



Heinlein Robert
The Unpleasant Profession of
Jonathan Hoag

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Robert A. Heinlein

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HOUSE"

THE UNPLEASANT PROFESSION OF JONATHAN HOAG

–the end it is not well.

From too much love of living,

From hope and fear set free,

We thank with brief thanksgiving

Whatever gods may be

That no life lives forever;

That dead men rise up never;

That even the weariest river

Winds somewhere safe to sea.

–SWINBURNE

"Is it blood, doctor?" Jonathan Hoag moistened his lips with his tongue and leaned forward in the chair, trying to see what was written on the slip of paper the medico held.

Dr. Potbury brought the slip of paper closer to his vest and looked at Hoag over his spectacles. "Any particular reason," he asked, "why you should find blood under your fingernails?"

"No. That is to say- Well, no-there isn't. But it is blood-isn't it?"

"No," Potbury said heavily. "No, it isn't blood."

Hoag knew that he should have felt relieved. But he was not. He knew in that moment that he had clung to the notion that the brown grime under his fingernails was dry blood rather than let himself dwell on other, less tolerable, ideas.

He felt sick at his stomach. But he had to know-

"What is it, doctor? Tell me."

Potbury looked him up and down. "You asked me a specific question. I've answered it. You did not ask me what the substance was; you asked me to find out whether or not it was blood. It is not."

"But- You are playing with me. Show me the analysis." Hoag half rose from his chair and reached for the slip of paper.

The doctor held it away from him, then tore it carefully in two. Placing the two pieces together he tore them again, and again.

"Why, you!"

"Take your practice elsewhere," Potbury answered. "Never mind the fee. Get out. And don't come back."

Hoag found himself on the street, walking toward the elevated station. He was still much shaken by the doctor's rudeness. He was afraid of rudeness as some persons are of snakes, or great heights, or small rooms. Bad manners, even when not directed at him personally but simply displayed to others in his presence, left him sick and helpless and overcome with shame.

If he himself were the butt of boorishness he had no defense save flight.

He set one foot on the bottom step of the stairs leading up to the elevated station and hesitated. A trip by elevated was a trying thing at best, what with the pushing and the jostling and the grimy dirt and the ever-present chance of uncouth behavior; he knew that he was not up to it at the moment. If he had to listen to the cars screaming around the curve as they turned north toward the Loop, he suspected that he would scream, too.

He turned away suddenly and was forced to check himself abruptly, for he was chest to chest with a man who himself was entering the stairway. He shied away. "Watch your step, buddy," the man said, and brushed on past him.

"Sorry," Hoag muttered, but the man was already on by.

The man's tone had been brisk rather than unkind; the incident should not have troubled Hoag, but it did. The man's dress and appearance, his very odor, upset Hoag. Hoag knew that there was no harm in well-worn dungarees and leather windbreaker, no lack of virtue in a face made a trifle greasy by sweat dried in place in the course of labor. Pinned to the bill of the man's cap was an oval badge, with a serial number and some lettering. Hoag guessed that he was a truck driver, a mechanic, a rigger, any of the competent, muscular crafts which keep the wheels turning over. Probably a family man as well, a fond father and a good provider, whose greatest lapse from virtue might be an extra glass of beer and a tendency to up it a nickel on two pairs.

It was sheer childishness for Hoag to permit himself to be put off by such appearance and to prefer a white shirt, a decent topcoat, and gloves. Yet if the man had smelled of shaving lotion rather than sweat the encounter would not have been distasteful.

He told himself so and told himself that he was silly and weak. Still—could such a coarse and brutal face really be the outward mark of warmth and sensitivity? That shapeless blob of nose, those piggish eyes?

Never mind, he would go home in a taxi, not looking at anyone. There was a stand just ahead, in front of the delicatessen.

"Where to?" The door of the cab was open; the hackman's voice was impersonally insistent.

Hoag caught his eye, hesitated and changed his mind. That brutishness again—eyes with no depth to them and a skin marred by blackheads and enlarged pores.

"Unnh... excuse me. I forgot something." He turned away quickly and stopped abruptly, as something caught him around the waist. It was a small boy on skates who had bumped into him. Hoag steadied himself and assumed the look of paternal kindness which he used to deal with children. "Whoa, there, young fellow!" He took the boy by the shoulder and gently dislodged him.

"Maurice!" The voice screamed near his ear, shrill and senseless. It came from a large woman, smugly fat, who had projected herself out of the door of the delicatessen. She grabbed the boy's other arm, jerking him away and aiming a swipe at his ear with her free hand as she did so. Hoag started to plead on the boy's behalf when he saw that the woman was glaring at him. The youngster, seeing or sensing his mother's attitude, kicked at Hoag.

The skate clipped him in the shin. It hurt. He hurried away with no other purpose than to get out of sight. He turned down the first side street, his shin causing him to limp a little, and his ears and the back of his neck burning quite as if he had indeed been caught mistreating the brat. The side street was not much better than the street he had left. It was not lined with shops nor dominated by the harsh steel tunnel of the elevated's tracks, but it was solid with apartment houses, four stories high and crowded, little better than tenements.

Poets have sung of the beauty and innocence of childhood. But it could not have been this street, seen through Hoag's eyes, that they had in mind. The small boys seemed rat-faced to him, sharp beyond their years, sharp and shallow and snide. The little girls were no better in his eyes. Those of eight or nine, the shapeless stringy age, seemed to him to have tattletale written in their pinched faces—mean souls, born for trouble-making and cruel gossip. Their slightly older sisters, gutter-wise too young, seemed entirely concerned with advertising their arrogant new sex—not for Hoag's benefit, but for their pimply counterparts loafing around the drugstore.

Even the brats in baby carriages—Hoag fancied that he liked babies, enjoyed himself in the role of honorary uncle. Not these. Snotty-nosed and sour-smelling, squalid and squalling—

The little hotel was like a thousand others, definitely third rate without pretension, a single bit of neon reading: "Hotel Manchester, Transient & Permanent," a lobby only a half lot wide, long and narrow and a little dark. They are stopped at by

drummers careful of their expense accounts and are lived in by bachelors who can't afford better. The single elevator is an iron-grille cage, somewhat disguised with bronze paint. The lobby floor is tile, the cuspidors are brass. In addition to the clerk's desk there are two discouraged potted palms and eight leather armchairs. Unattached old men, who seem never to have had a past, sit in these chairs, live in the rooms above, and every now and then one is found hanging in his room, necktie to light fixture.

Hoag backed into the door of the Manchester to avoid being caught in a surge of children charging along the sidewalk. Some sort of game, apparently-he caught the tail end of a shrill chant, "-give him a slap to shut his trap; the last one home's a dirty Jap!"

"Looking for someone, sir? Or did you wish a room?"

He turned quickly around, a little surprised. A room? What he wanted was his own snug apartment but at the moment a room, any room at all, in which he could be alone with a locked door between himself and the world seemed the most desirable thing possible. "Yes, I do want a room."

The clerk turned the register around. "With or without? Five fifty with, three and a half without."

"With."

The clerk watched him sign, but did not reach for the key until Hoag counted out five ones and a half. "Glad to have you with us. Bill! Show Mr. Hoag up to 412."

The lone bellman ushered him into the cage, looked him up and down with one eye, noting the expensive cut of his topcoat and the absence of baggage. Once in 412 he raised the window a trifle, switched on the bathroom light, and stood by the door.

"Looking for something?" he suggested. "Need any help?"

Hoag tipped him. "Get out," he said hoarsely.

The bellman wiped off the smirk. "Suit yourself," he shrugged.

The room contained one double bed, one chest of drawers with mirror, one straight chair and one armchair. Over the bed was a framed print titled "The Colosseum by Moonlight." But the door was lockable and equipped with a bolt as well and the window faced the alley, away from the street. Hoag sat down in the armchair. It had a broken spring, but he did not mind.

He took off his gloves and stared at his nails. They were quite clean. Could the whole thing have been hallucination? Had he ever gone to consult Dr. Potbury? A man who has had amnesia may have it again, he supposed, and hallucinations as well.

Even so, it could not all be hallucinations; he remembered the incident too vividly. Or could it be? He strained to recall exactly what had happened.

Today was Wednesday, his customary day off. Yesterday he had returned home from work as usual. He had been getting ready to dress for dinner-somewhat absent-mindedly, he recalled, as he had actually been thinking about where he would dine, whether to try a new Italian place recommended by his friends, the Robertsons, or whether it would be more pleasing to return again for the undoubtedly sound goulash prepared by the chef at the Buda-Pesth.

He had almost decided in favor of the safer course when the telephone had rung. He had almost missed it, as the tap was running in the washbasin. He had thought that he heard something and had turned off the tap. Surely enough, the phone rang again.

It was Mrs. Pomeroy Jameson, one of his favorite hostesses-not only a charming woman for herself but possessed of a cook who could make clear soups that were not dishwater. And sauces. She had offered a solution to his problem. "I've been suddenly left in the lurch at the last moment and I've just got to have another man for dinner. Are you free? Could you help me? Dear Mr. Hoag!"

It had been a very pleasant thought and he had not in the least resented being asked to fill in at the last minute. After all, one can't expect to be invited to every small dinner. He had been delighted to oblige Edith Pomeroy. She served an unpretentious but sound dry white wine with fish and she never committed the vulgarism of serving champagne at any time. A good hostess and he was glad she felt free to ask him for help. It was a tribute to him that she felt he would fit in, unplanned.

He had had such thoughts on his mind, he remembered, as he dressed. Probably, in his preoccupation, what with the interruption of the phone call breaking his routine, he had neglected to scrub his nails.

It must have been that. Certainly there had been no opportunity to dirty his nails so atrociously on the way to the Pomeroy's. After all, one wore gloves.

It had been Mrs. Pomeroy's sister-in-law—a woman he preferred to avoid!—who had called his attention to his nails. She had been insisting with the positiveness called "modern" that every man's occupation was written on his person. "Take my husband—what could he be but a lawyer? Look at him. And you, Dr. Fitts—the bedside manner!"

"Not at dinner, I hope."

"You can't shake it."

"But you haven't proved your point. You knew what we are."

Whereupon that impossible woman had looked around the table and nailed him with her eye. "Mr. Hoag can test me. I don't know what he does. No one does."

"Really, Julia." Mrs. Pomeroy had tried hopelessly to intervene, then had turned to the man on her left with a smile. "Julia has been studying psychology this season."

The man on her left, Sudkins, or Snuggins-Stubbins, that was his name. Stubbins had said, "What does Mr. Hoag do?"

"It's a minor mystery. He never talks shop."

"It's not that," Hoag had offered. "I do not consider—"

"Don't tell me!" that woman had commanded. "I'll have it in a moment. Some profession. I can see you with a brief case." He had not intended to tell her. Some subjects were dinner conversation; some were not. But she had gone on.

"You might be in finance. You might be an art dealer or a book fancier. Or you might be a writer. Let me see your hands."

He was mildly put off by the demand, but he had placed his hands on the table without trepidation. That woman had pounced on him. "Got you! You are a chemist."

Everyone looked where she pointed. Everyone saw the dark mourning under his nails. Her husband had broken the brief silence by saying, "Nonsense, Julia. There are dozens of things that will stain nails. Hoag may dabble in photography, or do a spot of engraving. Your inference wouldn't stand up in court."

"That's a lawyer for you! I know I'm right. Aren't I, Mr. Hoag?"

He himself had been staring unbrokenly at his hands. To be caught at a dinner party with untidy manicure would have been distressing enough—if he had been able to understand it.

But he had no slightest idea how his nails had become dirtied. At his work? Obviously—but what did he do in the daytime?

He did not know.

"Tell us, Mr. Hoag. I was right, was I not?"

He pulled his eyes away from those horrid fingernails and said faintly, "I must ask to be excused." With that he had fled from the table. He had found his way to the lavatory where, conquering an irrational revulsion, he had cleaned out the gummy reddish-brown filth with the blade of his penknife. The stuff stuck to the blade; he wiped it on cleansing tissue, wadded it up, and stuck it into a pocket of his waistcoat. Then he had scrubbed his nails, over and over again.

He could not recall when he had become convinced that the stuff was blood, was human blood.

He had managed to find his bowler, his coat, gloves, and stick without recourse to the maid. He let himself out and got away from there as fast as he could.

Thinking it over in the quiet of the dingy hotel room he was convinced that his first fear had been instinctive revulsion at the sight of the dark-red under his nails. It was only on second thought that he had realized that he did not remember where he had dirtied his nails because he had no recollection of where he had been that day, nor the day before, nor any of the days before that. He did not know what his profession was.

It was preposterous, but it was terribly frightening.

He skipped dinner entirely rather than leave the dingy quiet of the hotel room; about ten o'clock he drew a tub of water just as hot as he could get it and let himself soak. It relaxed him somewhat and his twisted thoughts quieted down. In any case, he consoled himself, if he could not remember his occupation, then he certainly could not return to it. No chance again of finding that grisly horror under his fingernails.

He dried himself off and crawled under the covers. In spite of the strange bed he managed to get to sleep.

A nightmare jerked him awake, although he did not realize it at first, as the tawdry surroundings seemed to fit the nightmare. When he did recall where he was and why he was there the nightmare seemed preferable, but by that time it was gone, washed out of his mind. His watch told him that it was his usual getting-up time; he rang for the bellman and arranged for a breakfast tray to be fetched from around the corner.

By the time it arrived he was dressed in the only clothes he had with him and was becoming anxious to get home. He drank two cups of indifferent coffee standing up, fiddled with the food, then left the hotel.

After letting himself into his apartment he hung up his coat and hat, took off his gloves, and went as usual straight to his dressing room. He had carefully scrubbed the nails of his left hand and was just commencing on his right when he noticed what he was doing.

The nails of his left hand were white and clean; those of the right were dark and dirty. Carefully holding himself in check he straightened up, stepped over and examined his watch where he had laid it on his dresser, then compared the time with that shown by the electric clock in his bedroom. It was ten minutes past six P.M.-his usual time for returning home in the evening.

He might not recall his profession; his profession had certainly not forgotten him.

II

II

The firm of Randall & Craig, Confidential Investigation, maintained its night phone in a double apartment. This was convenient, as Randall had married Craig early in their association. The junior partner had just put the supper dishes to soak and was trying to find out whether or not she wanted to keep the book-of-the-month when the telephone rang. She reached out, took the receiver, and said, "Yes?" in noncommittal tones.

To this she added, "Yes."

The senior partner stopped what he was doing-he was engaged in a ticklish piece of scientific research, involving deadly weapons, ballistics and some esoteric aspects of aero-dynamics; specifically he was trying to perfect his overhand throw with darts, using a rotogravure likeness of cafe society's latest glamour girl thumbtacked to the bread board as a target. One dart had nailed her left eye; he was trying to match it in the right.

"Yes," his wife said again.

"Try saying 'No,'" he suggested.

She cupped the mouthpiece. "Shut up and hand me a pencil." She made a long arm across the breakfast-nook table and obtained a stenographer's pad from a hook there. "Yes. Go ahead." Accepting the pencil she made several lines of the hooks and scrawls that stenographers use in place of writing. "It seems most likely," she said at last. "Mr. Randall is not usually in at this hour. He much prefers to see clients during office hours. Mr. Craig? No, I'm sure Mr. Craig couldn't help you. Positive. So? Hold the line and I'll find out."

Randall made one more try at the lovely lady; the dart stuck in the leg of the radio-record player. "Well?"

"There is a character on the other end of this who wants to see you very badly tonight. Name of Hoag, Jonathan Hoag. Claims that it is a physical impossibility for him to come to see you in the daytime. Didn't want to state his business and got all mixed up when he tried to."

"Gentleman or lug?"

"Gentleman."

"Money?"

"Sounds like it. Didn't seem worried about it. Better take it, Teddy. April 15th is coming up."

"O.K. Pass it over."

She waved him back and spoke again into the phone. "I've managed to locate Mr. Randall. I think he will be able to speak with you in a moment or two. Will you hold the line, please?" Still holding the phone away from her husband she consulted her watch, carefully counted off thirty seconds, then said, "Ready with Mr. Randall. Go ahead, Mr. Hoag," and slipped the instrument to her

husband.

"Edward Randall speaking. What is it, Mr. Hoag?"

"Oh, really now, Mr. Hoag, I think you had better come in in the morning. We are all human and we like our rest-I do, anyhow.

"I must warn you, Mr. Hoag, my prices go up when the sun goes down.

"Well, now, let me see-I was just leaving for home. Matter of fact, I just talked with my wife so she's expecting me. You know how women are. But if you could stop by my home in twenty minutes, at... uh... seventeen minutes past eight, we could talk for a few minutes. All right-got a pencil handy? Here is the address-" He cradled the phone.

"What am I this time? Wife, partner, or secretary?"

"What do you think? You talked to him."

"Wife, I'd guess. His voice sounded prissy."

"O.K."

"O.K."

"I'll change to a dinner gown. And you had better get your toys up off the floor, Brain."

"Oh, I don't know. It gives a nice touch of eccentricity."

"Maybe you'd like some shag tobacco in a carpet slipper. Or some Regie cigarettes." She moved around the room, switching off the overhead lights and arranging table and floor lamps so that the chair a visitor would naturally sit in would be well lighted.

Without answering he gathered up his darts and the bread board, stopping as he did so to moisten his finger and rub the spot where he had marred the radio, then dumped the whole collection into the kitchen and closed the door. In the subdued light, with the kitchen and breakfast nook no longer visible, the room looked serenely opulent.

"How do you do, sir? Mr. Hoag, my dear. Mr. Hoag... Mrs. Randall."

"How do you do, madame."

Randall helped him off with his coat, assuring himself in the process that Mr. Hoag was not armed, or- if he was-he had found somewhere other than shoulder or hip to carry a gun. Randall was not suspicious, but he was pragmatically pessimistic.

"Sit down, Mr. Hoag. Cigarette?"

"No. No, thank you."

Randall said nothing in reply. He sat and stared, not rudely but mildly, nevertheless thoroughly. The suit might be English or it might be Brooks Brothers. It was certainly not Hart, Schaffner & Marx. A tie of that quality had to be termed a cravat, although it was modest as a nun. He upped his fee mentally. The little man was nervous-he wouldn't relax in his chair. Woman's presence, probably. Good-let him come to a slow simmer, then move him off the fire.

"You need not mind the presence of Mrs. Randall," he said presently. "Anything that I may hear, she may hear also."

"Oh... oh, yes. Yes, indeed." He bowed from the waist without getting up. "I am very happy to have Mrs. Randall present." But he did not go on to say what his business was.

"Well, Mr. Hoag," Randall added presently, "you wished to consult me about something, did you not?"

"Uh, yes."

"Then perhaps you had better tell me about it."

"Yes, surely. It- That is to say- Mr. Randall, the whole business is preposterous."

"Most businesses are. But go ahead. Woman trouble? Or has someone been sending you threatening letters?"

"Oh, no! Nothing as simple as that. But I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I don't know," Hoag answered quickly with a little intake of breath. "I want you to find out."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Hoag," Randall said. "This seems to be getting more confused rather than less. You say you are afraid and you want me to find out what you are afraid of. Now I'm not a psychoanalyst; I'm a detective. What is there about this business that a detective can do?"

Hoag looked unhappy, then blurted out, "I want you to find out what I do in the daytime."

Randall looked him over, then said slowly, "You want me to find out what you do in the daytime?"

"Yes. Yes, that's it."

"Mm-m-m. Wouldn't it be easier for you to tell me what you do?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell you!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

Randall was becoming somewhat annoyed. "Mr. Hoag," he said, "I usually charge double for playing guessing games. If you won't tell me what you do in the daytime, it seems to me to indicate a lack of confidence in me which will make it very difficult indeed to assist you. Now come clean with me-what is it you do in the daytime and what has it to do with the case? What is the case?"

Mr. Hoag stood up. "I might have known I couldn't explain it," he said unhappily, more to himself than to Randall. "I'm sorry I disturbed you. I-"

"Just a minute, Mr. Hoag." Cynthia Craig Randall spoke for the first time. "I think perhaps you two have misunderstood each other. You mean, do you not, that you really and literally do not know what you do in the daytime?"

"Yes," he said gratefully. "Yes, that is exactly it."

"And you want us to find out what you do? Shadow you, find out where you go, and tell you what you have been doing?"

Hoag nodded emphatically. "That is what I have been trying to say."

Randall glanced from Hoag to his wife and back to Hoag. "Let's get this straight," he said slowly. "You really don't know what you do in the daytime and you want me to find out. How long has this been going on?"

"I... I don't know."

"Well- what do you know?"

Hoag managed to tell his story, with prompting. His recollection of any sort ran back about five years, to the St. George Rest Home in Dubuque. Incurable amnesia-it no longer worried him and he had regarded himself as completely rehabilitated. They-the hospital authorities-had found a job for him when he was discharged.

"What sort of a job?"

He did not know that. Presumably it was the same job he now held, his present occupation. He had been strongly advised, when he left the rest home, never to worry about his work, never to take his work home with him, even in his thoughts. "You see," Hoag explained, "they work on the theory that amnesia is brought on by overwork and worry. I remember Dr. Rennault telling me emphatically that I must never talk shop, never let my mind dwell on the day's work. When I got home at night I was to forget such things and occupy myself with pleasant subjects. So I tried to do that."

"Hm-m-m. You certainly seem to have been successful, almost too successful for belief. See here-did they use hypnosis on you in treating you?"

"Why, I really don't know."

"Must have. How about it, Cyn? Does it fit?"

His wife nodded, "It fits. Posthypnosis. After five years of it he couldn't possibly think about his work after hours no matter how he tried. Seems like a very odd therapy, however."

Randall was satisfied. She handled matters psychological. Whether she got her answers from her rather extensive formal study, or straight out of her subconscious, he neither knew nor gave a hang. They seemed to work. "Something still bothers me," he added. "You go along for five years, apparently never knowing where or how you work. Why this sudden yearning to know?"

He told them the story of the dinner-table discussion, the strange substance under his nails, and the non-co-operative doctor. "I'm frightened," he said miserably. "I thought it was blood. And now I know it's something-worse."

Randall looked at him. "Why?"

Hoag moistened his lips. "Because-" He paused and looked helpless. "You'll help me, won't you?"

Randall straightened up. "This isn't in my line," he said. "You need help all right, but you need help from a psychiatrist. Amnesia isn't in my line. I'm a detective."

"But I want a detective. I want you to watch me and find out what I do."

Randall started to refuse; his wife interrupted. "I'm sure we can help you, Mr. Hoag. Perhaps you should see a psychiatrist-"

"Oh, no!"

"-but if you wish to be shadowed, it will be done."

"I don't like it," said Randall. "He doesn't need us."

Hoag laid his gloves on the side table and reached into his breast pocket. "I'll make it worth your while." He started counting out bills. "I brought only five hundred," he said anxiously. "Is it enough?"

"It will do," she told him.

"As a retainer," Randall added. He accepted the money and stuffed it into his side pocket. "By the way," he added, "if you don't know what you do during business hours and you have no more background than a hospital, where do you get the money?" He made his voice casual.

"Oh, I get paid every Sunday. Two hundred dollars, in bills."

When he had gone Randall handed the cash over to his wife. "Pretty little tickets," she said, smoothing them out and folding them neatly. "Teddy, why did you try to queer the pitch?"

"Me? I didn't-I was just running up the price. The old 'get-away-closer.' "

"That's what I thought. But you almost overdid it."

"Not at all. I knew I could depend on you. You wouldn't let him out of the house with a nickel left on him."

She smiled happily. "You're a nice man, Teddy. And we have so much in common. We both like money. How much of his story did you believe?"

"Not a damned word of it."

"Neither did I. He's rather a horrid little beast- I wonder what he's up to."

"I don't know, but I mean to find out."

"You aren't going to shadow him yourself, are you?"

"Why not? Why pay ten dollars a day to some ex-flattie to muff it?"

"Teddy, I don't like the set-up. Why should he be willing to pay this much"-she gestured with the bills-"to lead you around by the nose?"

"That is what I'm going to find out."

"You be careful. You remember 'The Red-headed League.' "

"The 'Red-headed-' Oh, Sherlock Holmes again. Be your age, Cyn."

"I am. You be yours. That little man is evil."

She left the room and cached the money. When she returned he was down on his knees by the chair in which Hoag had sat, busy with an insufflator. He looked around as she came in.

"Cyn-"

"Yes, Brain."

"You haven't touched this chair?"

"Of course not. I polished the arms as usual before he showed up."

"That's not what I mean. I meant since he left. Did he ever take off his gloves?"

"Wait a minute. Yes, I'm sure he did. I looked at his nails when he told his yarn about them."

"So did I, but I wanted to make sure I wasn't nuts. Take a look at that surface."

She examined the polished chair arms, now covered with a thin film of gray dust. The surface was unbroken-no fingerprints. "He must never have touched them- But he did. I saw him. When he said, 'I'm frightened,' he gripped both arms. I remember noticing

how blue his knuckles looked."

"Collodion, maybe?"

"Don't be silly. There isn't even a smear. You shook hands with him. Did he have collodion on his hands?"

"I don't think so. I think I would have noticed it. The Man with No Fingerprints. Let's call him a ghost and forget it."

"Ghosts don't pay out hard cash to be watched."

"No, they don't. Not that I ever heard of." He stood up and marched out into the breakfast nook, grabbed the phone and dialed long distance. "I want the Medical Exchange in Dubuque, uh-" He cupped the phone and called to his wife. "Say, honey, what the hell state is Dubuque in?"

Forty-five minutes and several calls later he slammed the instrument back into its cradle. "That tears it," he announced. "There is no St. George Rest Home in Dubuque. There never was and probably never will be. And no Dr. Rennault."

III

III

"There he is!" Cynthia Craig Randall nudged her husband.

He continued to hold the Tribune in front of his face as if reading it. "I see him," he said quietly. "Control yourself. Yuh'd think you had never tailed a man before. Easy does it."

"Teddy, do be careful."

"I will be." He glanced over the top of the paper and watched Jonathan Hoag come down the steps of the swank Gotham Apartments in which he made his home. When he left the shelter of the canopy he turned to the left. The time was exactly seven minutes before nine in the morning.

Randall stood up, folded his paper with care, and laid it down on the bus-station bench on which he had been waiting. He then turned toward the drugstore behind him, dropped a penny in the slot of a gum-vending machine in the shop's recessed doorway. In the mirror on the face of the machine he watched Hoag's unhurried progress down the far side of the street. With equal lack of rush he started after him, without crossing the street.

Cynthia waited on the bench until Randall had had time enough to get a half block ahead of her, then got up and followed him.

Hoag climbed on a bus at the second corner. Randall took advantage of a traffic-light change which held the bus at the corner, crossed against the lights, and managed to reach the bus just as it was pulling out. Hoag had gone up to the open deck; Randall seated himself down below.

Cynthia was too late to catch the bus, but not too late to note its number. She yoohoed at the first cruising taxi that came by, told the driver the number of the bus, and set out. They covered twelve blocks before the bus came in sight; three blocks later a red light enabled the driver to pull up alongside the bus. She spotted her husband inside; it was all she needed to know. She occupied the time for the rest of the ride in keeping the exact amount shown by the meter plus a quarter tip counted out in her hand.

When she saw them get out of the bus she told the driver to pull up. He did so, a few yards beyond the bus stop. Unfortunately they were headed in her direction; she did not wish to get out at once. She paid the driver the exact amount of the tariff while keeping one eye-the one in the back of her head-on the two men. The driver looked at her curiously.

"Do you chase after women?" she said suddenly.

"No, lady. I gotta family."

"My husband does," she said bitterly and untruthfully. "Here." She handed him the quarter.

Hoag and Randall were some yards past by now. She got out, headed for the shop just across the walk, and waited. To her surprise she saw Hoag turn and speak to her husband. She was too far away to hear what was said.

She hesitated to join them. The picture was wrong; it made her apprehensive-yet her husband seemed unconcerned. He listened quietly to what Hoag had to say, then the two of them entered the office building in front of which they had been standing.

She closed in at once. The lobby of the office building was as crowded as one might expect at such an hour in the morning. Six elevators, in bank, were doing rushing business. No. 2 had just slammed its doors. No. 3 had just started to load. They were not in No. 3; she posted herself near the cigar stand and quickly cased the place.

They were not in the lobby. Nor were they, she quickly made sure, in the barber shop which opened off the lobby. They had probably been the last passengers to catch Elevator No. 2 on its last trip. She had been watching the indicator for No. 2 without learning anything useful from it; the car had stopped at nearly every floor.

No. 2 was back down by now; she made herself one of its passengers, not the first nor the last, but one of the crowd. She did not name a floor, but waited until the last of the others had gotten off.

The elevator boy raised his eyebrows at her. "Floor, please!" he commanded.

She displayed a dollar bill. "I want to talk to you."

He closed the gates, accomplishing an intimate privacy. "Make it snappy," he said, glancing at the signals on his board.

"Two men got on together your last trip." She described them quickly and vividly. "I want to know what floor they got off at."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't know. This is the rush hour."

She added another bill. "Think. They were probably the last two to get aboard. Maybe they had to step out to let others off. The shorter one probably called out the floor."

He shook his head again. "Even if you made it a fin I couldn't tell you. During the rush Lady Godiva and her horse could ride this cage and I wouldn't know it. Now-do you want to get out or go down?"

"Down." She handed him one of the bills. "Thanks for trying."

He looked at it, shrugged, and pocketed it.

There was nothing to do but to take up her post in the lobby. She did so, fuming. Done in, she thought, done in by the oldest trick known for shaking a tail. Call yourself a dick and get taken in by the office-building trick! They were probably out of the building and gone by now, with Teddy wondering where she was and maybe needing her to back up his play.

She ought to take up tatting! Damn!

She bought a bottle of Pepsi-Cola at the cigar stand and drank it slowly, standing up. She was just wondering whether or not she could stand another, in the interest of protective coloration, when Randall appeared.

It took the flood of relief that swept over her to make her realize how much she had been afraid. Nevertheless, she did not break character. She turned her head away, knowing that her husband would see her and recognize the back of her neck quite as well as her face.

He did not come up and speak to her, therefore she took position on him again. Hoag she could not see anywhere; had she missed him herself, or what?

Randall walked down to the corner, glanced speculatively at a stand of taxis, then swung aboard a bus which had just drawn up to its stop. She followed him, allowing several others to mount it before her. The bus pulled away. Hoag had certainly not gotten aboard; she concluded that it was safe to break the routine.

He looked up as she sat down beside him. "Cyn! I thought we had lost you."

"You darn near did," she admitted. "Tell me-what's cookin'?"

"Wait till we get to the office."

She did not wish to wait, but she subsided. The bus they had entered took them directly to their office, a mere half-dozen blocks away. When they were there he unlocked the door of the tiny suite and went at once to the telephone. Their listed office phone was connected through the PBX of a secretarial service.

"Any calls?" he asked, then listened for a moment. "O.K. Send up the slips. No hurry."

He put the phone down and turned to his wife. "Well, babe, that's just about the easiest five hundred we ever promoted."

"You found out what he does with himself?"

"Of course."

"What does he do?"

"Guess."

She eyed him. "How would you like a paste in the snoot?"

"Keep your pants on. You wouldn't guess it, though it's simple enough. He works for a commercial jeweler-polishes gems. You know that stuff he found under his fingernails, that got him so upset?"

"Yes?"

"Nothing to it. Jeweler's rouge. With the aid of a diseased imagination he jumps to the conclusion it's dried blood. So we make half a grand."

"Mm-m-m. And that seems to be that. This place he works is somewhere in the Acme Building, I suppose."

"Room 1310. Or rather Suite 1310. Why didn't you tag along?"

She hesitated a little in replying. She did not want to admit how clumsy she had been, but the habit of complete honesty with each other was strong upon her. "I let myself get misled when Hoag spoke to you outside the Acme Building. I missed you at the elevator."

"I see. Well, I- Say! What did you say? Did you say Hoag spoke to me?"

"Yes, certainly."

"But he didn't speak to me. He never laid eyes on me. What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? What are you talking about! Just before the two of you went into the Acme Building, Hoag stopped, turned around and spoke to you. The two of you stood there chinning, which threw me off stride. Then you went into the lobby together, practically arm in arm."

He sat there, saying nothing, looking at her for a long moment. At last she said, "Don't sit there staring like a goon! That's what happened."

He said, "Cyn, listen to my story. I got off the bus after he did and followed him into the lobby. I used the old heel-and-toe getting into the elevator and swung behind him when he faced the front of the car. When he got out, I hung back, then fiddled around, half in and half out, asking the operator simpleton questions, and giving him long enough to get clear. When I turned the corner he was just disappearing into 1310. He never spoke to me. He never saw my face. I'm sure of that."

She was looking white, but all she said was, "Go on."

"When you go in this place there is a long glass partition on your right, with benches built up against it. You can look through the glass and see the jewelers, or jewelersmiths, or whatever you call 'em at work. Clever-good salesmanship. Hoag ducked right on in and by the time I passed down the aisle he was already on the other side, his coat off and a smock on, and one of those magnifying dinguses screwed into his eye. I went on past him to the desk-he never looked up- and asked for the manager. Presently a little birdlike guy shows up and I ask him if they have a man named Jonathan Hoag in their employ. He says yes and asks if I want to speak to him. I told him no, that I was an investigator for an insurance company. He wants to know if there is anything wrong and I told him that it was simply a routine investigation of what he had said on his application for a life policy, and how long had he worked there? Five years, he told me. He said that Hoag was one of the most reliable and skillful employees. I said fine, and asked if he thought Mr. Hoag could afford to carry as much as ten thousand. He says certainly and that they were always glad to see their employees invest in life insurance. Which was what I figured when I gave him the stall."

"As I went out I stopped in front of Hoag's bench and looked at him through the glass. Presently he looked up and stared at me, then looked down again. I'm sure I would have spotted it if he had recognized me. A case of complete skeezo, sheezo... how do you pronounce it?"

"Schizophrenia. Completely split personalities. But look, Teddy-"

"Yeah?"

"You did talk with him. I saw you."

"Now slow down, puss. You may think you did, but you must have been looking at two other guys. How far away were you?"

"Not that far. I was standing in front of Beecham's Bootery. Then comes Chez Louis, and then the entrance to the Acme Building. You had your back to the newspaper stand at the curb and were practically facing me. Hoag had his back to me, but I couldn't have been mistaken, as I had him in full profile when the two of you turned and went into the building together."

Randall looked exasperated. "I didn't speak with him. And I didn't go in with him; I followed him in."

"Edward Randall, don't give me that! I admit I lost the two of you, but that's no reason to rub it in by trying to make a fool of me."

Randall had been married too long and too comfortably not to respect danger signals. He got up, went to her, and put an arm around her. "Look, kid," he said, seriously and gently, "I'm not pulling your leg. We've got our wires crossed somehow, but I'm giving it to you just as straight as I can, the way I remember it."

She searched his eyes, then kissed him suddenly, and pulled away. "All right. We're both right and it's impossible. Come on."

" 'Come on' where?"

"To the scene of the crime. If I don't get this straightened out I'll never sleep again."

The Acme Building was just where they had left it. The Bootery was where it belonged, likewise Chez Louis, and the newsstand. He stood where she had stood and agreed that she could not have been mistaken in her identification unless blind drunk. But he was equally positive as to what he had done.

"You didn't pick up a snifter or two on the way, did you?" he suggested hopefully.

"Certainly not."

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do, too! We're finished with Hoag, aren't we? You've traced him down and that's that."

"Yes... why?"

"Take me up to where he works. I want to ask his daytime personality whether or not he spoke to you getting off the bus."

He shrugged. "O.K., kid. It's your party."

They went inside and entered the first free elevator. The starter clicked his castanets, the operator slammed his doors and said, "Floors, please."

Six, three, and nine. Randall waited until all those had been served before announcing, "Thirteen."

The operator looked around. "I can give you twelve and fourteen, buddy, and you can split 'em."

"Huh?"

"There ain't no thirteenth floor. If there was, nobody would rent on it."

"You must be mistaken. I was on it this morning."

The operator gave him a look of marked restraint. "See for yourself." He shot the car upward and halted it. "Twelve." He raised the car slowly, the figure 12 slid out of sight and was quickly replaced by another. "Fourteen. Which way will you have it?"

"I'm sorry," Randall admitted. "I've made a silly mistake. I really was in here this morning and I thought I had noted the floor."

"Might ha' been eighteen," suggested the operator. "Sometimes an eight will look like a three. Who you lookin' for?"

"Detheridge & Co. They're manufacturing jewelers."

The operator shook his head. "Not in this building. No jewelers, and no Detheridge."

"You're sure?"

Instead of answering, the operator dropped his car back to the tenth floor. "Try 1001. It's the office of the building."

No, they had no Detheridge. No, no jewelers, manufacturing or otherwise. Could it be the Apex Building the gentleman wanted, rather than the Acme? Randall thanked them and left, considerably shaken.

Cynthia had maintained complete silence during the proceedings. Now she said, "Darling—"

"Yeah. What is it?"

"We could go up to the top floor, and work down."

"Why bother? If they were here, the building office would know about it."

"So they would, but they might not be telling. There is something fishy about this whole business. Come to think about it, you could hide a whole floor of an office building by making its door look like a blank wall."

"No, that's silly. I'm just losing my mind, that's all. You better take me to a doctor."

"It's not silly and you're not losing your grip. How do you count height in an elevator? By floors. If you didn't see a floor, you would never realize an extra one was tucked in. We may be on the trail of something big." She did not really believe her own arguments, but she knew that he needed something to do.

He started to agree, then checked himself. "How about the stairways? You're bound to notice a floor from a staircase."

"Maybe there is some hanky-panky with the staircases, too. If so, we'll be looking for it. Come on."

But there was not. There were exactly the same number of steps-eighteen-between floors twelve and fourteen as there were between any other pair of adjacent floors. They worked, down from the top floor and examined the lettering on each frosted-glass door. This took them rather long, as Cynthia would not listen to Randall's suggestion that they split up and take half a floor apiece. She wanted him in her sight.

No thirteenth floor and nowhere a door which announced the tenancy of a firm of manufacturing jewelers, neither Detheridge & Co. nor any other name. There was no time to do more than read the firm names on the doors; to have entered each office, on one pretext or another, would have taken much more than a day.

Randall stared thoughtfully at a door labeled: "Pride, Greenway, Hamilton, Steinbolt, Carter & Greenway, Attorneys at Law." "By this time," he mused, "they could have changed the lettering on the door."

"Not on that one," she pointed out. "Anyhow, if it was a set-up, they could have cleaned out the whole joint, too. Changed it so you wouldn't recognize it." Nevertheless she stared at the innocent-seeming letters thoughtfully. An office building was a terribly remote and secret place. Soundproof walls, Venetian blinds-and a meaningless firm name. Anything could go in such a place-anything. Nobody would know. Nobody would care. No one would ever notice. No policeman on his beat, neighbors as remote as the moon, not even scrub service if the tenant did not wish it. As long as the rent was paid on time, the management would leave a tenant alone. Any crime you fancied and park the bodies in the closet.

She shivered. "Come on, Teddy. Let's hurry."

They covered the remaining floors as quickly as possible and came out at last in the lobby. Cynthia felt warmed by the sight of faces and sunlight, even though they had not found the missing firm. Randall stopped on the steps and looked around. "Do you suppose we could have been in a different building?" he said doubtfully.

"Not a chance. See that cigar stand? I practically lived there. I know every flyspeck on the counter."

"Then what's the answer?"

"Lunch is the answer. Come on."

"O.K. But I'm going to drink mine."

She managed to persuade him to encompass a plate of corned-beef hash after the third whiskey sour. That and two cups of coffee left him entirely sober, but unhappy. "Cyn-

"Yes, Teddy."

"What happened to me?"

She answered slowly. "I think you were made the victim of an amazing piece of hypnosis."

"So do I-now. Either that, or I've finally cracked up. So call it hypnosis. I want to know why."

She made doodles with her fork. "I'm not sure that I want to know. You know what I would like to do, Teddy?"

"What?"

"I would like to send Mr. Hoag's five hundred dollars back to him with a message that we can't help him, so we are returning his money."

He stared at her. "Send the money back? Good heavens!"

Her face looked as if she had been caught making an indecent suggestion, but she went on stubbornly. "I know. Just the same, that's what I would like to do. We can make enough on divorce cases and skip-tracing to eat on. We don't have to monkey with a thing like this."

"You talk like five hundred was something you'd use to tip a waiter."

"No, I don't. I just don't think it's enough to risk your neck-or your sanity-for. Look, Teddy, somebody is trying to get us in the nine hole; before we go any further, I want to know why."

"And I want to know why, too. Which is why I'm not willing to drop the matter. Damn it, I don't like having shenanigans put over on me."

"What are you going to tell Mr. Hoag?"

He ran a hand through his hair, which did not matter as it was already mussed. "I don't know. Suppose you talk to him. Give him a stall."

"That's a fine idea. That's a swell idea. I'll tell him you've broken your leg but you'll be all right tomorrow."

"Don't be like that, Cyn. You know you can handle him."

"All right. But you've got to promise me this, Teddy."

"Promise what?"

"As long as we're on this case we do everything together."

"Don't we always?"

"I mean really together. I don't want you out of my sight any of the time."

"But see here, Cyn, that may not be practical."

"Promise."

"O.K., O.K. I promise."

"That's better." She relaxed and looked almost happy. "Hadn't we better get back to the office?"

"The hell with it. Let's go out and take in a triple feature."

"O.K., Brain." She gathered up her gloves and purse.

The movies failed to amuse him, although they had selected an all-Western bill, a fare of which he was inordinately fond. But the hero seemed as villainous as the foreman, and the mysterious masked riders, for once, appeared really sinister. And he kept seeing the thirteenth floor of the Acme Building, the long glass partition behind which the craftsmen labored, and the little dried-up manager of Detheridge & Co. Damn it-could a man be hypnotized into believing that he had seen anything as detailed as that?

Cynthia hardly noticed the pictures. She was preoccupied with the people around them. She found herself studying their faces guardedly whenever the lights went up. If they looked like this when they were amusing themselves, what were they like when they were unhappy? With rare exceptions the faces looked, at the best, stolidly uncomplaining. Discontent, the grim marks of physical pain, lonely unhappiness, frustration, and stupid meanness, she found in numbers, but rarely a merry face. Even Teddy, whose habitual debonair gaiety was one of his chief virtues, was looking dour-with reason, she conceded. She wondered what were the reasons for those other unhappy masks.

She recalled having seen a painting entitled "Subway." It showed a crowd pouring out the door of an underground train while another crowd attempted to force its way in. Getting on or getting off, they were plainly in a hurry, yet it seemed to give them no pleasure. The picture had no beauty in itself; it was plain that the artist's single purpose had been to make a bitter criticism of a way of living.

She was glad when the show was over and they could escape to the comparative freedom of the street. Randall flagged a taxi and they started home.

"Teddy-"

"Uh?"

"Did you notice the faces of the people in the theater?"

"No, not especially. Why?"

"Not a one of them looked as if they got any fun out of life."

"Maybe they don't."

"But why don't they? Look-we have fun, don't we?"

"You bet."

"We always have fun. Even when we were broke and trying to get the business started we had fun. We went to bed smiling and got up happy. We still do. What's the answer?"

He smiled for the first time since the search for the thirteenth floor and pinched her. "It's fun living with you, kid."

"Thanks. And right back at you. You know, when I was a little girl, I had a funny idea."

"Spill it."

"I was happy myself, but as I grew up I could see that my mother wasn't. And my father wasn't. My teachers weren't-most of the adults around me weren't happy. I got an idea in my head that when you grew up you found out something that kept you from ever being happy again. You know how a kid is treated: 'You're not old enough to understand, dear,' and 'Wait till you grow up, darling, and then you'll understand.' I used to wonder what the secret was they were keeping from me and I'd listen behind doors to try and see if I couldn't find out."

"Born to be a detective!"

"Shush. But I could see that, whatever it was, it didn't make the grown-ups happy; it made 'em sad. Then I used to pray never to find out." She gave a little shrug. "I guess I never did."

He chuckled. "Me neither. A professional Peter Pan, that's me. Just as happy as if I had good sense."

She placed a small gloved hand on his arm. "Don't laugh, Teddy. That's what scares me about this Hoag case. I'm afraid that if we go ahead with it we really will find out what it is the grown-ups know. And then we'll never laugh again."

He started to laugh, then looked at her hard. "Why, you're really serious, aren't you?" He chuckled her under the chin. "Be your age, kid. What you need is dinner-and a drink."

IV

IV

After dinner, Cynthia was just composing in her mind what she would say to Mr. Hoag on telephoning him when the house buzzer rang. She went to the entrance of their apartment and took up the house phone. "Yes?"

Almost immediately she turned to her husband and voicelessly shaped the words, "It's Mr. Hoag." He raised his brows, put a cautioning finger to his lips, and with an exaggerated tiptoe started for the bedroom. She nodded.

"Just a moment, please. There-that's better. We seem to have had a bad connection. Now who is it, please?"

"Oh... Mr. Hoag. Come up, Mr. Hoag." She punched the button controlling the electrical outer lock.

He came in bobbing nervously. "I trust this is not an intrusion, but I have been so upset that I felt I couldn't wait for a report."

She did not invite him to sit down. "I am sorry," she said sweetly, "to have to disappoint you. Mr. Randall has not yet come home."

"Oh." He seemed pathetically disappointed, so much so that she felt a sudden sympathy. Then she remembered what her husband had been put through that morning and froze up again.

"Do you know," he continued, "when he will be home?"

"That I couldn't say. Wives of detectives, Mr. Hoag, learn not to wait up."

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, I presume I should not impose on you further. But I am anxious to speak with him."

"I'll tell him so. Was there anything in particular you had to say to him? Some new data, perhaps?"

"No-" he said slowly. "No, I suppose... it all seems so silly!"

"What does, Mr. Hoag?"

He searched her face. "I wonder- Mrs. Randall, do you believe in possession?"

"Possession?"

"Possession of human souls-by devils."

"I can't say that I've thought much about it," she answered cautiously. She wondered if Teddy were listening, if he could reach her quickly if she screamed.

Hoag was fumbling strangely at his shirt front; he got a button opened; she whiffed an acrid, unclean smell, then he was holding out something in his hand, something fastened by a string around his neck under his shirt.

She forced herself to look at it and with intense relief recognized it for what it was—a cluster of fresh cloves of garlic, worn as a necklace. "Why do you wear it?" she asked.

"It does seem silly, doesn't it?" he admitted. "Giving way to superstition like that—but it comforts me. I've had the most frightening feeling of being watched—"

"Naturally. We've been— Mr. Randall has been watching you, by your instructions."

"Not that. A man in a mirror—" He hesitated.

"A man in a mirror?"

"Your reflection in a mirror watches you, but you expect it; it doesn't worry you. This is something new, as if someone were trying to get at me, waiting for a chance. Do you think I'm crazy?" he concluded suddenly.

Her attention was only half on his words, for she had noticed something when he held out the garlic which had held her attention. His fingertips were ridged and grooved in whorls and loops and arches like anyone else's—and they were certainly not coated with collodion tonight. She decided to get a set of prints for Teddy. "No, I don't think you're crazy," she said soothingly, "but I think you've let yourself worry too much. You should relax. Wouldn't you like a drink?"

"I would be grateful for a glass of water."

Water or liquor, it was the glass she was interested in. She excused herself and went out to the kitchen where she selected a tall glass with smooth, undecorated sides. She polished it carefully, added ice and water with equal care not to wet the sides. She carried it in, holding it near the bottom.

Intentionally or unintentionally, he had outmaneuvered her. He was standing in front of the mirror near the door, where he had evidently been straightening his tie and tidying himself and returning the garlic to its hide-away. When he turned around at her approach she saw that he had put his gloves back on.

She invited him to sit down, thinking that if he did so he would remove his gloves. But he said, "I've imposed on you too long as it is." He drank half the glass of water, thanked her, and left silently.

Randall came in. "He's gone?"

She turned quickly. "Yes, he's gone. Teddy, I wish you would do your own dirty work. He makes me nervous. I wanted to scream for you to come in."

"Steady, old girl."

"That's all very well, but I wish we had never laid eyes on him." She went to a window and opened it wide.

"Too late for Herpicide. We're in it now." His eye rested on the glass. "Say—did you get his prints?"

"No such luck. I think he read my mind."

"Too bad."

"Teddy, what do you intend to do about him now?"

"I've got an idea, but let me work it out first. What was this song and dance he was giving you about devils and a man in a mirror watching him?"

"That wasn't what he said."

"Maybe I was the man in the mirror. I watched him in one this morning."

"Huh-uh. He was just using a metaphor. He's got the jumps." She turned suddenly, thinking that she had seen something move over her shoulder. But there was nothing there but the furniture and the wall. Probably just a reflection in the glass, she decided, and said nothing about it. "I've got 'em, too," she added. "As for devils, he's all the devil I want. You know what I'd like?"

"What?"

"A big stiff drink and early to bed."

"Good idea." He wandered out into the kitchen and started mixing the prescription. "Want a sandwich too?"

Randall found himself standing in his pajamas in the living room of their apartment, facing the mirror that hung near the outer door. His reflection-no, not his reflection, for the image was properly dressed in conservative clothes appropriate to a solid man of business-the image spoke to him.

"Edward Randall."

"Huh?"

"Edward Randall, you are summoned. Here-take my hand. Pull up a chair and you will find you can climb through easily."

It seemed a perfectly natural thing to do, in fact the only reasonable thing to do. He placed a straight chair under the mirror, took the hand offered him, and scrambled through. There was a washstand under the mirror on the far side, which gave him a leg down. He and his companion were standing in a small, white tiled washroom such as one finds in office suites.

"Hurry," said his companion. "The others are all assembled."

"Who are you?"

"The name is Phipps," the other said, with a slight bow. "This way, please."

He opened the door of the washroom and gave Randall a gentle shove. He found himself in a room that was obviously a board room-with a meeting in session, for the long table was surrounded by about dozen men. They all had their eyes on him.

"Up you go, Mr. Randall."

Another shove, not quite so gentle and he was sitting in the middle of the polished table. Its hard top felt cold through the thin cotton of his pajama trousers.

He drew the jacket around him tightly and shivered. "Cut it out," he said. "Let me down from here. I'm not dressed." He tried to get up, but he seemed unable to accomplish that simple movement.

Somebody behind him chuckled. A voice said, "He's not very fat." Someone answered, "That doesn't matter, for this job."

He was beginning to recognize the situation-the last time it had been Michigan Boulevard without his trousers. More than once it had found him back in school again, not only undressed, but lessons unprepared, and late in the bargain. Well, he knew how to beat it-close your eyes and reach down for the covers, then wake up safe in bed.

He closed his eyes.

"No use to hide, Mr. Randall. We can see you and you are simply wasting time."

He opened his eyes. "What's the idea?" he said savagely. "Where am I? Why'dju bring me here? What's going on?"

Facing him at the head of the table was a large man. Standing, he must have measured six feet two at least, and he was broad-shouldered and heavy-boned in proportion. Fat was laid over his huge frame liberally. But his hands were slender and well shaped and beautifully manicured; his features were not large and seemed smaller, being framed in fat jowls and extra chins. His eyes were small and merry; his mouth smiled a good deal and he had a trick of compressing his lips and shoving them out.

"One thing at a time, Mr. Randall," he answered jovially. "As to where you are, this is the thirteenth floor of the Acme Building-you remember." He chuckled, as if they shared a private joke. "As to what goes on, this is a meeting of the board of Detheridge & Co. I"-he managed to bow sitting down, over the broad expanse of his belly-"am R. Jefferson Stoles, chairman of the board, at your service, sir."

"But-"

"Please, Mr. Randall-introductions first. On my right. Mr. Townsend."

"How do you do, Mr. Randall."

"How do you do," Randall answered mechanically. "Look here, this has gone far-"

"Then Mr. Gravesby, Mr. Wells, Mr. Yoakum, Mr. Printemps, Mr. Jones. Mr. Phipps you have met. He is our secretary. Beyond him is seated Mr. Reifsnider and Mr. Snyder-no relation. And finally Mr. Parker and Mr. Crewes. Mr. Potiphar, I am sorry to say, could not attend, but we have a quorum."

Randall tried to get up again, but the table top seemed unbelievably slippery. "I don't care," he said bitterly, "whether you have a quorum or a gang fight. Let me out of here."

"Tut, Mr. Randall. Tut. Don't you want your questions answered?"

"Not that bad. Damn it, let me-"

"But they really must be answered. This is a business session and you are the business at hand."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You are, shall we say, a minor item on the agenda, but one which must be cleared up. We do not like your activity, Mr. Randall. You really must cease it."

Before Randall could answer, Stoles shoved a palm in his direction. "Don't be hasty, Mr. Randall. Let me explain. Not all of your activities. We do not care how many blondes you plant in hotel rooms to act as complacent correspondents in divorce cases, nor how many wires you tap, nor letters you open. There is only one activity of yours we are concerned with. I refer to Mr. Hoag." He spat out the last word.

Randall could feel a stir of uneasiness run through the room.

"What about Mr. Hoag?" he demanded. There was the stir again. Stoles' face no longer even pretended to smile.

"Let us refer to him hereafter," he said, "as 'your client.' It comes to this, Mr. Randall. We have other plans for Mr... for your client. You must leave him alone. You must forget him, you must never see him again."

Randall stared back, uncowed. "I've never welshed on a client yet. I'll see you in hell first."

"That," admitted Stoles, shoving out his lips, "is a distinct possibility, I grant you, but one that neither you nor I would care to contemplate, save as a bombastic metaphor. Let us be reasonable. You are a reasonable man, I know, and my confreres and I, we are reasonable creatures, too. Instead of trying to coerce or cajole you I want to tell you a story, so that you may understand why."

"I don't care to listen to any stories. I'm leaving."

"Are you really? I think not. And you will listen!"

He pointed a finger at Randall; Randall attempted to reply, found that he could not. "This," he thought, "is the damndest no-pants dream I ever had. Shouldn't eat before going to bed-knew better."

"In the Beginning," Stoles stated, "there was the Bird." He suddenly covered his face with his hands; all the others gathered around the table did likewise.

The Bird-Randall felt a sudden vision of what those two simple words meant when mouthed by this repulsive fat man; no soft and downy chick, but a bird of prey, strong-winged and rapacious-unwinking eyes, whey-colored and staring-purple wattles-but most especially he saw its feet, bird feet, covered with yellow scales, fleshless and taloned and foul from use. Obscene and terrible-

Stoles uncovered his face. "The Bird was alone. Its great wings beat the empty depths of space where there was none to see. But deep within It was the Power and the Power was Life. It looked to the north when there was no north; It looked to the south when there was no south; east and west It looked, and up and down. Then out of the nothingness and out of Its Will It wove the nest.

"The nest was broad and deep and strong. In the nest It laid one hundred eggs. It stayed on the nest and brooded the eggs, thinking Its thoughts, for ten thousand thousand years. When the time was ripe It left the nest and hung it about with lights that the fledglings might see. It watched and waited.

"From each of the hundred eggs a hundred Sons of the Bird were hatched-ten thousand strong. Yet so wide and deep was the nest there was room and to spare for each of them-a kingdom apiece and each was a king-king over the things that creep and crawl and swim and fly and go on all fours, things that had been born from the crevices of the nest, out of the warmth and the waiting.

"Wise and cruel was the Bird, and wise and cruel were the Sons of the Bird. For twice ten thousand thousand years they fought and ruled and the Bird was pleased. Then there were some who decided that they were as wise and strong as the Bird Itself. Out of the stuff of the nest they created creatures like unto themselves and breathed in their nostrils, that they might have sons to serve them and fight for them. But the sons of the Sons were not wise and strong and cruel, but weak and soft and stupid. The Bird was not pleased.

"Down It cast Its Own Sons and let them be chained by the softly stupid- Stop fidgeting, Mr. Randall! I know this is difficult for your little mind, but for once you really must think about something longer than your nose and wider than your mouth, believe me!"

"The stupid and the weak could not hold the Sons of the Bird; therefore, the Bird placed among them, here and there, others more powerful, more cruel, and more shrewd, who by craft and cruelty and deceit could circumvent the attempts of the Sons to break free. Then the Bird sat back, well content, and waited for the game to play itself out.

"The game is being played. Therefore, we cannot permit you to interfere with your client, nor to assist him in any way. You see that, don't you?"

"I don't see," shouted Randall, suddenly able to speak, "a damn thing! To hell with the bunch of you! This joke has gone far enough."

"Silly and weak and stupid," Stoles sighed. "Show him, Mr. Phipps."

Phipps got up, placed a brief case on the table, opened it, and drew something from it, which he shoved under Randall's nose—a mirror.

"Please look this way, Mr. Randall," he said politely.

Randall looked at himself in the mirror.

"What are you thinking of, Mr. Randall?"

The image faded, he found himself staring into his own bedroom, as if from a slight height. The room was dark, but he could plainly see his wife's head on her pillow. His own pillow was vacant.

She stirred, and half turned over, sighing softly. Her lips were parted a trifle and smiling faintly, as if what she dreamed were pleasant.

"See, Mr. Randall?" said Stoles. "You wouldn't want anything to happen to her, now, would you?"

"Why, you dirty, low-down—"

"Softly, Mr. Randall, softly. And that will be enough from you. Remember your own interests—and hers." Stoles turned away from him. "Remove him, Mr. Phipps."

"Come, Mr. Randall." He felt again that undignified shove from behind, then he was flying through the air with the scene tumbling to pieces around him.

He was wide-awake in his own bed, flat on his back and covered with cold sweat.

Cynthia sat up. "What's the matter, Teddy?" she said sleepily. "I heard you cry out."

"Nothing. Bad dream, I guess. Sorry I woke you."

" 'S all right. Stomach upset?"

"A little, maybe."

"Take some bicarb."

"I will." He got up, went to the kitchen and fixed himself a small dose. His mouth was a little sour, he realized, now that he was awake; the soda helped matters.

Cynthia was already asleep when he got back; he slid into bed quietly. She snuggled up to him without waking, her body warming his. Quickly he was asleep, too.

" 'Never mind trouble! Fiddle-de-dee! " He broke off singing suddenly, turned the shower down sufficiently to permit ordinary conversation, and said, "Good morning, beautiful!"

Cynthia was standing in the door of the bathroom, rubbing one eye and looking blearily at him with the other. "People who sing before breakfast—good morning."

"Why shouldn't I sing? It's a beautiful day and I've had a beautiful sleep. I've got a new shower song. Listen."

"Don't bother."

"This is a song," he continued, unperturbed, "dedicated to a Young Man Who Has Announced His Intention of Going Out into the Garden to Eat Worms."

"Teddy, you're nasty."

"No, I'm not. Listen." He turned the shower on more fully. "You have to have the water running to get the full effect," he explained. "First verse:

"I don't think I'll go out in the garden;
I'll make the worms come in to me!
If I have to be miser'ble,
I might as well be so comjort'bly!"
He paused for effect. "Chorus," he announced.
"Never mind trouble! Fiddle-de-dee!
Eat your worms with Vitamin B!
Follow this rule and you will be
Still eating worms at a hundred 'n' three!"
He paused again. "Second verse," he stated. "Only I haven't thought up a second verse yet. Shall I repeat the first verse?"
"No, thanks. Just duck out of that shower and give me a chance at it."
"You don't like it," he accused her.
"I didn't say I didn't."
"Art is rarely appreciated," he mourned. But he got out.
He had the coffee and the orange juice waiting by the time she appeared in the kitchen. He handed her a glass of the fruit juice.
"Teddy, you're a darling. What do you want in exchange for all this coddling?"
"You. But not now. I'm not only sweet, I'm brainy."
"So?"
"Uh-huh. Look- I've figured out what to do with friend Hoag."
"Hoag? Oh, dear!"
"Look out-you'll spill it!" He took the glass from her and set it down. "Don't be silly, babe. What's gotten into you?"
"I don't know, Teddy. I just feel as if we were tackling the kingpin of Cicero with a pea shooter."
"I shouldn't have talked business before breakfast. Have your coffee-you'll feel better."
"All right. No toast for me, Teddy. What's your brilliant idea?"
"It's this," he explained, while crunching toast. "Yesterday we tried to keep out of his sight in order not to shake him back into his nighttime personality. Right?"
"Uh-huh."
"Well, today we don't have to. We can stick to him like a leech, both of us, practically arm in arm. If it interferes with the daytime half of his personality, it doesn't matter, because we can lead him to the Acme Building. Once there, habit will take him where he usually goes. Am I right?"
"I don't know, Teddy. Maybe. Amnesia personalities are funny things. He might just drift into a confused state."
"You don't think it will work?"
"Maybe it will, maybe it won't. But as long as you plan for us to stay close together, I'm willing to try it-if you won't give up the whole matter."
He ignored the condition she placed on it. "Fine. I'll give the old buzzard a ring and tell him to wait for us at his apartment." He reached across the breakfast table and grabbed the phone, dialed it and talked with Hoag. "He's certainly a June bug, that one," he said as he put the phone down. "At first he couldn't place me at all. Then all of a sudden he seemed to click and everything was all right. Ready to go, Cyn?"
"Half a sec."
"O. K." He got up and went into the living room, whistling softly.
The whistling broke off; he came quickly back into the kitchen. "Cyn-"
"What's the matter, Teddy?"

"Come into the living room-please!"

She hurried to do so, suddenly apprehensive at the sight of his face. He pointed to a straight chair which had been pulled over to a point directly under the mirror near the outer door. "Cyn-how did that get where it is?"

"That chair? Why, I pulled a chair over there to straighten the mirror just before I went to bed. I must have left it there."

"Mm-m-m- I suppose you must have. Funny I didn't notice it when I turned out the light."

"Why does it worry you? Think somebody might have gotten into the apartment last night?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure-that's what I was thinking." But his brow was still wrinkled.

Cynthia looked at him, then went back into the bedroom. There she gathered up her purse, went through it rapidly, then opened a small, concealed drawer in her dressing table. "If anyone did manage to get in, they didn't get much. Got your wallet? Everything in it? How about your watch?"

He made a quick check and reported, "They're all right. You must have left the chair there and I just didn't notice it. Ready to go?"

"Be right with you."

He said no more about it. Privately he was thinking what an involved mess a few subconscious memories and a club sandwich just before turning in could make. He must have noticed the chair just before turning out the light-hence its appearance in the nightmare. He dismissed the matter.

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Hoag was waiting for them. "Come in," he said. "Come in. Welcome, madame, to my little hide-away. Will you sit down? Have we time for a cup of tea? I'm afraid, he added apologetically, "that I haven't coffee in the house."

"I guess we have," agreed Randall. "Yesterday you left the house at eight fifty-three and it's only eight thirty-five now. I think we ought to leave at the same time."

"Good." Hoag bustled away, to return at once with a tea service on a tray, which he placed on a table at Cynthia's knees. "Will you pour, Mrs. Randall? It's Chinese tea," he added. "My own blend."

"I'd be pleased." He did not look at all sinister this morning, she was forced to admit. He was just a fussy little bachelor with worry lines around his eyes-and a most exquisite apartment. His pictures were good, just how good she had not the training to tell, but they looked like originals. There were not too many of them, either, she noticed with approval. Arty little bachelors were usually worse than old maids for crowding a room full of too much.

Not Mr. Hoag's flat. It had an airy perfection to it as pleasing, in its way, as a Brahms waltz. She wanted to ask him where he had gotten his drapes.

He accepted a cup of tea from her, cradled it in his hand and sniffed the aroma before sipping from it. He then turned to Randall. "I'm afraid, sir, that we are off on a wild-goose chase this morning."

"Perhaps. Why do you think so?"

"Well, you see, I really am at a loss as to what to do next. Your telephone call- I was preparing my morning tea-I don't keep a servant-as usual, when you called. I suppose I am more or less in a brown fog in the early mornings-absent-minded, you know, just doing the things one does when one gets up, making one's toilet and all that with one's thoughts elsewhere. When you telephoned I was quite bemused and it took me a moment to recall who you were and what business we had with each other. In a way the conversation cleared my head, made me consciously aware of myself, that is to say, but now-" He shrugged helplessly. "Now I haven't the slightest idea of what I am to do next."

Randall nodded. "I had that possibility in mind when I phoned you. I don't claim to be a psychologist but it seemed possible that your transition from your nighttime self to your daytime self took place as you left your apartment and that any interruption in your routine might throw you off."

"Then why-"

"It won't matter. You see, we shadowed you yesterday; we know where you go."

"You do? Tell me, sir! Tell me."

"Not so fast. We lost track of you at the last minute. What I had in mind is this; We could guide you along the same track, right up to the point where we lost track of you yesterday. At that point I am hoping that your habitual routine will carry you on through-and we will be in right at your heels."

"You say 'we.' Does Mrs. Randall assist you in this?"

Randall hesitated, realizing that he had been caught out in a slight prevarication. Cynthia moved in and took over the ball.

"Not ordinarily, Mr. Hoag, but this seemed like an exceptional case. We felt that you would not enjoy having your private affairs looked into by the ordinary run of hired operator, so Mr. Randall has undertaken to attend to your case personally, with my help when necessary."

"Oh, I say, that's awfully kind of you!"

"Not at all."

"But it is-it is. But, uh, in that case-I wonder if I have paid you enough. Do not the services of the head of the firm come a little higher?"

Hoag was looking at Cynthia; Randall signaled to her an emphatic "Yes"-which she chose to ignore. "What you have already paid, Mr. Hoag, seems sufficient. If additional involvements come up later, we can discuss them then."

"I suppose so." He paused and pulled at his lower lip. "I do appreciate your thoughtfulness in keeping my affairs to yourselves. I shouldn't like-" He turned suddenly to Randall. "Tell me-what would your attitude be if it should develop that my daytime life is scandalous?" The word seemed to hurt him.

"I can keep scandal to myself."

"Suppose it were worse than that. Suppose it were-criminal. Beastly."

Randall stopped to choose his words. "I am licensed by the State of Illinois. Under that license I am obliged to regard myself as a special police officer in a limited sense. I certainly could not cover up any major felony. But it's not my business to turn clients in for any ordinary peccadillo. I can assure you that it would have to be something pretty serious for me to be willing to turn over a client to the police."

"But you can't assure me that you would not do so?"

"No," he said flatly.

Hoag sighed. "I suppose I'll just have to trust to your good judgment." He held up his right hand and looked at his nails. "No. No, I can't risk it. Mr. Randall, suppose you did find something you did not approve of-couldn't you just call me up and tell me that you were dropping the case?"

"No."

He covered his eyes and did not answer at once. When he did his voice was barely audible. "You've found nothing-yet?" Randall shook his head. "Then perhaps it is wiser to drop the matter now. Some things are better never known."

His evident distress and helplessness, combined with the favorable impression his apartment had made on her, aroused in Cynthia a sympathy which she would have thought impossible the evening before. She leaned toward him. "Why should you be so distressed, Mr. Hoag? You have no reason to think that you have done anything to be afraid of-have you?"

"No. No, nothing really. Nothing but an overpowering apprehension."

"But why?"

"Mrs. Randall, have you ever heard a noise behind you and been afraid to look around? Have you ever awakened in the night and kept your eyes tightly shut rather than find out what it was that had startled you? Some evils reach their full effect only when acknowledged and faced.

"I don't dare face this one," he added. "I thought that I did, but I was mistaken."

"Come now," she said kindly, "facts are never as bad as our fears-"

"Why do you say so? Why shouldn't they be much worse?"

"Why, because they just aren't." She stopped, suddenly conscious that her Pollyanna saying had no truth in it, that it was the sort of thing adults use to pacify children. She thought of her own mother, who had gone to the hospital, fearing an appendectomy-which her friends and loving family privately diagnosed as hypochondria-there to die, of cancer.

No, the facts were frequently worse than our most nervous fears.

Still, she could not agree with him. "Suppose we look at it in the worst possible light," she suggested. "Suppose you have been doing something criminal, while in your memory lapses. No court in the State would hold you legally responsible for your actions."

He looked at her wildly. "No. No, perhaps they would not. But you know what they would do? You do, don't you? Have you any idea what they do with the criminally insane?"

"I certainly do," she answered positively. "They receive the same treatment as any other psycho patient. They aren't discriminated against. I know; I've done field work at the State Hospital."

"Suppose you have-you looked at it from the outside. Have you any idea what it feels like from the inside? Have you ever been placed in a wet pack? Have you ever had a guard put you to bed? Or force you to eat? Do you know what it's like to have a key turned in a lock every time you make a move? Never to have any privacy no matter how much you need it?"

He got up and began to pace. "But that isn't the worst of it. It's the other patients. Do you imagine that a man, simply because his own mind is playing him tricks, doesn't recognize insanity in others? Some of them drool and some of them have habits too beastly to tell of. And they talk, they talk, they talk. Can you imagine lying in a bed, with the sheet bound down, and a thing in the next bed that keeps repeating, 'The little bird flew up and then flew away; the little bird flew up and then flew away; the little bird flew up, and then flew away-' "

"Mr. Hoag!" Randall stood up and took him by the arm. "Mr. Hoag-control yourself! That's no way to behave."

Hoag stopped, looking bewildered. He looked from one face to the other and an expression of shame came over him. "I... I'm sorry, Mrs. Randall," he said. "I quite forgot myself. I'm not myself today. All this worry-

"It's all right, Mr. Hoag," she said stiffly. But her earlier revulsion had returned.

"It's not entirely all right," Randall amended. "I think the time has come to get a number of things cleared up. There has been entirely too much going on that I don't understand and I think it is up to you, Mr. Hoag, to give me a few plain answers."

The little man seemed honestly at a loss. "I surely will, Mr. Randall, if there is anything I can answer. Do you feel that I have not been frank with you?"

"I certainly do. First-when were you in a hospital for the criminally insane?"

"Why, I never was. At least, I don't think I ever was. I don't remember being in one."

"Then why all this hysterical balderdash you have been spouting the past five minutes? Were you just making it up?"

"Oh, no! That... that was... that referred to St. George Rest Home. It had nothing to do with a... with such a hospital."

"St. George Rest Home, eh? We'll come back to that. Mr. Hoag, tell me what happened yesterday."

"Yesterday? During the day? But Mr. Randall, you know I can't tell you what happened during the day."

"I think you can. There has been some damnable skulduggery going on and you're the center of it. When you stopped me in front of the Acme Building-what did you say to me?"

"The Acme Building? I know nothing of the Acme Building. Was I there?"

"You're damned right you were there and you pulled some sort of a shenanigan on me, drugged me or doped me, or something. Why?"

Hoag looked from Randall's implacable face to that of his wife. But her face was impassive; she was having none of it. He turned hopelessly back to Randall. "Mr. Randall, believe me-I don't know what you are talking about. I may have been at the Acme Building. If I were and if I did anything to you, I know nothing of it."

His words were so grave, so solemnly sincere in their sound that Randall was unsettled in his own conviction. And yet-damn it, somebody had led him up an alley. He shifted his approach. "Mr. Hoag, if you have been as sincere with me as you claim to be, you won't mind what I'm going to do next." He drew from the inner pocket of his coat a silver cigarette case, opened it, and polished the mirrorlike inner surface of the cover with his handkerchief. "Now, Mr. Hoag, if you please."

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