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A DESKFUL OF GIRLS

novel by

Fritz Leiber



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(*illustrating "A Deskful of Girls"*)

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Although by profession a writer and editor, Fritz Leiber has many connections with show business. Back in the days when he signed his stories "Fritz Leiber, Jr.," his father was a noted Shakespearean actor (whose reading of Lear's curse upon his daughters is one of the most exciting memories in my four decades of theater-going) and later a distinguished interpreter of character roles in films. Young Leiber played minor parts in his father's company, and only a few years ago starred in a Chicago production of OTHELLO. And if (like me) you stay up late to watch old horror movies, you may come across something called WEIRD WOMAN that derives remotely from Leiber's magnificent CONJURE WIFE. Now Leiber examines one of the strangest phenomena of the entertainment business: the sex goddess—in a terrifyingly vivid story of a psychologist with a craving for power, a weakness for occultism, and a unique office fixture:

A Deskful of Girls

by FRITZ LEIBER

YES, I SAID GHOSTGIRLS, SEXY ONES. Personally I never in my life saw any ghosts except the sexy kind, though I saw enough of those I'll tell you, but only for one evening, in the dark of course, with the assistance of an eminent (I should also say notorious) psychologist. It was an interesting experience, to put it mildly, and it introduced me to an unknown field of psychophysiology, but under no circumstances would I want to repeat it.

But ghosts are supposed to be frightening? Well, who ever said

that sex isn't? It is to the neophyte, female or male, and don't let any of the latter try to kid you. For one thing, sex opens up the unconscious mind, which isn't exactly a picnic area. Sex is a force and rite that is basic, primal; and the caveman or cavewoman in each of us is a truth bigger than the jokes and cartoons about it. Sex was behind the witchcraft religion, the sabbats were sexual orgies. The witch was a sexual creature. So is the ghost.

After all, what is a ghost, according to all traditional views, but the

shell of a human being—an animated skin? And the skin is all sex—it's touch, the boundary, the mask of flesh.

I got that notion about skin from my eminent-notorious psychologist, Dr. Emil Slyker, the first and the last evening I met him, at the Countersign Club, though he wasn't talking about ghosts to begin with. He was pretty drunk and drawing signs in the puddle spilled from his triple martini.

He grinned at me and said, "Look here, What's-Your-Name—oh yes, Carr Mackay, Mister *Justine* himself. Well, look here, Carr, I got a deskful of girls at my office in this building and they're needing attention. Let's shoot up and have a look."

Right away my hopelessly naive imagination flashed me a vivid picture of a desk swarming inside with girls about five or six inches high. They weren't dressed — my imagination never dresses girls except for special effects after long thought—but these looked as if they had been modeled from the drawings of Heinrich Kley or Mahlon Blaine. Literal vest-pocket Venuses, saucy and active. Right now they were attempting a mass escape from the desk, using a couple of nail files for saws, and they'd already cut some trap doors between the drawers so they could circulate around. One group was improvising a blowtorch from an atomizer and lighter fluid. Another was try-

ing to turn a key from the inside, using tweezers for a wrench. And they were tearing down and defacing small signs, big to them, which read YOU BELONG TO DR. EMIL SLYKER.

My mind, which looks down at my imagination and refuses to associate with it, was studying Dr. Slyker and also making sure that I behaved outwardly like a worshipful fan, a would-be Devil's apprentice. This approach, helped by the alcohol, seemed to be relaxing him into the frame of mind I wanted him to have—one of boastful condescension. Slyker was a plump gut of a man with a perpetually sucking mouth, in his early fifties, fair-complexioned, blond, balding, with the power-lines around his eyes and at the corners of the nostrils. Over it all he wore the ready-for-photographers mask that is a sure sign its wearer is on the Big Time. Eyes weak, as shown by the dark glasses, but forever peering for someone to strip or cow. His hearing bad too, for that matter, as he didn't catch the barman approaching and started a little when he saw the white rag reaching out toward the spill from his drink. Emil Slyker, "doctor" courtesy of some European universities and a crust like blued steel, movie columnist, pumper of the last ounce of prestige out of that ashcan word "psychologist," psychic researcher several mysterious rumored jumps ahead of Wilhelm Reich with his

orgone and Rhine with his ESP, psychological consultant to starlets blazing into stars and other ladies in the bucks, and a particularly expert disher-out of that goulash of psychoanalysis, mysticism and magic that is the *chef-d'oeuvre* of our era. *And*, I was assuming, a particularly successful blackmailer. A stinker to be taken very seriously.

My real purpose in contacting Slyker, of which I hoped he hadn't got an inkling yet, was to offer him enough money to sink a small luxury liner in exchange for a sheaf of documents he was using to blackmail Evelyn Cordew, current pick-of-the-pantheon among our sex goddesses. I was working for another film star, Jeff Crain, Evelyn's ex-husband, but not "ex" when it came to the protective urge. Jeff said that Slyker refused to bite on the direct approach, that he was so paranoid in his suspiciousness as to be psychotic, and that I would have to make friends with him first. Friends with a paranoid!

So in pursuit of this doubtful and dangerous distinction, there I was at the Countersign Club, nodding respectfully happy acquiescence to the Master's suggestion and asking tentatively, "Girls needing attention?"

He gave me his whoremaster, keeper-of-the-keys grin and said, "Sure, women need attention whatever form they're in. They're like pearls in a vault, they grow dull and fade unless they have regular

contact with warm human flesh. Drink up."

He gulped half of what was left of his martini—the puddle had been blotted up meantime and the black surface reburnished—and we made off without any fuss over checks or tabs; I had expected him to stick me with the former at least, but evidently I wasn't enough of an acolyte yet to be granted that honor.

It fitted that I had caught up with Emil Slyker at the Countersign Club. It is to a key club what the latter is to a top-crust bar. Strictly Big Time, set up to provide those in it with luxury, privacy and security. Especially security: I had heard that the Countersign Club bodyguarded even their sober patrons home late of an evening with or without their pickups, but I hadn't believed it until this well-dressed and doubtless well-heeled silent husky rode the elevator up the dead midnight office building with us and only turned back at Dr. Slyker's door. Of course I couldn't have got into the Countersign Club on my own—Jeff had provided me with my entree: an illustrated edition of the Marquis de Sade's *Justine*, its margins annotated by a world-famous recently-deceased psychoanalyst. I had sent it in to Slyker with a note full of flowery expression of "my admiration for your work in the psycho-physiology of sex."

The door to Slyker's office was something. No glass, just a dark expanse—teak or ironwood, I guessed—with EMIL SLYKER, CONSULTING PSYCHOLOGIST burnt into it. No Yale lock, but a large keyhole with a curious silver valve that the key pressed aside. Slyker showed me the key with a deprecating smile; the gleaming castellations of its web were the most complicated I'd ever seen, its stem depicted Pasiphaë and the bull. He certainly was willing to pay for atmosphere.

There were three sounds: first the soft grating of the turning key, then the solid snap of the bolts retracting, then a faint creak from the hinges.

Open, the door showed itself four inches thick, more like that of a safe or vault, with a whole cluster of bolts that the key controlled. Just before it closed, something very odd happened: a filmy plastic sheet whipped across the bolts from the outer edge of the doorway and conformed itself to them so perfectly that I suspected static electrical attraction of some sort. Once in place it barely clouded the silvery surface of the bolts and would have taken a close look to spot. It didn't interfere in any way with the door closing or the bolts snapping back into their channels.

The Doctor sensed or took for granted my interest in the door and explained over his shoulder in the dark, "My Siegfried Line. More than one ambitious crook or in-

spired murderer has tried to smash or think his or her way through that door. They've had no luck. They can't. At this moment there is literally no one in the world who could come through that door without using explosives—and they'd have to be well placed. Cozy."

I privately disagreed with the last remark. Not to make a thing of it, I would have preferred to feel in a bit closer touch with the silent corridors outside, even though they held nothing but the ghosts of unhappy stenographers and neurotic dames my imagination had raised on the way up.

"Is the plastic film part of an alarm system?" I asked. The Doctor didn't answer. His back was to me. I remembered that he'd shown himself a shade deaf. But I didn't get a chance to repeat my question for just then some indirect lighting came on, although Slyker wasn't near any switch ("Our talk triggers it," he said) and the office absorbed me.

Naturally the desk was the first thing I looked for, though I felt foolish doing it. It was a big deep job with a dark soft gleam that might have been that of fine-grained wood or metal. The drawers were file size, not the shallow ones my imagination had played with, and there were three tiers of them to the right of the knee-hole—space enough for a couple of life-size girls if they were

doubled up according to one of the formulas for the hidden operator of Maelzel's chess-playing automaton. My imagination, which never learns, listened hard for the patter of tiny bare feet and the clatter of little tools. There wasn't even the scurry of mice, which would have done something to my nerves, I'm sure.

The office was an L with the door at the end of this leg. The walls I could see were mostly lined with books, though a few line drawings had been hung—my imagination had been right about Heinrich Kley, though I didn't recognize these pen-and-ink originals, and there were some Fuselis you won't ever see reproduced in books handled over the counter.

The desk was in the corner of the L with the components of a hi fi spaced along the bookshelves this side of it. All I could see yet of the other leg of the L was a big surrealist armchair facing the desk but separated from it by a wide low bare table. I took a dislike to that armchair on first sight, though it looked extremely comfortable. Slyker had reached the desk now and had one hand on it as he turned back toward me, and I got the impression that the armchair had changed shape since I had entered the office—that it had been more like a couch to start with, although now the back was almost straight.

But the Doctor's left thumb in-

dicated I was to sit in it and I couldn't see another chair in the place except the padded button on which he was now settling himself—one of those stenographer deals with a boxing-glove back placed to catch you low in the spine like the hand of a knowledgeable masseur. In the other leg of the L, besides the armchair, were more books, a heavy concertina blind sealing off the window, two narrow doors that I supposed were those of a closet and a lavatory, and what looked like a slightly scaled-down and windowless telephone booth until I guessed it must be an orgone box of the sort Reich had invented to restore the libido when the patient occupies it. I quickly settled myself in the chair, not to be gingerly about it. It was rather incredibly comfortable, almost as if it had adjusted its dimensions a bit at the last instant to conform to mine. The back was narrow at the base but widened and then curled in and over to almost a canopy around my head and shoulders. The seat too widened a lot toward the front, where the stubby legs were far apart. The bulky arms sprang unsupported from the back and took my own just right, though curving inwards with the barest suggestion of a hug. The leather or unfamiliar plastic was as firm and cool as young flesh and its texture as mat under my fingertips.

"An historic chair," the Doctor observed, "designed and built for

me by von Helmholtz of the Bauhaus. It has been occupied by all my best mediums during their so-called trance states. It was in that chair that I established to my entire satisfaction the real existence of ectoplasm—that elaboration of the mucous membrane and occasionally the entire epidermis that is distantly analogous to the birth envelope and is the fact behind the persistent legends of the snake-shedding of filmy live skins by human beings, and which the spiritualist quacks are forever trying to fake with their fluorescent cheesecloth and doctored negatives. Orgone, the primal sexual energy?—Reich makes a persuasive case, still... But ectoplasm?—yes! Angna went into trance sitting just where you are, her entire body dusted with a special powder, the tracks and distant smudges of which later revealed the ectoplasm's movements and origin—chiefly in the genital area. The test was conclusive and led to further researches, very interesting and quite revolutionary, none of which I have published; my professional colleagues froth at the mouth, elaborating an opposite sort of foam, whenever I mix the psychic with psychoanalysis—they seem to forget that hypnotism gave Freud his start and that for a time the man was keen on cocaine. Yes indeed, an historic chair.”

I naturally looked down at it and for a moment I thought I had

vanished, because I couldn't see my legs. Then I realized that the upholstery had changed to a dark gray exactly matching my suit except for the ends of the arms, which merged by fine gradations into a sallow hue which blotted out my hands.

“I should have warned you that it's now upholstered in chameleon plastic,” Slyker said with a grin. “It changes color to suit the sitter. The fabric was supplied me over a year ago by Henri Artois, the French dilettante chemist. So the chair has been many shades: dead black when Mrs. Fairlee—you recall the case?—came to tell me she had just put on mourning and then shot her bandleader husband, a charming Florida tan during the later experiments with Angna. It helps my patients forget themselves when they're free-associating and it amuses some people.”

I wasn't one of them, but I managed a smile I hoped wasn't too sour. I told myself to stick to business—Evelyn Cordew's and Jeff Crain's business. I must forget the chair and other incidentals, and concentrate on Dr. Emil Slyker and what he was saying—for I have by no means given all of his remarks, only the more important asides. He had turned out to be the sort of conversationalist who will talk for two hours solid, then when you have barely started your reply, give you a hurt look and say, “Excuse me, but if I can get a word in

edgewise—" and talk for two hours more. The liquor may have been helping, but I doubt it. When we had left the Countersign Club he had started to tell me the stories of three of his female clients—a surgeon's wife, an aging star scared by a comeback opportunity, and a college girl in trouble—and the presence of the bodyguard hadn't made him hold back on gory details.

Now, sitting at his desk and playing with the catch of a file drawer as if wondering whether to open it, he had got to the point where the surgeon's wife had arrived at the operating theater early one morning to publish her infidelities, the star had stabbed her press agent with the wardrobe mistress' scissors, and the college girl had fallen in love with her abortionist. He had the conversation-hogger's trick of keeping a half dozen topics in the air at once and weaving back and forth between them without finishing any.

And of course he was a male tantalizer. Now he whipped open the file drawer and scooped out some folders and then held them against his belly and watched me as if to ask himself, "Should I?"

After a maximum pause to build suspense he decided he should, and so I began to hear the story of Dr. Emil Slyker's girls, not the first three, of course—they had to stay frozen at their climaxes unless their folders turned up—but others.

I wouldn't be telling the truth if I didn't admit it was a let-down. Here I was expecting I don't know what from his desk and all I got was the usual glimpses into childhood's garden of father-fixation and sibling rivalry and the bed-changing *Sturm und Drang* of later adolescence. The folders seemed to hold nothing but conventional medico-psychiatric case histories, along with physical measurements and other details of appearance, unusually penetrating *précis* of each client's financial resources, occasional notes on possible psychic gifts and other extrasensory talents, and maybe some candid snapshots, judging from the way he'd sometimes pause to study appreciatively and then raise his eyebrows at me with a smile.

Yet after a while I couldn't help starting to be impressed, if only by the sheer numbers. Here was this stream, this freshet, this flood of females, young and not-so-young but all thinking of themselves as girls and wearing the girl's suede mask even if they didn't still have the girl's natural face, all converging on Dr. Slyker's office with money stolen from their parents or highjacked from their married lovers, or paid when they signed the six-year contract with semianual options, or held out on their syndicate boyfriends, or received in a lump sum in lieu of alimony, or banked for dreary years every fortnight from paychecks and then

withdrawn in one grand gesture, or thrown at them by their husbands that morning like so much confetti, or, so help me, advanced them on their half-written novels. Yes, there was something very impressive about this pink stream of womankind rippling with the silver and green of cash conveyed infallibly, as if all the corridors and streets outside were concrete-walled spillways, to Dr. Slyker's office, but not to work any dynamos there except financial ones, instead to be worked over by a one-man dynamo and go foaming madly or trickling depletedly away or else stagnate excitingly for months, their souls like black swamp water gleaming with mysterious lights.

Slyker stopped short with a harsh little laugh. "We ought to have music with this, don't you think?" he said. "I believe I've got the *Nutcracker Suite* on the spindle," and he touched one of an unobtrusive bank of buttons on his desk.

They came without the whisper of a turntable or the faintest preliminary susurrus of tape, those first evocative, rich, sensual, yet eery chords, but they weren't the opening of any section of the *Nutcracker* I knew—and yet, damn it, they sounded as if they should be. And then they were cut off as if the tape had been snipped and I looked at Slyker and he was white and one of his hands was just coming back from the bank of but-

tons and the other was clutching the file folders as if they might somehow get away from him and both hands were shaking and I felt a shiver crawling down my own neck.

"Excuse me, Carr," he said slowly, breathing heavily, "but that's high-voltage music, psychically very dangerous, that I use only for special purposes. It is part of the *Nutcracker*, incidently—the 'Ghostgirls Pavan' which Chaikovsky suppressed completely under orders from Madam Sesostris, the Saint Petersburg clairvoyant. It was tape-recorded for me by... no, I don't know you quite well enough to tell you that. However, we will shift from tape to disk and listen to the known sections of the suite, played by the same artists."

I don't know how much this recording or the circumstances added to it, but I have never heard the "Danse Arabe" or the "Waltz of the Flowers" or the "Dance of the Flutes" so voluptuous and exquisitely menacing—those tinkling, superficially sugar-frosted bits of music that class after class of little-girl ballerinas have minced and teetered to *ad nauseam*, but underneath the glittering somber fancies of a thorough-going eroticist. As Slyker, guessing my thoughts, expressed it: "Chaikovsky shows off each instrument—the flute, the throatier woodwinds, the silver chimes, the harp bubbling gold—

as if he were dressing beautiful women in jewels and feathers and furs solely to arouse desire and envy in other men."

For of course we only listened to the music as background for Dr. Slyker's zigzagging, fragmentary, cream-skimming reminiscences. The stream of girls flowed on in their smart suits and flowered dresses and bouffant blouses and toreador pants, their improbable loves and unsuspected hates and incredible ambitions, the men who gave them money, the men who gave them love, the men who took both, the paralyzing trivial fears behind their wisely chic or corn-fed fresh façades, their ravishing and infuriating mannerisms, the trick of eye or lip or hair or wrist-curve or bosom-angle that was the focus of sex in each.

For Slyker could bring his girls to life very vividly, I had to grant that, as if he had more to jog his memory than case histories and notes and even photographs, as if he had the essence of each girl stoppered up in a little bottle, like perfumes, and was opening them one by one to give me a whiff. Gradually I became certain that there *were* more than papers and pictures in the folders, though this revelation, like the earlier one about the desk, at first involved a let-down. Why should I get excited if Dr. Slyker filed away mementos of his clients?—even if they were keepsakes of love: lace handker-

chiefs and filmy scarves, faded flowers, ribbons and bows, 20-dernier stockings, long locks of hair, gay little pins and combs, swatches of material that might have been torn from dresses, snippets of silk delicate as ghost dandelions—what difference did it make to me if he treasured this junk or it fed his sense of power or was part of his blackmail? Yet it did make a difference to me, for like the music, like the little fearful starts he'd kept giving ever since the business of the "Ghost-girls Pavan," it helped to make everything very real, as if in some more-than-ordinary sense he did have a deskful of girls. For now as he opened or closed the folders there'd often be a puff of powder, a pale little cloud as from a jogged compact, and the pieces of silk gave the impression of being larger than they could be, like a magician's colored handkerchiefs, only most of them were flesh-colored, and I began to get glimpses of what looked like X-ray photographs and artist's transparencies, maybe lifesize but cunningly folded, and other slack pale things that made me think of the ultra-fine rubber masks some aging actresses are rumored to wear, and all sorts of strange little flashes and glimmers of I don't know what, except there was that aura of femininity and I found myself remembering what he'd said about fluorescent cheesecloth and I did seem to get whiffs of very

individual perfume with each new folder.

He had two file drawers open now, and I could just make out the word burnt into their fronts. The word certainly looked like PRESENT, and there were two of the closed file drawers labeled what looked like PAST and FUTURE. I didn't know what sort of hocus-pocus was supposed to be furthered by those words, but along with Slyker's darting, lingering monologue they did give me the feeling that I was afloat in a river of girls from all times and places, and the illusion that there somehow was a girl in each folder became so strong that I almost wanted to say, "Come on, Emil, trot 'em out, let me look at 'em."

He must have known exactly what feelings he was building up in me, for now he stopped in the middle of a saga of a starlet married to a Negro baseball player and looked at me with his eyes open a bit too wide and said, "All right, Carr, let's quit fooling around. Down at the Countersign I told you I had a deskful of girls and I wasn't kidding—although the truth behind that assertion would get me certified by all the little head-shrinkers and Viennese windbags except it would scare the pants off them first. I mentioned ectoplasm earlier, and the proof of its reality. It's exuded by most properly stimulated women in deep trance, but it's not just some dimly fluorescent

froth swirling around in a dark séance chamber. It takes the form of an envelope or limp balloon, closed toward the top but open toward the bottom, weighing less than a silk stocking but duplicating the person exactly down to features and hair, following the master-plan of the body's surface buried in the genetic material of the cells. It is a real shed skin but also dimly alive, a gossamer mannequin. A breath can crumple it, a breeze can whisk it away, but under some circumstances it becomes startlingly stable and resilient, a real apparition. It's invisible and almost impalpable by day, but by night, when your eyes are properly acomodated, you can just manage to see it. Despite its fragility it's almost indestructible, except by fire, and potentially immortal. Whether generated in sleep or under hypnosis, in spontaneous or induced trance, it remains connected to the source by a thin strand I call the 'umbilicus' and it returns to the source and is absorbed back into the individual again as the trance fades. But sometimes it becomes detached and then it lingers around as a shell, still dimly alive and occasionally glimpsed, forming the very real basis for the stories of hauntings we have from all centuries and cultures—in fact, I call such shells 'ghosts.' A strong emotional shock generally accounts for a ghost becoming detached from its owner, but it can also be

detached artificially. Such a ghost is remarkably docile to one who understands how to handle and cherish it—for instance, it can be folded into an incredibly small compass and tucked away in an envelope, though by daylight you wouldn't notice anything in such an envelope if you looked inside. 'Detached artificially' I said, and that's what I do here in this office, and you know what I use to do it with, Carr?" He snatched up something long and daggerlike and gleaming and held it tight in his plump hand so that it pointed at the ceiling. "Silver shears, Carr, silver for the same reason you use a silver bullet to kill a werewolf, though those words would set the little headshrinkers howling. But would they be howling from outraged scientific attitude, Carr, or from professional jealousy or simply from fear? Just the same as it's unclear why they'd be howling, only certain they would be howling, if I told them that in every fourth or fifth folder in these files I have one or more ghostgirls."

He didn't need to mention fear—I was scared enough myself now, what with him spouting this ghostguff, this spiritualism blather put far more precisely than any spiritualist would dare, this obviously firmly held and elaborately rationalized delusion, this perfect symbolization of a truly insane desire for power over women—filing them away in envelopes!—and then

when he got bug-eyed and brandished those foot-long stiletto-shears... Jeff Crain had warned me Slyker was "nuts—brilliant, but completely nuts and definitely dangerous," and I hadn't believed it, hadn't really visualized myself frozen on the medium's throne, locked in ("no one without explosives") with the madman himself. It cost me a lot of effort to keep on the acolyte's mask and simper adoringly at the Master.

My attitude still seemed to be fooling him, though he was studying me in a funny way, for he went on, "All right, Carr, I'll show you the girls, or at least one, though we'll have to put out all the lights after a bit—that's why I keep the window shuttered so tightly—and wait for our eyes to accommodate. But which one should it be?—we have a large field of choice. I think since it's your first and probably your last, it should be someone out of the ordinary, don't you think, someone who's just a little bit special?—Wait a second—I know." And his hand shot under the desk where it must have touched a hidden button, for a shallow drawer shot out from a place where there didn't seem to be room for one. He took from it a single fat file folder that had been stored flat and laid it on his knees.

Then he began to talk again in his reminiscing voice and damn if it wasn't so cool and knowing that it started to pull me back toward

the river of girls and set me thinking that this man wasn't really crazy, only extremely eccentric, maybe the eccentricity of genius, maybe he actually had hit on a hitherto unknown phenomenon depending on the more obscure properties of mind and matter, describing it to me in whimsically florid jargon, maybe he really had discovered something in one of the blind spots of modern science-and-psychology's picture of the universe.

"Stars, Carr. Female stars. Movie queens. Royal princesses of the gray world, the ghostly chiaroscuro. Shadow empresses. They're realer than people, Carr, realer than the great actresses or casting-couch champions they start as, for they're symbols, Carr, symbols of our deepest longings and—yes—most hidden fears and secretest dreams. Each decade has several who achieve this more-than-life and less-than-life existence, but there's generally one who's the chief symbol, the top ghost, the dream who lures men along toward fulfilment and destruction. In the Twenties it was Garbo, Garbo the Free Soul—that's my name for the symbol she became; her romantic mask heralded the Great Depression. In the late Thirties and early Forties it was Bergman the Brave Liberal; her dewiness and Swedish-Modern smile helped us accept World War Two. And now it's"—he touched the bulky folder on his knees—"now it's Evelyn Cordew the Good-

Hearted Bait, the gal who accepts her troublesome sexiness with a resigned shrug and a foolish little laugh, and what general catastrophe she foreshadows we don't know yet. But here she is, and in five ghost versions. Pleased, Carr?"

I was so completely taken by surprise that I couldn't say anything for a moment. Either Slyker had guessed my real purpose in contacting him, or I was faced with a sizable coincidence. I wet my lips and then just nodded.

Slyker studied me and finally grinned. "Ah," he said, "takes you aback a bit, doesn't it? I perceive that in spite of your moderate sophistication you are one of the millions of males who have wistfully contemplated desert-islanding with Delectable Evvie. A complex cultural phenomenon, Eva-Lynn Korduplewski. The child of a coal miner, educated solely in backstreet movie houses—shaped by dreams, you see, into a master dream, an empress dream-figure. A hysteric, Carr, in fact the most classic example I have ever encountered, with unequaled mediumistic capacities and also with a hypertrophied and utterly ruthless ambition. Riddled by hypochondrias, but with more real drive than a million other avid schoolgirls tangled and trapped in the labyrinth of film ambitions. Dumb as they come, no rational mind at all, but with ten times Einstein's intuition — intuition enough, at

least, to realize that the symbol our sex-exploiting culture craved was a girl who accepted like a happy martyr the incandescent sexuality men and Nature forced on her—and with the patience and malleability to let the feathersoft beating of the black-and-white light in a cheap cinema shape her into that symbol. I sometimes think of her as a girl in a cheap dress standing on the shoulder of a big through-way, her eyes almost blinded by the lights of an approaching bus. The bus stops and she climbs on, dragging a pet goat and breathlessly giggling explanations at the driver. The bus is Civilization.

“Everybody knows her life story, which has been put out in a surprisingly accurate form up to a point: her burlesque-line days, the embarrassingly faithful cartoon-series *Girl in a Fix* for which she posed, her bit parts, the amazingly timed success of the movies *Hydrogen Blonde* and *The Jean Harlow Saga*, her broken marriage to Jeff Crain—What was that, Carr? Oh, I thought you’d started to say something—and her hunger for the real stage and intellectual distinction and power. You can’t imagine how hungry for brains and power that girl became *after* she hit the top.

“I’ve been part of the story of that hunger, Carr, and I pride myself that I’ve done more to satisfy it than all the culture-johnnies she’s had on her payroll. Evelyn Cordew

has learned a lot about herself right where you’re sitting, and also threaded her way past two psychotic crack-ups. The trouble is that when her third loomed up she didn’t come to me, she decided to put her trust in wheat germ and yogurt instead, so now she hates my guts—and perhaps her own, on that diet. She’s made two attempts on my life, Carr, and had me trailed by gangsters...and by other individuals. She’s talked about me to Jeff Crain, whom she still sees from time to time, and Jerry Smyslov and Nick De Grazia, telling them I’ve got a file of information on her burlesque days and a few of her later escapades, including some interesting photostats and the real dope on her income and her tax returns, and that I’m using it to blackmail her white. What she actually wants is her five ghosts back, and I can’t give them to her because they might kill her. Yes, kill her, Carr.” He flourished the shears for emphasis. “She claims that the ghosts I’ve taken from her have made her lose weight permanently—‘look like a skeleton’ are her words—and given her fits of mental blackout, a sort of psychic fading—whereas actually the ghosts have bled off from her a lot of malignant thoughts and destructive emotions, which could literally kill her (or someone!) if reabsorbed—they’re drenched with death-wish. Still, I hear she actually does look a little haggard, a

trifle faded, in her last film, in spite of all Hollywood's medico-cosmetic lore, so maybe she has a sort of case against me. I haven't seen the film, I suppose you have. What do you think, Carr?"

I knew I'd been overworking the hesitation and the silent flattery, so I whipped out quickly, "I'd say it was due to her anemia. It seems to me that the anemia is quite enough to account for her loss of weight and her tired look."

"Ah! You've slipped, Carr," he lashed back, pointing at me triumphantly, except that instead of the outstretched finger there were those ridiculous, horrible shears. "Her anemia is one of the things that's been kept top-secret, known only to a very few of her intimates. Even in all the half-humorous releases about her hypochondrias that's one disease that has never been mentioned. I suspected you were from her when I got your note at the Countersign Club—the handwriting squirmed with tension and secrecy—but the *Justine* amused me—that was a fairly smart dodge—and your sorcerer's apprentice act amused me too, and I happened to feel like talking. But I've been studying you all along, especially your reactions to certain test-remarks I dropped in from time to time, and now you've really slipped." His voice was loud and clear, but he was shaking and giggling at the same time and his eyes showed white all the way

around the irises. He drew back the shears a little, but clenched his fingers more tightly around them in a dagger grip, as he said with a chuckle, "Our dear little Evvie has sent all types up against me, to bargain for her ghosts or try to scare or assassinate me, but this is the first time she's sent an idealistic fool. Carr, why didn't you have the sense not to meddle?"

"Look here, Dr. Slyker," I countered before he started answering for me, "it's true I have a special purpose in contacting you. I never denied it. But I don't know anything about ghosts or gangsters. I'm here on a simple, businesslike assignment from the same guy who lent me the *Justine* and who has no purpose whatever beyond protecting Evelyn Cordew. I'm representing Jeff Crain."

That was supposed to calm him. Well, he did stop shaking and his eyes stopped wandering, but only because they were going over me like twin searchlights, and the giggle went out of his voice.

"Jeff Crain! Evvie just wants to murder me, but that cinematic Hemingway, that hulking guardian of hers, that human Saint Bernard tonguing the dry crumbs of their marriage—he wants to set the T-men on me, and the boys in blue and the boys in white too. Evvie's agents I mostly kid along, even the gangsters, but for Jeff's agents I have only one answer."

The silver shears pointed straight

at my chest and I could see his muscles tighten like a fat tiger's. I got ready for a spring of my own at the first movement this madman made toward me.

But the move he made was back across the desk with his free hand. I decided it was a good time to be on my feet in any case, but just as I sent my own muscles their orders I was hugged around the waist and clutched by the throat and grabbed by the wrists and ankles. By something soft but firm.

I looked down. Padded, broad, crescent-shaped clamps had sprung out of hidden traps in my chair and now held me as comfortably but firmly as a gang of competent orderlies. Even my hands were held by wide, velvet-soft cuffs that had snapped out of the bulbous arms. They were all a nondescript gray but even as I looked they began to change color to match my suit or skin, whichever they happened to border.

I wasn't scared. I was merely frightened half to death.

"Surprised, Carr? You shouldn't be." Slyker was sitting back like an amiable schoolteacher and gently wagging the shears as if they were a ruler. "Streamlined unobtrusiveness and remote control are the essence of our times, especially in medical furniture. The buttons on my desk can do more than that. Hypos might slip out—hardly hygienic, but then germs are overrated. Or electrodes for shock. You

see, restraints are necessary in my business. Deep mediumistic trance can occasionally produce convulsions as violent as those of electroshock, especially when a ghost is cut. And I sometimes administer electroshock too, like any garden-variety headshrinker. Also, to be suddenly and firmly grabbed is a profound stimulus to the unconscious and often elicits closely-guarded facts from difficult patients. So a means of making my patients hold still is absolutely necessary—something swift, sure, tasteful and preferably without warning. You'd be surprised, Carr, at the situations in which I've been forced to activate those restraints. This time I prodded you to see just how dangerous you were. Rather to my surprise you showed yourself ready to take physical action against me. So I pushed the button. Now we'll be able to deal comfortably with Jeff Crain's problem...and yours. But first I've a promise to keep to you. I said I would show you one of Evelyn Cordew's ghosts. It will take a little time and after a bit it will be necessary to turn out the lights."

"Dr. Slyker," I said as evenly as I could, "I—"

"Quiet! Activating a ghost for viewing involves certain risks. Silence is essential, though it will be necessary to use—very briefly—the suppressed Chaikovsky music which I turned off so quickly earlier this evening." He busied

himself with the hi fi for a few moments. "But partly because of that it will be necessary to put away all the other folders and the four ghosts of Evvie we aren't using, and lock the file drawers. Otherwise there might be complications."

I decided to try once more. "Before you go any further, Dr. Slyker," I began, "I would really like to explain—"

He didn't say another word, merely reached back across the desk again. My eyes caught something coming over my shoulder fast and the next instant it clapped down over my mouth and nose, not quite covering my eyes, but lapping up to them—something soft and dry and clinging and faintly crinkled feeling. I gasped and I could feel the gag sucking in, but not a bit of air came through it. That scared me seven-eighths of the rest of the way to oblivion, of course, and I froze. Then I tried a very cautious inhalation and a little air did seep through. It was wonderfully cool coming into the furnace of my lungs, that little suck of air—I felt I hadn't breathed for a week.

Slyker looked at me with a little smile. "I never say 'Quiet' twice, Carr. The foam plastic of that gag is another of Henri Artois' inventions. It consists of millions of tiny valves. As long as you breathe softly—very, very softly, Carr—they permit ample air to pass, but if you gasp or try to shout through

it, they'll close up tight. A wonderfully soothing device. Compose yourself, Carr; your life depends on it."

I have never experienced such utter helplessness. I found that the slightest muscular tension, even crooking a finger, made my breathing irregular enough so that the valves started to close and I was in the fringes of suffocation. I could see and hear what was going on, but I dared not react, I hardly dared think. I had to pretend that most of my body wasn't there (the chameleon plastic helped!), only a pair of lungs working constantly but with infinite caution.

Slyker had just set the Cordew folder back in its drawer, without closing it, and started to gather up the other scattered folders, when he touched the desk again and the lights went out. I have mentioned that the place was completely sealed against light. The darkness was complete.

"Don't be alarmed, Carr," Slyker's voice came chuckling through it. "In fact, as I am sure you realize, you had better not be. I can tidy up just as handily—working by touch is one of my major skills, my sight and hearing being rather worse than appears—and even your eyes must be fully accommodated if you're to see anything at all. I repeat, don't be alarmed, Carr, least of all by ghosts."

I would never have expected it, but in spite of the spot I was in

(which actually did seem to have its soothing effects), I still got a little kick—a very little one—out of thinking I was going to see some sort of secret vision of Evelyn Cordew, real in some sense or faked by a master faker. Yet at the same time, and I think beyond all my fear for myself, I felt a dispassionate disgust at the way Slyker reduced all human drives and desires to a lust for power, of which the chair imprisoning me, the “Siegfried Line” door, and the files of ghosts, real or imagined, were perfect symbols.

Among immediate worries, although I did a pretty good job of suppressing all of them, the one that nagged at me the most was that Slyker had admitted to me the inadequacy of his two major senses. I didn't think he would make that admission to someone who was going to live very long.

The black minutes dragged on. I heard from time to time the rustle of folders, but only one soft thud of a file drawer closing, so I knew he wasn't finished yet with the putting-away and locking-up job.

I concentrated the free corner of my mind—the tiny part I dared spare from breathing—on trying to hear something else, but I couldn't even catch the background noise of the city. I decided the office must be soundproofed as well as light-sealed. Not that it mattered, since I couldn't get a signal out anyway.

Then a noise did come—a solid snap that I'd heard just once before, but knew instantly. It was the sound of the bolts in the office door retracting. There was something funny about it that took me a moment to figure out: there had been no preliminary grating of the key.

For a moment too I thought Slyker had crept noiselessly to the door, but then I realized that the rustling of folders at the desk had kept up all the time.

And the rustling of folders continued. I guessed Slyker had not noticed the door. He hadn't been exaggerating about his bad hearing.

There was the faint creaking of the hinges, once, twice—as if the door were being opened and closed—then again the solid snap of the bolts. That puzzled me, for there should have been a big flash of light from the corridor—unless the lights were all out.

I couldn't hear any sound after that, except the continued rustling of the file folders, though I listened as hard as the job of breathing let me—and in a crazy kind of way the job of cautious breathing helped my hearing, because it made me hold absolutely still yet without daring to tense up. I knew that someone was in the office with us and that Slyker didn't know it. The black moments seemed to stretch out forever, as if an edge of eternity had got hooked into our time-stream.

All of a sudden there was a *swish*, like that of a sheet being whipped through the air very fast, and a grunt of surprise from Slyker that started toward a screech and then was cut off as sharp as if he'd been gagged nose-and-mouth like me. Then there came the scuff of feet and the squeal of the castors of a chair, the sound of a struggle, not of two people struggling, but of a man struggling against restraints of some sort, a frantic confined heaving and panting. I wondered if Slyker's little lump of chair had sprouted restraints like mine, but that hardly made sense.

Then abruptly there was the whistle of breath, as if his nostrils had been uncovered, but not his mouth. He was panting through his nose. I got a mental picture of Slyker tied to his chair some way and eying the darkness just as I was doing.

Finally out of the darkness came a voice I knew very well because I'd heard it often enough in movie houses and from Jeff Crain's tape-recorder. It had the old familiar caress mixed with the old familiar giggle, the naïveté and the knowingness, the warm sympathy and cool-headedness, the high-school charmer and the sybil. It was Evelyn Cordew's voice, all right.

"Oh for goodness sake stop threshing around, Emmy. It won't help you shake off that sheet and it makes you look so funny. Yes, I said 'look,' Emmy—you'd be sur-

prised at how losing five ghosts improves your eyesight, like having veils taken away from in front of them; you get more sensitive all over.

"And don't try to appeal to me by pretending to suffocate. I tucked the sheet under your nose even if I did keep your mouth covered. Couldn't bear you talking now. The sheet's called wraparound plastic—I've got my chemical friend too, though he's not Parisian. It'll be next year's number-one packaging material, he tells me. Filmy, harder to see than cellophane, but very tough. An electronic plastic, no less, positive one side, negative the other. Just touch it to something and it wraps around, touches itself, and clings like anything. Like I just had to touch it to you. To make it unwrap fast you can just shoot some electrons into it from a handy static battery—my friend's advertising copy, Emmy—and it flattens out *whang*. Give it enough electrons and it's stronger than steel.

"We used another bit of it that last way, Emmy, to get through your door. Fitted it outside, so it'd wrap itself against the bolts when your door opened. Then just now, after blacking out the corridor, we pumped electrons into it and it flattened out, pushing back all the bolts. Excuse me, dear, but you know how you love to lecture about your valved plastics and all your other little restraints, so you

mustn't mind me giving a little talk about mine. And boasting about my friends too. I've got some you don't know about, Emmy. Ever heard the name Smyslov, or the Arain? Some of them cut ghosts themselves and weren't pleased to hear about you, especially the past-future angle."

There was a protesting little squeal of castors, as if Slyker were trying to move his chair.

"Don't go away, Emmy. I'm sure you know why I'm here. Yes, dear, I'm taking them all back as of now. All five. And I don't care how much death-wish they got, because I've got some ideas for that. So now 'scuse me, Emmy, while I get ready to slip into my ghosts."

There wasn't any noise then except Emil Slyker's wheezy breathing and the occasional rustle of silk and the whir of a zipper, followed by soft feathery falls.

"There we are, Emmy, all clear. Next step, my five lost sisters. Why, your little old secret drawer is open—you didn't think I knew about that, Emmy, did you? Let's see now, I don't think we'll need music for this—they know my touch; it should make them stand up and shine."

She stopped talking. After a bit I got the barest hint of light over by the desk, very uncertain at first, like a star at the limit of vision, where it keeps winking back and forth from utter absence to the barest dim existence, or like a

lonely lake lit only by starlight and glimpsed through a thick forest, or as if those dancing points of light that persist even in absolute darkness and indicate only a restless retina and optic nerve had fooled me for a moment into thinking they represented something real.

But then the hint of light took definite form, though staying at the dim limit of vision and crawling back and forth as I focused on it because my eyes had no other point of reference to steady it by.

It was a dim angular band making up three edges of a rectangle, the top edge longer than the two vertical edges, while the bottom edge wasn't there. As I watched it and it became a little clearer, I saw that the bands of light were brightest toward the inside—that is, toward the rectangle they partly enclosed, where they were bordered by stark blackness—while toward the outside they faded gradually away. Then as I continued to watch I saw that the two corners were rounded while up from the top edge there projected a narrow, lesser rectangle—a small tab.

The tab made me realize that I was looking at a file folder silhouetted by something dimly glowing inside it.

Then the top band darkened toward the center, as would happen if a hand were dipping into the folder, and then lightened again as if the hand were being

withdrawn. Then up out of the folder, as if the invisible hand were guiding or coaxing it, swam something no brighter than the bands of light.

It was the shape of a woman, but distorted and constantly flowing, the head and arms and upper torso maintaining more of an approximation to human proportions than the lower torso and legs, which were like churning, trailing draperies or a long gauzy skirt. It was extremely dim, so I had to keep blinking my eyes, and it didn't get brighter.

It was like the figure of a woman phosphorescently painted on a long-skirted slip of the filmiest silk that had silk-stockings-like sheathes for arms and head attached—yes, and topped by some illusion of dim silver hair. And yet it was more than that. Although it looped up gracefully through the air as such a slip might when shaken out by a woman preparing to put it on, it also had a writhing life of its own.

But in spite of all the distortions, as it flowed in an arc toward the ceiling and dove downward, it was seductively beautiful and the face was recognizably that of Evie Cordew.

It checked its dive and reversed the direction of its flow, so that for a moment it floated upright high in the air, like a filmy nightgown a woman swishes above her head before she slips into it.

Then it began to settle toward

the floor and I saw that there really was a woman standing under it and pulling it down over her head, though I could see her body only very dimly by the reflected glow of the ghost she was drawing down around her.

The woman on the floor shot up her hands close to her body and gave a quick wriggle and twist and ducked her head and then threw it back, as a woman does when she's getting into a tight dress, and the flowing glowing thing lost its distortions as it fitted itself around her.

Then for a moment the glow brightened a trifle as the woman and her ghost merged and I saw Evvie Cordew with her flesh gleaming by its own light—the long slim ankles, the vase-curve of hips and waist, the impudent breasts almost as you'd guess them from the Bikini shots, but with larger aureoles—saw it for an instant before the ghost-light winked out like white sparks dying, and there was utter darkness again.

Utter darkness and a voice that crooned, "Oh that was like silk, Emmy, pure silk stocking all over. Do you remember when you cut it, Emmy? I'd just got my first screen credit and I'd signed the seven-year contract and I knew I was going to have the world by the tail and I felt wonderful and I suddenly got terribly dizzy for no reason and I came to you. And you straightened me out for then by coaxing out

and cutting away my happiness. You told me it would be a little like giving blood, and it was. That was my first ghost, Emmy, but only the first."

My eyes, recovering swiftly from the brighter glow of the ghost returning to its sources, again made out the three glowing sides of the file folder. And again there swam up out of it a crazily churning phosphorescent woman trailing gauzy streamers. The face was recognizably Evvie's, but constantly distorting, now one eye big as an orange then small as a pea, the lips twisting in impossible smiles and grimaces, the brow shrinking to that of a pinhead or swelling to that of a mongolian idiot, like a face reflected from a plate-glass window running with water. As it came down over the real Evelyn's face there was a moment when the two were together but didn't merge, like the faces of twins in such a flooded window. Then, as if a squeegee had been wiped down it, the single face came bright and clear, and just as the darkness returned she caressed her lips with her tongue.

And I heard her say, "That one was like hot velvet, Emmy, smooth but with a burn in it. You took it two days after the sneak preview of *Hydrogen Blonde*, when we had the little party to celebrate after the big party, and the current Miss America was there and I showed her what a really valuable body

looked like. That was when I realized that I'd hit the top and it hadn't changed me into a goddess or anything. I still had the same ignorances as before and the same awkwardnesses for the cameramen and cutters to hide—only they were worse because I was in the center of the show window—and I was going to have to fight for the rest of my life to keep my body like it was and then I was going to start to die, wrinkle by wrinkle, lose my juice cell by cell, like anybody else."

The third ghost arched toward the ceiling and down, waves of phosphorescence flickering it all the time. The slender arms undulated like pale serpents and the hands, the finger- and thumb-tips gently pressed together, were like the inquisitive heads of serpents—until the fingers spread so the hands resembled five-tongued creeping puddles of phosphorescent ink. Then into them as if into shoulder-length ivory silk gloves came the solid fingers and arms. For a bit the hands, first part to be merged, were brightest of the whole figure and I watched them help fit each other on and then sweep symmetrically down brow and cheeks and chin, fitting the face, with a little sidewise dip of the ring fingers as they smoothed in the eyes. Then they swept up and back and raked through both heads of hair, mixing them. This ghost's hair was very dark and, mingling, it toned down Evelyn's blonde a little.

"That one felt slimy, Emmy, like the top crawled off of a swamp. Remember, I'd just teased the boys into fighting over me at the Troc. Jeff hurt Lester worse than they let out and even old Sammy got a black eye. I'd just discovered that when you get to the top you have all the ordinary pleasures the boobs yearn for all their lives, and they don't mean anything, and you have to work and scheme every minute to get the pleasures beyond pleasure that you've got to have to keep your life from going dry."

The fourth ghost rose toward the ceiling like a diver paddling up from the depths. Then, as if the whole room were filled with its kind of water, it seemed to surface at the ceiling and jackknife there and plunge down again with a little swoop and then reverse direction again and hover for a moment over the real Evelyn's head and then sink slowly down around her like a diver drowning. This time I watched the bright hands cupping the ghost's breasts around her own as if she were putting on a luminescent net brassiere. Then the ghost's filminess shrank suddenly to tighten over her torso like a cheap cotton dress in a cloud-burst.

As the glow died to darkness a fourth time, Evelyn said softly, "Ah but that was cool, Emmy. I'm shivering. I'd just come back from my first location work in Europe and was sick to get at Broadway,

and before you cut it you made me relive the yacht party where I overheard Ricco and the author laughing at how I'd messed up my first legitimate play reading, and we swam in the moonlight and Monica almost drowned. That was when I realized that nobody, even the bottom boobs in the audience, really respected you because you were their sex queen. They respected the little female boob in the seat beside them more than they did you. Because you were just something on the screen that they could handle as they pleased inside their minds. With the top folk, the Big Timers, it wasn't any better. To them you were just a challenge, a prize, something to show off to other men to drive them nuts, but never something to love. Well, that's four, Emmy, and four and one makes all."

The last ghost rose whirling and billowing like a silk robe in the wind, like a crazy photomontage, like a surrealist painting done in a barely visible wash of pale flesh tones on a black canvas, or rather like an endless series of such surrealist paintings, each distortion melting into the next—trailing behind it a gauzy wake of draperies which I realized was the way ghosts were always pictured and described. I watched the draperies bunch as Evelyn pulled them down around her, and then they suddenly whipped tight against her thighs, like a skirt in a strong wind or

like nylon clinging in the cold. The final glow was a little stronger, as if there were more life in the shining woman than there had been at first.

"Ah that was like the brush of wings, Emmy, like feathers in the wind. You cut it after the party in Sammy's plane to celebrate me being the top money star in the industry. I bothered the pilot because I wanted him to smash us in a dive. That was when I realized I was just property—something for men to make money out of (and me to make money, too, out of me) from the star who married me to prop his box-office rating to the sticks theater owner who hoped I'd sell a few extra tickets. I found that my deepest love—it was once for you, Emmy—was just something for a man to capitalize on. That any man, no matter how sweet or strong, could in the end never be anything but a pimp. Like you, Emmy."

Just darkness for a while then, darkness and silence, broken only by the faint rustling of clothing.

Finally her voice again: "So now I got my pictures back, Emmy. All the original negatives, you might say, for you can't make prints of them or second negatives—I don't think. Or is there a way of making prints of them, Emmy—duplicate women? It's not worth letting you answer—you'd be bound to say yes to scare me.

"What do we do with you now,

Emmy? I know what you'd do to me if you had the chance, for you've done it already. You've kept parts of me—no, five real *me's*—tucked away in envelopes for a long time, something to take out and look at or run through your hand or twist around a finger or crumple in a ball, whenever you felt bored on a long afternoon or an endless night. Or maybe show off to special friends or even give other girls to wear—you didn't think I knew about that trick, did you, Emmy?—I hope I poisoned them, I hope I made them burn! Remember, Emmy, I'm full of death-wish now, five ghosts of it. Yes, Emmy, what do we do with you now?"

Then, for the first time since the ghosts had shown, I heard the sound of Dr. Slyker's breath whistling through his nose and the muffled grunts and creakings as he lurched against the clinging sheet.

"Makes you think, doesn't it, Emmy? I wish I'd asked my ghosts what to do with you when I had the chance—I wish I'd known how to ask them. They'd have been the ones to decide. Now they're too mixed in.

"We'll let the other girls decide—the other ghosts. How many dozen are there, Emmy? How many hundred? I'll trust their judgment. Do your ghosts love you, Emmy?"

I heard the click of her heels followed by soft rushes ending in

thuds — the file drawers being yanked open. Slyker got noisier.

"You don't think they love you, Emmy? Or they do but their way of showing affection won't be exactly comfortable, or safe? We'll see."

The heels clicked again for a few steps.

"And now, music. The fourth button, Emmy?"

There came again those sensual, spectral chords that opened the "Ghostgirls Pavan," and this time they led gradually into a music that seemed to twirl and spin, very slowly and with a lazy grace, the music of space, the music of free fall. It made easier the slow breathing that meant life to me.

I became aware of dim fountains. Each file drawer was outlined by a phosphorescent glow shooting upward.

Over the edge of one drawer a pale hand flowed. It slipped back, but there was another, and another.

The music strengthened, though spinning still more lazily, and out of the phosphorescence-edged parallelogram of the file drawers there began to pour, swiftly now, pale streams of womankind. Ever-changing faces that were gossamer masks of madness, drunkenness, desire and hate; arms like a flood of serpents; bodies that writhed, convulsed, yet flowed like milk by moonlight.

They swirled out in a circle like slender clouds in a ring, a spinning

circle that dipped close to me, inquisitively, a hundred strangely slitted eyes seeming to peer.

The spinning forms brightened. By their light I began to see Dr. Slyker, the lower part of his face tight with the transparent plastic, only the nostrils flaring and the bulging eyes switching their gaze about, his arms tight to his sides.

The first spiral of the ring speeded up and began to tighten around his head and neck. He was beginning to twirl slowly on his tiny chair, as if he were a fly caught in the middle of a web and being spun in a cocoon by the spider. His face was alternately obscured and illuminated by the bright smoky forms swinging past it. It looked as if he was being strangled by his own cigarette smoke in a film run backwards.

His face began to darken as the glowing circle tightened against him.

Once more there was utter darkness.

Then a whirring click and a tiny shower of sparks, three times repeated, then a tiny blue flame. It moved and stopped and moved, leaving behind it more silent tiny flames, yellow ones. They grew. Evelyn was systematically setting fire to the files.

I knew it might be curtains for me, but I shouted—it came out as a kind of hiccup—and my breath was instantly cut off as the valves in the gag closed.

But Evelyn turned. She had been bending close over Emil's chest and the light from the growing flames highlighted her smile. Through the dark red mist that was closing in on my vision I saw the flames begin to leap from one drawer after another. There was a sudden low roar, like film or acetate shavings burning.

Suddenly Evelyn reached across the desk and touched a button. As I started to red out, I realized that the gag was off, the clamps were loose.

I floundered to my feet, pain stabbing my numbed muscles. The room was full of flickering brightness under a dirty cloud bulging from the ceiling. Evelyn had jerked the transparent sheet off Slyker and was crumpling it up. He started to fall forward, very slowly. Looking at me she said, "Tell Jeff he's dead." But before Slyker hit the floor, she was out the door. I took a step toward Slyker, felt the stinging heat of the flames. My legs were like shaky stilts as I made for the door. As I steadied myself on the jamb I took a last look back, then lurched on.

There wasn't a light in the corridor. The glow of the flames behind me helped a little.

The top of the elevator was dropping out of sight as I reached the shaft. I took the stairs. It was a painful descent. As I trotted out of the building—it was the best speed I could manage — I heard sirens coming. Evelyn must have put in a call—or one of her "friends," though not even Jeff Crain was able to tell me more about them: who her chemist was and who were the Arain—it's an old word for spider, but that leads nowhere. I don't even know how she knew I was working for Jeff; Evelyn Cordew is harder than ever to see and I haven't tried. I don't believe even Jeff's seen her; though I've sometimes wondered if I wasn't used as a cat's paw.

I'm keeping out of it—just as I left it to the firemen to discover Dr. Emil Slyker "suffocated by smoke" from a fire in his "weird" private office, a fire which it was reported did little more than char the furniture and burn the contents of his files and the tapes of his hi fi.

I think a little more was burned. When I looked back the last time I saw the Doctor lying in a strait jacket of pale flames. It may have been scattered papers or the electronic plastic. I think it was ghost-girls burning.

