BLIND ALLEY

Malcolm Jameson

Title: Blind Alley

Date of first publication: 1943

Author: Malcolm Jameson (1891-1945)

Date first posted: Mar. 16, 2022

Date last updated: Mar. 16, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220334

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Source: Unknown Worlds, June 1943]

Blind Alley

by Malcolm Jameson

He was rich and old, and he longed for the good old days, and the good old ways of his youth. So he made a bargain by which he got back to those days, and those ways, and—

Nothing was further from Mr. Feathersmith's mind that dealings with streamlined, mid-twentieth-century witches or dickerings with the Devil. But something *had* to be done. The world was fast going to the bowwows, and he suffered from an overwhelming nostalgia for the days of his youth. His thoughts constantly turned to Cliffordsville and the good old days when men were men and God was in His heaven and all was right with the world. He hated modern women, the blatancy of the radio, That Man in the White House, the war—

Mr. Feathersmith did not feel well. His customary grouch —which was a byword throughout all the many properties of Pyramidal Enterprises, Inc.—had hit an all-time high. The weather was rotten, the room too hot, business awful, and everybody around him a dope. He loathed all mention of the war, which in his estimation had been bungled from the start. He writhed and cursed whenever he thought of priorities, quotas and taxes; he frothed at the mouth at every new government regulation. His plants were working night and day on colossal contracts that under any reasonable regime would double his wealth every six months, but what could he expect but a few paltry millions?

He jabbed savagely at a button on his desk, and before even the swiftest-footed of messengers could have responded, he was irritably rattling the hook of his telephone.

"Well?" he snarled, as a tired, harassed voice answered. "Where's Paulson? Wake him up! I want him."

Paulson popped into the room with an inquiring, "Yes, sir?" Mr. Paulson was his private secretary and to his mind stupid, clumsy and unambitious. But he was a male. For Mr. Feathersmith could not abide the type of woman that cluttered up offices in these decadent days. Everything about them was distasteful—their bold, assured manner; their calm assumption of efficiency, their persistent invasion of fields sacred to the stronger and wiser sex. He abhorred their short skirts, their painted faces and their varnished nails, the hussies! And the nonchalance with which they would throw a job in an employer's face if he undertook to drive them was nothing short of maddening. Hence Mr. Paulson.

"I'm roasting," growled Mr. Feathersmith "This place is an oven."

"Yes, sir," said the meek Paulson, and went to the window where an expensive air-conditioning unit stood. It regulated the air, heating it in winter, cooling it in summer. It was cold and blustery out and snow was in the air; Mr. Feathersmith should have been grateful. But he was not. It was a modern gadget, and though a touch of the hand was all that was needed to regulate it, he would have nothing to do with it. All Paulson did was move a knob one notch.

"What about the Phoenix Development Shares?" barked the testy old man. "Hasn't Ulrich unloaded those yet? He's had time enough."

"The S.E.C. hasn't approved them yet," said Paulson, apologetically. He might have added, but thought best not to, that Mr. Farquhar over there had said the prospectus stank and that the whole proposition looked like a bid for a long-term lease on a choice cell in a Federal penitentiary.

"*Aw-r-rk*," went Mr. Feathersmith, "a lot of Communists, that's what they are. What are we coming to? Send Clive in."

"Mr. Clive is in court, sir. And so is Mr. Blakeslee. It's about the reorganization plan for the Duluth, Moline & Southern—the bondholders protective committee—"

"*Aw-r-rk*," choked Mr. Feathersmith. Yes, those accursed bondholders—always yelping and starting things. "Get out. I want to think."

His thoughts were bitter ones. Never in all his long and busy life had things been as tough as now. When he had been simply Jack Feathersmith, the promoter, it had been possible to make a fortune overnight. You could lose at the same rate, too, but still a man had a chance. There were no starry-eyed reformers always meddling with him. Then he had become the more dignified "entrepreneur," but the pickings were still good. After that he had styled himself "investment banker" and had done well, though a certain district attorney raised some nasty questions about it and forced some refunds and adjustments. But that had been in the '30s when times were hard for everybody. Now, with a war on and everything, a man of ability and brains ought to mop up. But would they let him? *Aw-r-rk!*

Suddenly he realized he was panting and heaving and felt very, very weak. He must be dying. But that couldn't be right. No man of any age kept better fit. Yet his heart was pounding and he had to gasp for every breath. His trembling hand fumbled for the button twice before he found it. Then, as Paulson came back, he managed a faint, "Get a doctor—I must be sick."

For the next little while things were vague. A couple of the hated females from the outer office were fluttering and cooing about the room, and one offered him a glass of water which he spurned. Then he was aware of a pleasant-faced young chap bending over him listening to his chest through a stethoscope. He discovered also that one of those tight, blood-pressure contraptions was wrapped around his arm. He felt the prick of a needle. Then he was lifted to a sitting position and given a couple of pills.

"A little stroke, eh?" beamed the young doctor, cheerily. "Well, you'll be all right in a few minutes. The ephedrine did the trick."

Mr. Feathersmith ground his teeth. If there was anything in this topsy-turvy modern age he liked less than anything else it was the kind of doctors they had. A little stroke, eh? The young whippersnapper! A fresh kid, no more. Now take old Dr. Simpson, back at Cliffordsville. There was a doctor for you—a sober, grave man who wore a beard and a proper Prince Albert coat. There was no folderol about him—newfangled balderdash about basal metabolism, X rays, electro-cardiograms, blood counts and all that rot. He simply looked at a patient's tongue, asked him about his bowels, and then wrote a prescription. And he charged accordingly.

"Do you have these spells often?" asked the young doctor. He was so damn cheerful about it, it hurt.

"Never," blared Mr. Feathersmith: "never was sick a day in my life. Three of you fellows pawed me over for three days, but couldn't find a thing wrong. Consolidated Mutual wrote me a million straight life on the strength of that and tried their damnedest to sell me another million. That's how good I am."

"Pretty good," agreed the doctor with a laugh. "When was that?"

"Oh, lately—fifteen years ago, about."

"Back in '28, huh? That was when even life insurance companies didn't mind taking a chance now and then. You were still in your fifties then, I take it?"

"I'm fit as a fiddle yet," asserted the old man doggedly. He wanted to pay this upstart off and be rid of him.

"Maybe," agreed the doctor, commencing to put his gear away, "but you didn't look it a little while ago. If I hadn't got here when I did—"

"Look here, young man," defied Mr. Feathersmith, "you can't scare me."

"I'm not trying to," said the young man, easily. "If a heart block can't scare you, nothing can. Just the same, you've got to make arrangements. Either with a doctor or an undertaker. Take your choice. My car's downstairs if you think I'll do."

"*Aw-r-rk*," sputtered Mr. Feathersmith, but when he tried to get up he realized how terribly weak he was. He let them escort him to the elevator, supporting him on either side, and a moment later was being snugged down on the back seat of the doctor's automobile.

The drive uptown from Wall Street was as unpleasant as usual. More so, for Mr. Feathersmith had been secretly dreading the inevitable day when he would fall into doctors' hands, and now that it had happened, he looked out on the passing scene in search of diversion.

The earlier snow had turned to rain, but there were myriads of men and lots of equipment clearing up the accumulation of muck and ice. He gazed at them sourly—*scrape, scrape, scrape*—noise, clamor and dirt, all symptomatic of the modern city. He yearned for Cliffordsville where it rarely snowed, and when it did it lay for weeks in unsullied whiteness on the ground. He listened to the gentle swishing of the whirling tires on the smooth, wet pavement, disgusted at the monotony of it. One street was like another, one city like another—smooth, endless concrete walled in by brick and plate glass and dreary rows of light poles. No one but a fool would live in a modern city. Or a modern town, for that matter, since they were but unabashed tiny imitations of their swollen sisters. He sighed. The good old days were gone beyond recapture.

It was that sigh and that forlorn thought that turned his mind to Forfin. Forfin was a shady fellow he knew and once or twice had employed. He was a broker of a sort, for the lack of better designation. He hung out in a dive near Chatham Square and was altogether a disreputable person, yet he could accomplish strange things. Such as dig up information known only to the dead, or produce prophecies that could actually be relied on. The beauty of dealing with him was that so long as the fee was adequate—and it had to be that—he delivered the goods and asked no questions. His only explanation of his peculiar powers was that he had contacts—gifted astrologers and numerologists, unprincipled demonologists and their ilk. He was only a go-between, he insisted, and invariably required a signed waiver before undertaking any assignment. Mr. Feathersmith recalled now that once when he had complained of a twinge of

rheumatism that Forfin had hinted darkly at being able to produce some of the water of the Fountain of Youth. At a price, of course. And when the price was mentioned, Mr. Feathersmith had haughtily ordered him out of the office.

The doctor's office was the chamber of horrors he had feared. There were many rooms and cubbyholes filled with shiny adjustable enameled torture chairs and glassy cabinets in which rows of cruel instruments were laid. There were fever machines and other expensive-looking apparatus, and a laboratory full of mysterious tubes and jars. White-smocked nurses and assistants flitted noiselessly about like helpful ghosts. They stripped him and weighed him and jabbed needles in him and took his blood. They fed him messy concoctions and searched his innards with a fluoroscope; they sat him in a chair and snapped electrodes on his wrists and ankle to record the pounding of his heart on a film. And after other thumpings, listenings and measurings, they left him weary and quivering to dress himself alone.

Naked as he was, and fresh from the critical probing of the doctor and his gang, he was unhappily conscious of how harshly age had dealt with him after all. He was pink and lumpy now where he had once been firm and tanned. His spindly shanks seemed hardly adequate for the excess load he now carried about his middle. Until now he had valued the prestige and power that goes with post-maturity, but now, for the first time in his life, he found himself hankering after youth again. Yes, youth would be desirable on any terms. It was a thoughtful Mr. Feathersmith who finished dressing that afternoon.

The doctor was waiting for him in his study, as infernally cheerful as ever. He motioned the old man to a chair.

"You are a man of the world," he began, "so I guess you can take it. There is nothing to be alarmed over—immediately. But you've got to take care of yourself. If you do, there are probably a good many years left in you yet. You've got a cardiac condition that has to be watched, some gastric impairments, your kidneys are pretty well shot, there are signs of senile arthritis, and some glandular failure and vitamin deficiency. Otherwise, you are in good shape."

"Go on." Now Mr. Feathersmith knew he would have to get in touch with Forfin.

"You've got to cut out all work, avoid irritation and excitement, and see me at least weekly. No more tobacco, no liquor, no spicy or greasy foods, no late hours. I'm giving you a diet and some prescriptions as to pills and tablets you will need—"

The doctor talked on, laying down the law in precise detail. His patient listened dumbly, resolving steadfastly that he would do nothing of the sort. Not so long as he had a broker on the string who could contact magicians.

That night Mr. Feathersmith tried to locate Forfin, but Forfin could not be found. The days rolled by and the financier felt better. He was his old testy self again and promptly disregarded all his doctor's orders. Then he had his

second heart attack, and that one nearly took him off. After that he ate the vile diet, swallowed his vitamin and gland-extract pills, and duly went to have his heart examined. He began liquidating his many business interests. Sooner or later his scouts would locate Forfin. After that he would need cash, and lots of it. Youth, he realized now, was worth whatever it could be bought for.

The day he met with his lawyers and the buyers' lawyers to complete the sale of Pyramidal Enterprises, Inc., Mr. Blakeslee leaned over and whispered that Forfin was back in town. He would be up to see Mr. Feathersmith that night. A gleam came into the old man's eye and he nodded. He was ready. By tomorrow all his net worth would be contained in cash and negotiable securities. It was slightly over thirty-two million dollars altogether, an ample bribe for the most squeamish demonologist and enough left over for the satisfaction of whatever dark powers his incantations might raise. He was confident money would do the trick. It always had, for him, and was not the love of it said to be the root of all evil?

Mr. Feathersmith was elated. Under ordinary circumstances he would have conducted a transaction of the magnitude of selling Pyramidal with the maximum of quibbling and last-minute haggling. But today he signed all papers with alacrity. He even let Polaris Petroleum & Pipeline go without a qualm, though the main Polaris producing field was only a few miles south of his beloved Cliffordsville. He often shuddered to think of what an oil development would do to a fine old town like that, but it

made him money and, anyhow, he had not been back to the place since he left it years ago to go and make his fortune.

After the lawyers had collected their papers and gone, he took one last look around. In his office, as in his apartment, there was no trace of garish chromium and red leather. It was richly finished in quiet walnut paneling with a single fine landscape on one wall. A bookcase, a big desk, two chairs and a Persian rug completed the furnishings. The only ultramodern feature was the stock ticker and the news teletype. Mr. Feathersmith liked his news neat and hot off the griddle. He couldn't abide the radio version, for it was adorned and embellished with the opinions and interpretations of various commentators and self-styled experts.

It was early when he got home. By chance it was raining again, and as he stepped from his limousine under the marquee canopy that hung out over the sidewalk, the doorman rushed forward with an umbrella lest a stray drop wet his financial highness. Mr. Feathersmith brushed by the man angrily—he did not relish sycophantism, he thought. Flunkies, pah! He went up in the elevator and out into the softly lit corridor that led to his apartment. Inside he found his houseboy, Felipe, listening raptly to a swing version of a classic, playing it on his combination FM radio and Victrola.

"Shut that damn thing off!" roared Mr. Feathersmith. Symphonic music he liked, when he was in the mood for it, but nothing less.

Then he proceeded to undress and have his bath. It was the one bit of ritual in his day that he really enjoyed. His bathroom was a marvel of beauty and craftsmanship—in green and gold tile with a sunken tub. There was a needle bath, too, a glass-inclosed shower, and a sweat chamber. He reveled for a long time in the steamy water. Then, remembering that Forfin might come at any time, he hurried out.

His dinner was ready. Mr. Feathersmith glowered at the table as he sat down. It was a good table to look at, but that was not the way he felt about it. The cloth was cream-colored damask and the service exquisitely tooled sterling; in the center sat a vase of roses with sprays of ferns. But the crystal pitcher beside his plate held certified milk, a poor substitute for the vintage Pommard he was accustomed to. Near it lay a little saucer containing the abominable pills—six of them, two red, two brown, one black, and one white.

He ate his blue points. After that came broiled pompano, for the doctor said he could not get too much fish. Then there was fresh asparagus and creamed new potatoes. He topped it off with fresh strawberries and cream. No coffee, no liqueur.

He swallowed the stuff mechanically, thinking of all the while of Chub's place, back in Cliffordsville. There a man could get an honest-to-goodness beef-steak, two inches thick and reeking with fat, fresh cut from a steer killed that very day in Chub's back yard. He thought, too, of Pablo, the tamale man. His stand was on the corner by the Opera House, and he kept his sizzling product in a huge lard can wrapped in an old red tablecloth. The can sat on a small

charcoal stove so as to keep warm, and the whole was in a basket. Pablo dished out the greasy, shuck-wrapped morsels onto scraps of torn newspaper and one sat down on the curb and ate them with his fingers. They may have been made of fragments of dog—as some of his detractors alleged—but they were good. Ten cents a dozen, they were. Mr. Feathersmith sighed another mournful sigh. He would give ten thousand dollars for a dozen of them right now—and the ability to eat them.

Feathersmith waited impatiently for Forfin to come. He called the operator and instructed her to block all calls except that announcing his expected guest. Damn that phone, anyway. All that any Tom, Dick or Harry who wanted to intrude had to do was dial a number. The old man had an unlisted phone, but people who knew where he lived called through the house switchboard notwithstanding.

At length the shifty little broker came. Mr. Feathersmith lost no time in approaches or sparring. Forfin was a practical man like himself. You could get down to cases with him without blush or apology.

"I want," Mr. Feathersmith said, baldly, "to turn the hand of the clock back forty years. I want to go to the town of Cliffordsville, where I was born and raised, and find it just as I left it. I propose to start life all over again. Can you contact the right people for the job?"

"*Phew!*" commented Mr. Forfin, mopping his head. "That's a big order. It scares me. That'll involve Old Nick himself—"

He looked uneasily about, as if the utterance of the name was a sort of inverted blasphemy.

"Why not?" snapped the financier, bristling. "I always deal with principals. They can act. Skip the hirelings, demons, or whatever they are."

"I know," said Forfin, shaking his. head disapprovingly, "but he's a slick bargainer. Oh, he keeps his pacts—to the dot. But he'll slip a fast one over just the same. It's his habit. He gets a kick out of it—outsmarting people. And it'll cost. Cost like hell."

"I'll be the judge of the cost," said the old man, stiffly, thinking of the scant term of suffering, circumscribed years that was the best hope the doctor had held out to him, "and as to bargaining. I'm not a pure sucker. How do you think I got where I am?"

"O.K.," said Forfin, with a shrug. "It's your funeral. But it'll take some doing. When do we start?"

"Now."

"He sees mortals only by appointment, and I can't make 'em. I'll arrange for you to meet Madame Hecate. You'll have to build yourself up with her. After that you're on your own. You'd better have plenty of ready dough. You'll need it."

"I've got it," said Mr. Feathersmith shortly. "And yours?"

"Forget it. I get my cut from *them*."

That night sleep was slow in coming. He reviewed his decision and did not regret it. He had chosen the figure of forty deliberately. Forty from seventy left thirty—in his estimation the ideal age. If he were much younger, he would be pushed around by his seniors; if he were much older, he wouldn't gain so much by the jump back. But at thirty he would be in the prime of physical condition, old enough to be thought of as mature by the youngsters, and young enough to command the envy of the oldsters. And, as he remembered it, the raw frontier days were past, the effete modernism yet to come.

He slept. He dreamed. He dreamed of old Cliffordsville, with its tree-lined streets and sturdy houses sitting way back, each in its own yard and behind its own picket fence. He remembered the soft clay streets and how good the dust felt between the toes when he ran barefoot in the summertime. Memories of good things to eat came to him—the old spring house and watermelons hung in bags in the well, chickens running the yard, and eggs an hour old. There was Sarah, the cow, and old Aunt Anna, the cook. And then there were the wide-open business opportunities of those days. A man could start a bank or float a stock company and there were no snooping inspectors to tell him what he could and couldn't do. There were no blaring radios, or rumbling, stinking trucks or raucous auto horns. People stayed healthy because they led the good life. Mr. Feathersmith rolled over in bed and smiled. It wouldn't be long now!

The next afternoon Forfin called him. Madame Hecate would see him at five; and he gave a Fifth Avenue address. That was all.

Mr. Feathersmith was really surprised when he entered the building. He had thought a witch would hang out in some dubious district where there was grime and cobwebs. But this was one of the swankiest buildings in a swanky street. It was filled with high-grade jewelers and diamond merchants, for the most part. He wondered if he had heard the address wrong.

At first he was sure he had, for when he came to examine the directory board he could find no Hecate under the H's or any witches under the W's. He stepped over to the elevator starter and asked him whether there was a tenant by that name.

"If she's on the board, there is," said that worthy, looking Mr. Feathersmith up and down in a disconcerting fashion. He went meekly back to the hoard. He rubbed his eyes. There was her name—in both places. "Madame Hecate, Consultant Witch. Suite 1313."

He went back to the elevators, then noticed that the telltale arcs over the doors were numbered—10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and so on. There was no thirteenth floor. He was about to turn to the starter again when he noticed a small car down at the end of the hall. Over its door was the label, "Express to 13th Floor." He walked down to it and stepped inside. An insolent little guy in a red monkey jacket lounged against the starting lever. He leered up at Mr. Feathersmith and said:

"Are you *sure* you want to go up, pop?"

Mr. Feathersmith gave him the icy stare he had used so often to quell previous impertinences, and then stood rigidly looking out the door. The little hellion slid the door to with a shrug and started the cab.

When it stopped he got off in a small foyer that led to but a single door. The sign on the door said merely "Enter," so Mr. Feathersmith turned the knob and went in. The room looked like any other midtown reception room. There was a desk presided over by a lanky, sour woman of uncertain age, whose only noteworthy feature was her extreme pallor and haggard eyes. The walls were done in a flat blue-green pastel color that somehow hinted at iridescence, and were relieved at the top by a frieze of interlaced pentagons of gold and black. A single etching hung on the wall, depicting a conventionalized witch astride a broomstick silhouetted against a full moon, accompanied by a flock of bats. A pair of chairs and a sofa completed the furnishings. On the sofa a huge black cat slept on a red velvet pillow.

"Madame Hecate is expecting you," said the cadaverous receptionist in a harsh, metallic voice. "Please be seated."

"Ah, a zombi," thought Mr. Feathersmith, trying to get into the mood of his environment. Then as a gesture of good will, though he had no love for any animal, he bent over and stroked the cat. It lifted its head with magnificent deliberation, regarded him venomously for a moment through baleful green eyes; then, with the most studied

contempt, spat. After that it promptly tucked its head back in its bosom as if that disposed of the matter for all eternity.

"Lucifer doesn't like people," remarked the zombi, powdering her already snowy face. Just then a buzzer sounded faintly, three times.

"The credit man is ready for you," said the ghostly receptionist. "You'll have to pass him first. This way, please."

For some reason that did not astonish Mr. Feathersmith as much as some other features of the place. After all, he was a businessman, and even in dealing with the myrmidons of Hell, business was business. He followed her through the inner door and down a side passage to a little office. The fellow who received him was an affable, thin young man, with brooding, dark-brown eyes, and an errant black lock that kept falling down and getting in his eyes.

"A statement of your net worth, please," asked the young man, indicating a chair. He turned and waved a hand about the room. It was lined with fat books, shelf after shelf of them, and there were filing cases stuffed with loose papers and photographs. "I should warn you in advance that we have already made an independent audit and know the answer. It is a formality, as it were. Thought you ought to know."

Mr. Feathersmith gazed upon the books with wonderment. Then his blood ran chill and he felt the goose-flesh rise on

him and a queer bristly feeling among the short hairs on the back of his neck. The books were all about *him*! There were two rows of thick volumes neatly titled in gold leaf, such as "J. Feathersmith—Private Life—Volume IX." There was one whole side of the room lined with other books, in sets. One set was labeled "Business Transactions," another "Subconscious Thoughts and Dreams," and then other volumes on various related aspects of their subject. One that shocked him immensely bore the horrid title of "Indirect Murders, Et Cetera." For an instant he did not grasp its import, until he recalled the aftermath of the crash of Trans-Mississippi Debentures. It was a company he had bought into only to find it mostly water. He had done the only thing to do and get out with a profit—he blew the water up into vapor, then pulled the plug. A number of suicides resulted. He supposed the book was about that and similar fiascoes.

He turned to face the Credit Man and was further dismayed to see that gentleman scrutinizing a copy of the contract of sale of the Pyramidal company. So he knew the terms exactly! Worse, on the blotter in plain sight was a photostat copy of a will that he had made out that very morning. It was an attempt on Mr. Feathersmith's part to hedge. He had left all his money to the Simonist Brotherhood for the propagation of religion, thinking to use it as a bargaining point with whatever demon showed up to negotiate with him. Mr. Feathersmith scratched his neck—a gesture of annoyance at being forestalled that he had not used for years. It was all the more irritating that the Credit Man was purring softly and smiling to himself.

"Well?" said the Credit Man.

Mr. Feathersmith had lost the first round and knew it. He had come in to arrange a deal and to dictate, more or less, his own terms. Now he was at a distinct disadvantage. There was only one thing to do if he wanted to go on; that was to come clean. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. There was one scribbled line on it. "Net worth—$32,673,251.03, plus personal effects."

"As of noon, today," added Mr. Feathersmith, handing the paper across the desk.

The Credit Man glanced at it, then shoved it into a drawer with the comment that it appeared to be substantially correct. Then he announced that that was all. He could see Madame Hecate now.

Madame Hecate turned out to be the greatest surprise so far. Mr. Feathersmith had become rather dubious as to his ability to previse these strange people he was dealing with, but he was quite sure the witch would be a hideous creature with an outjutting chin meeting a down-hanging beak and with the proverbial hairy warts for facial embellishments. She was not like that at all. Madame Hecate was as cute a little trick as could be found in all the city. She was a vivacious, tiny brunette with sparkling eyes and a gay, carefree manner, and was dressed in a print house-dress covered by a tan smock.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Feathersmith," she gurgled, wiping her hands on a linen towel and tossing it into a handy

container. "The audience with His Nibs is arranged for about an hour from now. Ordinarily he only comes at midnight, but lately he has had to spend so much time on Earth he works on a catch-as-catch-can basis. At the moment he is in Germany—it is midnight there now, you know—giving advice to one of his most trusted mortal aides. No doubt you could guess the name, but for reasons you will appreciate, our clientele is regarded as confidential. But he'll be along shortly."

"Splendid," said Mr. Feathersmith. For a long time it had been a saying of his that he wouldn't wait an hour for and appointment with the Devil himself. But circumstances had altered. He was glad that he had *only* an hour to wait.

"Now," said the witch, shooting him a coy, sidelong glance, "let's get the preliminaries over with. A contract will have to be drawn up, of course, and that takes time. Give me the main facts as to what you want, and I'll send them along to the Chief Fiend in the Bureau of Covenants. By the time His Nibs gets here, the scribes will have everything ready."

She produced a pad and a pencil and waited, smiling sweetly at him.

"Well, uh," he said, a trifle embarrassed because he did not feel like telling her *quite* all that was in his mind—she seemed such an innocent to be in the witch business, "I had an idea it would be nice to go back to the town of my boyhood to spend the rest of my life—"

"Yes?" she said eagerly. "And then—"

"Well," he finished lamely, "I guess that's about all. Just put me back in Cliffordsville as of forty years ago—that's all I want."

"How unique!" she exclaimed, delightedly. "You know, most men want power and wealth and success in love and all that sort of thing. I'm sure His Nibs will grant this request instantly."

Mr. Feathersmith grunted. He was thinking that he had already acquired all those things from an uninformed, untrained start in that same Cliffordsville just forty years ago. Knowing what he did now about men and affairs and the subsequent history of the world, what he would accomplish on the second lap would astonish the world. But the thought suggested an addendum.

"It should be understood," he appended, "that I am to retain my present ... uh ... wisdom, unimpaired, and complete memory."

"A trifle, Mr. Feathersmith," she bubbled; "a trifle, I assure you."

He noticed that she had noted the specifications on separate sheets of paper, and since he indicated that was all, she advanced to a nearby brazier that stood on a tripod and lit them with a burning candle she borrowed from a sconce. The papers sizzled smartly into greenish flame, curled and disappeared without leaving any ash.

"They are there now," she said. "Would you like to see our plant while you wait?"

"With pleasure." he said, with great dignity. Indeed, he was most curious about the layout, for the room they were in was a tiny cubicle containing only a high desk and a stool and the brazier. He had expected more demoniac paraphernalia.

She led the way out and he found the place was far more extensive than he thought. It must cover the entire floor of the building. There was a long hall, and off it many doors.

"This is the Alchemical Department," she said, turning into the first one. "I was working in here when you came. That is why my hands were so gummy. Dragon fat is vile stuff, don't you think?"

She flashed those glowing black eyes on him and a dazzling smile.

"I can well imagine," he replied.

He glanced into the room. At first sight it had all the appearance of a modern chemical laboratory, though many of the vessels were queerly shaped. The queerest of all were the alchemists, of whom about a dozen sat about on high stools. They were men of incalculable age, bearded and wearing heavy-rimmed octagonal-lensed eyeglasses. All wore black smocks spattered with silvery crescents, sunbursts, stars, and such symbols. All were intent on their work. The bottles on

the tables bore fantastic labels, such as "asp venom," "dried cameleopard blood," and "powdered unicorn horn."

"The man at the alembic," explained the witch, sweetly, "is compounding a modified love philter. You'd be surprised how many star salesmen depend on it. It makes them virtually irresistible. We let them have it on a commission basis."

She pointed out some other things, such as the two men adjusting the rheostat on an electric athanor, all of which struck Mr. Feathersmith as being extremely incongruous. Then they passed on.

The next room was the Voodoo Department, where a black sculptress was hard at work fashioning wax dolls from profile and front-view photographs of her clients' most hated enemies. An assistant was studying a number of the finished products and occasionally thrusting pins into certain vital parts. There were other unpleasant things to be seen there and Mr. Feathersmith shuddered and suggested they pass on.

"If it affects you that way," said the witch, with her most beguiling smile, "maybe we had better skip the next."

The next section was devoted to Demonology and Mr. Feathersmith was willing to pass it by, having heard something of the practices of that sect. Moreover, the hideous moans and suppressed shrieks that leaked through the wall were sufficient to make him lose any residual interest in the orgies. But it was not to be. A door was flung

open and an old hag tottered out, holding triumphantly aloft a vial of glowing violet vapor.

"Look," she cackled with hellish glee, "I caught it! The anguish of a dying hen! He! He!"

Mr. Feathersmith suffered a twinge of nausea and a bit of fright, but the witch paused long enough to coo a few words of praise.

She popped her head into the door beyond where a senile practitioner could be seen sitting in a black robe and dunce's cap spangled with stars and the signs of the zodiac. He was in the midst of a weird planetarium.

"This is the phoniest racket in the shop," she murmured, "but the customers love it. The old guy is a shrewd guesser. That's why he gets by. Of course, his horoscopes and all these props are just so much hogwash—custom, you know."

Mr. Feathersmith flicked a glance at the astrologer, then followed her into the next room. A class of neophytes appeared to be undergoing instruction in the art of Vampirism. A demon with a pointer was holding forth before a set of wall charts depicting the human circulatory system and emphasizing the importance of knowing just how to reach the carotid artery and jugular vein. The section just beyond was similar. It housed the Department of Lycanthropy and a tough-looking middle-aged witch was lecturing on the habits of predatory animals. As Mr. Feathersmith and his guide looked in, she was just

concluding some remarks on the value of prior injections of aqua regia as a resistant to possible silver bullets.

He never knew what other departments were in the place, for the witch happened to glance up at one of the curious clocks that adorned the walls. She said it kept Infernal time. At any rate, His Nibs was due shortly. They must hurry to the Apparition Chamber.

That awesome place was in a class by itself. Murals showing the torments of Hell covered the long walls. At one end was a throne, at the other a full-length portrait of His Nibs himself, surrounded by numerous photographs. The portrait was the conventional one of the vermilion anthropoid modified by barbed tail, cloven hoofs, horns, and a wonderfully sardonic leer. The rest of the pictures were of ordinary people—some vaguely familiar to Mr. Feathersmith.

"His Vileness always appears to mortals as one of their own kind," explained the witch, seeing Mr. Feathersmith's interest in the gallery. "It works out better that way."

Two imps were bustling about, arranging candles and bowls of incense about a golden pentagon embedded in the black composition floor. There were other cabalistic designs worked into the floor by means of metallic strips set edgewise, but apparently they were for lesser demons or jinn. The one receiving attention at the moment was immediately before the throne. The witch produced a pair of ear plugs and inserted them into Mr. Feathersmith's cars. Then she

blindfolded him, patted him soothingly and told him to take it easy—it was always a little startling the first time.

It was. He heard the spewing of some type of fireworks, and the monotone of the witch's chant. Then there was a splitting peal of thunder, a blaze of light, and a suffocating sulphurous atmosphere. In a moment that cleared and he found his bandage whisked off. Sitting comfortably on the throne before him was a chubby little man wearing a gray pinstriped business suit and smoking a cigar. He had large blue eyes, several chins, and a jovial, back-slapping expression. He might have been a Rotarian and proprietor of a moderate-sized business anywhere.

"Good morning," he said affably. "I understand you want transportation to Cliffordsville of four decades ago. My Executive Committee has approved it, and here it is—"

Satan snapped his fingers. There was a dull plop and an explosion of some sort overhead. Then a document fluttered downward. The witch caught it deftly and handed it to His Nibs, who glanced at it and presented it to Mr. Feathersmith.

Whether the paper was parchment or fine-grained asbestos mat, that gentleman could not say. But it was covered with leaping, dazzling letters of fire that were exceedingly hard to read, especially in the many paragraphs of fine print that made up the bulk of the document. Its heading was:

COMPACT

between His Infernal Highness Satan, known hereinafter as The Party of the First Part, and one J. Feathersmith, a loyal and deserving servant, known as The Party of the Second Part. To wit:

The perusal of such a contract would have been child's play for the experienced Mr. Feathersmith, had it not been for the elusive nature of the dancing letters, since only the part directly under his eye was legible. The rest was lost in the fiery interplay of squirming script and had the peculiar property of seeming to give a different meaning at every reading. Considered as a legal document, thought Mr. Feathersmith out of the depths of his experience, it was a honey. It seemed to mean what it purported to mean, yet—

At any rate, there was a clause there that plainly stated, even after repeated readings, that The Party of the Second Part would be duly set down at the required destination, furnished with necessary expense money and a modest stake, and thereafter left on his own.

"The compensation?" queried Mr. Feathersmith, having failed to see mention of it. "You'll want my soul, I presume."

"Dear me, no," responded Satan cheerily, with a friendly pat on the knee. "We've owned that outright for many, many years. Money's all we need. You see, if anything happened to you as you are, the government would get about three quarters of it and the lawyers the rest. We hate to see that three quarters squandered in subversive work—such as

improved housing and all that rot. So, if you'll kindly give us your check—"

"How much?" Mr. Feathersmith wanted to know, reaching for his check-book.

"Thirty-three million," said Satan calmly.

"That's outrageous!" shouted the client. "I haven't that much—"

"There was to be one percent off for cash, Your Vileness," reminded the witch sweetly.

Mr. Feathersmith glared at both of them. He had been neatly trimmed—right down to chicken feed. His first impulse was to terminate the interview then and there. But he remembered that, given youth and opportunity, he could make any number of fortunes. He also had in mind the dismal future forecast for him by the doctor. No. The transaction had to be gone through with. He meekly signed checks for his full balance, and an order on his brokers for the delivery of all other valuables.

There was one more thing to do—sign the pact.

"Roll up your left sleeve," said the witch. He noticed she held a needle-tipped syringe in one hand and a pad dampened with alcohol in the other. She rubbed him with the cotton, then jabbed him with the needle. When she had withdrawn a few cubic centimeters of blood, she yanked the needle out, unscrewed it and replaced it by a fountain-pen point.

"Our practitioners did awfully sloppy work in the old days," she laughed, as she handed him the gruesomely charged pen and the pact. "You have no idea how many were lost prematurely through infection."

"Uh-huh," said Mr. Feathersmith, rolling down his sleeve and getting ready to sign. He might as well go through with it—the sooner the better.

"Your transportation," she added, handing him a folding railroad ticket with a weird assortment of long-defunct or merged railroads on it, queer dates and destinations. But he saw that it ended where and when he wanted to go.

"Grand Central Station, Track 48. 10:34 tonight."

"Better give him some cash," suggested Satan, hauling out a roll of bills and handing them to her. Mr. Feathersmith looked at them with fast-rising anxiety; the sight of them shook him to the foundations. For they were large, blanketlike sheets of paper, none smaller than a fifty, and many with yellow backs. Satan also handed over a coin purse, in which were some gold pieces and six or eight big silver dollars. Mr. Feathersmith had completely forgotten that they used such money in the old days—pennies and dollar bills were unknown in the West, and fives and tens in paper so rare as to be refused by shopkeepers. How much else had he forgotten? It rattled him so that he did not notice when Satan disappeared, and he allowed himself to be ushered out in a mumbling daze by the little witch.

By train time, though, he had cheered up. There was just the little journey halfway across the continent to be negotiated and the matter of the forty years. No doubt that would occur during the night as a miracle of sorts. He let the redcap carry his luggage aboard the streamlined flier and snugged himself down in his compartment. He had not had to bother with having clothes of the period made to order, for the witch had intimated that those details would be taken care of automatically.

His next job was to compose the story he was going to tell to explain his return to Cliffordsville. Besides other excellent reasons, he had chosen the particular time for his rejuvenation so as to not run foul of himself in his earlier personality or any of his family. It had been just at the close of the Spanish War that both parents had died of yellow fever, leaving him an orphan and in possession of the old homestead and the parental bank account. He had lost little time in selling the former and withdrawing the latter. After that he had shaken the dust of Cliffordsville from his feet for what he thought was to be all time. By 1902 there was no member of the Feathersmith family residing in the county. His return, therefore, would be regarded merely as an ordinary return. He would give some acceptable explanations, then take up where he had left off. Sooner or later he would pull out again—probably to Detroit to get in on the ground floor with Henry Ford, and he thought it would be a good idea, too, to grab himself some U.S. Steel, General Motors and other comers-to-be. He licked his lips in anticipation of the killing he would make in the subsequent World War I years when he could ride Bethlehem all the way to the top, pyramiding as he went, without a tremor of fear.

He also thought with some elation of how much fun it would be to get reacquainted with Daisy Norton, the girl he might have married if he had but stayed in Cliffordsville. She was cold to him then, but that was because her father was a rich aristocrat and looked down upon the struggling Feathersmiths. But this time he would marry her and the Norman acres under which the oil field lay. After that—

He had undressed automatically and climbed into his berth. He let his feverish anticipations run on, getting dozier all the time. He suddenly recalled that he really should have seen the doctor before leaving, but dismissed it with a happy smile. By the time he had hit his upper twenties he was done with whooping cough, measles and mumps. It had been all these years since, before he required the services of a doctor again. He made a mental note that when he next reached sixty he would take a few precautions. And with that happy thought he dropped off into sound sleep.

The Limited slid on through the night, silently and jarless. Thanks to its air conditioning; good springs, well-turned wheels, smooth traction, rock-ballasted roadbed and heavy rails, it went like the wind. For hundreds of miles the green lights of block signals flickered by, but now and again another train would thunder by on an eastbound track. Mr. Feathersmith gave no thought to those things as he pillowed deeper into the soft blankets, or worried about the howling blizzard raging outside. The Limited would get there on time and with the minimum of fuss. That particular Limited went fast and far that night—mysteriously it must have covered in excess of a thousand miles and got well off its usual route.

For when Mr. Feathersmith did wake, along toward dawn, things were uncannily different.

To begin with, the train was lurching and rocking violently from side to side, and there was a persistent slapping of a flat wheel underneath. The blizzard had abated somewhat, but the car was cold. He lifted the curtain a bit and looked out on a snow-streaked, hilly landscape that strongly suggested Arkansas. Then the train stopped suddenly in the middle of a field and men came running alongside with lanterns. A hotbox, he heard one call, which struck him as odd, for he had not heard of hotboxes for a long time.

After about an hour, and after prolonged whistling, the train slowly gathered way again. By that time Mr. Feathersmith noticed that his berth had changed during the night. It was an old-fashioned fore-and-aft berth with an upper pressing down upon it. He discovered he was wearing a flannel nightgown, too—another item of his past he had failed to remember, it had been so long since he had changed to silk pajamas. But by then the porter was going through the car rousing all the passengers.

"Gooch Junction in half a' hour, folks," he was saying. "Gotta get up now—dey drop the sleeper dere."

Mr. Feathersmith groaned and got up. Yes, yes, of course. Through sleepers were the exception, not the rule, forty years ago. He found his underwear—red flannel union suit it was—and his shirt, a stiff-bosomed affair with detachable cuffs

and a complicated arrangement of cuff holders. His shoes were Congress gaiters with elastic in the sides, and his suit of black broadcloth beginning to turn green. He got on the lower half of it and bethought himself of his morning shave. He fished under the berth for his bag and found it—a rusty old Gladstone, duly converted as promised. But there was no razor in it of any type he dared use. There was a set of straight razors and strops and a mug for soap, but he would not trust himself to operate with them. The train was much too rough for that.

But he had to wash, so he climbed out of the berth, bumping others, and found the lavatory. It was packed with half-dressed men in the process of shaving. The basins were miserable affairs of marble and supplied by creaky pumps that delivered a tablespoonful of water at a time. The car was finished in garish quartered oak, mahogany, mother-of-pearl and other bright woods fitted into the most atrocious inlays Mr. Feathersmith could have imagined. The taste in decoration, he realized, had made long steps-since 1902.

His companions were "drummers"—heavy, well-fed men, all. One was in dry goods: one in coffee, tea and spices; another in whiskey; and two of the rest in patent medicines. Their conversation touched on Bryan and Free Silver, and one denounced Theodore Roosevelt's Imperialism—said it was all wrong for us to annex distant properties like the Sandwich Islands and the Philippines. One man thought Aguinaldo was a hero, another that Funston was the greatest general of all time. But what worried them most was whether they would get to Gooch Junction at all, and if so, how much late.

"We're only an hour behind now," said the whiskey drummer, "but the brakeman told me there's a bad wreck up ahead and it may take 'em all day to clear it—"

"Many killed?"

"Naw. Just a freight—engine crew and brakeman and about a dozen tramps. That's all."

"Shucks. They won't hold us up for that. They'll just pile the stuff up and burn it."

It was ten when they reached the Junction, which consisted of only a signal tower, a crossing, and several sidings. There was no diner on, but the butcher had a supply of candy, paper-thin ham sandwiches on stale bread, and soda pop. If one did not care for those or peanuts, he didn't eat. Dropping the sleeper took a long time and much backing and filling, during which the locomotive ran off the rails and had to be jockeyed back on. Mr. Feathersmith was getting pretty disgusted by the time he reached the day coach and found he had to share a seat with a raw farm boy in overalls and a sloppy old felt hat. The boy had an aroma that Mr. Feathersmith had not smelled for a long, long time. And then he noticed that the aroma prevailed in other quarters, and it came to him all of a sudden that the day was Thursday and considerably removed from last Saturday and presumptive baths.

It was about that time that Mr. Feathersmith became aware that he himself had been unchanged except for wardrobe and accessories. He had expected to wake up youthful. But he did

not let it worry him unduly, as he imagined the Devil would come through when he had gone all the way back. He tried to get a paper from the butcher, but all there were were day-old St. Louis papers and the news was chiefly local. He looked for the financial section and only found a quarter of a column where a dozen railroad bonds were listed. The editor seemed to ignore the Orient and Europe altogether, and there was very little about Congress. After that he settled down and tried to get used to the temperature. At one end of the car there was a pot-bellied cast-iron stove, kept roaring by volunteer stokers, but despite its ruddy color and the tropic heat in the two seats adjacent, the rest of the car was bitter cold.

The train dragged on all day, stopping often on bleak sidings and waiting for oncoming trains to pass. He noticed on the blackboards of the stations they passed that they were now five hours late and getting later. But no one seemed to worry. It was the expected. Mr. Feathersmith discovered he had a great turnip of a gold watch in the pocket of his waistcoat—a gorgeously flowered satin affair, incidentally—and the watch was anchored across his front by a chain heavy enough to grace the bows of a young battleship. He consulted it often, but it was no help. They arrived at Florence, where they should have been before noon, just as the sun was setting. Everybody piled out of the train to take advantage of the twenty-minute stop to eat at the Dining House there.

The food was abundant—fried ham, fried steaks, cold turkey, roast venison and fried chicken and slabs of fried salt

pork. But it was all too heavy and greasy for his worn stomach. The fact that the vegetables consisted of four kinds of boiled beans plus cabbage reminded him that he did not have his vitamin tablets with him. He asked for asparagus, but people only looked amused. That was stuff for the rich and it came in little cans. No, no asparagus. Fish? At breakfast they might have salt mackerel. They *could* open a can of salmon. Would that do? He looked at the enormous, floury biscuits, the heavy pitchers of honey and sorghum molasses and a bowl of grits, and decided he would have just a glass of milk. The butter he never even considered, as it was a pale, anæmic salvy substance. They brought him an immense tumbler of buttermilk and he had to make the best of that.

By the time they were back in the cars, the brakeman was going down the aisle, lighting the Pintsch lamps overhead with a lamplighter. The gas had a frightful odor, but no one seemed to mind. It was "up-to-date," not the smelly kerosene they used on some lines.

The night wore on, and in due time the familiar landscape of old Cliffordsville showed up outside the window. Another item he discovered he had forgotten was that Cliffordsville had been there before the railroad was run through. On account of curves and grades, the company had by-passed the town by a couple of miles, so that the station—or depot—stood that distance away. It would have been as good a way as any to approach the town of his childhood, except that on this day the snow had turned to drizzling rain. The delightful clay roads were all right in dry weather, but a mass of bottomless, sticky, rutted mud on a day like this. Mr.

Feathersmith walked out onto the open platform of the car and down its steps. He viewed the sodden station and its waterlogged open platform with misgiving. There was but one rig that had come to meet the train. It was the Planter's Hotel bus—a rickety affair with facing fore-and-aft seats approached from the rear by three steps and grab-irons, à la Black Maria. The driver had his storm curtains up, but they were only fastened by little brass gimmicks at the corners and flapped abominably. There were four stout horses drawing the vehicle, but they were spattered with mud up to the belly and the wheels were encrusted with foot-thick adhesions of clay.

"Stranger here?" asked the driver, as he gathered up his reins and urged the animals to break the bus out of the quagmire it had sunk down in.

"I've been here before," said Feathersmith, wondering savagely why—back in those good old days—somebody had not had enough gumption to grade and gravel-surface this road. "Does Mr. Toler still run the hotel?"

"Yep. Swell hotel he's got, too. They put in a elevator last year."

That was a help, thought Mr. Feathersmith. As he remembered the place it had twenty-foot ceilings and was three stories high. With his heart, at least for the first day here, he was just as happy at not having to climb those weary, steep stairs. And, now that he thought of it, the Planter's Hotel was a darn good hotel for its day and time. People said there was nothing like it closer than Dallas.

The drive in took the best part of two hours. The wind tore at the curtains and gusts of rain blew in. Three times they bogged down completely and the driver had to get out and put his shoulder to a wheel as the four horses lay belly-flat against the oozy mud and strained as if their hearts and backs would break. But eventually they drew up before the hotel, passing through streets that were but slightly more passable than the road. Mr. Feathersmith was shocked at the utter absence of concrete or stone sidewalks. Many blocks boasted no sidewalks at all; the others were plank affairs.

A couple of Negro boys lounged before the hotel and upon the arrival of the bus got into a tussle as to which should carry the Gladstone bag. The tussle was a draw, with the result that they both carried it inside, hanging it between them.

The hotel was a shattering disappointment from the outset. Mr. Feathersmith's youthful memories proved very false indeed. The lobby's ceiling was thirty feet high, not twenty, and supported by two rows of cast-iron fluted columns topped with crudely done Corinthian caps. The bases and caps had been gilded once, but they were tarnished now, and the fly-specked marble painting of the shafts was anything but convincing. The floor was alternate diamond squares of marble—black with blue, and spotted with white enameled cast-iron cuspidors of great capacity, whose vicinity attested the poor marksmanship of Cliffordsville's chewers of the filthy weed. The marble-topped desk was decorated by a monstrous ledger, an inkpot and pens, and presided over by a

supercilious young man with slicked-down hair neatly parted in the middle and a curly, thick brown mustache.

"A three-dollar room, of course, sir?" queried the clerk, giving the register a twirl and offering the pen.

"Of course," snapped Mr. Feathersmith, "the best. And with bath."

"With bath, sir?" deprecated the young man, as if taking it as a joke. "Why, there is a bath on every floor. Just arrange with the bellboy."

The old financier grunted. He was forgetting things again. He glanced over his shoulder toward the rear of the lobby where a red-hot stove was closely surrounded by a crowd of drummers. It seemed to be the only spot of warmth in the place, but he was intent on his bath. So he accepted the huge key and tag and followed the boy to the elevator. That proved to be a loosely woven, open-cage affair in an open shaft and operated by a cable that ran vertically through it. The boy slammed the outer door—there was no inner—and grasped the cable with both hands and pulled. There was a throaty rumble down below and the car began gradually to ascend. Inch by inch it rose, quivering, at about half the speed of a modern New York escalator. Mr. Feathersmith fumed and fidgeted, but there was no help for it. The elevators of forty years ago were like that. It was just too bad his room was 303.

It was big enough, twenty by twenty by twenty. A perfect cube, containing two gigantic windows which only a Sandow

could manage. The huge double bed with heavy mahogany head and foot pieces was lost in it. Several rocking chairs stood about, and a rag rug was on the floor. But the *pièce de résistance* of the room was the marble-topped washstand. On it rested a porcelain bowl and pitcher and beside it a slop jar. Mr. Feathersmith knew without looking what the cabinet beneath it contained. He walked over to it and looked into the pitcher. The water had a crust of ice on top of it. The room had not a particle of heat!

"I want a bath. Right away," he said to the bellboy. "Hot."

"Yassir," said the boy, scratching his head, "but I ain't know ef the chambermaid's got around to cleaning hit yit. They ain't many as wants bath till to-morrow. I kin go look and see, though."

"I've got some laundry, too. I want it back tomorrow."

"Oh, mister—you-all must be from New Yawk. They ain't no such thing here. They's a steam laundry, but they only take up Mondays and gits it back on Sat'day. My ma kin do it fer you, but that'll have to be Monday, too. She irons awful nice. They's mighty little she ever burns—and steal!—why, white folks, you could trust her with anything you got. Now'n then she loses a hand'chuf er some little thing like that, but steal—nossir."

"Skip it," snorted Mr. Feathersmith, "and see about that bath." He was relearning his lost youth fast. There had been times when metropolitan flunkyism had annoyed him, but he would give something for some of it now. He pulled out a

dime and gave it to the boy, who promptly shuffled out for a conference with the maid over the unheard-of demand of a bath on Friday afternoon.

One look at the bathroom was enough. It was twenty-feet high, too, but only eight feet long by three wide, so that it looked like the bottom of a dark well. A single carbon filament lamp dangled from a pair of black insulated wires, led across the ceiling, and gave a dim orange light—as did the similar one in the bedroom. The bath-tub was a tin affair, round-bottomed and standing on four cast-iron legs. It was dirty, and fed by a half-inch pipe that dribbled a pencil-thin stream of water. In about two hours, Mr. Feathersmith estimated, his bath would be drawn and ready—provided, of course, that the maid should remove in the meantime the mass of buckets, pans, brooms, mops and scrub rags that she stored in the place. One glance at the speckled, choked other piece of plumbing in the place made him resolve he would use the gadget underneath his own washstand.

"I kin bring hot water—a pitcher ur so," suggested the colored boy, "ef you want it."

"Never mind," said Mr. Feathersmith. He remembered now that a barber shop was just around the corner and they had bathtubs as well. It would be easier to go there, since he needed a shave, anyway, and pay an extra quarter and get it over with.

He slept in his new bed that night and found it warm despite the frigidness of the room, for the blankets of the

time were honest wool and thick. But it was the only crumb of comfort he could draw from his new surroundings.

The next morning Mr. Feathersmith's troubles truly began. He got up, broke the crust of ice in his pitcher, and gaspingly washed his face and hands. He waited tediously for the slow-motion elevator to come up and take him down to breakfast. That meal was inedible, too, owing to its heaviness. He marveled that people could eat so much so early in the morning. He managed some oatmeal and buttered toast, but passed up all the rest. He was afraid that grapefruit was unheard of; as to the other fruits, there were apples. Transportation and storage had evidently not solved the out-of-season fruit and vegetable problem.

It also worried him that Satan had done nothing so far about his rejuvenation. He got up the same gnarled, veiny hands, florid face, and bald head. He wished he had insisted on a legible copy of the contract at the time, instead of waiting for the promised confirmation copy. But all that was water over the dam. He was here, so, pending other developments, he must see about establishing his daily comforts and laying the foundation for his fortune.

There were several things he wanted: to acquire the old Feathersmith homestead; to marry Daisy Norton; to bring in the Cliffordsville oil field—wasn't there already Spindletop, Batson and Sour Lake making millions?—then go back to New York, where, after all, there was a civilization of a sort, however primitive.

He took them in order. Representing himself as a granduncle of his original self, he inquired at the local real-estate man's office. Yes, the Feathersmith place was for sale —cheap. The former cook, Anna, was living near it and available for hire. It did not take Mr. Feathersmith long to get to the local livery stable and hire a two-horse rig to take him out there.

The sight of the place was a shock to him. The road out was muddy in stretches, and rocky and bumpy in others. At last they came to a sagging plank gate in a barbed-wire fence and the driver dragged it open. The great trees Mr. Feathersmith had looked back on with fond memory proved to be post oaks and cedars. There was not a majestic elm or pecan tree in the lot. The house was even more of a disappointment. Instead of the vast mansion he remembered, it was a rambling, run-down building whose porches sagged and where the brown remnants of last summer's honeysuckle still clung to a tangle of cotton strings used for climbers. They should have a neat pergola built for them, he thought, and entered.

The interior was worse. One room downstairs had a fireplace. Upstairs there was a single sheet-iron wood stove. What furniture that was left was incredibly tawdry; there was no telephone and no lights except kerosene wick lamps. The house lacked closets or a bath, and the back yard was adorned with a crazy Chic Sale of the most uninviting pattern. A deserted hog-pen and a dilapidated stable completed the assets. Mr. Feathersmith decided he wouldn't live there again on any terms.

But a wave of sentimentality drove him to visit Anna, the former cook. She, at least, would not have depreciated like the house had done in a paltry two years. He learned she lived in a shack close by, so he went. He introduced himself as an elder of the Feathersmith family, and wanted to know if she would cook and wash for him.

"I doan want no truck with any kind of Feathersmith," she asserted. "They're po' white trash—all of 'em. The ole man and the missus wan't so bad, but that young skunk of a Jack sold out before they was hardly cold and snuck outa town twixt sundown and daylight an' we ain't never seed ur heard tell of him since. Jus' let me alone—that's all I ask."

With that she slammed the cabin door in his face.

So! thought Mr. Feathersmith. Well, he guessed he didn't want her, either. He went back to town and straight to the bank. Having discovered he had three thousand dollars in big bills and gold, a sizable fortune for Cliffordsville of the period, since the First National Bank was capitalized for only ten, he went boldly in to see Mr. Norton. He meant to suggest that they jointly exploit the Norton plantations for the oil that was under it. But on the very moment he was entering the portals of the bank he suddenly remembered that the Cliffordsville field was a very recent once, circa 1937, and therefore deep. Whereas Spindletop had been discovered by boring shallow wells—a thousand feet and mostly less—later-day wells had depths of something over a mile. In 1902 the suggestion of drilling to six thousand feet and more

would have been simply fantastic. There was neither the equipment nor the men to undertake it. Mr. Feathersmith gulped the idea down and decided instead to make a deposit and content himself with polite inquiries about the family.

Mr. Norton was much impressed with the other's get-up and the cash deposit of three thousand dollars. That much currency was not to be blinked at in the days before the Federal Reserve Board Act. When money stringencies came —and they did often—it was actual cash that counted, not that ephemeral thing known as credit. He listened to Mr. Feathersmith's polite remarks and observed that he would consider it an honor to permit his wife and daughter to receive the new depositor at their home. Personally fingering the beloved bank notes, Mr. Norton ushered out his new customer with utmost suavity.

The call was arranged, and Mr. Feathersmith put in his appearance at exactly 4:30 p.m. of the second day following. Ransacking his mind for memories of customs of the times, he bethought himself to take along a piece of sheet music, a pound of mixed candies, and a bouquet of flowers.

The visit was a flop. Befitting his new status as an important depositor, he took a rubber-tired city hack to the door, and then, to avoid the charge of sinful extravagance, he dismissed the fellow, telling him to come back at five. After that, bearing his gifts, he maneuvered the slippery pathway of pop bottles planted neck down, bordered by bricks and desiccated rosebushes. He mounted the steps and punched the doorbell. After that there was a long silence, but he knew that there was tittering inside and that several persons pulled

the curtains softly and surveyed him surreptitiously. At length the door opened cautiously and an old black mammy dressed in silk to match let him in and led him into the parlor.

It was a macabre room, smelling of mold. She seated him in a horsehair-covered straight chair, then went about the business of opening the inside folding blinds. After that she flitted from the room. After a long wait Mrs. Norton came in, stately and dignified, and introduced herself. Whereupon she plumped herself down on another chair and stared at him. A few minutes later the giggling Daisy came in and was duly introduced. She also bowed stiffly, without offering a hand, and sat down. Then came the grandmother. After that they just sat—the man at one end of the room, and the three sedate women in a row at the other, their knees and ankles tightly compressed together and their hands folded in their laps. Mr. Feathersmith got up and tried to manage a courtly bow while he made his presentations, thinking they were awfully stuffy.

He thought so particularly, because he had formerly had Daisy out on a buggy ride and knew what an expert kisser she could be when the moon was right. But things were different. He introduced various possible topics of conversation, such as the weather, the latest French styles, and so forth. But they promptly—and with the utmost finality—disposed of each with a polite, agreeing "Yes, sir." It was maddening. And then he saw that Daisy Norton was an empty-headed little doll who could only giggle, kiss, as required, and say, "Yes, sir." She had no conception of economics, politics, world affairs—

"*Aw-r-rk!*" thought Mr. Feathersmith. The thought took him back to those hellcats of modern women—like Miss Tomlinson, in charge of his Wall Street office force—the very type he wanted to get away from, but who was alert and alive.

He listened dully while Daisy played a "Valse Brilliante" on the black square piano, and saw the embroideries her fond mother displayed. After that he ate the little cakes and coffee they brought. Then left. That was Daisy Norton. Another balloon pricked.

On the trip back to the hotel he was upset by seeing a number of yellow flags hung out on houses. It puzzled him at first, until he remembered that that was the signal for smallpox within. It was another thing he had forgotten about the good old days. They had smallpox, yellow fever, diphtheria, scarlet fever, and other assorted diseases that raged without check except constitutional immunity. There was the matter of typhoid, too, which depended on water and milk supply surveillance. And it came to him that so long as Satan chose to keep him aged, he must live chiefly on milk. Cliffordsville, he well remembered, annually had its wave of typhoid, what with its using unfiltered creek water and the barbarian habit of digging wells in the vicinity of cess-pools. Mr. Feathersmith was troubled. Didn't he have enough physical complaints as it was?

He was reminded even more forcibly of that shortly afterward when he came to, sitting up on the floor of a

barroom with someone forcing whiskey into his mouth.

"You fainted, mister, but you'll be all right now."

"Get me a doctor," roared Mr. Feathersmith. "It's ephedrine I want, not whiskey!"

The doctor didn't come. There was only the one, and he was out miles in the country administering to a case of "cramp colic"—a mysterious disease later to achieve the more fashionable notoriety of "acute appendicitis." The patient died, unhappily, but that did not bring the doctor back to town any quicker.

The next morning Mr. Feathersmith made a last desperate effort to come back. There was a bicycle mechanic in town who had recently established a garage in order to take care of Mr. Norton's lumbering Ford and Dr. Simpson's buggylike Holtzmann. Those crude automobiles thought it a triumph to make ten miles without a tow, had to be cranked by hand, and were lighted at night by kerosene carriage lamps or acetylene bicycle lamps.

"Why not devise a self-starter," suggested Mr. Feathersmith, recalling that millions had been made out of them, "a gadget you press with the foot, you know, that will crank the engine with an electric motor?"

"Why not wings?" asked the surly mechanic. He did not realize that both were practical, or that Mr. Feathersmith had seen better days. The trouble with Mr. Feathersmith was that

he had always been a promoter and a financier, with little or no knowledge of the mechanical end of the game.

"It works," he insisted solemnly, "a storage battery, a motor, and a gil-hookey to crank the motor. Think it over. It would make us rich."

"So would perpetual motion," answered the garage man.

And that was that.

Dr. Simpson, when contact was made, was even a poorer consolation.

"Ephedrine? Digitalis? Vitamins? Thyroxin? You're talking gibberish—I don't know what you mean. Naturally, a man of your age is likely to get short of breath at times—even faint. But shucks, Mr. Feathersmith, don't let that bother you. I've known men to live to a hundred that didn't stack up as well as you. Take it easy, rest plenty with a nap every afternoon, and you'll be all right. We're only young once, you know."

When Mr. Feathersmith found that the good doctor had nothing to offer better than a patented "tonic" and poultices for his rheumatism, he thereafter let him strictly alone. The situation as to vitamins and glandular extracts was worse than hopeless—the dieticians had not got around yet to finding out about calories, let alone those. Mr. Feathersmith worried more and more over Satan's inexplicable delay in bestowing youth befitting the age, for Forfin had insisted the

Old Boy would fulfill his promise if the price was paid. But until that was done, the old financier could only wait and employ his time as profitably as he could.

He kept ransacking his brains for things he could invent, but every avenue proved to be a blind alley. He mentioned the possibility of flying to the circle that sat about the lobby stove, but they scornfully laughed it down. It was an obvious impossibility, except for the dirigible gas bags Santos-Dumont was playing with in France. He tried to organize a company to manufacture aluminum, but unfortunately no one had heard of the stuff except one fellow who had been off to school and seen a lump of it in the chemical laboratory. It was almost as expensive as gold, and what good was it?

Mr. Feathersmith realized then that if he was in possession of a 1942 automobile no one could duplicate it, for the many alloys were unknown and the foundry and machine-shop practice necessary were undeveloped. There was nothing to paint it with but carriage paint—slow-drying and sticky. There were no fuels or lubricants to serve it, or any roads fit to run it on.

He played with other ideas, but they all came croppers. He dared not even mention radio—it smacked too much of magic—or lunacy. And he most certainly did not want to be locked up as a madman in an insane asylum of the era. If standard medicine was just beginning to crawl, psychiatry was simply nonexistent. So he kept quiet about his speculations.

Since life had become so hard and he was cut off from any normal intercourse with his fellow townsmen, he yearned for good music. But, alas, that likewise was not to be had outside one or two metropolitan orchestras. He went once to church and heard a home-grown, self-taught soprano caterwaul in a quavering voice. After that he stayed away. He caught himself wishing for a good radio program—and he had altered considerably his standards of what was good.

A week rolled by. During it he had another stroke that was almost his last. The New York doctor had warned him that if he did not obey all the rules as to diet and other palliatives, he might expect to be taken off at any time. Mr. Feathersmith knew that his days were numbered—and the number was far fewer than it would have been if he had remained in the modern age he thought was so unbearable. But still there was the hope that the Devil would yet do the right thing by him.

That hope was finally and utterly blasted the next day. Mr. Feathersmith was in the grip of another devastating fit of weakness and knew that shortly he would be unable to breathe and would therefore fall into a faint and die. But just before his last bit of strength and speck of consciousness faded, there was a faint plop overhead and an envelope fluttered down and into his lap. He looked at it, and though the stamp and cancellation were blurred and illegible, he saw the return address in the corner was "Bureau of Complaints and Adjustments, Gehenna." His trembling fingers tore the missive open. A copy of his contract fell out into his lap.

He scanned it hurriedly. As before, it seemed flawless. Then he discovered a tiny memorandum clipped to its last

page. He read it and knew his heart would stand no more. It was from the cute little witch of Fifth Avenue.

DEAREST SMOOKY-WOOKY:

His Nibs complains you keep on bellyaching. That's not fair. You said you wanted to be where you are, and there you are. You wanted your memory unimpaired. Can we help it if your memory is lousy? And not once, old dear, did you cheep about also having your youth restored. So that lets us out. Be seeing you in Hell, old thing.

Cheerio!

He stared at it with fast-dimming eyes.

"The little witch ... the bad, badgering little—" and then an all-engulfing blackness saved him from his mumbling alliteration.

THE END.

[The end of *Blind Alley* by Malcolm Jameson]