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THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

By Cyril M. Kornbluth

(Writing as Cecil Corwin)

Albing Publications

1940

1

Peter Packer excitedly dialed his slide rule, peering through a lens as one of the minutely scored lines met with another. He rose from his knees, brushing dust from the neat crease of his serge trousers. No doubt of it—the house had a secret attic room. Peter didn't know anything about sliding panels or hidden buttons; in the most direct way imaginable he lifted the axe he had brought and crunched it into the wall.

On his third blow he holed through. The rush of air from the darkness was cool and sweet. Smart old boy, his grandfather, thought Peter. Direct ventilation all over the house—even in a false compartment. He chopped away heartily, the hollow strokes ringing through the empty attic and down the stairs.

He could have walked through the hole erect when he was satisfied with his labors; instead he cautiously turned a flashlight inside the space. The beam was invisible; all dust had long since settled. Peter grunted. The floor seemed to be sound. He tested it with one foot, half in, half out of the hidden chamber. It held.

The young man stepped through easily, turning the flash on walls and floor. The room was not large, but it was cluttered with a miscellany of objects—chests, furniture, knickknacks and whatnots. Peter opened a chest, wondering about pirate gold. But there was no gold, for the thing was full to the lid with chiffons in delicate hues. A faint fragrance of musk filled the air; sachets long since packed away were not entirely gone.

Funny thing to hide away, thought Peter. But Grandfather Packer had been a funny man—having this house built to his own very sound plans, waiting always on the Braintree docks for the China and India clippers and what rare cargo they might have brought. Chiffons! Peter poked around in the box for a moment, then closed the lid again. There were others.

He turned the beam of the light on a wall lined with shelves. Pots of old workmanship—spices and preserves, probably. And a clock. Peter stared at the clock. It was about two by two by three feet—an unusual and awkward size. The workmanship was plain, the case of crudely finished wood. And yet there was something about it—his eyes widened as he realized what it was. The dial showed thirteen hours!

Between the flat figures XII and I there was another—an equally flat XIII. What sort of freak this was the young man did not know. Vaguely he conjectured on prayer time, egg boiling and all the other practical applications of chronometry. But nothing he could dredge up from his well-stored mind would square with this freak. He set the flash on a shelf and hefted the clock in his arms, lifting it easily.

This, he thought, would bear looking into. Putting the light in his pocket, he carried the clock down the stairs to his second-floor bedroom. It looked strangely incongruous there, set on a draftman's table hung with rules and T squares. Determinedly, Peter began to pry open the back with a chisel, when it glided smoothly open without tooling. There was better construction in the old timepiece than he had realized. The little hinges were still firm and in working order. He peered into the works and ticked his nail against one of the chimes. It sounded sweet and clear.

The young man took up a pair of pliers. Lord knew where the key was, he thought, as he began to wind the clock. Slowly it got under way, ticking loudly. The thing had stopped at 12:59. That would be nearly one o'clock on any other timepiece; on this, the minute hand crept slowly toward the enigmatic XIII.

Peter wound the striking mechanism carefully, and watched as a little whir sounded. The minute hand met the roman numeral, and with a click the chimes sounded out in an eerie, jangling discord. Peter thought with sudden confusion that all was not as well with the clock as he had thought. The chimes grew louder, filling the little bedroom with their clang.

Horrified, the young man put his hands on the clock as though he could stop off the noise. As he shook the old cabinet, the peals redoubled until they battered against the eardrums of the draftsman, ringing in his skull and resounding from the walls, making instruments dance and rattle on the drawing board. Peter drew back, his hands to his ears. He was filled with nausea, his eyes bleared and smarting. As the terrible clock thundered out its din without end, he reached the door feebly, the room swaying and spinning about him, nothing real but the suddenly glowing clock dial and the clang and thunder of its chimes.

As he opened the door it ceased, and he closed his eyes in relief as his nausea passed. He looked up again, and his eyes widened with horror. Though it was noon outside, a night wind fanned his face, and though he was on the second-story landing of his Grandfather Packer's house, dark trees rose about him, stretching as far as the eye could see.

For three hours—by his wristwatch's luminous dial—Peter had wandered, aimless and horrified, waiting for dawn. The aura of strangeness that hung over the forest in which he walked was bearable; it was the gnawing suspicion that he had gone mad that shook him to his very bones. The trees were no ordinary things, of that he was sure. For he had sat under one forest giant and leaned back against its bole only to rise with a cry of terror. He had felt its pulse beat slowly and regularly under the bark. After that he did not dare to rest, but he was a young and normal male. Whether he would or not, he found himself blundering into ditches and stones from sheer exhaustion. Finally, sprawled on the ground, he slept.

Peter awoke stiff and sore from his nap on the bare ground, but he felt better for it. The sun was high in the heavens; he saw that it was about eleven o'clock. Remembering his terrors of the night, he nearly laughed at himself. This was a forest, and there were any number of sane explanations of how he had got here. An attack of amnesia lasting about twelve hours would be one cause. And there were probably others less disturbing.

He thought the country might be Maine. God knew how many trains or busses he had taken since he lost his memory in his bedroom. Beginning to whistle, he strode through the woods. Things were different in the daytime.

There was a sign ahead! He sprinted up to its base. The thing was curiously large, painted in red characters on a great slab of wood, posted on a dead tree some twelve feet from the ground. The sign said: ELLIL. He rolled the name over in his mind and decided that he didn't recognize it. But he couldn't be far from a town or house.

Ahead of him sounded a thunderous grunt.

Bears! he thought in a panic. They had been his childhood bogies; he had been frightened of them ever since. But it was no bear, he saw. He almost wished it was. For the thing that was veering on him was a frightful composite of every monster of mythology, menacing him with saber-like claws and teeth and gusts of flame from its ravening throat. It stood only about as high as the man, and its legs were long, but to the engineer it seemed ideally styled for destruction.

Without ado he jumped for a tree and dug his toes into the grooves of the bark, shinning up it as he used to as a child. But there was nothing childlike about it now. With the creature's flaming breath scorching his heels, he climbed like a monkey, stopping only at the third set of main branches, twenty-five feet from the ground. There he clung, limp and shuddering, and looked down.

The creature was hopping grotesquely about the base of the tree, its baleful eyes on him. The man's hand reached for a firmer purchase on the branch, and part came away in his hand. He had picked a sort of coconut—heavy, hard, and with sharp corners. Peter raised his eyebrows. Why not? Carefully noting the path that the creature below took around the trunk, he poised the fruit carefully. Wetting a finger, he adjusted the placing. On a free drop that long you had to allow for windage, he thought.

Twice more around went the creature, and then its head and the murderous fruit reached the same point at the same time. There was a crunching noise which Peter could hear from where he was, and the insides of its head spilled on the forest sward.

"Clever," said a voice beside him on the branch.

He turned with a cry. The speaker was only faintly visible—the diaphanous shadow of a young girl, not more than eighteen, he thought.

Calmly it went on, "You must be very mancic to be able to land a fruit so accurately. Did he give you an extra sense?"

Her tone was light, but from what he could see of her dim features, they were curled in an angry smile.

Nearly letting go of the branch in his bewilderment, he answered as calmly as he could, "I don't know whom you mean. And what is mancic?"

"Innocent," she said coldly. "Eh? I could push you off this branch without a second thought. But first you tell me where Almarish got the model for you. I might turn out a few myself. Are you a doppelgaenger or a golem?"

"Neither," he spat, bewildered and horrified. "I don't even know what they are!"

"Strange," said the girl. "I can't read you." Her eyes squinted prettily and suddenly became solid, luminous wedges in her transparent face. "Well," she sighed, "let's get out of this." She took the man by his elbow and dropped from the branch, hauling him after her. Ready for a sickening impact with the ground, Peter winced as his heels touched it light as a feather. He tried to disengage the girl's grip, but it was hard as steel.

"None of that," she warned him. "I have a blast finger. Or didn't he tell you?"

"What's a blast finger?" demanded the engineer.

"Just so you won't try anything," she commented. "Watch." Her body solidified then, and she pointed her left index finger at a middling-sized tree. Peter hardly saw what happened, being more interested in the incidental miracle of her face and figure. But his attention was distracted by a flat crash of thunder and sudden glare. And the tree was riven as if by a terrific stroke of lightning. Peter smelled ozone as he looked from the tree to the girl's finger and back again.

"No nonsense?" she asked.

"Okay," he said.

"Come on."

They passed between two trees, and the vista of forest shimmered and tore, revealing a sort of palace—all white stone and maple timbers.

"That's my place," said the girl.

2

"Now," she said, settling herself into a cane-backed chair.

Peter looked about the room. It was furnished comfortably with pieces of antique merit, in the best New England tradition. His gaze shifted to the girl, slender and palely luminous, with a half-smile playing about her chiseled features.

"Do you mind," he said slowly, "not interrupting until I'm finished with what I have to say?"

"A message from Almarish? Go on."

And at that he completely lost his temper. "Listen, you snip!" he raged. "I don't know who you are or where I am, but I'd like to tell you that this mystery isn't funny or even mysterious—just downright rude. Do you get that? Now—my name is Peter Packer. I live in Braintree, Mass. I make my living as a consulting and industrial engineer. This place obviously isn't Braintree, Mass. Right? Then where is it?"

"Ellil," said the girl simply.

"I saw that on a sign," said Packer. "It still doesn't mean anything to me. Where is Ellil?"

Her face became suddenly grave. "You may be telling the truth," she said thoughtfully. "I do not know yet. Will you allow me to test you?"

"Why should I?" he snapped.

"Remember my blast finger?"

Packer winced. "Yes," he said. "What are the tests?"

"The usual," she smiled. "Rosemary and garlic, crucifixes and the secret name of Jehovah. If you get through those you're okay."

"Then get on with it," the man said confusedly.

"Hold these." She passed him a flowery sprig and a clove of garlic. He took them, one in each hand.

"All right?" he asked.

"Oh, those, yes. Now take the cross and read this name. You can put the vegetables down now."

He followed instructions, stammering over the harsh Hebrew word.

In a cold fury the girl sprang to her feet and leveled her left index finger at him. "Clever," she blazed. "But you can't get away with it! I'll blow you so wide open—"

"Wait," he pleaded. "What did I do?" The girl, though sweet-looking, seemed to be absolutely irresponsible.

"Mispronounced the name," she snapped. "Because you can't say it straight without crumbling into dust!"

He looked at the paper again, and read aloud, slowly and carefully. "Was that right?" he asked.

Crestfallen, the girl sat down. "Yes," she said. "I'm sorry. You seem to be okay. A real human. Now what do you want to know?"

"Well—who are you?"

"My name's Millicent." She smiled deprecatingly. "I'm a—sort of a sorceress."

"I can believe that," grunted the man. "Now, why should you take me for a demon, or whatever you thought I was?"

"Doppelgaenger," she corrected him. "I was sure—well, I'd better begin at the beginning.

"You see, I haven't been a sorceress very long—only two years. My mother was a witch—a real one, and pretty first class. I've heard it said that she brewed the neatest spells in Ellil. All I know I learned from her—never studied it formally. My mother didn't die a natural sort of death, you see. Almarish got her."

"Who's Almarish?"

She wrinkled her mouth with disgust. "That thug!" she spat. "He and his gang of half-breed demons are out to get control of Ellil. My mother wouldn't stand for it—she told him so, right out flat over a multiplex apparition. And after that he was gunning for her steadily—no letup at all. And believe me, there are mighty few witches who can stand up under much of that, but Mother stood him off for fifteen years. They got my father—he wasn't much good—a little while after I was born. Vampires.

"Mother got caught alone in the woods one morning without her tools—unguents, staffs and things—by a whole flock of golems and zombies." The girl shuddered. "Some of them—well, Mother finished about half before they overwhelmed her and got a stake of myrtle through her heart. That finished her—she lost all her magic, of course, and Almarish sent an ordinary plague of ants against her. Adding insult to injury, I call it!" There were real tears of rage in her eyes.

"And what's this Almarish doing now?" asked Peter, fascinated.

Millicent shrugged. "He's after me," she said simply. "The bandur you killed was one of my watchdogs. And I thought he'd sent you. I'm sorry."

"I see," breathed the man slowly. "What powers has he?"

"The usual, I suppose. But he has no principles about using them. And he has his gang—I can't afford real retainers. Of course I whip up some simulacra whenever I hold a reception or anything of that sort. Just images to serve and take wraps. They can't fight."

Peter tightened his jaw. "You must be in a pretty bad way," he volunteered diffidently.

The girl looked him full in the eye, her lip trembling. She choked out, "I'm in such a hell of a spot!" and then the gates opened and she was weeping as if her heart would break.

The man stared frozenly, wondering how he could comfort a despondent sorceress. "There, there," he said tentatively.

She wiped her eyes and looked at him. "I'm sorry," she said, sniffling. "But it's seeing a fairly friendly face again after all these years—no callers but leprechauns and things. You don't know what it's like."

"I wonder," said Peter, "how you'd like to live in Braintree."

"I don't know," she said brightly. "But how could I get there?"

"There should be at least one way," reflected the man.

"But why—What was that?" shot out the girl, snatching up a wand.

"Knock on the door," said Peter. "Shall I open it?"

"Please," said Millicent nervously, holding up the slender staff.

The man stood aside and swung the door wide. In walked a curious person of mottled red and white coloring. One eye was small and blue, the other large and savagely red. His teeth were quite normal—except that the four canines protruded two inches each out of his mouth. He walked with a limp; one shoe seemed curiously small. And there was a sort of bulge in the trousers that he wore beneath his formal morning coat.

"May I introduce myself?" said this individual, removing his sleek black topper. "I am Balthazar Pike. You must be Miss Millicent? And this—ah—zombie?" He indicated Peter with a dirty leer.

"Mr. Packer, Mr. Pike," said the girl.

Peter simply stared in horror while the creature murmured, "Enchanted."

Millicent drew herself up proudly. "And this, I suppose," she said, "is the end?"

"I fear so, Miss Millicent," said the creature regretfully. "I have my orders. Your house has been surrounded by picked forces; any attempt to use your blast finger or any other weapon of offense will be construed as resistance. Under the laws of civilized warfare we are empowered to reduce you to ashes should such resistance be forthcoming. May I have your reply?"

The girl surveyed him haughtily, then, with a lightning-like sweep of her wand, seemed to blot out every light in the room. Peter heard her agitated voice. "We're in a neutral screen, Mr. Packer. I won't be able to keep it up for long. Listen! That was one of Almarish's stinkers—the big cheese. He didn't expect any trouble from me. He'll take me captive as soon as they break the screen down. Do you want to help me?"

"Of course!" exploded the man.

"Good. Then you find the third oak from the front door on the left and walk widdershins three times. You'll find out what to do from them."

"Walk how?" asked Peter.

"Widdershins—counterclockwise. Lord, you're dumb!"

Then the lights seemed to go on again, and Peter saw that the room was filled with the half-breed creatures. With an expression of injured dignity, the formally attired Balthazar Pike asked, "Are you ready to leave now, Miss Millicent? Quite ready?"

"Thank you, General, yes," said the girl coldly. Two of the creatures took her arms and walked her from the room. Peter saw that as they stepped over the threshold they vanished, all three.

The last to leave was Pike, who turned and said to the man, "I must remind you, Mister—er—ah—that you are trespassing. This property now belongs to the Almarish Realty Corporation. All offenders will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Good day, Mister—er—ah—" With which he stepped over the doorsill and vanished.

Hastily Peter followed him across the line, but found himself alone outside the house. For which he was grateful. "Third oak left from the door," he repeated. Simple enough. Feeling foolish, he walked widdershins three times around and stopped dead, waiting for something.

What a sweet, brave kid she had been! He hoped nothing would really happen to her—before he got there.

He felt a sort of tugging at his serge trousers and stepped back in alarm. "Well?" shrilled a small voice. Peter looked down and winced. The dirtiest, most bedraggled little creature he had ever seen was regarding him with tiny, sharp eyes. There were others, too, squatting on pebbles and toadstools.

"Miss Millicent told me to ask you what I should do," said Peter. As the little leader of the troop glared at him he added hastily, "If you please."

"Likely tale," piped the voice of the creature. "What's in it for us?"

"I dunno," said the man, bewildered. "What do you want?"

"Green cloth," the creature answered promptly. "Lots of it. And if you have any small brass buttons, them, too."

Peter hastily conducted an inventory of his person. "I'm sorry," he said hesitantly. "I haven't any green. How about blue? I can spare my vest." He carefully lowered the garment to the ground among the little people.

"Looks all right," said the leader. "Jake!" One of the creatures advanced and fingered the cloth. "Hmm—" he said. "Good material." Then there was a whispered consultation with the leader, who at last shouted up to Peter, "Head east for water. You can't miss it!"

"Hey!" said Peter, blinking. But they were already gone. And though he widdershin-walked for the next half hour, and even tried a few incantations remembered from his childhood, they did not come back—nor did his vest.

So, with his back to the sinking sun, he headed east for water.

3

The sign said: MAHOORA CITY LIMITS.

Peter scratched his head and passed it. He had hit the stretch of highway a few miles back, once he had got out of the forest, and it seemed to be leading straight into a city of some kind. There was a glow ahead in the sky—a glow which abruptly became a glare.

"Jeepers!" the man gasped. "Buildings—skyscrapers!" Before him reared a sort of triple Wall Street with which were combined the most spectacular features of Rockefeller Center. In the sudden way in which things happened in Ellil, he turned a sort of blind corner in the road and found himself in the thick of it.

A taxi roared past him; with a muttered imprecation he jumped out of the way. The bustling people on the sidewalks ignored him completely. It was about six o'clock; they were probably going home from their offices. There were all sorts of people—women and girls, plain and pretty, men and boys, slim, fat, healthy and dissipated. And there, Peter saw striding along in lordly indifference, was a cop.

"Excuse me," said Peter, elbowing his way through the crowd to the member of Mahoora's finest. "Can you tell me where I can find water?" That was, he realized, putting it a bit crudely. But he was hopelessly confused by the traffic and swarms of pedestrians.

The cop turned on him with a glassy stare. "Water?" he rumbled. "Would yez be wantin' tap, ditch, fire—or cologne?"

The man hesitated. He didn't know, he realized in a sudden panic. The elves, or whatever they had been, hadn't specified. Cagily he raised his hand to his brow and muttered, "'Scuse me—previous engagement—made the appointment for today—just forgot—" He was edging away from the cop when he felt a hand on his arm.

"What was that about water?" asked the cop hoarsely, putting his face near Peter's.

Desperately the man blurted, "The water I have to find to lick Almarish!" Who could tell? Maybe the cop would help him.

"What?" thundered M.P.D. Shield No. 2435957607. "And me a loyal supporter of the Mayor Almarish Freedom, Peace and Progress Reform Administration?" He frowned. "You look subversive to me—come on!" He raised his nightstick suggestively, and Peter meekly followed him through the crowds.

"How'd they get you in here?" asked Peter's cellmate.

Peter inspected him. He was a short, dark sort of person with a pair of disconcertingly bright eyes. "Suspicion," said Peter evasively. "How about you?"

"Practicing mancy without a license, theoretically. Actually because I tried to buck the Almarish machine. You know how it is."

"Can't say I do," answered Peter. "I'm a stranger here."

"Yeah? Well—like this. Few years ago we had a neat little hamlet here. Mahoora was the biggest little city in these parts of Ellil, though I say it myself. A little industry—magic chalices for export, sandals of swiftness, invisibility cloaks, invincible weapons—you know?"

"Um," said Peter noncommittally.

"Well, I had a factory—modest little chemical works. We turned out love philters from my own prescription. It's what I call a neat dodge—eliminates the *balneum mariae* entirely from the processing, cuts down drying time—maybe you aren't familiar with the latest things in the line?"

"Sorry, no."

"Oh—well, then, in came these plugs of Almarish's. Flying goon squads that wrecked plants and shops on order, labor spies, provocateurs, everything. Soon they'd run out every racketeer in the place and hijacked them lock, stock and barrel. Then they went into politics. There was a little scandal about buying votes with fairy gold—people kicked when it turned into ashes. But they smoothed that over when they got in.

"And then—! Graft right and left, patronage, unemployment, rotten-food scandals, bribery, inefficiency—everything that's on the list. And this is their fifth term. How do you like that?"

"Lord," said Peter, shocked. "But how do they stay in office?"

"Oh," grinned his friend. "The first thing they did was to run up some pretty imposing public works—tall buildings, bridges, highways and monuments. Then they let it out that they were partly made of half-stuff. You know what that is?"

"No," said Peter. "What is it?"

"Well—it's a little hard to describe. But it isn't really there and it isn't really not there. You can walk on it and pick it up and things, but—well, it's a little hard to describe. The kicker is this: half-stuff is there only as long as you—the one who prepared a batch of it, that is—keep the formula going. So if we voted those leeches out of office they'd relax their formula and the half-stuff would vanish and the rest of the buildings and bridges and highways and monuments would fall with a helluva noise and damage. How do you like that?"

"Efficiency plus," said Peter. "Where's this Almarish hang out?"

"The mayor?" asked his cellmate sourly. "You don't think he'd be seen in the city, do you? Some disgruntled citizen might sic a flock of vampires on His Honor. He was elected in absentia. I hear he lives around Mal-Tava way."

"Where's that?" asked Peter eagerly.

"You don't know? Say, you're as green as they come! That's a pretty nasty corner of Ellil—the nastiest anywhere, I guess. It's a volcanic region, and those lava nymphs are pretty tough molls. Then there's a dragon ranch down there. The owner got careless and showed up missing one day. The dragons broke out and ran wild; they're the killingest you could hope to see. Anything else?"

"No," said Peter, heavyhearted. "I guess not."

"That's good. Because I think we're going to trial right now."

A guard was opening the door, club poised. "His Honor, Judge Balthazar Pike, will see you now," said the warden. Peter groaned.

The half-breed demon, his sartorial splendor of the preceding afternoon replaced by judiciary black silk, smiled grimly on the two prisoners. "Mr. Morden," he said, indicating the erstwhile love-philter manufacturer, "and Mister—er—ah —?"

"Packer!" exploded the man. "What are you doing here?"

"Haw!" laughed the judge. "That's what I was going to ask you. But first we have this matter of Mr. Morden to dispose of. Excuse me a moment? Clerk, read the charges."

A cowed-looking little man picked an index card from a stack and read, "Whereas Mr. Percival Morden of Mahoora has been apprehended in the act of practicing mancy and whereas this Mr. Morden does not possess an approved license for such practice it is directed that His Honor Chief Judge Balthazar Pike declare him guilty of the practice of mancy without a license. Signed, Mayor Almarish. Vote straight Freedom Peace and Progress Reform Party for a clean and efficient

administration." He paused for a moment and looked timidly at the judge, who was cleaning his talons. "That's it, Your Honor," he said.

"Oh—thank you. Now, Morden—guilty or not guilty?"

"What's the difference?" asked the manufacturer sourly. "Not guilty, I guess."

"Thank you." The judge took a coin from his pocket. "Heads or tails?" he asked.

"Tails," answered Morden. Then, aside to Peter, "It's magic, of course. You can't win."

The half-breed demon spun the coin dexterously on the judicial bench; it wobbled, slowed, and fell with a tinkle. The judge glanced at it. "Sorry, old man," he said sympathetically. "You seem to be guilty. Imprisonment for life in an oak tree. You'll find Merlin de Bleys in there with you. You'll like him, I rather fancy. Next case," he called sharply as Morden fell through a trapdoor in the floor.

Peter advanced before the bar of justice. "Can't we reason this thing out?" he asked agitatedly. "I mean, I'm a stranger here and if I've done anything I'm sorry—"

"Tut!" exclaimed the demon. He had torn the cuticle of his left index talon, and it was bleeding. He stanched the green liquid with a handkerchief and looked down at the man. "Done anything?" he asked mildly. "Oh—dear me, no! Except for a few trifles like felonious impediment of an officer in the course of his duty, indecent display, seditious publication, high treason and unlawful possession of military and naval secrets—done anything?" His two odd eyes looked reproachfully down on the man.

Peter felt something flimsy in his hand. Covertly he looked down and saw a slip of blue paper on which was written in green ink: *This is Hugo, my other watchdog. Feed him once a day on green vegetables. He does not like tobacco. In haste, Millicent.*

There was a stir in the back of the courtroom, and Peter turned to see one of the fire-breathing horrors which had first attacked him in the forest tearing down the aisle, lashing out to right and left, incinerating a troop of officers with one blast of its terrible breath. Balthazar Pike was crawling around under his desk, bawling for more police.

Peter cried, "You can add one more—possession of a bandur without a license! Sic 'em, Hugo!"

The monster flashed an affectionate look at him and went on with the good work of clearing the court. The man sprang aside as the trapdoor opened beneath his feet, and whirled on a cop who was trying to swarm over him. With a quick one-two he laid him out and proceeded to the rear of the courtroom, where Hugo was standing off a section of the fire department that was trying to extinguish his throat. Peter snatched an axe from one and mowed away heartily. Resistance melted away in a hurry, and Peter pushed the hair out of his eyes to find that they were alone in the court.

"Come on, boy," he said. Whistling cheerily, he left the building, the bandur at his heels, smoking gently. Peter collared a cop—the same one who had first arrested him. "Now," he snarled, "where do I find water?"

Stuttering with fright, and with two popping eyes on the bandur, the officer said, "The harbor's two blocks down the street if you mean—"

"Never mind what I mean!" growled Peter, luxuriating in his new-found power. He strode off pugnaciously, Hugo following.

4

"I beg your pardon—are you looking for water?" asked a tall, dark man over Peter's shoulder. Hugo growled and let loose a tongue of flame at the stranger's foot.

"Shuddup, Hugo," said Peter. Then, turning to the stranger, "As a matter of fact, I was. Do you—?"

"I heard about you from them," said the stranger. "You know. The little people."

"Yes," said Peter. "What do I do now?"

"Underground railroad," said the stranger. "Built after the best Civil War model. Neat, speedy and efficient. Transportation at half the usual cost. I hope you weren't planning to go by magic carpet?"

"No," Peter assured him hastily. "I never use them."

"That's great," said the stranger, swishing his long black cloak. "Those carpet people—stifling industry, I call it. They spread a whispering campaign that our road was unsafe! Can you imagine it?"

"Unsafe," scoffed Peter. "I'll bet they wish their carpets were half as safe as your railroad!"

"Well," said the stranger thoughtfully, "perhaps not half as safe.... No, I wouldn't say half as safe...." He seemed likely to go on indefinitely.

Peter asked, "Where do I get the Underground?"

"A little east of here," said the stranger. He looked about apprehensively. "We'd better not be seen together," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Meet you over there by the clock tower—you can get it there."

"Okay," said Peter. "But why the secrecy?"

"We're really underground," said the stranger, walking away.

Peter rejoined him at the corner of the clock tower. With an elaborate display of unconcern the stranger walked off, Peter following at some distance. Soon they were again in the forest that seemed to border the city of Mahoora.

Once they were past the city-limits sign the stranger turned, smiling. "I guess we're safe now," he said. "They could try a raid and drag us back across the line, but they wouldn't like to play with your bandur, I think. Here's the station."

He pressed a section of bark on a huge tree; silently it slid open like a door. Peter saw a row of steps leading down into blackness. "Sort of spooky," he said.

"Not at all! I have the place ghostproofed once a year." The stranger led the way, taking out what looked like a five-branched electric torch.

"What's that?" asked Peter, fascinated by the weird blue light it shed.

"Hand of glory," said the stranger casually. Peter looked closer and shuddered, holding his stomach. Magic, he thought, was probably all right up to the point where it became grave robbery.

They arrived at a neatly tiled station; Peter was surprised to find that the trains were tiny things. The one pulled up on the tracks was not as high as he was.

"You'll have to stoke, of course," said the stranger.

"What?" demanded Peter indignantly.

"Usual arrangement. Are you coming or aren't you?"

"Of course—but it seems strange," complained Peter, climbing into the engine. Hugo climbed into the coal car and curled up, emitting short smoky bursts of flame, which caused the stranger to keep glancing at him in fear for his fuel.

"What's in the rest of the train?" asked Peter.

"Freight. This is the through cannonball to Mal-Tava. I have a special shipment for Almarish. Books and things, furniture, a few cases of liquor—you know?"

"Yes. Any other passengers?"

"Not this month. I haven't much trouble with them. They're usually knights and things out to kill sorcerers like Almarish. They take their horses along or send them ahead by carpet. Do you plan to kill Almarish?"

Peter choked. "Yes," he finally said. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing—I take your money and leave you where you want to go. A tradesman can't afford opinions. Let's get up some steam, eh?"

Amateurishly Peter shoveled coal into the little furnace while the stranger in the black cloak juggled with steam valves and levers. "Don't be worried," he advised Peter. "You'll get the hang of things after a while." He glanced at a watch.

"Here we go," he said, yanking the whistle cord.

The train started off into its tunnel, sliding smoothly and almost silently along, the only noise being from the driving rods. "Why doesn't it clack against the rails?" asked Peter.

"Levitation. Didn't you notice? We're an inch off the track. Simple, really."

"Then why have a track?" asked Peter.

The stranger smiled and said, "Without—" then stopped abruptly and looked concerned and baffled. And that was all the answer Peter got.

"Wake up," shouted the stranger, nudging Peter. "We're in the war zone!"

"Zasso?" asked Peter, blinking. He had been napping after hours of steady travel. "What war zone?"

"Trolls—you know."

"No, I don't!" snapped Peter. "What side are we on?"

"Depends on who stops us," said the stranger, speeding the engine. They were out of the tunnel now, Peter saw, speeding along a couple of inches above the floor of an immense dim cave. Ahead, the glittering double strand of the track stretched into the distance.

"Oh—oh!" muttered the cloaked stranger. "Trouble ahead!"

Peter saw a vague, stirring crowd before them. "Those trolls?" he asked.

"Yep," answered the engineer resignedly, slowing the train. "What do you want?" he asked a solid-looking little man in a ragged uniform.

"To get the hell out of here," said the little man. He was about three feet tall, Peter saw.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The lousy Insurgents licked us," said the troll. "Will you let us on the train before they cut us down?"

"First," said the engineer methodically, "there isn't room. Second, I have to keep friends with the party in power. Third, you know very well that you can't be killed."

"What if we are immortal?" asked the troll agitatedly. "Would you like to live forever scattered in little pieces?"

"Second," said Peter abruptly, "you can get out of it as best you can." He was speaking to the engineer. "And first, you can dump all the freight you have for Almarish. He won't want it anyway when I'm through with him."

"That right?" asked the troll.

"Not by me!" exploded the engineer. "Now get your gang off the track before I plough them under!"

"Hugo," whispered Peter. With a lazy growl the bandur scorched the nape of the engineer's neck.

"All right," said the engineer. "All right. Use force—all right." Then, to the leader of the trolls, "You tell your men they can unload the freight and get as comfortable as they can."

"Wait!" interjected Peter. "Inasmuch as I got you out of this scrape—I think—would you be willing to help me out in a little affair of honor with Almarish?"

"Sure!" said the troll. "Anything at all. You know, for a surface-dweller you're not half bad." With which he began to spread the good news among his army.

Later, when they were all together in the cab, taking turns with the shovel, the troll introduced himself as General Skaldberg of the Third Loyalist Army. They were steaming ahead again at full speed.

The end of the cavern was in sight when another swarm of trolls blocked the path. "Go through them!" ordered Peter coldly.

"For pity's sake," pleaded the stranger. "Think of what this will do to my franchise!"

"That's your worry," said the general. "You fix it up with the Insurgents. We gave you the franchise anyway—they have no right of search."

"Maybe," muttered the engineer. He closed his eyes as they went slapping into the band of trolls under full steam. When it was all over and they were again tearing through the tunnel, he looked up. "How many?" he asked brokenly.

"Only three," said the general regretfully. "Why didn't you do a good job while you were at it?"

"You should have had your men fire from the freight cars," said the engineer coldly.

"Too bad I didn't think of it. Could you turn back and take them in a surprise attack?"

The engineer cursed violently, giving no direct answer. But for the next half hour he muttered to himself distractingly, groaning "Franchise!" over and over again.

"How much farther before we get to Mal-Tava?" asked Peter glumly.

"Very soon now," said the troll. "I was there once. Very broken terrain—fine for guerrilla work."

"Got any ideas on how to handle the business of Almarish?"

The general scratched his head. "As I remember," he said slowly, "I once thought it was a pushover for some of Clausewitz's ideas. It's a funny tactical problem—practically no fortifications within the citadel—everything lumped outside in a wall of steel. Of course Almarish probably has a lot on the ball personally. All kinds of direct magic at his fingertips. And that's where I get off with my men. We trolls don't even pretend to know the fine points of thaumaturgy. Mostly straight military stuff with us."

"So I have to face him alone?"

"More or less," said the general. "I have a couple of guys that majored in Military Divination at Ellil Tech Prep. They can probably give you a complete layout of the citadel, but they won't be responsible for illusions, multiplex apparitions or anything else Almarish might decide to throw in the way. My personal advice to you is—be skeptical."

"Yes?" asked Peter miserably.

"Exactly," said Skaldberg. "The real difficulty in handling arcane warfare is in knowing what's there and what ain't. Have you any way of sneaking in a confederate? Not a spy, exactly—we military men don't approve of spying—but a sort of—ah—one-man intelligence unit."

"I have already," said Peter diffidently. "She's a sorceress, but not much good, I think. Has a blast finger, though."

"Very good," grunted Skaldberg. "Very good indeed. God, how we could have used her against the Insurgents! The hounds had us in a sort of peninsular spot—with only one weak line of supply and communication between us and the main force—and I was holding a hill against a grand piquet of flying carpets that were hurling thunder-bolts at our munitions supply. But their sights were away off and they only got a few of our snipers. God, what a blast finger would have done to those bloody carpets!"

The engineer showed signs of interest. "You're right!" he snapped. "Blow 'em out of the sky—menace to life and limb! I have a bill pending at the All Ellil Conference on Communication and Transportation—would you be interested?"

"No," grunted the general. The engineer, swishing his long black cloak, returned to his throttle, muttering about injunctions and fair play.

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"Easy, now!" whispered the general.

"Yessir," answered a troll, going through obvious mental strain while his hand, seemingly of its own volition, scrawled lines and symbols on a sheet of paper. Peter was watching, fascinated and mystified, as the specialist in military divination was doing his stuff.

"There!" said the troll, relaxing. He looked at the paper curiously and signed it: *Borgenssen, Capt.*

"Well?" asked General Skaldberg excitedly. "What was it like?"

The captain groaned. "You should see for yourself, sir!" he said despondently. "Their air force is flying dragons and their infantry's a kind of Kraken squad. What they're doing out of water I don't know."

"Okay," said the general. He studied the drawing. "How about their mobility?"

"They haven't got any and they don't need any," complained the diviner. "They just sit there waiting for you—in a solid ring. And the air force has a couple of auxiliary rocs that pick up the Krakens and drop them behind your forces. Pincer

stuff—very bad."

"I'll be the judge of that!" thundered the general. "Get out of my office!" The captain saluted and stumbled out of the little cave which the general had chosen to designate as GHQ. His men were "barracked" on the bare rock outside. Volcanoes rumbled and spat in the distance. There came one rolling crash that stood Peter's hair on end.

"Think that was for us?" he asked nervously.

"Nope—I picked this spot for lava drainage. I have a hundred men erecting a shutoff at the only exposed point. We'll be safe enough." He turned again to the map, frowning. "This is our real worry—what I call impregnable, or damn near it. If we could get them to attack us—but those rocs smash anything along that line. We'd be cut off like a rosebud. And with our short munitions we can't afford to be discovered and surrounded. Ugh! What a spot for an army man to find himself in!"

A brassy female voice asked, "Somep'n bodderin' you, shorty?"

The general spun around in a fine purple rage. Peter looked in horror and astonishment on the immodest form of a woman who had entered the cave entirely unperceived—presumably by some occult means. She was a slutty creature, her hair dyed a vivid red and her satin skirt quite a few inches above the knee. She was violently made up with flame-colored rouge, lipstick and even eye shadow.

"Well," she complained stridently, puffing on a red cigarette, "wadda you joiks gawkin' at? Aincha nevva seen a lady befaw?"

"Madam—" began the general, outraged.

"Can dat," she advised him easily. "I hoid youse guys chewin' da fat—I wanna help youse out." She seated herself on an outcropping of rock and adjusted her skirt—northward.

"I concede that women," spluttered the general, "have their place in activities of the military—but that place has little or nothing to do with warfare as such! I demand that you make yourself known. Where did you come from?"

"Weh did I come from?" she asked mockingly. "Weh, he wansa know. Lookit dat!" She pointed one of her bright-glazed fingernails at the rocky floor of the cave, which grew liquid in a moment, glowing cherry red. She leered at the two and spat at the floor. It grew cold in another moment. "Don't dat mean nothin' to youse?" she asked.

The general stared at the floor. "You must be a volcano nymph."

"Good fa you, shorty!" she sneered. "I represent da goils from Local Toity-Tree. In brief, chums, our demands are dese: one, dat youse clear away from our union hall pronto; two, dat youse hang around in easy reach—in case we want use fa poipoises of our own. In retain fa dese demands we—dat's me an' da goils—will help youse guys out against Almarish. Dat lousy fink don't give his hands time off no more. Dis place might as well be a goddam desert fa all da men around. Get me?"

"These—ah—purposes of your own in clause two," said the general hesitantly. "What would they be?"

She smiled dirtily and half-closed her eyes. "Escort soivice, ya might call it. Nuttin' harmful ta yer men, Cap. We'll probably get tired of dem in a munt' or two and send dem off safe. You trolls are kinda cute."

The general stared, too horrified even to resent being called "Cap."

"Well?" demanded the nymph.

"Well—yes," said the general.

"Okay, shorty," she said, crushing out her cigarette against her palm. "Da goils'll be aroun' at dawn fa da attack. I'll try ta keep 'em off yer army until da battle's over. So long!" She sank into the earth, leaving behind only a smell of fleur-de-floozy perfume.

"God!" whispered General Skaldberg. "The things I do for the army!"

In irregular open formation the trolls advanced, followed closely by the jeering mob of volcano nymphs.

"How about it, General?" asked Peter. He and the old soldier were surveying the field of battle from a hill in advance of their forces; the hideous octopoid forms of the defenders of Almarish could be plainly seen, lumbering onward to meet the trolls with a peculiar sucking gait.

"Any minute now—any second," said Skaldberg. Then, "Here it comes!" The farthest advanced of the trolls had met with the first of the Krakens. The creature lashed out viciously; Peter saw that its tentacles had been fitted with studded bands and other murderous devices. The troll dodged nimbly and pulled an invincible sword on the octopoid myth. They mixed it; when the struggle went behind an outcropping of rock the troll was in the lead, unharmed, while the slow-moving Kraken was leaking thinly from a score of punctures.

"The dragons," said Peter, pointing. "Here they are." In V formation the monsters were landing on a far end of the battlefield, then coming at a scrabbling run.

"If they make it quicker than the nymphs—" breathed the general. Then he sighed relievedly. They had not. The carnage among the dragons was almost funny; at will the nymphs lifted them high in the air on jets of steam and squirted melted rock in their eyes. Squalling in terror, the dragons flapped into the air and lumbered off southward.

"That's ocean," grinned the general. "They'll never come back—trying to find new homes, I suspect."

In an incredibly short time the field was littered with the flopping chunks that had been hewed from the Krakens. Living still they were, but powerless. The general shook his hand warmly. "You're on your own now," he said. "Good luck, boy. For a civilian, you're not a bad sort of egg at all." He walked away.

Glumly Peter surveyed the colossal fortress of Almarish. He walked aimlessly up to its gate, a huge thing of bronze and silver, and pulled at the silken cord hanging there. A gong sounded and the door swung open. Peter advanced hopelessly into a sort of audience chamber.

"So!" thundered a mighty voice.

"So what?" asked Peter despondently. He saw on a throne high above him an imposing figure. "You Almarish?" he asked listlessly.

"I am. And who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm Peter Packer of Braintree, Mass. I don't even expect you to believe me." The throne lowered slowly and jerkily, as if on hydraulic pumps. The wizard descended and approached Peter. He was a man of about forty, with a full brown beard reaching almost to his belt.

"Why," asked the sorcerer, "have you come bearing arms?"

"It's the only way I could come," said Peter. "Let me first congratulate you on an efficient, well-oiled set of political machinery. Not even back in the United States have I seen graft carried to such a high degree. Second, your choice of assistants is an eye-opener. Your Mr. Pike is the neatest henchman I've ever seen. Third, produce the person of Miss Millicent or I'll have to use force."

"Is that so?" rumbled Almarish. "Young puppy! I'd like to see you try it. Wrestle with me—two falls out of three. I dare you!"

Peter took off his coat of blue serge. "I never passed up a dare yet," he said. "How about a mat?"

"Think I'm a sissy?" the sorcerer jeered.

Peter was stripped for action. "Okay," he said. Slowly Almarish advanced on him, grappling for a hold. Peter let him take his forearm, then shifted his weight so as to hurl the magician over his shoulder. A moment later Peter was astonished to find himself on the floor underneath the wizard.

"Haw!" grunted Almarish, rising. "You still game?" He braced himself.

"Yep!" snapped Peter. He hurled himself in a flying tackle that began ten feet away from the wizard and ended in a bone-crushing grip about the knees. Peter swarmed up his trunk and cruelly twisted an arm across his chest. The magician yelped in sudden agony, and let himself fall against the floor. Peter rose, grinning. "One all," he said cheerfully.

Almarish grappled for the third fall; Peter cagily backed away. The wizard hurled himself in a bruising body block against Peter, battering him off his feet and falling on the young man. Instinctively Peter bridged his body, arching it off the floor. Almarish, grunting fiercely, gripped his arm and turned it slowly, as though he were winding a clock. Peter

snapped over, rolling on the wizard's own body as a fulcrum. He had his toe in his hand, and closed his fist with every ounce of muscle he had. The sorcerer screamed and fell over on his face. Peter jammed his knee in the wizard's inside socket and bore down terribly. He could feel the bones bend in his grip.

"Enough!" gasped the wizard. Peter let him loose.

"You made it," said Almarish. "Two out of three."

Peter studied his face curiously. Take off that beard and you had—

"You said it, Grandfather Packer," said Peter, grinning.

Almarish groaned. "It's a wise child that knows its own father—grandfather, in this case," he said. "How could you tell?"

"Everything just clicked," said Peter simply. "You disappearing—that clock—somebody applying American methods in Ellil—and then I shaved you mentally and there you were. Simple?"

"Sure is. But how do you think I made out here, boy?"

"Shamefully. That kind of thing isn't tolerated any more. It's gangsterism—you'll have to cut it out, Gramp."

"Gangsterism be damned!" snorted the wizard. "It's business. Business and common sense."

"Business maybe—certainly not common sense. My boys wiped out your guard, and I might have wiped out you if I had magic stronger than yours."

Grandfather Packer chuckled in glee. "Magic? I'll begin at the beginning. When I got that dad-blamed clock back in '63, I dropped right into Ellil—onto the head of an assassin who was going for a real magician. Getting the setup, I pinned the killer with a half nelson and the magician dispatched him. Then he got grateful—said he was retiring from public life and gave me a kind of token—good for any three wishes.

"So I took it, thanking him kindly, and wished for a palace and a bunch of gutty retainers. It was in my mind to run Ellil like a business, and I did it the only way I knew how—force. And from that day to this I used only one wish and I haven't a dab of magic more than that!"

"I'll be damned!" whispered Peter.

"And you know what I'm going to do with those other two wishes? I'm going to take you and me right back into the good old U.S.A.!"

"Will it only send two people?"

"So the magician said."

"Grandfather Packer," said Peter earnestly, "I am about to ask a very great sacrifice of you. It is also your duty to undo the damage which you have done."

"Oh," said Almarish glumly. "The girl? All right."

"You don't mind?" asked Peter incredulously.

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of young love," grunted the wizard sourly. "She's up there."

Peter entered timidly; the girl was alternately reading a copy of the *Braintree Informer* and staring passionately at a photograph of Peter. "Darling," said Peter.

"Dearest," said Millicent, catching on almost immediately.

A short while later Peter was asking her, "Do you mind, dearest, if I ask one favor of you—a very great sacrifice?" He produced a small, sharp penknife.

And all the gossip for a month in Braintree was of Peter Packer's stunning young wife, though some people wondered how it was that she had only nine fingers.

embroidered robes of imperial purple, he was dashing to left and right about his bedroom, stooping low, snatching with his jeweled hands at an elusive something that skidded about the floor with little, chuckling snickers.

Outside, beyond the oaken door, there was a sinister thud of footsteps, firm and normal slaps of bare sole against pavement alternating with sinister tappings of bone. "Slap-click. Slap-click. Slap-click," was the beat. Almarish shot a glance over his shoulder at the door, his bearded face pale with strain.

"Young 'un," he snapped to an empty room, "this ain't the silly season. Come out, or when I find you I'll jest take your pointed ears and twist them till they come off in my hands."

Again there was the chuckling snicker, this time from under the bed. Almarish, his beard streaming, dove head-long, his hands snapping shut. The snicker turned into a pathetic wail.

"Leggo!" shrilled a small voice. "You're crushing me, you ox!"

Outside the alternating footsteps had stopped before his door. A horny hand pounded on the solid oak.

"Be with ye in a minute," called the bearded enchanter. Sweat had broken out on his brow. He drew out his clenched fists from under the bed.

"Now, young lady!" he said grimly, addressing his prize.

The remarkable creature in his hands appeared to be young; at least she was not senile. But if ever a creature looked less like a lady it was she. From tiny feet, shod in rhinestone, high-heeled pumps to softly waved chestnut hair at her very crown, she was an efficient engine of seduction and disaster. And to omit what came between would be a sin: her voluptuous nine inches were encased in a *lamé* that glittered with the fire of burnished silver, cut and fitted in the guise of an evening gown. Pouting and sullen as she was in Almarish's grasp, she hadn't noticed that the hem was scarcely below her ankles, as was intended by the unknown couturier who had spared no pains on her. That hem, or the maladjustment of it, revealed, in fact, that she had a pretty, though miniature, taste in silks and lacework.

"Ox!" she stormed at the bearded sorcerer. "Beastly oaf—you'll squeeze me out of shape with your great, clumsy hands!"

"That would be a pity," said Almarish. "It's *quite* a shape, as you seem to know."

The pounding on the door redoubled. "Lord Almarish!" shouted a voice, clumsily feigning anxiety. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, Pike," called the sorcerer. "Don't bother me now. I have a lady with me. We're looking at my potted plants."

"Oh," said the voice of Pike. "All right—my business can wait."

"That stalled him," grunted Almarish. "But not for long. You, what's your name?"

She stuck out a tiny tongue at him.

"Look here," said Almarish gently. He contracted his fist a little and the creature let out an agonized squawk on a small scale. "What's your name?" he repeated.

"Moira," she snapped tartly. "And if your throat weren't behind all that hay I'd cut it."

"Forget that, kid," he said. "Let me give you a brief *résumé* of pertinent facts:

"My name is Packer and I'm from Braintree, Mass., which you never heard of. I came to Ellil by means of a clock with thirteen hours. Unusual, eh? Once here I sized things up and began to organize on a business basis with the assistance of a gang of half-breed demons. I had three wishes, but they're all used up now. I had to send back to Braintree my grandson Peter, who got here the same way I did, and with him a sweet young witch he picked up.

"Before leaving he read me a little lecture on business reform and the New Deal. What I thought was commercial common sense—little things like bribes, subornation of perjury, arson, assassination and the like—he claimed was criminal. So I, like a conscientious Packer, began to set things right. This my gang didn't like. The best testimony of that fact is that the gentleman outside my door is Balthazar Pike, my trusted lieutenant, who has determined to take over.

"I learned that from Count Hacza, the vampire, when he called yesterday, and he said that I was to be wiped out today. He wrung my hand with real tears in his eyes—an affectionate chap—as he said goodbye."

"And," snarled the creature, "ain't that too damn' bad?"

"No," said Almarish mildly. "No, because you're going to get me out of this. I knew you were good luck the moment you

poked your nose through the wall and began to snicker."

Moira eyed him keenly. "What's in it for me?" she finally demanded.

There was again the pounding on the door. "Lord Almarish," yelled Balthazar Pike, "aren't you through with those potted plants yet?"

"No," called the sorcerer. "We've just barely got to the gladioli."

"Pretty slow working," grumbled the trusted lieutenant. "Get some snap into it."

"Sure, Pike. Sure. Only a few minutes more." He turned on the little creature. "What do you want?" he asked.

There was a curious catch in her voice as she answered, "A vial of tears from *la Bête Joyeux*."

"Cut out the bunk," snapped Almarish impatiently. "Gold, jewels—anything at all. Name it."

"Look, whiskers," snarled the little creature. "I told you my price and I'll stick to it. What's more I'll take you to the right place."

"And on the strength of that," grinned the sorcerer, "I'm supposed to let you out of my hands?"

"That's the idea," snapped Moira. "You have to trust somebody in this lousy world—why not me? After all, mister, I'm taking your word—if you'll give it."

"Done," said Almarish with great decision. "I hereby pledge myself to do everything I can to get you that what-ever-it-was's tears, up to and including risk and loss of life."

"Okay, whiskers," she said. "Put me down." He obliged, and saw her begin to pace out pentacles and figures on the mosaic floor. As she began muttering to herself with great concentration he leaned his head against the door. There were agitated murmurs without.

"Don't be silly," Pike was saying. "He told me with his own mouth he had a woman—"

"Look, Bally," said another voice, one that Almarish recognized as that of a gatekeeper, "I ain't sayin' you're wacked up, but they ain't even no mice in his room. I ain't let no one in and the ectoplasmeter don't show nothin' on the grounds of the castle."

"Then," said Pike, "he must be stalling. Rourke, you get the rest of the 'breeds and we'll break down the door and settle Lord Almarish's hash for good. The lousy weakling!"

Lord Almarish began to sweat afresh and cast a glance at Moira, who was standing stock-still to one side of the mosaic design in the floor. He noted abruptly a series of black tiles in the center that he had never seen before. Then others surrounding them turned black, and he saw that they were not coloring but ceasing to exist. Apparently something of a bottomless pit was opening up beneath his palace.

Outside the padding and clicking of feet sounded. "Okay, boys! Get it in line!"

They would be swinging up a battering ram, Almarish surmised. The shivering crash of the first blow against the oaken door made his ears ring. Futilely he braced his own brawny body against the planking and felt the next two blows run through his bones.

"One more!" yelled his trusted lieutenant. And with that one more the door would give way, he knew, and what they would do to him would be no picnic. He had schooled them well, though crudely, in the techniques of strike-breaking effected by employers of the 1880s.

"Hurry it up!" he snapped at Moira. She didn't answer, being wholly intent, it seemed, on the enlargement of the pit which was growing in the floor. It would now admit the passage of a slimmer man than the sorcerer, but his own big bones would never make it.

With agonizing slowness the pit grew, tile by tile, as the tiny creature frowned into it till her face was white and bloodless. Almarish fancied he could hear through the door the labored breathing of the half-breed demons as they made ready to swing again.

Crash! It came again, and only his own body kept the door from falling in fragments.

"Right—*dive!*" shrilled the little voice of Moira as the battering ram poked through into the room. He caught her up in

one hand and squeezed through into the blackness of the pit. He looked up and could see a circle of faces snarling with rage as he slid down a kind of infinitely smooth inclined tunnel. Abruptly the patch of light above him was blotted out and there was absolutely nothing to be seen.

All Almarish knew was that he was gliding in utter blackness at some terrifying speed in excess of anything sane down to a place he knew nothing of in the company of a vicious little creature whose sole desire seemed to be to cut his throat and drink his blood with glee.

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"Where," asked Almarish, "does this end?"

"You'll find out," snarled the little creature. "Maybe you're yellow already?"

"Don't say that," he warned. "Not unless you want to get playfully pinched—in half."

"Cold-blooded," she marveled. "Like a snake or lizard. Heart's probably three-ventricled, too."

"Our verbal contract," said the sorcerer, delicately emphasizing *verbal*, "didn't include an exchange of insults."

"Yeah," she said abstractedly. And though they were in the dark, he could sense that she was worried. "Yeah, that's right."

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"It's your fault," she shrilled. "It's your own damned fault hurrying me up so I did this!" The man knew that she was near distraction with alarm. And he could feel the reason why. They were slowing down, and this deceleration, presumably, was not on Moira's schedule.

"We on the wrong line?" he asked coolly.

"Yes. That's about it. And don't ask me what happens now, because I don't know, you stupid cow!" Then she was sniffling quietly in his hand, and the sorcerer was wondering how he could comfort her without breaking her in two.

"There now," he soothed tentatively, stroking her hair carefully with the tip of a finger. "There, now, don't get all upset —"

It occurred to him to worry on his own account. They had slowed to a mere snail's pace, and at the dramatically, psychologically correct moment a light appeared ahead. A dull chanting resounded through the tube:

"*Slimy flesh,
Clotted blood,
Fat, white worms,
These are food.*"

From Moira there was a little, strangled wail. "Ghouls!"

"Grave robbers?" asked the sorcerer. "I can take care of them—knock a few heads together."

"No," she said in thin, hopeless tones. "You don't understand. These are the real thing. You'll see."

As they slid from the tube onto a sort of receiving table Almarish hastily pocketed the little creature. Then, staring about him in bewilderment, he dropped his jaw and let it hang.

The amiable dietary ditty was being ground out by a phonograph, tending which there was a heavy-eyed person dressed all in gray. He seemed shapeless, lumpy, like a half-burned tallow candle on whose sides the drops of wax have congealed in half-teardrops and cancerous clusters. He had four limbs and, on the upper two, hands of a sort, and wore what could roughly be described as a face.

"You," said Almarish. "What's—where—?" He broke off in confusion as a lackluster eye turned on him.

From a stack beside him the creature handed him a pamphlet. The sorcerer studied the title:

WORKERS!
FIGHT TO PRESERVE AND EXTEND
the GLORIOUS REVOLUTION which has BEFALLEN

YOU!

He read further:

There are those among you who still can remember the haphazard days of individual enterprise and communal wealth. Those days were bad; many starved for lack of nutritious corpses. And yet people died Above; why this poverty in the midst of plenty?

There were Above as usual your scouts who cast about for likely members of your elite circle, those who wished to live forever on the traditional banquets of the Immortal Eaters. Fortunate indeed was the scout who enrolled Ingvar Hemming. For it was he who, descending to the Halls of the Eaters, saw the pitiful confusion which existed.

Even as he had brought order into the vast holdings which had been his when Above, he brought order to the Halls. A ratio was established between production and consumption and civilized habits of life-in-death were publicized. Nowadays no Immortal Eater would be seen barbarously clawing the flesh from a corpse as in the bad old days; in these times your Safety-Tasty cans are the warrant of cleanliness and flavor.

Bug-eyed, Almarish turned to the back of the booklet and scanned the advertisements:

There's STRENGTH
s-p-e-e-d
grace
In A HEMMING HEARSE
"To serve we strive
The dead-alive."

For Those Guests Tonight!
Why Not
A Bottle of SAFETY-TASTY
EYES
10 per bottle—Hemming-Pakt
"5 blue, 5 brown—remember?"

He tore his eyes from the repulsive pages. "Chum," he demanded hoarsely of the phonograph attendant, "what the hell goes on here?"

"Hell?" asked the ghoul in a creaky, slushy voice. "You're way off. You'll never get there now. I buzzed the receiving desk—they'll come soon."

"I mean this thing." Gingerly he held it up between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh—that. I'm supposed to give it to each new arrival. It's full of bunk. If you could possibly get out of here, you'd do it. This ain't no paradise, not by a long shot."

"I thought," said Almarish, "that you all had enough to eat now. And if you can afford hearses you must be well off."

"You think so?" asked the attendant. "I can remember back when things was different. And then this Hemming man—he comes down from Above, corners the supply, hires men to can it and don't pay them enough to buy it in cans. I don't understand it, but I know it ain't right."

"But who buys the—the eyes and hearses?"

"Foremen an' ex-ex-ekky-tives. And whut they are I don't know. It jest ain't jolly down here no more."

"Where you from?" asked Almarish.

"Kentucky. Met a scout, 1794. Liked it and been here ever since. You change—cain't git back. It's a sad thing naow." He dummed up abruptly as a squad of ghouls approached. They were much less far gone—"changed"—than the attendant.

One snapped out a notebook.

"Name?" he demanded.

"Packer, Almarish—what you will," he said, fingering an invincible dagger in his sleeve.

"Almarish—the Almarish?"

"Overlord of Ellil," he modestly confessed, assuming, and rightly, that the news of his recent deposition had not yet reached the Halls of the Eternal Eaters. "Come on a tour of inspection. I was wondering if I ought to take over this glorified cafeteria."

"I assume," said one of the reception committee—for into such it had hastily resolved itself—"you'll want to see our vice-president in charge of Inspection and Regulation?"

"You assume wrongly," said the sorcerer coldly. "I want to see the president."

"*Mr. Hemming?*" demanded the spokesman. All heads save that of Almarish bowed solemnly. "You—you haven't an appointment, you know."

"Lead on," ordered the sorcerer grimly. "To *Mr. Hemming*." Again the heads bowed.

Almarish strode majestically through the frosted-glass door simply lettered with the name and title of the man who owned the nation of ghouls body and soul.

"Hello, Hemming," said he to the man behind the desk, sitting down unbidden.

The president was scarcely "changed" at all. It was possible that he had been eating food that he had been used to when Above. What Almarish saw was an ordinary man in a business suit, white-haired, with a pair of burning eyes and a stoop forward that gave him the aspect of a cougar about to pounce.

"Almarish," he said, "I welcome you to my—corporation."

"Yes—thank you," said the sorcerer. He was vaguely worried. Superb businessman that he was, he could tell with infallible instinct that something was wrong—that his stupendous bluff was working none too well.

"I've just received an interesting communication," said Hemming casually. "A report via rock signals that there was some sort of disturbance in your Ellil. A sort of—palace revolution. Successful, too, I believe."

Almarish was about to spring at his throat and bring down guards about his head when he felt a stirring in his pocket. Over the top of one peeked the head of Moira.

"Won't you," she said, "introduce me to the handsome man?"

Almarish, grinning quietly, brought her out into full view. With a little purr she gloriously stretched her lithe body. Hemming was staring like an old goat.

"This," said the sorcerer, "is Moira."

"For sale?" demanded the president, clenching his hands till the knuckles whitened on the top of his desk.

"Of course," she drawled amiably. "At the moment a free agent. Right?" She tipped Almarish a wink.

"Of course," he managed to say regretfully, "you know your own mind, Moira, but I wish you'd stay with me a little longer."

"I'm tired of you," she said. "A lively girl like me needs them young and handsome to keep my interest alive. There are some men"—she cast a sidelong, slumbrous glance at Hemming—"some men I'd never grow tired of."

"Bring her over," said the president, trying to control his voice.

Almarish realized that there was something in the combination of endemic desirability and smallness which was irresistible. He didn't know it, but that fact was being demonstrated in his own Braintree, Mass., at that very time by a shop which had abandoned full-sized window dummies and was using gorgeous things a little taller than Moira but scarcely as sexy. In the crowds around their windows there were four men to every woman.

His Moira pirouetted on the desk top, displaying herself. "And," she said, "for some men I'll do a really extraordinary favor."

"What's that?" asked Hemming, fighting with himself to keep his hands off her. He was plainly terrified of squashing this gorgeous creature.

"I could make you," she said, "my size. Only a little taller, of course. Women like that."

"You can?" he asked, his voice breaking. "Then go ahead!"

"I have your full consent?"

"Yes," he said. "Full consent."

"Then—" A smile curved her lips as she swept her hands through the air in juggling little patterns.

A lizard about ten inches long reared up on its hind legs, then frantically skittered across the tabletop. Almarish looked for Hemming; could not see him anywhere. He picked up Moira. In a sleepy, contented voice she was saying:

"My size. Only a little taller, of course."

8

Back in the tube from which they had been shunted into the Halls of the Eternal Eaters, as the ghouls fancied calling themselves, Almarish couldn't get sense out of Moira. She had fallen asleep in his pocket and was snoring quietly, like a kitten that purred in its sleep.

And more than ever he marveled at this cold-blooded little creature. She had had the routine of seduction and transformation down so pat that he was sure she had done it a hundred times—or a thousand. You couldn't tell ages in any of these unreal places; he, who should be a hundred and eight, looked just thirty-five and felt fifteen years younger than that.

All the same, it would be a good thing not to give Moira full and clear consent to anything at all. That must be an important part of the ceremony.

He hoped that the ghouls would straighten themselves out now that their president was a ten-inch lizard. But there were probably twenty villainous vice-presidents, assorted as to size, shape and duties, to fill his place. Maybe they'd get to fighting over it, and the ghouls-in-ordinary would be able to toss them all over.

Just like Ellil. A good thing he'd gotten out of that.

Not that he liked this way of traveling, he assured himself. It couldn't be anything half so honest as it seemed—a smooth-lined tube slanting down through solid rock. It was actually, of course, God-knew-what tricky path between the planes of existence. That thirteen-hour clock was one way, this was another, but more versatile.

Lights ahead again—red lights. He took Moira from his pocket and shook her with incredible delicacy.

"You ox!" she snapped. "Trying to break my back?"

"Sorry," he said. "Lights—red ones. What about them?"

"That's it," she said grimly. "Do you feel like a demigod—particularly?"

"No," he admitted. "Not—particularly."

"Then that's too damn bad," she snapped. "Remember, you have a job to do. When you get past the first trials and things, wake me up."

"Trials?"

"Yes, always. Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Norse—they all have a Weigher of Souls. It's always the same place, of course, but they like the formality. Now let me sleep."

He put her back into his pocket and tried to brake with his hands and feet. No go. But soon he began to decelerate. Calling up what little he knew of such things, he tried to draw a desperate analogy between molecules standing radially instead of in line and whatever phenomenon this was which made him—who was actually, he knew, not moving at all—not-move more slowly than before, when he had been standing still at an inconceivably rapid pace.

The lights flared ahead into a bloody brilliance, and he skidded onto another of the delivery tables of sardonyx.

A thing with a hawk face took his arm.

"Stwm stm!" it said irritably.

"Velly solly," said the sorcerer. "Me no spik—whatever in Hades you're speaking."

"R khrt sr tf mtht," it said with a clash of its beak. Almarish drew his invincible dirk, and the thing shrugged disarmingly.

"Chdl nfr," it grinned, sauntering off.

A Chinese approached, surveying him. "Sholom aleichim," he greeted Almarish, apparently fooled by the beard.

"Aleichim sholom," replied the enchanter, "but you've made a mistake."

"Sorry," said the Chinese. "We'll put you on the calendar at General Sessions. Take him away!" he called sharply.

Almarish was hustled into a building and up a flight of stairs by two men in shiny blue uniforms before he had a chance to ask what the charge was. He was hustled through a pen, through innumerable corridors, through a sort of chicken-wire cage, and finally into a courtroom.

"*Hurrah!*" yelled thousands of voices. Dazedly he looked over a sea of faces, mostly bloodthirsty.

"Tough crowd," one of the attendants muttered. "We better stick around to take care of you. They like to collect souvenirs. Arms ... scalps...."

"See him?" demanded the other attendant, pointing at the judge. "Used to be a Neminant Divine. This is his punishment. This and dyspepsia. Chronic."

Almarish could read the sour lines in the judge's face like a book. And the book looked as though it had an unhappy ending.

"Prisoner to the bar," wheezed the justice.

THE COURT: Prisoner, give your name and occupation.

PRISONER: Which ones, Your Honor? There are so many.

(*Laughter and hisses.*)

A VOICE: Heretic—burn him!

THE COURT: Order! Prisoner, give the ones you like best. And remember—We Know All.

PRISONER: Yes, Your Honor. Packer, ex-overlord of Ellil.

THE COURT: Read the accusation, clerk.

CLERK: (*several words lost*) did willfully conspire to transform said Hemming into a lizard ten inches long.

(*Laughter in the court.*)

THE COURT: Poppycock!

RECORDING CLERK: How do you spell that, Your Honor?

THE COURT: Silence! I said *Poppycock*!

RECORDING CLERK: Thank you, Your Honor.

PRISONER'S COUNSEL: Your Honor, (*several words lost*), known (*several words lost*) childhood (*several words lost*).

THE COURT: Prisoner's counsel is very vague.

PRISONER: My God—is *he* my lawyer?

THE COURT: So it would appear.

PRISONER: But I never saw the man before, and he's obviously drunk, Your Honor!

THE COURT: Hic! What of it, prisoner?

PRISONER: Nothing. Nothing at all. Move to proceed.

PROSECUTING ATT'Y: I object! Your Honor, I object!

THE COURT: Sustained.

(*A long silence. Hisses and groans.*)

THE COURT: Mr. Prosecutor, *you* got us into this—what have you to say for yourself?

PROSECUTING ATT'Y: Your Honor, I—I—I move to proceed.

PRISONER: It's my turn, Your Honor. *I* object.

THE COURT: Overruled.

(*Cheers and whistles.*)

VOICES: Hang him by the thumbs!

Cut his face off!

Heretic—burn him!

THE COURT: I wish it to go on record that I am much gratified by the intelligent interest which the public is taking in this trial.

(*Cheers and whistles.*)

PROSECUTING ATT'Y: Your Honor, I see no need further to dillydally. This is a clear-cut case and the state feels no hesitation in demanding that the Court impose maximum penalty under law—which, if I remember aright, is death *per flagitatem extremum, peine forte et dure, crucifictio ultima* and *inundation sub aqua regia*—in that order.

(*Cheers and screams. Wild demonstration.*)

THE COURT: I so—

A VOICE: Hey, blue-eyes!

THE COURT: I so—

A VOICE (*the same*): Hey, you, cutie-pants!

THE COURT: Prisoner.

PRISONER: Yes, Your Honor?

THE COURT: Prisoner, are you aware of what you have in your pocket?

PRISONER: Oh—*her*. Cute, isn't she?

THE COURT: Bring it closer. I shall make it Exhibit A.

A VOICE (*the same*): Hey—that tickles!

THE COURT: Exhibit A, have you any testimony to give?

(*Demonstration, mostly whistles.*)

EXHIBIT A: Yes, Your Honor. Take me away from this horrible man! The things he's done to me—

THE COURT: Yes? Yes?

EXHIBIT A: You can't imagine. But Your Honor, you're not like him. You know, Your Honor, there are *some men* (*rest of testimony lost*).

THE COURT: (*comments lost*).

EXHIBIT A: (*testimony lost*).

THE COURT: Really! You don't mean it! Well, go ahead.

EXHIBIT A: Have I your full consent?

THE COURT: You have—free, clear and legal.

EXHIBIT A: (*gestures with both hands*).

THE COURT: (*turns into lizard approx. 10 in. long*).

EXHIBIT A: Come on, whiskers—let's beat it!

PRISONER: I hear you talkin'!

PROSECUTING ATT'Y: Go after them, you damfools!

COURT ATTACHÉS: Not us, bud. What kind of dopes do we look like to you?

(*Screams, howls, whistles, yells, demonstrations, complete pandemonium.*)

9

"How will I know," demanded Almarish, "when I'm supposed to turn left?"

"When the three moons show up as an equilateral triangle," said Moira, "will be high time. Now, damn you, let me go to sleep."

"Why are you always so tired after these little transformation acts of yours?"

"You, not being a real sorcerer, wouldn't understand. But suffice it to say that any magic-worker would have to do as much. Watch out for ghosts. Good night."

She was in his pocket again, either purring or snoring. He never could decide which was the right word. And Almarish realized that this little lady had somehow become very dear to him.

He was walking along a narrow, sullen strip of desert bordered on either side by devil trees that lashed out with poisonous, thorny branches. The things must have had sharp ears, for they would regularly lie in wait for him and lash up as he stepped past. Fortunately, they could not make the extra yard or two of leeway he had.

Above, the three moons of the present night were shifting in a stately drill, more like dancers than celestial bodies, sometimes drawing near to an equilateral triangle but never quite achieving it. And she had been most specific about it.

There was still *la Bête Joyeux* to face, from whose eyes had to be wrung a vial of tears for purpose or purposes unknown to the sorcerer. His French was a little weak, but he surmised that the thing was a happy beast, and that to make it weep would bear looking into. He made a mental note to ask her about it. He was always asking her about things.

The devil trees were at it again, this time with a new twist. They would snap their tentacles at him like whips, so that one or more of the darts would fly off and whiz past his face. And it was just as well that they did. One of those things would drop a rhino in full charge, Moira had told him. Odd name, Moira. Sounded Irish.

He looked up and drew his breath in sharply. The moons had formed their triangle and held it for a long, long five minutes. Time to turn left. The way was blocked, of course, by ill-tempered trees. He drew the invincible dirk, hoping that the trees did not know enough magic to render the thing just an innocent little brand, and deliberately stepped within reach of one of the trees.

It lashed out beautifully; Almarish did not have to cut at it. The tentacle struck against the blade and lopped itself clean off. The tree uttered a mournful squeal and tried to find and haul in the severed tentacle with the others. They had a way of sticking them back on again.

He slashed away heartily, counting them as they fell. With each fresh gush of pussy sap the tree wailed more and more weakly. Finally it drooped, seemingly completely done in. Treachery, of course. He flung a lump of sandstone into the nest of arms and saw them close, slowly and with little crushing power, around it. Were it he instead of the stone, he could have hacked himself free before the thing burst into sand.

Quite boldly, therefore, he picked his way among the oozing tendrils, now and then cutting at one from the wrist. He gum-shoed past the trunk itself and saw the pulsing membranes quiver malevolently at his step. They had things like this

back in Ellil; he felt more than competent to deal with them.

But ghosts, now—ghosts were something else again. He had never seen a ghost, though the rumors did go about. And if ever ghosts were to be seen, it was in this spot.

Here the moons did not send their light—he didn't know why—and the grass underfoot was fatty, round rods. From shrubs shone a vague, reddish light that frayed on a man's nerves. There was the suggestion of a sound in the air, like the ghost itself of a noise dispersed.

"Moira," he said softly. "Snap out of it. I'm scared."

A tiny head peeked over the top of his pocket. "Yellow already?" she insultingly asked. "The master of all Ellil's turning green?"

"Look," he said. "Just you tell me what we're up against and I'll go ahead. Otherwise, no."

"Ghosts," she said. "This place is a den of them. I suppose you've heard all the stories about them and don't quite believe. Well, the stories are true. Just forget about the whimsy *à la* John Kendrick Bangs. Ghosts aren't funny; they're the most frightening things that ever were. There's nothing you can do about them; none of the magical formulas work because they aren't even magical. They are distilled essence of terror in tactile form. There's absolutely nothing you can do with, to, or about them. I can't give you a word of advice. You know what you have to do, whiskers. We're after that vial of tears."

"Right," he said. "Keep your head out—here we go."

He—they—walked into a vast glob of darkness that saturated their minds, seeped between their molecules and into their lungs and hearts.

"Oh my God!" wailed a voice. "Oh, my God!"

Almarish didn't turn his head; kept walking straight on.

"Stranger—help me—here they come—" the voice shrilled. There was a sickening sound of crackling, then a mushy voice that spoke a few indistinguishable words.

"They're at it," said Moira tremulously. "Don't let it get you down."

"A big man like you," said the sweet voice of a young girl, "consorting with that evil little creature! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I'm *ever* so much nicer...."

In the gooey blackness appeared a figure—wispy, luminous—of a charming maiden whose head was a skull and whose hair was a convolution of pink, writhing worms. Gently they hissed in chorus:

*"Bold, big master,
Come to terms;
Feed the dainty
Maid of Worms."*

The last line of the ditty echoed from all sides in a variety of voices, ranging from a new-born wail to the hoarseness of a death rattle.

Almarish shut his eyes and walked ahead as the Maid reached out her arms. He walked into her and felt a clammy, gelid coldness, the tightness of arms around him, and ropy things fumbling on his face. Repressing a shriek, breathing heavily, he strode on, finally opening his eyes. Again he—they—were in the blackness, without a sound or light. Fumbling for a handkerchief, he swabbed at his brow and cheeks, dripping with cold sweat. As he thought of the Maid again, his back rose into little prickles of ice.

"It was me," he said, trembling violently, "who could never stand mice and roaches, Moira."

"Keep going," she snapped coldly. "This isn't a picnic." The little creature was upset again. Almarish walked on, missed his footing and fell, sprawling grotesquely. Slowly he drifted down through unimaginable depths of blackness, reaching out frantically for holds, and there were none.

"Stop it!" shrilled Moira. "Stop struggling!"

Obediently he relaxed. His fall ended with a bump, on a twilit road sloping gently downward as far as the eye could see. There was a vague, rumbling noise underfoot, as if there were heavy carts on the road.

He looked up along the road. Something was coming, and it was brutally big. Legless, it rolled along on iron wheels, coming at him. The thing was a flattened ovoid of dark, sharkish gray, and like a shark it had a gruesome, toothy slit of mouth. Growing bigger and bigger, it thundered down the road as he watched, petrified, his own mouth open in childish alarm.

A shrill scream from his pocket brought him to. "Jump, you dummy!" shrieked Moira. "*Jump!*" He leaped into the air as the thing, its triangular mouth snapping savagely, teeth clashing, thundered beneath him.

He watched it go on down the road, still cold with terror.

"Can it come back?" he asked.

"Of course not," said Moira. "Could *you* roll uphill?"

"You're right," he said. "Quite right. But what do we do now?" He mopped his brow again.

"Look," said the little creature kindly. "I know how you feel, but don't worry. You're doing a lot better than you think you are. We'll be out of this in a minute, if you don't break down." She looked sharply into his face.

"Maybe I won't," he said. "I'm not making promises, the way I feel. What—what in Hades—?"

He—they—were snatched up by a gigantic wind and were sucked through the air like flies in an air-conditioning plant.

"Close your eyes," said Moira. "Close them tight and think of something—anything—except what's going to happen to you. Because if you think of something else, it won't happen."

Almarish squeezed his eyes tight shut as a thunderous droning noise filled his ears. "Ex sub one sub two," he gabbled, "equals ei square plus two ei plus the square root of bee plus and minus ei square minus two ei bee over two ei." The droning roar was louder; he jammed his thumbs into his ears.

He felt a hideous impulse to open his eyes. Little, stinging particles of dust struck against his neck.

Flying through the air, turning over and over, the droning roar became one continual crash that battered against his body with physical force. There was one indescribable, utterly, incomparably violent noise that nearly blew his brain out like an overload of electricity. Then things became more or less quiet, and he tumbled onto a marshy sort of ground.

"All clear?" he asked, without opening his eyes.

"Yes," said Moira. "You were magnificent."

He lifted his lids warily and saw that he sat on a stretch of forest sward. Looking behind him—

"My God!" he screamed. "Did we go through *that*?"

"Yes," said Moira. "It's a ghost—unless you're afraid of it, it can't hurt you."

Behind them, the thousand-foot blades of a monstrous electric fan swirled brilliantly at several hundred r.p.s. The noise reached them in a softening blur of sound. Gently it faded away.

Almarish of Ellil leaned back quietly.

"The big calf!" muttered Moira. "Now he faints on me!"

10

"Now," said Almarish, "what about this happy animal?"

"*La Bête Joyeux?*" asked the little creature.

"If that's what its name is. Why this damned nonsense about tears?"

"It's a curse," said Moira grimly. "A very terrible curse."

"Then it'll keep. Who's in there?"

He pointed to a stony hut that blocked the barely defined trail they were following. Moira shaded her tiny eyes and

wrinkled her brow as she stared. "I don't know," she admitted at last. "It's something new."

Almarish prepared to detour. The stone door slid open. Out looked a wrinkled, weazened face, iron-rimmed spectacles slid down over the nose. It was whiskered, but not as resplendently as Almarish's, whose imposing mattress spread from his chin to his waist. And the beard straggling from the face was not the rich mahogany hue of the sorcerer's, but a dirty white, streaked with gray and soup stains.

"Hello," said Almarish amiably, getting his fingers around the invincible dirk.

"Beaver!" shrilled the old man, pointing a dirty-yellow, quavering, derisive finger at Almarish. Then he lit a cigarette with a big, apparently homemade match and puffed nervously.

"Is there anything," inquired the sorcerer, "we can do for you? Otherwise we'd like to be on our way."

"We?" shrilled the old man.

Almarish realized that Moira had retreated into his pocket again. "I mean I," he said hastily. "I was a king once—you get into the habit."

"Come in," said the old man quaveringly. By dint of extraordinarily hard puffing, he had already smoked down the cigarette to his yellowed teeth. Carefully he lit another from its butt.

Almarish did not want to come in. At least he had not wanted to, but there was growing in his mind a conviction that this was a very nice old man, and that it would be a right and proper thing to go in. That happy-animal nonsense could wait. Hospitality was hospitality.

He went in and saw an utterly revolting interior, littered with the big, clumsy matches and with cigarette butts smoked down to eighth-inches and stamped out. The reek of nicotine filled the air; ashtrays deep as water buckets overflowed everywhere onto the floor.

"Perhaps," said the sorcerer, "we'd better introduce ourselves. I'm Almarish, formerly of Ellil."

"Pleased to meet you," shrilled the ancient. Already he was chain-smoking his third cigarette. "My name's Hopper. I'm a geasan."

"What?"

"Geasan—layer-on of geases. A geas is an injunction which can't be disobeyed. Sit down."

Almarish felt suddenly that it was about time he took a little rest. "Thanks," he said, sitting in a pile of ashes and burned matches. "But I don't believe that business about you being able to command people."

The geasan started his sixth cigarette and cackled shrilly. "You'll see. Young man, I want that beard of yours. My mattress needs restuffing. You'll let me have it, of course."

"Of course," said Almarish. Anything at all for a nice old man like this, he thought. But that business about geases was too silly for words.

"And I may take your head with it. You won't object."

"Why, no," said the sorcerer. What in Hades was the point of living, anyway?

Lighting his tenth cigarette from the butt of the ninth, the geasan took down from the wall a gigantic razor.

A tiny head peeked over the top of the sorcerer's pocket.

"Won't you," said a little voice, "introduce me, Almarish, to your handsome friend?"

The eleventh cigarette dropped from the lips of the ancient as Almarish brought out Moira and she pirouetted on his palm. She cast a meaningful glance at the geasan. "Almarish is *such* a boor," she declared. "Not one bit like some men...."

"It was the cigarettes that gave him his power, of course," decided the sorcerer as he climbed the rocky bluff.

"My size," purred Moira, "only a little taller, of course. Women like that." She began to snore daintily in his pocket. Almarish heaved himself over the top of the bluff, and found himself on a stony plain or plateau scattered with tumbled rocks.

"Vials, sir?" demanded a voice next to his ear.

"Ugh!" he grunted, rapidly sidestepping. "Where are you?"

"Right here." Almarish stared. "No—*here*." Still he could see nothing.

"What was that about vials?" he asked, fingering the dirk.

Something took shape in the air before his eyes. He picked it out of space and inspected the thing. It was a delicate bottle, now empty, designed to hold only a few drops. Golden wires ran through the glass forming patterns suggestive of murder and other forms of sudden death.

"How much?" he asked.

"That ring?" suggested the voice. Almarish felt his hand being taken and one of his rings being twisted off.

"Okay," he said. "It's yours."

"Thanks ever so much," replied the voice gratefully. "Miss Megaera will *love* it."

"Keep away from those Eumenides, boy," Almarish warned. "They're tricky sluts."

"I'll thank you to mind your own business, sir," snapped the voice. It began to whistle an air, which trailed away into the distance.

From behind one of the great, tumbled cairns of rock slid, with a colossal clashing of scales, a monster.

"Ah, there," said the monster.

Almarish surveyed it carefully. The thing was a metallic cross among the octopus, scorpion, flying dragon, tortoise, ape and toad families. Its middle face smiled amiably, almost condescendingly, down on the sorcerer.

"You the *Bête Joyeux*?" asked Almarish.

"See here," said the monster, snorting a bit and dribbling lava from a corner of its mouth. "See here—I've been called many things, some unprintable, but that's a new one. What's it mean?"

"Happy animal, I think," said Almarish.

"Then I probably am," said the monster. It chuckled. "Now what do you want?"

"See this vial? It has to be filled with your tears."

"So what?" asked the monster, scratching itself.

"Will you weep for me?"

"Out of sheer perversity, no. Shall we fight now?"

"I suppose so," said Almarish, heavyhearted. "There's only one other way to get your tears that I can think of. Put up your dukes, chum."

The monster squared off slowly. It didn't move like a fighter; it seemed to rely on static fire power, like a battle-tank. It reached out a tentacle whose end opened slowly into a steaming nozzle. Almarish snapp'd away as a squirt of sulfurous matter gushed from the tip.

With a lively blow the sorcerer slashed off the tentacle, which scuttled for shelter. The monster proper let out a yell of pain. One of its lionlike paws slapped down and sidewise at Almarish; he stood his ground and let the thing run into the dirk its full length, then jumped inside the thing's guard and scaled its shoulder.

"No fair!" squalled the monster.

He replied with a slash that took off an ear. The creature scratched frantically for him, but he easily eluded the clumsy nails that raked past its hide. As he danced over the skin, stabbing and slashing more like a plowman than a warrior, the nails did fully as much damage as he did.

Suddenly, treacherously, the monster rolled over. Almarish birled it like a log in a pond, harrowing up its exposed belly as it lay on its back.

Back on its feet again, the thing was suddenly still. The sorcerer, catching his breath, began to worry. The squawking pants that had been its inhalations and exhalations had stopped. But it wasn't dead, he knew. The thing was holding its breath. But why was it doing that?

The temperature of the skin began to rise, sharply. So, thought Almarish, it was trying to smoke him off by containing all its heat! He scrambled down over its forehead. The nostril flaps were tight shut. Seemingly, it breathed only by its middle head, the one he was exploring.

His heels were smoking, and the air was growing super-heated. Something had to be done, but good and quick.

With a muttered prayer, Almarish balanced the dirk in his hand and flung it with every ounce of his amazing brawn. Then, not waiting to see the results, he jumped down and ran frantically to the nearest rock. He dodged behind it and watched.

The dirk had struck home. The nostril flaps of the monster had been *pinned* shut. He chuckled richly to himself as the thing pawed at its nose. The metallic skin was beginning to glow red-hot, then white.

He ducked behind the rock, huddled close to it as he saw the first faint hairline of weakness on the creature's glowing hide.

Crash! It exploded like a thunderclap. Parts whizzed past the rock like bullets, bounced and skidded along the ground, fusing rocks as they momentarily touched.

Almarish looked up at last. *La Bête Joyeux* was scattered over most of the plateau.

Almarish found the head at last. It had cooled down considerably; he fervently hoped that it had not dried out. With the handle of his dirk he pried up the eyelid and began a delicate operation.

Finally the dead-white sac was in his hands. Unstoppering the vial, he carefully milked the tear gland into it.

"Moira," he said gently, shaking her.

"You ox!"

She was awake in a moment, ill-tempered as ever.

"What is it now?"

"Your vial," he said, placing it on his palm beside her.

"Well, set it down on the ground. Me, too." He watched as she tugged off the stopper and plunged her face into the crystal-clear liquid.

Then, abruptly, he gasped. "Here," he said, averting his eyes. "Take my cloak."

"Thanks," said the tall young lady with a smile. "I didn't think, for the moment, that my clothes wouldn't grow when I did."

"Now—would you care to begin at the beginning?"

"Certainly. Moira O'Donnell's my name. Born in Dublin. Located in Antrim at the age of twenty-five, when I had the ill luck to antagonize a warlock named McGinty. He shrank me and gave me a beastly temper. Then, because I kept plaguing him, he banished me to these unreal parts.

"He was hipped on the Irish literary renaissance—Yeats, AE, Joyce, Shaw and the rest. So he put a tag on the curse that he found in one of Lord Dunsany's stories, about the tears of *la Bête Joyeux*. In the story it was 'the gladsome beast,' and Mac's French was always weak.

"What magic I know I picked up by eavesdropping. You can't help learning things knocking around the planes, I guess. There were lots of bits that I filed away because I couldn't use them until I achieved full stature again. And now,

Almarish, they're all yours. I'm very grateful to you."

He stared into her level green eyes. "Think you could get us back to Ellil?"

"Like *that!*" She snapped her fingers.

"Good. Those rats—Pike and the rest—caught me unawares, but I can raise an army anywhere on a week's notice and take over again."

"I knew you could do it. I'm with you, Almarish, Packer, or whatever your name is."

Difffidently he said, "Moira, you grew very dear to me as you used to snore away in my pocket."

"I don't snore!" she declared.

"Anyway—you can pick whichever name you like. It's yours if you'll have it."

After a little while she said, smiling into his eyes:

"My size. Only a little taller, of course."

[The end of *Thirteen O'Clock* by Cyril M. Kornbluth]