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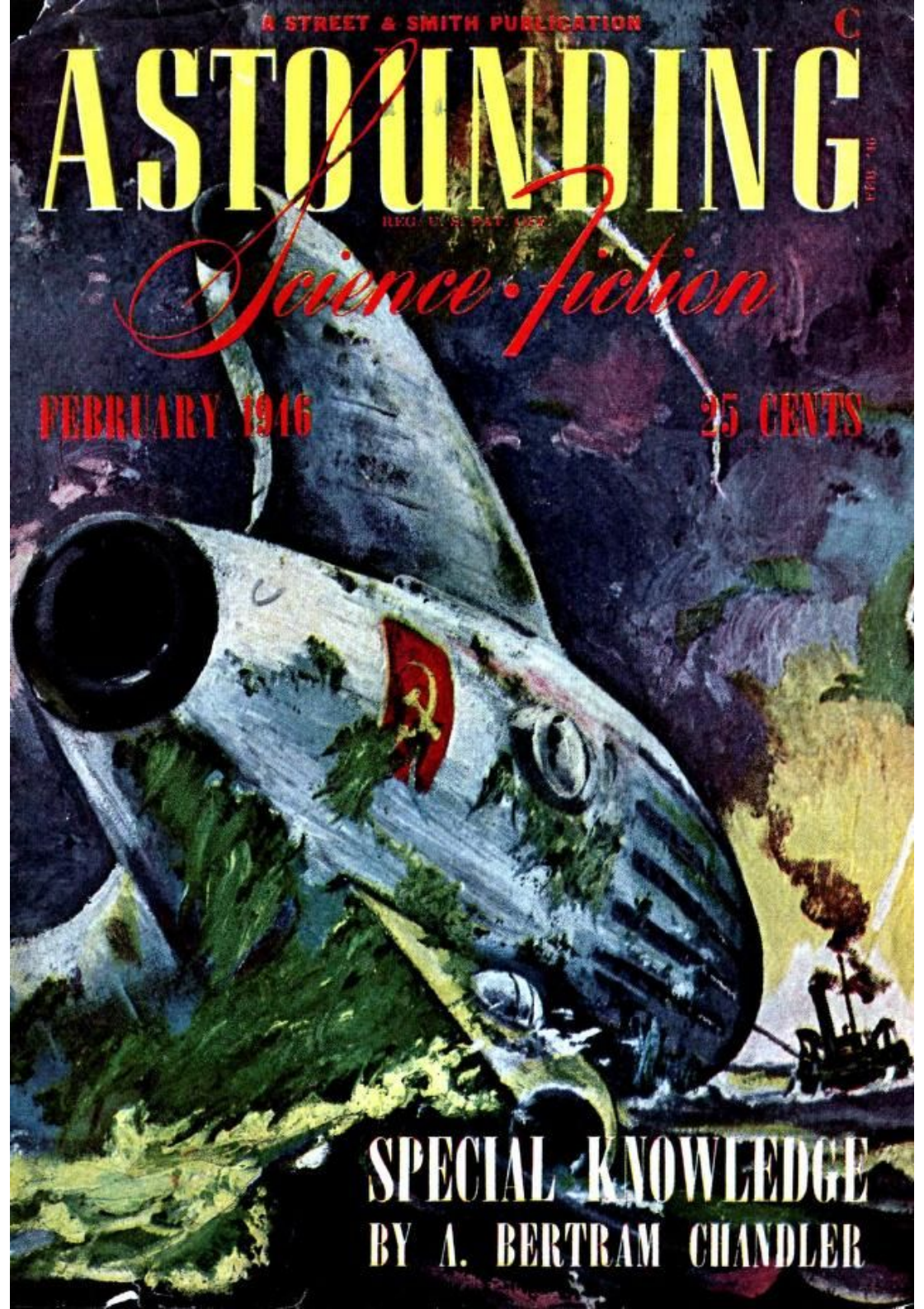
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SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE
BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER



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This Is The House

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lawrence O'Donnell.

First published *Astounding*, February 1946.

A house, it has been said, is a machine for living. The house they bought from its previous occupant had, very definitely, been made just that. But—not for human living!

Melton walked somberly into the living room and headed for the front windows, where he remained, brooding over some dark thought and twisting his hands idly behind him. His wife, Michaela, lifted her head and watched him, while the whirring of the sewing machine faded into silence. After a moment she said “You’re in my light, Bob.”

“Am I? Sorry,” Melton murmured, and moved aside. But he still kept his back to the room, and his fingers still moved nervously behind him. Michaela frowned, sent a slow, rather questioning glance around the room, and pushed back her chair.

“Let’s have a drink,” she said. “Your silhouette looks vaguely rocky. A short, strong cocktail, perhaps . . . huh?”

“A short, strong snort of rye, I’d say,” Melton expanded, brightening a trifle. “I’ll fix it. Hm-m-m.” He had taken a step toward the hall door, but now he paused, almost imperceptibly. Michaela remembered the refrigerator then. “I’ll do it,” she said, but Melton growled something and went on out, his footsteps heavy and determined.

Michaela crossed to the divan under the window and curled up on it, biting her lower lip and listening hard. As she expected, Bob was delaying opening the refrigerator. She heard the rattle of glasses, the clink of bottles, and a gurgle. The last time Bob had had occasion to investigate the refrigerator, there had been a gasp and a string of blazing, subdued oaths. But he had refused to tell why. Remembering other incidents that had occurred in the last three days, Michaela moved her shoulders uneasily. Not that she was cold. The house was warm, almost too warm, and that in itself, implied certain disturbing factors they had already noticed. Because the coal furnace in the basement was working rather impossibly well.

Melton came back with two highballs. He gave one glass to Michaela and slumped into a chair near her. There was a long silence.

“O.K.,” Melton said presently. “So I didn’t put any ice in the drinks.”

“What of it?”

“Because there’s ice today. There wasn’t yesterday. But today the ice-trays are full. Only it’s red ice.”

“Red ice,” Michaela repeated. “I didn’t do it.”

Her husband looked at her darkly. “I made no accusations,” he pointed out. “I didn’t really think you cut a vein and bled into the ice-trays, simply to worry me. I’m just saying that the ice is red now.”

“That’s easily solved. We’ll drink the rye straight. Where’s the bottle?”

Melton produced it from behind his chair. “I thought we could use several. Did you phone the agent today, Mike?”

“Yes. Nothing came of it. He got the idea we had termites.”

“I wish we had. Better termites than . . . well, what about the former tenant? Hadn’t he been able to find out anything at all?”

“No, and he thinks we’re busybodies.”

“I don’t care”—Melton took a long swig from his glass—“what he thinks. We bought this house on the understanding that it wasn’t . . . wasn’t . . .” He slowed down and stopped. Michaela exchanged a long glance with him.

Melton nodded. “Sure. That’s the way it is. What *can* we say?”

“Harmon kept talking about electricians and plumbers. He recommended several.”

“That helps a lot.”

“You’re a defeatist,” Michaela said, “and give me another drink. Thanks. After all, we’re saving coal.”

“At the expense of my sanity.”

“Could be you don’t understand this sort of furnace.”

Melton put down his glass and glared at her. “I’ve handled furnace accounts at the office.” He worked with a New York advertising agency, which was one reason they had taken this house, half an hour from Manhattan and pleasantly isolated on the outskirts of a small Hudson River town. “I’ve had to find out a little about how they worked. There’s a place for a draft, there’s a vent where the gases go out, and there’s a boiler built into the furnace. You put coal in, and, presumably, it burns out, heats the water in the boiler, and is circulated through the house radiators. There’s also a blower that doesn’t work. Look. If you light a match, it burns up, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. It burns up.”

“But the coal doesn’t,” Melton said triumphantly. “Three days ago I put a couple of shovels of coal in the furnace. I’ve had a red bed of coals ever since. The house is warm. It shouldn’t be.” He reached over to an end table and scabbled at some papers. “I even figured out how long it should have taken the coal to burn. The answer is four hours at the outside. Not three days.”

“What about that automatic stoker idea?” Michaela asked, “Did you look?”

“Well, I didn’t use an X ray. But I looked. Yeah. I’ll show you.” He stood up, seized Michaela’s hand, and they headed for the cellar, by-passing the eccentric refrigerator.

The cellar was capacious, cement-floored, and with six-by-six vertical supporting beams here and there. In one corner, by the coal bin, was the furnace, a bulging, dirty-white object with insulated pipes sticking out of it and wandering across the beams of the ceiling. All the draughts were shut, but the hydrostatic thermometer atop the boiler read 150. Melton opened the metal door. The bed of coals glowed red; ripples of wavy heat-motion ran across its surface.

“Where’s the stoker?” he asked.

“Built in,” Michaela suggested hopelessly. “It’s a big furnace.”

“The boiler’s like a jacket. That fattens it out.”

“Why not let the fire go out and start another? Maybe—”

“Let it go out? I can’t *make* it go out. I can’t even shake it through the grate.” He seized an iron crank and demonstrated. “The house is too hot, even with all the windows open. When snow sets in, I don’t know what we’ll do.”

Michaela turned abruptly toward the stairs. Melton said, “What’s the matter?”

“The doorbell.”

“I didn’t hear it.”

On the landing, Michaela paused to look down at her husband. “No,” she said reflectively, “one doesn’t. Hadn’t you noticed?” She made a despairing gesture and departed, leaving Melton to stare after her. Now that he thought of it, not once in the past three days had he heard the doorbell ring. Yet, he recalled now, there had been callers—mostly salesmen determined to sell the new tenants insulation, paint jobs, extermination equipment, and subscriptions to magazines. Somehow it had always been Michaela who had answered the door. Melton had taken it for granted that he had been in a part of the house where it wasn’t easy to hear the bell.

He scowled at the furnace, his thin, saturnine face set in troubled lines. Very easy to say, “Ignore the matter.” But you couldn’t. Not even the single matter of the furnace. And there

had been others. What was wrong with the house?

Superficially nothing. Certainly nothing that a prospective tenant would notice on inspection. The title search had showed no flaws; an architect had approved Melton's plan to buy the place. So they had moved in, grateful for a *pied a terre* after months of vain house-hunting. During the war, when economic masses were artificially migrated, rents soared and housing was a vital problem.

But 16 Pinehurst Drive seemed exactly what they wanted. It wasn't ultra-modern; it had a certain solid air of assurance about it. It had sat for fifteen years facing the Hudson Palisades across the river, like a prim dowager austerey gathering gray stone skirts about her. The foundation was stone; the upper stories—it was a two-story house—were wooden frame. And the layout of the rooms was ideal for their menage, Melton and Michaela and her brother Phil, who lived with them when he wasn't off on a binge, as he was, presumably, at present.

So they had moved in, the furniture had been installed, and the trouble began. Melton wished Phil were here. The guy, for all his erratic tendencies, had the ability to take things for granted; he exuded reassurance. But Phil hadn't even seen the new house yet.

He did not, therefore, know about the hall light, upstairs, which after a few experiments the Meltons had decided not to use at all. There was something about it. It altered complexions oddly, and had a quality of semifluorescence. Not quite that, but neither Michaela nor Melton liked to see each other in its illumination. The bulb wasn't at fault; they'd tried several—new ones at that—and the quality of the light was unchanged.

Now why in the devil—?

Yesterday, when Melton had gone to the refrigerator for ice cubes, he had got a tremendous shock. Electrical disturbance of some sort, obviously; but to see an aurora borealis effect in your refrigerator is inevitably disturbing. And there were other things, shading into subtleties of sensation and emotion, that couldn't be captured in words. The house wasn't haunted. It was rather, Melton felt, simply too efficient—in an extremely off-beam way.

The windows had been hard to open, extremely hard—for a while. Then, without any particular reason, they had all yielded as though greased, just in time to prevent the Meltons from dashing out of their overheated house to get a breath of fresh air. Melton decided to look up a friend, whom he'd met while handling the Instar Electric account. The man was a technician of some kind, and might be able to explain a few puzzling matters. Like the mice. If they were mice. There was something scuttling around at night, certainly too small to be a troll Michaela contended, and the traps Melton set caught nothing.

"Not those mice," Michaela had remarked. "They're too smart. One morning you're going down in the cellar and find a trap reset, with a tiny glass of whiskey as the bait. That'll be the end of you."

Melton was not amused.

A shrunken little man in baggy pants and a suede jacket appeared suddenly on the staircase landing and looked at Melton. Melton looked back in a baffled manner.

"Furnace trouble, huh?" the man said. "Your wife said you couldn't figure it out."

Michaela came into view. "This is Mr. Garr. I phoned him today."

Garr's leathery face cracked into a grin. "Got my name in the phone book under about everything," he said. "Wiring, plumbing, painting—plenty of folks get trouble that ain't just in one line. Like your furnace." He walked over to examine it. "Tinsmith—furnace man—electrician—you got to be all of 'em to get along. What's the matter with the thing?"

“The blower doesn’t work,” Melton said, avoiding Michaela’s accusing stare.

Garr used a flashlight, traced wires, and did things with a screwdriver. Sparks scattered. He finally examined the hydrostat atop the boiler, lifted its cap, and clucked. “Leak,” he said. “See the steam coming out? All rusted. The wires are grounded.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Gotta get another hydrostat. I’ll pick one up, Mr. . . . uh . . . Melton. You don’t need a blower much anyway. That all?”

Michaela said firmly, “No, it isn’t. We put a few shovels of coal in that furnace three days ago, and it’s still going.”

Garr didn’t seem impressed. He looked into the furnace, nodded in a pleased sort of way, and asked, “How many shovels didja say?”

“Four,” Melton told him.

“Ain’t enough,” Garr said helpfully. “You keep the coal a few inches lower than the door, see? That way, you get better heat.”

“The house is too hot now. How do you make a furnace go out?”

“She goes out. Just leave her alone. Or shake her down through the grate.”

“She won’t shake. Try it yourself.”

Garr tried it. “That’s right. Guess she’s fused. I’ll have to get some tools and new grates to fix that, maybe.” He straightened and peered around the cellar. “Darn nice house you got here, though. She’s well built. Good, solid beams.”

“Mice,” Melton said.

“Li’l field mice. You get ’em all around this part of the country. You keep a cat?”

“No.”

“Keep one,” Garr advised. “I got one, but she’s always having kittens. Next time she has a batch, I’ll save one for you. Yep, you got a nice house here. Anything else need fixing?”

Melton refrained from mentioning that Garr hadn’t fixed anything yet. “You might look at the refrigerator,” he suggested. “It’s been giving some trouble.”

Upstairs, in the kitchen, the refrigerator looked as though butter wouldn’t melt in its mouth, which was true. The ice cubes were still red, but Garr no doubt decided the Meltons were freezing strawberry pop or cherry juice. He produced a can of oil and squirted some into the motor. “Don’t ever use heavy oil on this,” he observed. “She’ll gum up on you.” He indicated bottles of beer in the refrigerator. “Good brand, that. I always get it.”

“Have a glass,” Melton said. He poured for the two of them. Michaela refused beer and went in search of the dregs of her cocktail. Melton perched himself on the edge of the sink, kicking his long legs idly, and watched the refrigerator hatefully.

“I was thinking there might be a short somewhere,” he suggested. “I . . . uh . . . got a bit of a shock when I opened the thing yesterday.”

Garr set down his glass. “Yeah? Let’s see.” He unscrewed the metal wall plate and blinked at what he saw. “Funny. I never saw a hook-up like that.”

Melton leaned forward. “That so?”

“Hm-m-m. She’s D. C., but—somebody screwed this up for you, Mr. Melton.”

“How?”

“Amateur electricians,” Garr said scornfully. “What’s this wire doing here? And this thing—what is it, anyhow?”

“Plastic?”

“Part of a thermometer, maybe. *I dunno*. Hm-m-m.” Garr wagged his head, made sparks fly with his screwdriver, and jerked a little. “I better throw the switch.”

“I’ll do it,” Melton said. He went down into the cellar, studied a few fuse boxes, and located the master switch. He threw it to the Off position, yelling the news up to Garr. After a moment Garr yelped. Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Garr, rubbing his hand, appeared. “You didn’t throw the switch,” he said reproachfully.

“Sure I did,” Melton said. “Look.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, maybe . . .” He fumbled around. Presently he unscrewed some of the fuses. “You go up in the kitchen and lemme know when the refrigerator stops working. I plugged it in again.”

Melton obeyed. Michaela came to watch. “Find anything?” she asked.

“I dunno,” Melton said, listening to the low purr of the motor. “The previous tenant probably rewired the house.”

“Who was he?” Michaela murmured. “Einstein? Or a Martian?”

“Probably a ham electrician who thought he knew more than he did.”

Michaela stroked the sleek white enamel of the refrigerator. “Only two years old. It really hasn’t been weaned yet, Bob. The wrong kind of juice might upset its digestion.”

“If I had the variety of food inside me that that icebox has in its innards, I’d be screaming for soda bicarb,” Melton said. “Hello, Mr. Garr. Fix it yet?”

Garr’s withered brown face looked troubled. “She’s still running, huh?” he remarked. “Never stopped once?”

“Not once.”

“She ain’t on any of those fuses, then. I’d have to tear down the wall to trace the circuit.” He looked doubtfully at the wall socket.

“Listen,” Melton said, “I’ve a pair of rubber gloves somewhere. Would they help?”

“Yep,” Carr nodded. “I’ll just finish my beer while you get ’em. Goes flat in a hurry, don’t it?”

“Mike,” Melton said, “replenish Mr. Garr’s glass.” He departed.

“Yep,” Garr said. “Mm-m . . . thanks, Miz Melton. You got a nice place here. I was telling your husband. Well built.”

“It’ll do, for a while. Later on I want to get a lot of new stuff in the kitchen. Those glass-fronted ovens and refrigerators—you know?”

Garr made a face. “I seen the ads. Ain’t practical. Glass,” he said plaintively, “what’s the use of it? O.K. to let the sun in, maybe, but—nuts, if you’ll pardon the expression, Miz Melton.”

“Sure,” Michaela said.

“A glass front on the icebox. She’ll frost up. Same with the oven—steam. Might as well have good, solid metal. Visible this, visible that, all over the kitchen.” He pointed to a metal container on the floor. “Visible garbage. That’s where it’ll end.”

“I could do without *that*.”

“All that stuff’s O.K., I suppose, but the average guy won’t want it. *I wouldn’t*. I got my house fixed up the way *I* want. I’m handy around the place. Got my lamps rigged so they’ll slide up and down their poles. Fixed a cut-off on the phone so I won’t be bothered nights. A man monkeys around his house and fixes it up to suit himself.”

“Here’re the gloves,” Melton said, coming back. “I think you can pretty much tell what a man’s like by seeing where he lives.”

Garr nodded emphatically. “That’s right. A place fixed up like in one of them home furnishing magazines—it may be pretty, but you don’t dare set down in a chair without dusting your pants.”

“Well,” Michaela said practically, “this house was empty when we moved in.”

“First time I’ve been in it for ten years,” Garr said. “People named Courtney lived here then. Contractor, he was. The whole family went to California, and a guy named French moved in.”

“What was he like,” Melton asked quickly.

“I never seen him. He didn’t go out much.”

“He never called you for repair work?”

“Guess he did it himself,” Garr said, with a scornful look at the wall socket. “I’ll fix *this*.” He did, with swift accuracy. After he had screwed the plate back in and plugged the socket into place, he stood up with a grunt. “That’ll do it. Anything else?”

“The bell.”

“Won’t she work?”

“Not exactly,” Melton said. “That is—”

“Mind going out and trying her?” Garr suggested.

“O.K.”

Michaela watched Garr. After a few seconds Garr gave her a quick glance. “She’s all right,” he said. “No short there, anyway.”

“You, uh, heard the bell?”

“Sure I heard it. Why? Didn’t you?”

“I . . . yes, I heard it,” Michaela said, though she had only felt it. “It works now, Bob,” she added, as Melton came back into the kitchen.

“It does?”

“Right as a trivet,” Garr said. “Well, I’ll be getting along, then.”

“What do I owe you?” Melton asked.

Garr named a low sum. Melton paid it, they had another beer, and Michaela said, “There’s the bell. Excuse me.”

Melton finished his beer in a hurry. He hadn’t heard anything. Michaela reappeared, said, “It’s Phil. He wants a drink,” and left the cocktail shaker on the sink. Garr shook hands cordially and departed. Melton sighed, glanced up thoughtfully at the bell annunciator on the wall, and opened the icebox. A ghastly blue radiance hit him in the face. His left hand, outstretched to seize a tray of ice cubes, started to tremble. The skin and flesh was gone from it. He slammed the door, then looked at his hand again. It had returned to normal.

Melton picked up a bottle, several glasses, and went into the living room, where Phil Barclay, his brother-in-law, was slouched casually on the couch. Phil was a small, slender man of forty, immaculately dressed as always, with a round, mild face that was slightly bloated at the moment. He cocked a blond eyebrow at Melton.

“Straight, Bob?”

“Straight,” Melton said grimly. “You’ll take it and like it.”

“I always do,” Phil said. He poured whiskey down his throat, shivered, and relaxed. “Ah. A hair of the dog. Oooh.”

“Hangover?” Michaela asked sympathetically.

“Certainly,” Phil said with dignity, fumbling in a pocket. He handed a folded paper to his sister. “Here’s the check on ‘Nymphs Secret.’ Wesley had it for me down at the gallery Friday.”

“Not bad at all,” Michaela said, examining the check.

“Not bad for a week’s work on that canvas. Well, put it in the family fund. No more work for me for months at least. Another drink, please.”

“You look like you’ve had plenty,” Melton said.

Phil gave him a long, probing stare. “You don’t look too good yourself,” he said. “In fact, you’re sweating.”

“It’s hot.”

“It’s *too* hot,” Phil agreed. “You’ll use up all the coal in a month at this rate. Or is it oil?”

“Coal,” Melton said, “and we won’t use it up. Not in *this* house.”

“I don’t like it either,” Phil said unexpectedly. Michaela put her palms together and leaned forward.

“What is it, Phil?” she asked.

He grinned. “Nothing. This is the first time I’ve been inside here, you know. No, I don’t want to look around. I . . . came up here day before yesterday.”

“Weren’t we home? You had a key, though.”

“I had a key,” Phil said staring at nothing, “but I decided not to use it. The bell wasn’t working, so I knocked on the door. Then—”

Melton’s tongue circled his lips. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Phil said flatly. “Nothing at all.”

“Then why—”

“I was a little high. I was jittery. There weren’t any ghosts. There was—” Phil paused. “I really don’t know, Bob. But I decided to go back to town.”

“Were you afraid?” Michaela asked.

Phil shook his head. “That was odd. I wasn’t afraid, really. There was nothing to be afraid of. I simply decided against coming in.”

“But why?” Michaela wanted to know. Her voice was high-pitched. “That’s no reason, and you know it.”

Phil poured the last drops from the bottle, and held it up. “See this! It’s empty. But you know what’s been in it. You can smell the whiskey.”

Melton slammed his fist down on his knee. “That’s it,” he snapped. “That so-and-so French! Who was he? And what did he do to this house? Hex it?”

Quite suddenly there was a sound, a mournful, hooting cry with a curious timbre of hollow distance. Melton felt a second’s disorientation. Then he identified it: a tug, on the twilight river.

“You’ve got it bad,” Phil said quietly. “If *that* can make you jump—”

“So I need a sedative. I’ve been working hard.”

“Well,” Phil said, getting up, “I guess I’ll look around the joint, after all. Stay put, Mickey. I’ll find my way. O.K., if you insist, Bob.”

They went through the house. Melton said very little, but he switched on the light in the upstairs hall and waited for Phil’s reaction. Phil didn’t remark on it. But he was oddly intrigued by the cellar. He poked and probed around there a good deal.

“What are you looking for?” Melton inquired. “A secret vault?”

“Huh? Well, no.” Phil gave a last, long look at the bare wall and headed for the stairs. “You say a chap named French lived here last?”

“John French. It’s on the title search papers. But as far as I can find out, nobody ever saw French. He had his stuff delivered. Never had any mail. No telephone.”

“What about recommendations? He must have had some when he moved in.”

“Ten years ago. I checked that, too. Ordinary stuff—a bank, an attorney.”

“Profession?”

“Retired.”

Phil experimentally turned on the sink faucets. “It’s a . . . bad house,” he said. “Yet it isn’t haunted, or evil, or anything in the Gothic line. Why is it so hot?”

Melton explained.

Then, on impulse, he looked up through the open door of the kitchen. In the dining room adjoining someone was standing motionless watching him. His reaction, he felt with curious objectivity, was extremely odd.

For, at first, after a very brief doubt, he felt that the figure’s presence was normal enough; his racing mind jumped at logic—a delivery boy, the mailman—and then, instantly after that, came a shocking sense of utter disorientation and realization that the person in the next room didn’t belong there. Hard on the heels of that jarring impact came the sudden knowledge that the silent figure was—

Was Michaela.

That was the worst of all. He hadn’t known her at all. For that short, shocking passage of time, he had seen her as a total stranger. His stomach was sweating, and he felt his heart pounding. The whole incident was over so quickly that no one noticed; Michaela came on into the kitchen, and Melton turned hurriedly to get a fresh bottle out of the cupboard.

“How do you like the place?” Michaela asked. Phil smiled crookedly.

“Very efficient,” he said, and Melton swallowed.

“Do you believe in the psychic impregnation of the inanimate?” Phil asked two days later, as he pushed a pillow under his head and curled up on the couch.

“What?” Melton said. It was early morning, and Melton was drinking coffee and watching the clock. They’d brought out the tiny alarm clock, since the electric model didn’t run too well.

“An old, old theory,” Phil said lazily. “If a man lives in a house for a long time, his psychic emanations seep into the walls and spoil the wallpaper. Or something. You know.”

“No,” Melton said. “Shut up. I’ve got a headache.”

“So have I. And a hangover, too. Hm-m-m. I can see that a coffin might acquire psychic emanations, but that’s merely because it’s functional. If a man sees a coffin, he knows what it’s for.”

“I’d like to see your coffin.” Melton remarked without malice. “And you in it.”

“Well, I thought you’d like to know I didn’t believe in that crap either. It’s my opinion that Mr. French fixed up this house to suit himself. He must have been a strange man. Man? Well, anyhow, have you noticed the woodwork?”

“It’s got shellac on it, if that’s what you mean.”

“It’s got something on it, but not shellac. I made some tests. You can’t get the stuff off. There’s a coating on every inside wall, ceiling, floor, and door in this house. Like insulation.”

“Well, it isn’t. There isn’t even insulation in the attic. Maybe I’ll have rock wool put down.”

“If you do, we’ll roast alive.”

Melton was following his own train of thought. “Renovating’s what the place needs. I think I’ll have exterminators come.”

“What for?”

“Mice. In the walls.”

“Mice! *Oh*, no.”

“What, then?” Melton inquired. “Rattlesnakes?”

“Machinery.”

“You’re crazy. I went up in the attic and looked down between the walls.”

“Did you see any mice?”

“No, but they probably saw me. That’s why I didn’t see them.”

“Now you’re confusing me,” Phil said unhappily. “Besides, we’re not talking about the same thing. I don’t mean turbines and dynamos and atom-smashers. Machines can be so simple they’re unrecognizable. Like that poker over there.”

“That’s no machine.”

“It’s a lever, isn’t it?” Phil said, and his brother-in-law snorted.

“All right, so we’ve got levers in the walls. Who uses ’em? That poker won’t pick itself up and—” Melton stopped suddenly and looked at the poker. Then he met Phil’s gaze. Phil was grinning.

“Yeah,” he said cryptically.

Melton rose, flinging his napkin to the table. “Machines in the walls, hell,” he remarked.

“Very simple and very complicated. And unrecognizable. Paint is just paint, but you can do a Mona Lisa with it.”

“So French coated the inside walls with paint that acts like a machine?”

“Invisible and intangible—how should *I* know. As for those noises at night—” He hesitated.

“Well?”

“I think the house is just recharging itself,” Phil said, and Melton fled, muttering under his breath.

He lunched with Tom Garrett, the technician from Instar Electric. Garrett was a fat little butterball of a man with a gleaming bald head and thick spectacle-lenses through which he blinked myopically. And he had little to advise on the matter of the house.

“Well, what have you?” he asked finally. “Some unusual electrical circuits. And, if you want me to be frank—”

“You will anyhow,” Melton said. “Shoot.”

“—a neurosis.”

“Affecting three people?”

“Certainly. A house can do that. Environment is a pretty strong influence. *Br-r-rp*. Excuse me. I’d be more inclined to suggest a vacation or a doctor than a rewiring job.”

“I had the place rewired. It didn’t make any difference.”

“Well, you’re not crazy,” Garrett said consolingly. “At least not yet. Your skeleton hand in the icebox—you know very well that in a strong light your hand shows translucent. You can see the outline of the bones.”

“Yeah. Every time I look out of a window I expect to see something else.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Just something different.”

“Do you see it?”

After a pause Melton said, “No.” Garrett stared.

“I wonder. I’d like to run up and take a look at that wiring of yours.”

“Delighted to have you. When?”

Garrett consulted a notebook. “I’m tied up for a bit, but—suppose I phone you?”

“The sooner the better. I’m thinking about moving, anyway, though.”

“Where else could you find a furnace like the one you’ve got?”

“I wish that were as funny as you think,” Melton said somberly. “And I’d like to see you check that wiring for me. I’ve a hunch you’ll be surprised. My brother-in-law has even wilder ideas than I have, so—”

“What?”

Melton went into detail.

Garrett was surprisingly intrigued. “You know, his idea about machines isn’t at all illogical. The farther we go, the simpler gadgets get. The klystron, for example—far less complicated than the average specialized vacuum tube. When we deal with electromagnetic energies, neutrons and so on, we sometimes find that the best sort of machine to handle them is—well, a plain metal bar.”

“But—*paint!*”

“I’ve seen paint that is a machine,” Garrett said. “Luminous. It gathers in sunlight during the day and releases it at night. Not that I take any stock in your brother-in-law’s theories; I’m just riding my own hobby. Eventually the world of the future—I think—won’t be burdened with immense, complicated gadgets. Everything will be so simple—or seem so simple—that a man from the twentieth century might find it quite home-like, except for the results.”

“Yeah,” Melton said. “They’d be a bit different, wouldn’t they?”

“Quite a bit, I expect. Well, I must go. I’ll give you a ring, Melton. And take my advice and have a doctor check you up.”

“Don’t tell me I’m sound as a bell,” Melton said. “You might be thinking of the Liberty Bell. That’s cracked.”

Dr. Farr touched his mustache and apparently liked the sensation, for he began to stroke it rhythmically. “How should I know, Bob?” he asked. “Half of my patients are slightly nuts, and, as long as they don’t know it, they get along fine. Just a matter of compensation and adjustment.”

“Four-bit words.”

“By the tests you may be a bit psychotic,” Farr said, referring to his notes. “Especially on orientation. That’s an especially significant symptom. However, I’ve known you for years, and I’d stake my reputation, such as it is, that this business is objective and not subjective.”

“Then it’s the house?”

“That may be the trigger. A fixation. You could have it about anything. It just happens to be the house. Get out of it.”

“I intend to,” Melton said,

Farr leaned back and looked at his diploma on the wall. “Your friend was right about environment. Lock a kid up in a dark closet, and he’s apt to lie afraid of the dark ever after.

And why? Because it's the wrong environment. If the house makes you nervous, pack up and git."

"What about Mike and Phil?"

"They could catch it from you. Or the other way around. Phil's a dipsomaniac anyway. He'll be heading for D. T.'s presently. Too bad: he's a fine artist."

Melton said, rather defensively, "You know what would happen to Phil if he didn't live with us. And he certainly pays his way."

"When he works. A couple of pictures a year. Ah, well. I'm a doctor, not a reformer. Is he still on his binge?"

Melton scowled. "He hasn't touched a drop for a couple of days. That's funny, too. Because he's high most of the time. I know the signs."

"Maybe he's got a bottle cached away."

"Not Phil. He does his drinking publicly; he's not ashamed of it. He'll get tanked any time, without apology. That *is* funny, now that I think of it."

"How does he act?"

"As usual. He spends a lot of time in the cellar."

"Maybe there are some bottles down there," Farr suggested. "Don't let him develop any guilt-complexes. Get him to drink with you, if he's got the urge. The psychological angle is pretty important. He trusts Mike and you completely, but . . . well. Tell him to drop in and see me. I want to check his heart, anyway, and I'll buy him a drink at the same time."

"You're some doctor." Melton said, chuckling. "Well, I've got to do some checking up on a man. See you soon."

"Move out of that house," Farr called after Melton's retreating figure. "It's probably haunted."

It wasn't haunted. Yet, that evening, as Melton paused on the porch, his key out, he knew very definitely that he didn't want to go in. He remembered a line from "*de la Mare*": "'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveler . . . knocking on the moonlit door—" And—how did it go?

"Only a host of listeners . . . listening . . . to that voice from the world of men."

Something like that. Indefinable and intangible, as much so as dust motes in moonlight. Move your hand through the shaft, and there's no resistance; the motes swirl away and return.

Melton grimaced and unlocked the door. In the living room, Phil was slumped on the couch, half asleep. Michaela dropped her sewing and stood up to greet him.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Nothing new," Michaela said. "Let me take your coat. I'll hang it up." She went out. Melton picked up the cloth Michaela had been sewing on; she hadn't got very far. He stared at Phil.

"No remarks?"

"I am happy," Phil said. "No remarks are necessary."

"Have a drink?"

"Nope."

"Doc Farr wants to see you, when you're in town."

"Why not?" Phil said. "Find out anything about John French?"

"Yes. How about that?" Michaela asked, coming back from upstairs. "You said you were going to check up."

Melton dropped into a chair. "I did check up. Through an agency. But it's no use. The guy simply didn't exist. Nobody ever saw him."

"Naturally," Phil said.

Melton sighed. "All right. Who was he? Santa Claus?"

"*Timeo Danaos*— The furnace is still going strong."

"And it's still too hot. Why don't you open a window?"

"They're stuck again," Michaela said. "We can't get 'em open at all now."

The lights went on. Melton said, "Did you do that, Phil?"

"No."

Melton went over to the switch and tested it. The lights stayed on.

"Good old John French," Phil murmured. "Good old Jack. This is the house that Jack built. And how!" He rose and went out to the kitchen. Melton heard footsteps on the cellar stairs.

"Yeah," Michaela said. "He's been going down there all day."

"He's high as a kite, you know."

"Of course I know. And—it isn't his usual binge."

"I know it isn't," Melton said. "Well . . . he must get the stuff in the cellar. Maybe Jack . . . maybe French left some bottles down there."

"Of what? Uh! Let's not think about it."

"What did you do today?" Melton asked.

"Nothing. Literally, nothing. I tried to do some sewing, but time passes too fast here. It was six o'clock before I knew it."

"Always tea time. What's for dinner?"

Michaela put her hand to her mouth. "Oh. Beat me, Bob. I forgot about dinner."

"I think you've been in the cellar, too," Melton said jokingly, but Michaela gave him a look of strained distress.

"No, Bob. I haven't—not once."

Melton watched her for a moment. Then he got up, went out to the kitchen, and opened the cellar door. The light was on, and he could see Phil in a corner, standing motionless.

"Come on up," he said. "We'll have to drink our dinner."

"In a minute," Phil said.

Melton went back to the living room. Presently Phil joined them, weaving a little in his walk. Melton nodded darkly.

"This is the rat that ate the malt," he remarked.

"Oh, don't," Michaela said. "I keep thinking about the man all tattered and torn."

"I keep thinking about Jack," Phil said. "Little man who wasn't there. Out of the everywhere into here. Look, Bob. If you spent ten years with the Ubangis, what would you do?"

"Give up kissing," Melton said.

"No, I mean it. If you had to move into a Ubangi hut and stay there. You wouldn't have anything in common with the natives, would you?"

"No."

"Well?"

"Well, what? What would *you* do?"

“Change the hut a bit,” Phil said. “Especially if I wanted to pretend I was a Ubangi, too. I wouldn’t alter it outside, but I’d fix it up a bit inside, for my own convenience, and I wouldn’t let anybody else come in. Chairs instead of grass mats. I wonder how French had this place furnished?”

“Just who do you think French was?” Melton asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I *could* know, even. But I know what he wasn’t.”

“What wasn’t he?”

“Human,” Phil said.

Michaela stirred and sucked in her under lip. Phil nodded at her.

“We’re in the house more than you are, Bob. Mickey and I. And it’s alive. It’s a machine, too. Sort of half and half.”

Melton grimaced. “I suppose it’s been talking to you.”

“Of course not. It wasn’t designed for that. Jack didn’t build this house, but he moved in, and fixed it up to suit himself. To suit his special requirements. Whatever they were. He liked—or needed—plenty of heat. That’s not too far off the beam. But some of the other things—”

“Like the refrigerator,” Phil said. “There weren’t any marks on the linoleum, and there would have been some, in ten years. I looked. Something else was hooked up to that socket. Rewiring won’t help any, Bob. Jack didn’t need wires. He may have switched ’em around a bit, for convenience; but I suppose all he had to do was juggle a couple of atoms and—he’d have a machine.”

“A living house. Yeah. Nuts.”

“A robot house, could be. A robot wouldn’t have to look like a man. We’ve got robots now, really, and they’re functionally designed.”

“All right,” Melton said harshly. “We can move.”

“We’d better. Because this house was made for Jack, not for us. It isn’t working just right. The refrigerator’s acting funny, but that’s because it’s plugged into a socket meant for some other gadget.”

“I tried it in some other plugs.”

“Any luck?”

Melton shook his head. “It was still . . . uh . . . funny.” He moved uneasily. “Why should French . . . I mean, why would he want to—”

“Why would a white man live in a Ubangi village? To study ethnology or entomology, perhaps. Or for the climate. Or simply to rest—to hibernate. Wherever Jack came from, he’s gone back there now, and he didn’t bother to put the house in its original condition. Yeah.” Phil rose and went out. The cellar door closed softly.

Melton went over to Michaela, knelt, and put his arm around her slim shoulders, feeling the yielding warmth of her. “We’ll move, darling,” he said.

She stared out of the window. “It’d be so lovely, if . . . well. The view’s magnificent. I wish we didn’t have to move. But it’s the only thing. When, Bob?”

“Want to start looking for another place tomorrow? A city apartment, maybe?”

“All right,” Michaela said. “A day or so more won’t make much difference, will it?”

He could hear Michaela’s soft breathing beside him, there in the dark. He could hear other things, too. They were not mice, he knew. Within the walls, there was a subtle, slow movement, at the threshold of hearing and consciousness. The house was recharging itself. The robot was preparing itself for the next day’s work.

It was mindless; it was not alive; it had no consciousness or sense of ego. It was a machine. But it was a machine so enormously versatile that only miraculous simplicity made its existence possible. How? A new pattern for electronic orbits? Or something quite unimaginable—

We can see into the microcosm with the electronic microscope, Melton thought. But we can't see far enough. Beyond—

There was an off-beat, distant rhythm in the quiet movement within the walls.

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the malt

That lay in the house that Jack built.

And so on. Melton followed the nursery rhyme to its conclusion. The inevitable growth, line by line, acquired a sort of horror to him. Yet he could not stop. He finished it and started all over.

Who had John French been?

Or what?

Suddenly and sickeningly, he felt the disorientation. Without looking at Michaela, he sprang from bed, fumbled his way downstairs, and stood motionless in the hall, waiting.

There was nothing.

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the rat—

He went out to the kitchen. The cellar door was open. He could not see Phil, but he knew that his brother-in-law was at the foot of the stairs.

“Phil,” he said softly.

“Yes, Bob.”

“Come on up.”

Phil mounted the steps. His pajamaed figure came into view, swaying slightly.

“What’s down there?” Melton asked.

“Nothing.”

“Liquor?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“Nothing,” Phil said, his eyes glazed and bright. “I stand in the corner, my head against the wall, and . . . I . . . paint—” He slowed down and stopped. “No,” he said after a moment. “It isn’t painting, is it? But I thought—”

“What?”

“The house suited Jack, didn’t it?” Phil said. “But then we don’t know what Jack was or what he wanted. I wonder if he came from the future? Or from another planet? One thing—he certainly came from a place that was rather remarkable.”

“We’re moving,” Melton said. “As soon as I can find a place.”

“All right.”

“Let’s go to bed.”

“Sure,” Phil said. “Why not. Good night, Bob.”

“Good night, Phil.”

For a long time he lay awake, unable to sleep.

This is the house that Jack built.

I wonder if Jack might come back—sometime?

The house suited Jack.

The house was alive.

No, it wasn't. It was a machine.

Any house could be such a machine—with a little renovation. By Jack.

The machine suited Jack. Sure. But what effect would it have on humans? Mutation? Translation, eventually, into another world? Something thoroughly unusual, at any rate.

Melton was not tempted to find out.

I'll find an apartment tomorrow, he resolved. And, a little comforted, he went to sleep.

He got home the next evening somewhat early, and let himself into the house without hesitation. Michaela and Phil were in the living room. They were sitting silently, but turned to watch him as he entered.

"I've got an apartment," Melton announced triumphantly. "We can start packing right away. How does that sound?"

"Swell," Michaela said. "Can we move tomorrow morning?"

"Sure. Jack can have his house back."

The lights came on. Melton gave them a quick glance.

"Still at it, eh? Well, who cares now? Drink? How about a cocktail. Mike? I'll even tackle the icebox tonight."

"No, thanks."

"Mm-m. Phil?"

"No. I don't want any."

"Well, I do," Melton said. He went into the kitchen, decided against ice cubes after all, and came back with a straight shot in a tiny glass. "Are we eating out tonight?" he demanded.

"Oh," Michaela said. "I forgot dinner again."

"I think we'd better move tomorrow," Melton said, "if not tonight." He sat down. "It's too early to eat now, but we can kill time with a drink or two." He looked at the clock. It was 4:20.

He looked again.

It was 10:40.

Nothing had changed. But the sky was black outside the window. Outside of that, nothing had altered; Michaela and Phil had not moved, and Melton's drink was untasted in his hand.

For a moment he thought wildly of amnesia. Then he realized that the truth was much simpler. He had simply let his mind go blank—he could even remember doing it—so that the time had, incredibly, slipped past until—

It was 10:40.

The shock of disorientation came, more slowly this time. It passed and was gone.

Neither Michaela nor Phil moved.

Melton looked at the clock. Simultaneously he felt a leaden, dull blankness creeping over his mind. *This is like hibernation*, he thought; gray, formless, without—

It was 8:12.

The sky was blue outside. The river was blue. Morning sunlight blazed on green patterns of leaves.

"Mike," Melton said.

"Yes, Bob."

It was 3:35.

But it was not time that had altered. Melton knew that very clearly. The fault lay in the house.

It was night.

It was 9:20.

The telephone rang. Melton reached out and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

“Hello,” he said.

Dr. Farr’s distant voice sounded loud in the still, hot room. Michaela and Phil sat like carved figures under the bright overhead light. Presently Melton said, “No. No, we changed our minds. We’re not going to move—”

He hung up.

Hibernation, he thought. The process had cumulative acceleration. For this was the house that Jack built. This was the den that Jack built. Some races—not human races—may need periods of hibernation. And they will build robot machines—very simple machines—to care for them while they sleep.

Adaptable machines. Machines that can adapt to other organisms. Human organisms. With a difference.

Hibernation for Jack—yes. But for Melton and Michaela and Phil— It wouldn’t work out in quite the same manner. For they were not of Jack’s breed or race.

“We’re never going to move,” Melton said softly, and saw that it was 1:03.

Within the walls the machine stirred, recharging itself. Moonlight came through the windows, distorted by some quality in the clear panes. The three figures sat motionless, not even waiting now, in the house that Jack built.

THE END.

[The end of *This is the House* by Henry Kuttner (as Lawrence O’Donnell)]