Sam Button was a great hero, first man to reach the Moon and all that, and it was a rare moment in history when he made it.

But still, they haven't got any right to hush up about the door. Because, even if that was one of the great moments in history, it

was also undoubtedly one of the funniest. Anything that funny ought to be handed on to posterity. So, since nobody else had taken on the chore I guess I'll have to take it on myself.

Old Sam Button was a long lean man with blonde hair that looked like it had been stuck on with glue. Old Sam was a rare man, as well as a lean one. For as far back as I can remember, Old Sam lived with one great dream, to get from Earth to the

Moon. There are a lot of people like that nowadays, but there weren't so many then.

We used to kid him about it. "Old Onward and Upward Button", we used to call him, and it was a standing joke that his mother had been frightened by a flying saucer.

Kidding never stopped Old Sam—not even when he was Young Sam. He knew exactly where he was going. He kept at it all through school, up to a Ph.D. in physics, and then went right to work on guided missiles. He planned it from the very beginning, so that, when the chance came, he would be ready. When it finally came, Old Sam was readier than any man in the country. Which shows you what a deeply dedicated man he was. It also makes it kind of peculiar that such a comedy finish should finally wind up his dream.

Old Sam had faith every step of the way—I mean faith in science. He was absolutely certain men would get to the Moon, and Mars, and all the other places, and he was pretty sure that most of it would be within his lifetime. So he traveled around the country, making speeches.

In his spare time, Old Sam wrote science articles, speculating on the amazing things we would find when we got wherever we were going. I guess he had more to do with the first big rocket

being built than any man in the country. It cost four billion dollars, you see, which even now will go a good long way in the right hands, and Congress naturally had to be practically dynamited before they'd hand it over.

But Old Sam never gave up. He bribed them, he warned them, he sweetened them, he promised them everything. He claimed that the Moon was an invaluable military base, that whoever got there first would rule the world, that the scientific information we would receive would be enormous. He even hinted seriously that there might be loose diamonds, lying around on the Moon's surface—caused, he said, by meteors striking rock with great speed and pressure.

He promised them, in short, the Moon—and, in the end, he got the money.

I have never heard a more eloquent speaker. The only time I ever saw him stumped was when one Senator, an amiable, earthy man from Missouri, commented that, "If the good Lord had meant us to get to the Moon, why'd he make it so dagnab fur away?"

"But science," Old Sam declared, "science would find a way." There were a lot more atoms in the world than there were people, and, as far as Sam was concerned, what the atoms did was more important.

Now, perhaps, you begin to

know a little about Old Sam. True, he was not exactly a likeable man. Dedicated men like that seldom are. But I guess Old Sam really went a mite too far. After spending a lot of his lifetime in a laboratory, he was certainly a one-sided man. If a thing wasn't done scientifically, it wasn't done at all, for Sam.

Fortunately, he had no children. If he had had kids, he was the kind of man who would have spared the love and spoiled the child. All his emotional interest was bound up in space flight. Which, considering what happened, must have made subsequent events really rough on him.

At any rate, he got his money and built the satellite station and the space-ship. They were four years in the building, and then, one July, he took off for the Moon.

I don't suppose there was a man on Earth who didn't know about Old Sam's trip, and there were very few people who weren't excited about Man's first step into space. It was a great moment, a dramatic moment. There were television cameras mounted on Old Sam's ship beaming it all back to Earth. At least fifty million people were following Old Explorer Sam and his crew on their spectacular journey.

So, one morning, as Sam finally began to maneuver for the

Lunar landing, he was already a monumental hero. Newspaper reporters all over the world had been busy for months, writing about the hazards of the trip, about the deathly cold of outer space, about collisions with mountainous meteors and cosmic death rays.

But Old Sam had merely sniffed smugly for the cameras. "Everything has been considered," he reassured the press, "we have foreseen every detail."

So the papers painted him as a vast man, calm, unworried, going off into the illimitable dark, on the greatest of all explorations. No doubt, Old Sam was a great man—in his way.

All eyes were on him, as he went in for Man's first landing on the Moon. The TV cameras were focussed upon him, as he gave the orders for the landing, standing proud and triumphant in a spotless white cap and gilded uniform. There was a great bump, the picture leaped and blurred for a moment, while fifty million breaths were held, and then you could almost hear the cheers rising up from all over Earth. The Moonship was finally down—down and safe. What a moment!

Old Sam took off his hat and made a little speech. "Men and women of Earth," he said simply, "we have reached the Moon." It was very impressive—it was about as impressive a moment as I have

ever seen. Then Old Sam stepped toward the door.

Naturally, the next moves had all been carefully rehearsed. He was to don his uniform, a thick rubberized affair with a fish-bowl helmet, then he was to step out of the airlock of the great steel ship, bearing a flag in his hand.

Then he was to plant the flag in the soil of the Moon, and the television cameras were to be brought outside the ship, and we were all to get our first look at the Moon, while he made the speech claiming it. So we all watched breathlessly, while he got into his helmet.

At last, Old Sam went to the airlock, turned once to wave at the cameras, and pushed a button.

The door didn't open.

There was a seemingly endless pause, and then, still calm, he pushed the button again.

The door still didn't open.

He pushed several times, then motioned to one of the crew. You could hear people begin giggling nervously. The crewman examined the lock with bewilderment, then mumbled something to Sam.

"What do you mean, frozen?"

Old Sam cried, and the question must have been audible all over the world. Then he pushed feverishly at the button, but the great steel door wouldn't open.

It was all very embarrassing. Having reached the Moon safely,

they couldn't get out of the ship. The ship of course was built of solid steel, fully pressurized, and there was simply no exit. They had spanned two hundred and forty thousand miles of space, had spent four billion dollars and they couldn't get out of the ship! No flag, no speeches, no scientific information—no diamonds! They couldn't get out of the ship!

The door was frozen shut. Moments later—some of the most wildly hysterical moments in history—Old Sam announced unbelievably to fifty million people that he had discovered the reason. Some mechanic, back on Earth, had greased the outside of the door. In outer space, the grease had frozen rock-solid. There was no possible way of opening the door.

I must say, to Old Sam's credit, that he didn't break down. He waited, at least, until the cameras were off him. Then all we saw was a frigidly smiling announcer, trying to point out that Man had after all reached the Moon. But you could feel the shock rising all over the world—and then the laughter.

Mankind guffawed from pole to pole. Practically everybody enjoyed it but Congress. Some hot-head introduced a resolution banning spaceflight forever. There was nothing for Old Sam to do, but to bring the ship back to

Earth. It would be understandable if he had committed suicide on the way. He came back to what must have been the worst ribbing in history. I guess, deep down, we were all a little embarrassed, and we had to take it out on somebody.

Well that's about all there is.

What Old Sam did thereafter is obscure. When the laughter finally died down, and space travel was revived, he had no part in it. For he died, about that time, of a stroke of apoplexy, brought on one day at a picnic with his wife.

It seems she had forgotten the can opener.



Next Issue — Another Fine Novel

Planet for Plunder

By Hal Clement and Sam Merwin Jr.

The alien's intentions were noble—he sought only to warn Earth's inhabitants of the unseen destruction that threatened them. But communication proved difficult, and human reactions unpredictable.

Complete IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The Man in the Iron Altogether

Are you a weakling? When you sit down at the piano, do your fingers lack muscle to depress the keys? If so, read the following pages . . .

by DAL STIVENS

EVERY TIME I carted coal from the cellar, I puffed hard enough to blow out a blast furnace. Drinking beer made me feel weak at the elbows. I was so frail that I was continually blown off my feet every time the N.B.C. broadcast Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antarctica*. That wind machine . . . !

When I tried to drive the car, it was almost more than my life was worth. The big heavy trucks kept coming straight for me, and I had scarcely enough strength to pull the wheel over so I could mount the sidewalk to get out of their way. I swore that, one day, I'd get my revenge.

I had a lot of scores to pay back. I was always being pushed around. It had been the same at

school. Hemstead used to bully me unmercifully. He particularly liked kicking me on the shins. He used to roll up his trouser cuffs before he started. Not only did this give him greater freedom of movement, but he was also a careful type. Hemstead was a lawyer now, but, all the same, I gave the neighbourhood of his chambers a wide berth.

These days, my wife bullied me unceasingly. Having to stoke the furnace made her cross.

"It's shameful that I should have to do it," she complained. "You are always promising to go to a body-developing expert, but you never do. You have a wish-bone for a backbone. Just *look* at you . . . !"

She glared at me, pointing an

accusing finger. "Too many cigarettes!" she said.

I nodded penitently.

"Too many beers!"

I nodded again, but not so penitently. The resolution to do something about my deplorable condition was solidifying in me suddenly—don't ask me how.

"Too many—" she began.

I cut in, looking hard at *her*. "Too many women!" I said. And I added, so she could get my meaning clearly, "Women—singular."

"It's ungrammatical," she said.

"It should be *woman*—singular."

"Anyway, you got my meaning," I said. "I thought it was rather bright."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said she. "Well, let me tell you . . ."

But she didn't. I had taken myself off—the wind helped, as it was blowing my way—to see a physical culture expert, Iron-heels Murphy.

"Make a man of me Iron-heels," I pleaded. I felt more frail than ever. "Give me a mighty chest, thews of corundum, tendons of steel . . ."

"Iron only," he said. "Steel is needed for moral rearmament."

Murphy looked me up and down. He had to—I was floating gently between the ceiling and the floor, thanks to an updraft. He pulled a piece of cord out of a side pocket.

"I'll tether you and get to

work," he said. "I've never seen a worse case, but I'll give you everything I've got. You represent a challenge to any builder of iron men."

Six months later Iron-heels had made good. I walked out of that gymnasium, a new man.

"I wouldn't have believed it possible, but I have excelled myself," he said, eyeing the finished product. "I've made you an iron man."

I plodded heavily across Times Square, and a bus crashed head-on into me. The driver was visibly upset.

"Why can't you look where you're going?" he said pettishly. "However *will* I get my bus back to the depot?"

"I dare say the engine's still all right," I told him. "You weren't going very fast."

A character piped up from the rear seat. "The engine's here in my lap," he said.

I plodded off. I was ready now to take my revenge on all those trucks that had run me off the road. I chose a ten-tonner—one of those big trailer jobs that don't give way, not even for grandmothers with babes in arms. In a matter of seconds, the hood had been concertinaed.

"Take *that!*" I said with arrant scorn.

The truck that I picked for my 37th victim braked to a violent stop just short of collision. The

driver leapt out, pale and shaking.

"Spare me!" he quaked. "I'm the guy who loves Baby Fiats."

I let him go.

After that I visited my dentist.

"Tough cavity," he said an hour later. The carpet was stuck like a pin-cushion with bent drills.

"But I never allow anything to get the best of me. Just hold that fuse steady, will you?"

He put a match to the fuse, hurried into the next room to wait for the explosion. After it was over, he came back.

"Clean as a whistle," he said, a couple of minutes later. "Hang on for a minute, until I shift some of the ceiling off your chest."

"Don't worry about me," I said. "I'm quite comfortable."

"I'm not thinking about *you*," he said. "It's the people upstairs. That basin belongs to their wash-room, and they might need it later."

After I left the dentist, I went and waited outside Hemstead's office. I'd teach him to be the school bully.

At five o'clock, he emerged. You should have seen his face light up with pleasure when he saw me. He put his rolled umbrella and briefcase down and rolled up his pinstripe trousers.

"Ah, Weasel, you little stinker!" I cried. "I have waited these many long years for my vengeance!"

"Ah . . . !" he whispered, his little eyes aglow.

"Take *that*, and see if you can do better," I cried. I kicked him hard on the shins and waited for him to retaliate. He did.

Chivalry demanded that I see Hemstead limp over to a taxi before I moved off. It was beginning to rain heavily as I set out for home. I was soaked through by the time I reached my house.

I was going to do big things to the furnace, but my wife took one look at my face and diagnosed measles. She put me to bed.

They weren't measles—they were rust spots. In the morning, I was a shell of my new self. Just as well, too, you'll say.

A hell of a fix!



NEXT OF KIN

Tom Roebuck's wild talents made him a menace to Mankind. But whoever mastered Tom offered a deadlier menace.

by ALGIS BUDRYS

TOM ROEBUCK'S house was built on the side of a steep cliff, shaped out of solid rock and softly polished cedar, with broad running windows and a flagged patio bordered by carefully tended beds of dwarf pine and yew. Only a narrow drive led up toward it, spurring off from the highway five miles away, and it was seldom used.

One day, toward dusk, when the cliff face was washed with red sunlight, and the windows blazed with reflected fire, Tom's brother William drove a jeep up the steep, narrow road and braked to a stop just below the patio. He switched off the ignition, twisted and pulled his scarred black suitcase out of the back. Hefting it with both hands, his shoulders sloping under the strain, he carried it up the short flight of steps to the patio and awkwardly crossed the flagstones, his spare body pulled off balance.

As he approached the glass panels of the living room wall, they slid



aside, and he carried the heavy bag into the house and set it down with a thump. He squinted into the room's semidarkness, and he made out Tom's figure sitting behind a desk. He smiled wanly.

"Hello, Tom."

"Hello, William." Tom got up slowly and crossed the room toward him. "I haven't seen you in a long time."

They shook hands in an uncomfortable silence. Finally, William said, "Fifteen years."

"And now you've come to stay with me," Tom said. He peered into his brother's face, grunted in exasperation. The soft, hidden lights came up in the room, and he looked closely at William.

"Your mind says you need a rest. You've been working yourself too hard. And you've missed me. That's all. But your heart's pounding, and your respiration's wrong." He glanced at the suitcase. "What's in there?" He looked quickly back to William's face, then back to the suitcase.

"Just clothes? Then why did your pulse jump?" he muttered. He looked sharply at William. "Are you afraid of me, William? Are you *really* afraid of me?" He scowled and crossed back to his desk. He dropped into the heavy chair.

"There's something wrong," he groaned to himself, like a bear being stung by bees. He squinted and looked across the room at William,

shaking his head slowly. "Well, sit down, William, sit down."

William moved a low couch and sat down on the end nearest the suitcase. "It's been a long time since we've seen each other," he said awkwardly. "Fifteen years is a long time. You're bigger than I remember you. Getting a little grey, too, I see." His lean, brown-fingered hands were cupped over his knees, and he sat stiffly upright.

"You're nervous," Tom muttered with a frown. Like a bear circling a sleeping man who might suddenly spring up and shoot him, he wagged his head from side to side. "I can't quite puzzle you out." His voice barely carried across the room.

"There's something wrong in your mind," he growled. "It's like—something like—looking at a scene painting instead of a real landscape." His fingers kneaded the arms of his chair as though the wood were rubber, and the lights lost some of their glow as his attention wandered away from them.

"I'm your brother," William said in a husky voice. "Stands to reason I might have just enough of what you've got to mark me out as different from other people."

Tom shook his head quickly. "No. It wasn't ever that way before. This is new—this is something I haven't run across before." He jabbed at William's face with his small, glowing eyes. "You're

hiding something. You're really hiding something."

William's bony fingers tightened on his thin knees. Little beads of perspiration appeared upon his upper lip.

"Why are you here, William?" Tom asked suddenly, for the first time in his life. "What do you want? What are you doing?"

"I'm here for a rest, if it's no inconvenience to you," William answered in a dried voice. "I need it, Tom. I've been working the farm by myself since Dad died. Fifteen years without a rest—I'm worn out, Tom. I hired a man I could trust and came out here. I figured you wouldn't mind."

"That's what you say, William. That's what your mind says, too. But it's flat—it's got no life, no depth of truth to it." Tom leaned his weight forward and peered across the room. "But I can't see the lie." He gnawed at his underlip.

"You going to ask me to leave?" William demanded.

"No!" Tom barked. "No," he repeated in a mutter, "you can stay."

William sighed. He stood up, without moving away from the couch. "You wouldn't say that if you thought I was going to do something to you."

Tom shook his head. "No, I wouldn't." His mouth went small. "I'll figure it out, William. Give me time. I'm curious."

William looked down at his

hands. "I'm doing something I feel foolish about, Tom," he said. The sound of his voice made Tom's head jerk up. "A grown man shouldn't act like a horse trader.

"But I couldn't just come here and do what I'm going to do. I can't do it cold—not to you, Tom. I wanted to see you once more. I had to build a lie to do it, and then I had to find out if I really had you fooled, or if maybe you had it figured out and were letting me step into a trap. But you haven't. I can tell, Tom. I watched you growing up. You don't need to be able to look into minds if you know a man well enough."

Tom growled at him, "William, what are you doing?"

William shook his head. His face became in a mask of pain. "Tom, you're getting on in years. You've got no wife, no children. I know what it feels like. 'What's my life been good for?' a man asks himself. 'What's this world got that it wouldn't have if I hadn't been born?'"

"If he can't answer that, ideas start to go around in his head. It's too late for kids. It's too late to start something new. It's too late, and you're never coming back through this world again. That's when a man begins to think that leaving any kind of mark is better than leaving no mark at all."

Tom looked at him steadily.

"A man who can make a rock float in the air—" William went

on, "a man who can be in one room one minute and in another room the next—a man who can make wood and rock run like water and then go hard again—the mark a man like that could leave would hardly be good for the rest of the world."

Tom laughed uneasily. "William, you're beginning to sound just like anybody else—you're afraid of me. Yet you ought to know, if anybody does. I wouldn't do anything like that."

"I know, I know," William answered. "Twenty years ago you built this place, and you've been living here ever since. You took yourself out of the way. But that was twenty years ago, and you've been here alone ever since, thinking Lord knows what. Now you're getting on. You've got the power to do anything you want, to the whole world and anybody or everybody in it. I know what goes on in a man's mind when he's getting to be your age."

Tom looked at him uncertainly. He glanced at the suitcase again. "William, what's in there?" he asked sharply.

William looked down at the old suitcase.

"You ever thought, Tom, about how you do the things you can do? There's no point to saying you think something, and things happen according to your thoughts. That's like saying electricity works by turning a switch.

"What kind of *current* do you use when you look into a man's mind? How many volts and amperes of your kind of electricity does it take to float a rock? What I'm getting at, Tom, is that there has to be a force of some kind, like electricity, that you use to get things done." He looked down at the rug.

"I'm calling it a kind of electricity. Well, it behaves a little like it. You can handle it about the same way, once you've gone and found it. You can build machines that use it."

Tom moved like a big, fast animal. William reached down and touched the suitcase, and something stopped Tom dead in his tracks. He stood motionless, staring at William in fascination.

"I left the farm after Dad died," William said. "I went off to Chicago and got a job in an electronics shop. Nights, I stayed up, thinking and working things out. I thought I might need it, some day." He touched the suitcase in a different spot, and suddenly Tom could relax and step back a pace.

"You can't reach me, Tom, or what's in this bag. The man who just knows where the wall switches are in his house can't stand off an electrician." William's face set in stubborn, painful lines. "Tom, I can't let you live. The world isn't safe from you."

Tom shuffled forward a step, raising his hands, but the barrier

checked him again. He pushed at it with his chest, his feet slipping on the rug, then gave it up. He stopped and looked at William with his arms folded. He sighed, and his face relaxed.

"All right, William," he said in a quiet voice. His eyes grew distant. "Maybe it's for the best." He looked around unseeingly at the room. "It's lonely here . . ." He paused.

"Listen, William . . ." He raised his hands and dropped them. "No, I can't argue. Fifteen years you've been getting ready for this day," he whispered.

"Sit down, Tom," William said quietly.

Tom shook his head. He planted his feet. He said, "No, I'll stand."

William looked at him silently. Then he reached down and touched the suitcase. When he looked up again, there was only a drifting cloud of silvery ashes, settling quietly down into the soft rug.

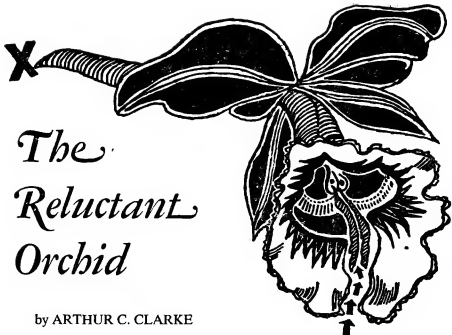
William rubbed his hand across his eyes and looked out at the darkness beyond the windows.

"There was only one of him," he whispered in the empty, lightless room. He turned off the machine inside the suitcase and walked toward the windows. In the distant east, the moon was rising. "He was special. But there's nothing special about me. There's nothing special about the machine. If I ever wrote down the specifications, there'd be thousands of us." He walked away from the windows and touched the suitcase again, and the lights glowed on again. He looked around the room.

"Funny things can happen in a man's mind when he has something like this in his hands. I know—I know what the temptation is." He looked at the machine. "What good is smashing it going to do?" he asked himself in a thin whisper. "I still know how to build another one." He sat down and stared at his folded hands. "But a man can't take his own life."

He looked out at the dimly visible patio. "Now it's my turn to be lonely," he said softly. "Now, I wonder who's going to come out here looking for me."





The Reluctant Orchid

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

*Harry Purvis, pub-crawling raconteur, tells of
a cannibal bloom that was not hungry enough.*

WHILE FEW PEOPLE in the *White Hart* will concede that any of Harry Purvis' stories are actually *true*, the regulars agree that some are much more probable than others. On any level of the Purvis Probability Scale, the Affair of the Reluctant Orchid must rate very low indeed.

I don't remember what ingenious gambit Harry used to launch this narrative. Perhaps some orchid-fancier had brought his latest monstrosity into the bar. This was

enough to set Harry off. No matter—I do remember the story, and, after all, that's what counts.

The adventure did not, on this occasion, concern any of Harry's numerous relatives, and he dextrously avoided questions as to just how he happened to know so many of the sordid details. The hero—if you can call him that—of this hot-house epic was an inoffensive little clerk named Hercules Keating. If you think *that* is the most unlikely part of the story, just stick around.

Hercules is not the sort of name a man can carry off lightly at the best of times, and, when you are four foot nine and look as if you'd have to take a physical-culture course before you can even become a 97-pound weakling, Hercules is a positive embarrassment. Perhaps this helped to explain why Hercules had very little social life, why all his real friends grew in pots in a humid conservatory at the bottom of his garden.

His needs were simple, and he spent little money on himself. Consequently, his collection of orchids and cacti was really rather remarkable. Indeed, he had a wide reputation among the small but far-flung fraternity of cactophiles, and often received, from remote corners of the globe, oddly-shaped parcels that smelled of mould and tropical jungles.

Hercules had only one living relative, and it would have been hard to find a greater contrast than that offered by Aunt Henrietta and her plant-loving nephew. She was a massive six footer, usually wore a rather loud line in Harris tweeds, drove a Jaguar with reckless skill, and chain-smoked cigars. Her parents had set their hearts on a boy, and had never been able to decide whether or not their wish had been granted.

Henrietta earned a living, and quite a good one, breeding dogs of various shapes and sizes. She was seldom without a couple of her

latest models, and they were not the type of portable canine ladies like to carry in their handbags. The Keating Kennels specialized in Great Danes, Alsations, and Saint Bernards.

Henrietta, rightly despising men as the weaker sex, had never married. However, for some reason, she took an avuncular—yes, avuncular is definitely the proper word—interest in Hercules, and called to see him almost every weekend.

It was a curious relationship—perhaps Henrietta found that Hercules bolstered her feelings of superiority. If he was a good example of the male sex, then they were certainly a pretty sorry lot. Yet, if this was Henrietta's motivation, she was unconscious of it and seemed genuinely fond of her nephew. She was patronizing, but never unkind.

As might be expected, her attentions did not exactly help Hercules' own well-developed inferiority complex. At first, he tolerated his aunt. Then, he came to dread her visits, her booming voice, her bone-crushing handshake. At last, he grew to hate her.

Eventually, indeed, this hate was the dominant emotion in his life, exceeding even his love for his orchids. But he was careful not to show it, realizing that, if Aunt Henrietta ever discovered how he truly felt about her, she would probably break him in two and throw the halves to her wolf-pack.

There was no way, then, in which Hercules could express his pent-up feelings. He had to be polite to Aunt Henrietta, even when he felt like murder—and he often *did* feel like murder, though he knew that there was nothing he would ever do about it. Until one day . . .

According to the dealer, the orchid came from "somewhere in the Amazon region"—a rather vague postal address. When Hercules first saw it, it was not a prepossessing sight, even to a man who loved orchids as much as he did. A shapeless root, about the size of a man's fist—that was all.

It was redolent of decay, and there was the faintest hint of a rank, carrion smell. Hercules was not even sure that it was viable, and told the dealer as much. Perhaps this enabled him to purchase it for a trifling sum, and he carried it home without much enthusiasm.

It showed no signs of life for the first month, but that did not worry Hercules. He knew his orchids. Then, one day, a tiny green shoot appeared and began to creep up to the light. After that, progress was rapid.

Soon there was a thick, fleshy stem as big as a man's forearm, and colored a positively virulent green. Near the top of the stem, a series of curious bulges circled the plant. Otherwise, it was completely featureless. Hercules was now quite excited—he was sure that some en-

tirely new species had swum into his ken.

The rate of growth became really fantastic. Soon the plant was taller than Hercules, not that that was saying a great deal. Moreover, the bulges seemed to be developing, until it looked as if at any moment the orchid would burst into bloom.

Hercules waited anxiously, knowing how short-lived some flowers can be, and spent as much time as he possibly could in the hot-house. Despite all his watchfulness, however, the transformation occurred one night, while he was asleep.

In the morning, the orchid was fringed by a series of eight dangling tendrils, almost reaching to the ground. They must have developed inside the plant and emerged with—for the vegetable world—explosive speed. Hercules stared at the phenomenon in amazement, and went very thoughtfully to work.

That evening, as he watered the plant and checked its soil, he noticed a still more peculiar fact. The tendrils were thickening, and they were not completely motionless. They had a slight but unmistakable tendency to vibrate, as if possessing a life of their own. Even Hercules, for all of his interest and enthusiasm, found this more than a little disturbing.

A few days later, there was no doubt about it at all. When he ap-

proached the orchid, the tendrils swayed towards him in an unpleasantly suggestive fashion. The impression of hunger was so strong that Hercules began to feel very uncomfortable indeed, and something started to nag at the back of his mind. It was quite a while before he could recall what it was.

Then he said to himself, "Of course! How stupid of me!" and went along to the local library. Here he spent a most interesting half-hour rereading a little piece by one H. G. Wells entitled, "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid."

My goodness! thought Hercules, when he had finished the tale. As yet, there had been no stupefying odor which might overpower the plant's intended victim, but otherwise the characteristics were all too similar. Hercules went home in a very unsettled mood indeed.

He opened the conservatory door and stood there, looking along the avenue of greenery toward his prize specimen. He judged the length of the tendrils—already he found himself calling them "tentacles"—with great care and walked to within what appeared a safe distance. The plant certainly gave an impression of alertness and menace far more appropriate to the animal than the vegetable kingdom. Hercules remembered the unfortunate history of Doctor Frankenstein, and he was not amused.

But, really, he told himself, this was ridiculous! Such things didn't

happen in real life. Well, there was one way to put matters to the test.

Hercules went into the house and came back a few minutes later with a broomstick, to the end of which he had attached a piece of raw meat. Feeling himself to be a considerable fool, he advanced towards the orchid as a lion-tamer might approach one of his charges at meal-time.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then two of the tendrils developed an agitated twitch. They began to sway back and forth, as if the plant was making up its mind. Abruptly, they whipped out with such speed that they practically vanished from view. They wrapped themselves round the meat, and Hercules felt a powerful tug at the end of his broomstick. Then the meat was gone—the orchid was clutching it to its figurative bosom.

"Jumping Jehosophat!" yelled Hercules. It was very seldom indeed that he used such strong language.

The orchid showed no further signs of life for twenty-four hours. It was waiting for the meat to become high, and it was also developing its digestive system. By the next day, a network of what looked like short roots had covered the still visible chunk of meat. By nightfall, the meat was gone.

The plant had tasted blood!

Hercules' emotions as he watched over his prize were curiously mixed. There were times

when it almost gave him nightmares, and he foresaw a whole range of horrid possibilities. The orchid was now extremely strong. If he ever got within its clutches, he would be done for. But, of course, there was not the slightest danger of that.

He had arranged a system of pipes, so that it could be watered from a safe distance. Its less orthodox food he simply tossed within range of the deadly tentacles. It was now eating a pound of raw meat a day, and he had an uncomfortable feeling that it could cope with much larger quantities if it had the opportunity.

Hercules' natural qualms were, on the whole, outweighed by his feeling of triumph that such a botanical marvel had fallen into his hands. Whenever he chose, he could become the most famous orchid-grower in the world. It was typical of his somewhat restricted viewpoint that it never occurred to him other people, besides orchid-fanciers, might be interested in his pet.

The creature was now about six feet tall and apparently still growing—though much more slowly than it had been. All the other plants had been moved from its end of the conservatory, not so much because Hercules feared that it might be cannibalistic, as to enable him to tend them without danger. He had stretched a rope across the central aisle so that there was

no risk of his accidentally walking within range of those eight dangling arms.

It was obvious that the orchid had a highly developed nervous system and something very nearly approaching intelligence. It knew when it was going to be fed, and exhibited unmistakable signs of pleasure. Most fantastic of all—though Hercules was still not sure about this—it seemed capable of producing sounds.

There were times, just before a meal, when he fancied he could hear an incredibly high-pitched whistle, skirting the edge of audibility. A new-born bat might have had such a voice. He wondered what purpose it served. Did the orchid somehow lure its prey into its clutches by sound? If so, he did not think the technique would work on him.

While Hercules was making these interesting discoveries, he continued to be fussed over by Aunt Henrietta and assaulted by her hounds, which were never as housebroken as she claimed them to be. She would roar up the street on a Sunday afternoon, with one dog in the seat beside her and another occupying most of the baggage compartment.

Then she would bound up the steps, two at a time, nearly deafen Hercules with her greeting, half paralyze him with her handshake and blow cigar smoke in his face. There had been a time when he

was terrified lest she kiss him, but he had long since realized that such effeminate vulgarity was foreign to her nature.

Aunt Henrietta looked upon Hercules' orchids with some scorn. Spending one's spare time in a hot-house was, she considered, a very effete recreation. When *she* wanted to let off steam, she went big-game hunting in Kenya. This did nothing to endear her to Hercules, who hated blood sports.

But despite his mounting dislike for his overpowering aunt, every Sunday afternoon he dutifully prepared tea for her and they had a *tête-à-tête* together which, on the surface at least, seemed perfectly friendly. Henrietta never guessed that, as he poured the tea, Hercules often wished it were poisoned. She was, far beneath her extensive fortifications, a fundamentally good-hearted person, and knowledge of his true feelings toward her would have hurt her deeply.

Hercules did not mention his vegetable octopus to Aunt Henrietta. He had, on occasion, shown her his most interesting specimens, but this was something he was keeping to himself. Perhaps, even before he had fully formulated his diabolical plan, his subconscious was already preparing the ground . . .

It was late on Sunday evening, when the roar of the Jaguar had died away into the night and Hercules was restoring his shattered

nerves in the conservatory, that the idea first came full-fledged into his mind. He was staring at the orchid, noting how the tendrils were now as thick around as a man's thumb, when a most pleasing fantasy suddenly flashed before his eyes. He pictured Aunt Henrietta struggling helplessly in the grip of the monster, unable to escape from its carnivorous clutches.

It would be the perfect crime. The distraught nephew would arrive on the scene too late to be of assistance, and, when the police answered his frantic call, they would see at a glance that the whole affair was a deplorable accident. True, there would be an inquest, but the coroner's censure would be toned down in view of Hercules' obvious grief.

The more he thought of the idea, the more he liked it. He could discover no flaws in the plan, as long as the orchid cooperated. This, clearly, would be his greatest problem. He would have to plan a course of training for the creature. It already looked sufficiently diabolical—he must give it a disposition to match its appearance.

Considering that he had no prior experience in such matters, and that there were no authorities he could consult, Hercules proceeded along sound and businesslike lines. He would use a fishing rod to dangle pieces of meat just outside the orchid's range, until the creature lashed its tentacles in a frenzy.

At such times its high-pitched vegetable squeak was clearly audible, and Hercules wondered how it managed to produce the sound. He also wondered what its organs of perception were, but this was yet another mystery that could not be solved without close examination.

Perhaps Aunt Henrietta, if all went well, would have a brief opportunity of discovering these interesting facts—though she would probably be too busy to report them for the benefit of posterity.

There was no doubt that the beast was quite powerful enough to deal with its intended victim. It had once wrenched a broomstick out of Hercules' grip, and, although that in itself proved very little, the sickening *crack* of the wood a moment later brought a smile of satisfaction to its trainer's thin lips. He began to be much more pleasant and attentive to his aunt. In every respect, indeed, he was the model nephew.

When Hercules considered that his picador tactics had brought the orchid into the right frame of mind, he wondered if he should test it with live bait. This was a problem that worried him for some weeks, during which time he began to look speculatively at every dog or cat he passed in the street. He finally abandoned this idea, but for a rather peculiar reason—he was simply too kind-hearted to put it into practice. Aunt Henrietta

would have to be the first victim.

He starved the orchid for two weeks before he put his plan into action. This was as long as he dared risk—he did not wish to weaken the beast, merely to increase its appetite and to make the outcome of the encounter more certain. So, one Sunday, when he had carried the teacups back into the kitchen and was sitting upwind of Aunt Henrietta's cigar, he said casually, "I've got something I'd like to show you, Auntie. I've been keeping it as a surprise. It'll tickle you to death."

That, he thought, was not a completely accurate description, but it gave the general idea.

Auntie took the cigar out of her mouth and looked at Hercules with frank surprise.

"Well!" she boomed. "Wonders will never cease! What *have* you been up to, you rascal?" She slapped him playfully on the back, thereby blasting all the air out of his lungs.

"You'll never believe it," gasped Hercules, when he had recovered his breath. "It's in the conservatory."

"Eh?" said Auntie, obviously puzzled.

"Yes—come along and have a look. It's going to create a real sensation."

Auntie gave a snort that might have indicated disbelief, but followed Hercules without further question. The two Alsatians, at the

moment busily chewing up the carpet, looked at her anxiously and half-rose to their feet, but she waved them away.

"All right, boys," she ordered gruffly. "I'll be back in a minute." Hercules thought this unlikely.

It was a dark evening, and the lights in the conservatory were off. As they entered, Auntie snorted, "Gad, Hercules—the place smells like a slaughterhouse. Haven't met such a stink since I shot that elephant in Bulawayo, and we couldn't find it for a week."

"Sorry, Auntie," apologized Hercules, propelling her forward through the gloom. "It's a new fertilizer I'm using. It produces the most stunning results. Go on—another couple of yards. I want this to be a *real* surprise."

"I hope this isn't a joke," said Auntie suspiciously, as she stomped forward.

"I can promise you it's no joke," replied Hercules, standing with his hand on the light switch. He could just see the looming bulk of the orchid—Auntie was now within ten feet of it. He waited until she was well inside the danger zone, then threw the switch.

There was a frozen moment while the scene was transfixed with light. Then Aunt Henrietta ground to a halt and stood, arms akimbo, in front of the giant orchid. For a moment, Hercules was afraid she would retreat before the plant could get into action. Then he saw

that she was calmly scrutinizing it, unable to make up her mind what the devil it was.

It was a full five seconds before the orchid moved. Then the dangling tentacles flashed into action—but not in the way that Hercules had expected. The plant clutched them tightly, protectively, *around itself*—and, at the same time, it gave a high-pitched scream of pure terror. In a moment of sickening disillusionment, Hercules realized the awful truth.

His orchid was an utter coward. It might be able to cope with the wildlife of the Amazon jungle, but coming suddenly upon Aunt Henrietta had completely broken its nerve.

As for its proposed victim, she stood watching the creature with an astonishment which swiftly changed to another emotion. She spun around on her heels and pointed an accusing finger at her nephew.

"Hercules!" she roared. "The poor thing's scared to death. *Have you been bullying it?*"

Hercules could only stand with his head hanging low in shame and frustration.

"N-no, Auntie," he quavered. "I guess it's naturally nervous."

"Well, I'm used to animals. You should have called me before. You must treat them firmly—but gently. Kindness always works, as long as you show you're the master. There, there, diddums—don't be fright-

ened of Auntie. She won't hurt you . . ."

It was, thought Hercules in his blank despair, a revolting sight. With surprising gentleness, Aunt Henrietta fussed over the plant-beast, patting and stroking it until the tentacles relaxed, and the shrill, whistling scream died away. After a few minutes of this pampering, it appeared to get over its fright. Hercules finally fled with a muffled sob when one of the tentacles shyly crept forward and began to stroke Henrietta's gnarled fingers . . .

From that day on, he was a broken man. What was worse, he could never escape from the consequences of his intended crime. Henrietta had acquired a new pet. From then on, he found her liable to call, not only at weekends but two or three times in between as well. It was obvious that she did not trust Hercules to treat the orchid properly. She still suspected him of bullying it.

She would bring tasty tidbits that

even her dogs had rejected, but which the orchid accepted with delight. The smell, which had so far been confined to the conservatory, began to creep into the house . . .

"There," concluded Harry Purvis, as he brought this improbable narrative to a close, "the matter rests—to the satisfaction of two, at any rate, of the parties concerned. The orchid is happy, and Aunt Henrietta has something else to dominate. From time to time, the creature has a nervous breakdown when a mouse gets loose in the conservatory, and she rushes to console it."

As for Hercules, there is no chance that he will ever give any more trouble to either of them. He seems to have sunk into a kind of vegetable sloth. "Indeed," said Harry thoughtfully, "every day he becomes more and more like an orchid himself."

"A harmless variety, of course . . ."

METHUSELAH MEETING !!!

The world's oldest science fiction fan club, the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society, will foregather publicly on October 25th in Freehafer Hall, Prince Rupert Apartments, 1305 West Ingraham, Downtown Los Angeles, to celebrate its one thousandth meeting. By far the most ancient of all such organizations—the LASFS is 31 meetings older than the fabled Methuselah's 969 years!—this West Coast group has never been known to show a trace either of grey hairs or stuffiness!—Quite the contrary! For information, phone Ackerman, Crestview 4-2762.

THE GREEN BUILDING

*Not even the scientists knew what it was—
save that it was intelligent and from outer
space. The problem was putting it to use.*

by GORDON R. DICKSON

THAT NEW GREEN building down there? Sorry, everything behind the fence is government property, and I don't have anything to do with . . . A reporter, are you? Fancy that, now. No—no sir, I do *not* believe in censorship of a free press. I happen to vote a straight ticket, and . . . Well, that's mighty nice of you to say so. Of course, I know we depend on our newspapers. You take a restaurant-owner like myself . . . You don't *say* so! Those army fellers said that? Well, I certainly sympathize, and—

Well now, I *will* sit down for a minute. The lunch rush is over now—but these waitresses . . . Yes, I was here from the beginning. In fact, I was here *at* the beginning. You mean to say they've kept it a secret from you newspaper fellers all this time? Well now, that's a shame—now don't quote me as

saying that. After all I'm in business here . . .

No, no, I didn't think you would, but I thought I'd better mention it, just to make sure like . . . What do I mean *at* the beginning? Why, I mean *at* the beginning. I was here, right here on this very spot, when It landed.

Not in this restaurant building, of course. I had a . . . I should say I *do* know what it used to be like around here. Those old days are graven on my heart—yes sir, graven right on my heart. Like I say, I used to have a different sort of business, a—well, you might call it a sort of candy store right here on this spot.

I'd sit here in the afternoon, waiting for school to let out and the kids to come by, just like I was the afternoon it happened, only that was Memorial Day and no school.

But I used to sit right here and—just look out the window beside you, there—and see right down across to the park and the little creek with the teeter-totters the kids used to play on, alongside it. And then up the other side of the hill to where the grade school itself was and the tops of Piper Park just showing over the head of the hill beyond.

It was real green and pretty then. None of the concrete and smell and barbed wire they got now. Just a free, happy, little hollow, sort of. I used to say . . .

The day it happened? That's what I'm telling you about. There I was, sitting and looking out, about two-twenty in the afternoon, thinking how peaceful it all was. Then I heard this sort of roar overhead. Them jet fighters again, I said to myself. But I didn't get up and go to the window and look—because, you know, by the time you go to look for them, they're gone already. Besides, I seen them lots before.

I just sat and waited for the roar to fade out. But it didn't fade. It got louder and louder. Then, just when I was starting to get up and look after all, there was this terrific concussion, and that was the last I knew for some few minutes.

When I recovered consciousness—come to, you know—I was lying in the ruins of what had been my once fine store. For a minute, I

couldn't just remember what had happened. Then I began to notice the counter knocked over and glass all over the place and how dark it was because the roof had fallen down around me.

I was sort of pinned in a little, narrow spot, there. Not pinned in, really, but sort of boxed in, so's I couldn't get out. I could see to the outside, though, and a little patch of the hollow with It laying there.

Well, I lay stuck there, with my head starting to ache, and watched It sticking up out of the grass in the park by the teeter-totters like a big chunk of old granite rock, the size of a three story building, with no telling how much more of it out of sight, buried in the ground underneath. I watched It glowing and fuming, and the trees all wilting around It. I could feel the heat and smell It clear up here.

And then, after a couple of hours, finally the soldiers come along and dug me out. You know, Camp Krillbee was on some kind of maneuvers around here just then. They had this area staked off faster'n you can say Jump Jimmy. That's what stopped you fellers from being wised up, of course. I noticed, afterwards, they had a story in the papers about a meteorite that fell here—and that was all.

But not for me, it wasn't all. I tell you, those government people wanted to know everything I knew, right down to what I had for

breakfast that same morning. First off, they took me to an army hospital and kept me there the rest of the day, though there wasn't anything wrong with me but a little bump on the head—and I don't know to this day where *that* come from, unless it was a can of beans falling off the shelf behind me when It hit.

Then, when they let me go home, I wasn't to tell anyone anything, not even my wife. Lot they know about such things! Why, nobody even *asked* me. You'd think some people'd be interested, but in new suburbs like this Piper Park, your next door neighbor's a stranger, sometimes.

Well now, I'm a man who keeps his word—which is more than you can say for certain people. Anyway, I didn't tell anybody what I saw. Not Jeanie, my wife, or my married daughter, or anyone. And, like I say, *they* weren't too interested, except in what was to be done about the store. I told her the government'd fix it. That settled her. Oh, I did say, too, that I saw something big that had fell—but they took for granted it was the meteorite the papers said it was. They never raised the subject again until I did.

But these government investigating fellers sure did. They let on it was about getting me a new store, but they had me down at the site—right close to where the green building is now—asking me

questions, and asking me questions until, Lord love Bessie, you'd have thought they'd wear their tongues out. They'd set up some temporary buildings—not like the permanent ones they have now, more like army barracks—surrounding It and pretty much hiding It.

They never let the school open again, either. Those kids had a real picnic for a week until Piper Park got them sorted out to other schools. And all the time, they were after me with these questions. What'd I hear first? And what kind of noise was it? And what'd I see when It was just sitting there, before they dug me out?

Well now, I wasn't born yesterday, *nor* the day before. They didn't tell *me* anything—but it didn't take much looking to see what was going on. Army trucks going in, and coming out, and stuff being set up, armed soldiers all around the fence, and cannon-like things sitting all around pointed at It. They had men in civilian clothes swarming all over It, too, with all sorts of instruments, enough to resurrect the dead.

Meteorite! That wasn't any meteorite. Of course, I could've told them that from the beginning. Meteors don't smell—and they don't sweat wet stuff out of them—and trees don't curl up and die around them. More'n that—and I wouldn't be telling you this now, except for what happened later—they don't move none after they hit the

ground. They don't twist and wiggle around like an old hog settling down into the mud, the way I'd seen It do before they dug me out of my wrecked store.

I told them that. I told them everything. They didn't thank me any—just kept after me, the same questions over and over again. I finally got my fill of it.

"You think I'm lying, *say* so!" I told them.

"No, no," they'd answer, real soothing. "No, no, we'd just like to go over it once more, in case you remember something else." Well, I'm as patient as Sunday. I kept going over it with them.

Then, just about that time—oh, maybe a month or two after it happened—when they were starting to slack up on the meteorite story and let on It was maybe an army secret flying missile that'd gone astray, my money for the store come through. Insurance check.

Well, I know a good thing when I see it. I bought the land here, where my candy store was, and had this restaurant built. There was already about five hundred people working on It down there, all coming on to starve about noon, with nothing closer—except an army chow line—than a hamburger joint at the highway overpass the other side of Piper Park.

Of course, I had to give the building and, later on, the business my personal attention, day and

night, you know. So, about this time, I began figuring that maybe they ought to owe me some money for the time I was spending answering their questions. So I asked them for it.

Well sir, not a cent. *Not—a—cent!* Twenty-thirty dollars a day for one of those civilian youngsters to pound away at It with a little rock-chipping hammer and make guesses—but not a cent for the man who saw It land, and knew . . .

What'd I know? Why, that It was *alive*, of course! They hadn't fooled me with their meteorite, guided-missile business. That thing was just as alive as you or I, and they were plenty concerned on account of it. Something that big and alive—and so hard they couldn't make a dent in It—and so tough it could land the way It did without getting hurt. I tell you, they were concerned.

But I don't want to get off on a sidetrack here. The important thing was, like I'm telling you, they refused to pay me a cent for my time.

"We only hire experts," this one feller told me.

"Well, I'm an expert," I said. "An expert at seeing It land. You got no experts to match me in that department."

He admitted that. But they'd gone over the landing pretty thoroughly with me, he said. And so on and so forth—and, what with

one thing and another, they figured they didn't have any more need for me.

"All right," I said. "Fair enough. Now, how about paying me for the time I've already spent?"

Seems he didn't have the authority to do that. Of course, I could bill Congress down in Washington or some such fool thing. But I had ought to consider that I was in pretty much the same position as a citizen who sees a crime being committed. I couldn't very well expect the police to pay me for telling them what I saw.

Now that's a pretty strong argument. If he'd left it at that, I might have left it at that, and no more said. But the darn fool couldn't leave well enough alone. He took me by the elbow and pulled me over to the window of his office and pointed at my new restaurant.

"Look there," he said. "And think of what you had before this happened. It seems to me that's pretty good payment for what you've done."

That made me mad.

"Mister," I said, "you better figure out who ate hamburger instead of pot roast to keep up the insurance on the old place, these last twenty years, before *you* go taking credit for that."

I slammed my hat on my head and walked out. And I've never been through the gates over there again since.

All right, I'm not one to fly off

the handle before I know which way I'm going. I've never said any more about it. I've gone right on serving all these mineralogists and bacteriologist and chemists and what-nots, just the same as ever. But I made up my mind when I walked out of that office that there was a certain fair and honest sum due me for the time and trouble I'd taken—and, come someday, I'd collect it. Sonny, it looks like *you're* the one to help me get it.

Yes, *you!* Now, you can just save yourself the trouble of pretending to be so surprised. I'm not as green as I look. You knew all about me before you came into this restaurant. Why did you know? Because they've finally decided to let the news out, that's why! All you newspaper fellers are jumping on it as quick as you can. The end of this week, the whole story's going to bust wide open.

How do I know? Never mind how I know. The point is, do you want to be first with the real eyewitness story of It landing, and all the facts? All right. Well, then—it just so happens I've got it worked out, down to the penny, what my time was worth in answering those questions.

How much? I'll just write it down here on the edge of your paper napkin. *That's* the figure. Yes sir, there's a pay phone right around the corner there by the Men's. I'll sit right here and wait . . .

They said okay? Thought they would. Now, lean closer here. Let me tell you. That thing down there's just about the size of a three-story building above ground, and maybe as much again below ground. And heavy? They figure it's heavier than lead—heavier than gold, even. Diamonds won't scratch it.

More'n that—lean real close, I don't want to talk too loud—they figure, even if they tried an atom bomb, It wouldn't be hurt. You follow me, sonny? We got something down there like nothing the human race ever bumped into before.

Ever since—now listen close—ever since the day It landed, they've been working, and studying, and testing, all the top scientists in the country, trying to figure It out. What is It? What's It here for? What's It aim to do? And what'll happen to us if It does? And they found some answers—that's how come the green building you asked about. They just finished *that* last week.

Let me tell you some more about It, first. You know that heat It puts out—you can feel it even up here—well, that's because it's got radioactive insides. They been mining all around It, setting up what they call heat-exchange units. They figure It puts out enough heat to warm every house in Piper Park . . .

What? No, the radiation doesn't

reach the outsides of It, just the head. And that stuff It sweats out—orthophosphoric acid. It eats ordinary dirt and rock and breathes air and sweats orthophosphoric acid. That's why the railroad spur going into the place—and the tank cars.

But you see what I mean—It's alive. And that's not the half of it—It's intelligent.

They got some feller down here who's been studying brain-waves for years, and he got pictures of brain-waves from It. They showed It was thinking—you get it now?

Two thousand people down there now, behind that barbed wire fence and those soldiers—nearly all of them top specialists in something or other. Well now, that's it. Something had to be done. Because, you see, while they managed to figure out *that* It was thinking, there's no possible earthly way—*yet*—they can figure out *what* It's thinking. And there's no telling what It might do.

That's the reason for the green building. That's why they've been working so hard and why they can't keep it secret any longer. It's that green building. What they got in it, even I don't know. But I do know the man in charge of it came all the way from the East to watch and make sure it was put up right.

That, sonny, is a device to keep that thing down there from taking off again until we humans are through with It.

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