



Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

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He alone, of all the prison world of indexed numbers, had dared to dream of long-forgotten freedom.

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Already he had taken on the alien loathsome shape..... In all except the still watching mind- the vestige of a soul that still could suffer.....

Schoken Books, Inc., New York, 1951.

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Titus Sulla played fox to a dangerous eagle when he baited the highland king whose fens bred magic more deadly than the bite of Caesar's swords.

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DYING didn't seem to affect Big Bernie at all. Of course, our deaths hadn't been like any of us expected, but by the time I was able to think halfway straight Bernie was lighting one of his hoarded cigars and looking over the strange new terrain with a wary eye.

Due to its trajectory, we'd had a chance to see the bomb coming at us, and had known it was curtains. I remembered it was the first time I was really scared bad.

Bernie squinted up at the sun. Yeah, there was a sun, but it was damn different from what we was used to. In fact, the whole hilly, shrub and tree covered country was different.

"Well, boys," said Bernie, taking the cigar

Bernie went over and put his arm around him, then slapped him once, fast. Bones snapped out of it, and Bernie helped him sit down on the ground and sort of squatted beside him. Bernie's sort of big through the middle, too, and squatting isn't so easy for him, but he got Bones to feeling better.

Finally Bernie looked up at the rest of us. "All right, you dumb dopes," he said. "Siddown and take a rest while you got a chance. we don't know what we'll run up against here!"

After a while Corporal Bernie Hynes called a huddle and we counted noses. Strangler Hazlitt, Bones Melton, Tex Radirke, Hod Morelli, Johnny Kusevic and me—Slim Prater. There'd been a lot of other boys in the vicinity.

BERNIE GOES TO HELL

Bernie had always written his own ticket—but this time he was up against the Devil himself.

out of his face and looking at it instead of us, "it looks like we made the Trip." There was no doubt what he meant.

Strangler Hazlitt cleared his throat. "Sure funny we come through with our uniforms and stuff, ain't it? And nobody hurt."

Bernie laughed deep in his chest. "Just goes to show how things are different from what people think. My poppa used to say, 'Don't believe it, Bernie, until you got your hands on it.'" The muscles of his big jaw knotted a couple of times. "But don't think we ain't hurt—where we just come from, there's parts of us still fallin' to the ground."

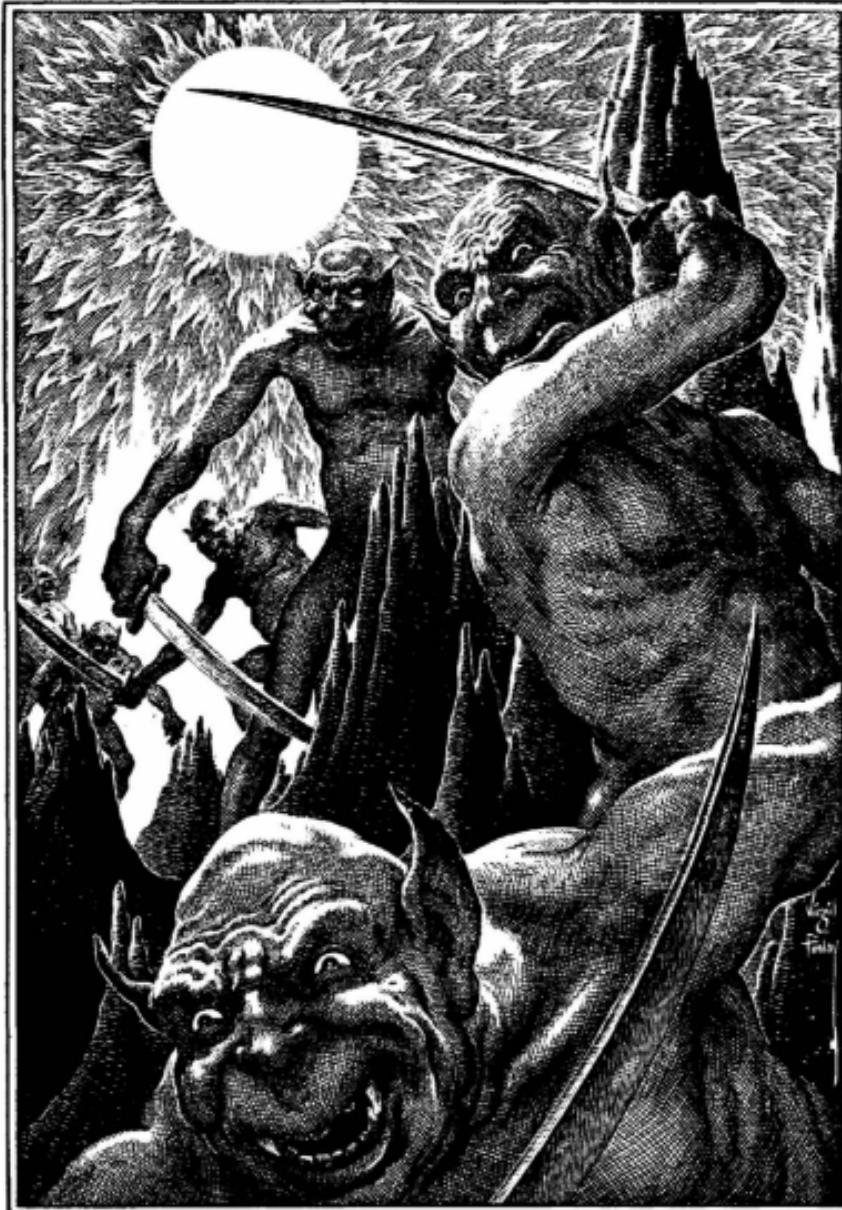
It was kind of hard to get used to, at first. We stood around, just thinking, until Bones Melton began to make screwy noises in his throat. We looked at him. The poor guy was white and kind of rigid, staring into space.

ity, of course, so we figured we was the only ones who'd got the complete business.

By now Bernie had his cigar worked down to a nub. We'd tried to dope out this death business and figure where we were. "Listen," said Bernie at last, "any of you guys religious?" No one said anything. "Okay," continued Bernie, "I'll tell you what I figure—I figure we're in Hell." He spit out a piece of tobacco.

Hod Morelli didn't like that. "Whadda ya mean—Hell? You don't know no more about it than the rest of us!" Strangler Hazlitt scratched an itchy spot and nodded agreement.

Bernie kind of bristled. "Look—you guys are all so damn stupid you couldn't tell which end was up if you didn't wear a hat. You leave me do the thinkin' for this outfit!"



"They busted out of cover yelling. . . ."

He'd told us that other times before and I believed him, but Strangler had other ideas. "Just a minute, Bernie—where do you get off givin' orders now? We're dead, ain't we? Who give you your rank here?" Strangler was a pretty hefty mug himself, and wasn't afraid of man or beast. Or even of Bernie. Most people would take a look at Bernie's wide, battered face, with its mashed nose which he'd gotten in the ring—and let him write his own ticket.

Bernie stood up slow, pulled in his stomach a little and hung his thumbs in his belt. He looked at all of us before he opened his mouth and removed the cigar butt. "I can whip anybody here," he said, "but I don't see no sense in it. I got more brains than all the rest of you put end-to-end, but we're going to run this outfit democratic. We're gonna vote for the boss. You got any objection to that, Strangler?"

Strangler doesn't think very fast, but when he gets hold of a guy he turns him every way but loose. He seemed to get Bernie's idea, though. "The votin' part sounds good," he said, "but I'd whip you just for the hell of it if I hadn't danin' near busted my wrist crankin' that jeep this morning." We all knew Strangler wasn't hacking out. He was just being reasonable—and he wasn't mad, which made a lot of difference.

Bernie chuckled like he was sure of himself. "Okay, Strangler. But lemme tell you somethin': There's nothin' wrong with your wrist now—feel it and see."

Strangler worked his wrist and blinked a few times. "My God, there ain't!" he said.

"Course there ain't!" said Bernie. "If you get here at all, you get here okay." He pouted out his chest some, which made his belt looser. "And I'll tell you why this is Hell—everything's red, ain't it? Look at the leaves on them bushes and trees even the grass!"

"You're right," I said. "It looks something like the color of poison oak leaves."

"Yeah," said Tex Radcliffe, "and the dirt's something like red sand, only it's dirt."

"But I don't see no fire," protested Johnny Kusevic. "It's kinda hot and dry, but I don't see no flames."

"You gotta forget what you heard about Hell," said Bernie. "That's just propaganda. Look at that sun if you wanna see flames."

He was right. The sun looked like a ball of red fire.

We took the vote right after that, and Bernie got it one hundred per cent. He admitted he'd voted for himself, but he said that didn't make any difference because he knew he was going to win anyway. It made sense, and we all felt better when the thing was

settled, because Bernie always had a knack of looking after his boys pretty well. We'd always had hot coffee and blankets even when the rest of the regiment was eating cold tin and doing pushups to keep warm. You had to admit Bernie knew his stuff, even if he didn't always follow the book.

THIE SUN didn't seem to move at all—it just hung on the horizon. We finally gathered some wood and heated up some rations. Bernie set up a sentry system when we turned in, and Johnny Kusevic took first duty with his automatic rifle.

The sun was in the same place when I woke up—with Tex poking me in the ribs and holding his hand over my mouth. "Hod seen a scoutin' party," he whispered.

Everyone else was awake and looking toward a rise about eighty yards away. I listened. There was a crackling sound—and voices—in the brush. Bernie moved us into position with the choice profanity he always uses when we go into action.

I Hopped behind a small mound; along side of Hod Morelli. His skin is ordinarily kind of dark, but now he was pale as a ghost and looked as if he'd just seen one. "Devils," he was muttering. "Big, red devils!"

They must have known we was there. There was twelve of them, and they busted out of cover yelling—and waving swords. I would have laughed if it hadn't been for their looks. They were red and big, all right, about seven feet tall—but lean and wiry, not heavy. And no horns or tails. There was something about their faces, though . . . they were devils—no doubt about it. The sweat on my face turned cool.

Bernie didn't hesitate. "Johnny—start it goin'!" he said.

Johnny Kusevic opened up with the automatic rifle. He let go with four shots, well spaced, like he was going to take the whole bunch one after the other. I've seen him do that. He just doesn't miss unless he's being shelled or strafed, and even then his percentage is plenty high.

But he stopped after that fourth shot—when he noticed that none of the devils had fallen. Four had staggered, but none went down.

"Okay!" barked Bernie. "Rake 'em!"

We opened up. One dropped like a log.

"In the head!" yelled Bones Melton. "Get 'em in the head!" Bones holds an expert rating.

We dropped five more before they were on us. It was a rough scrap. Those damn devils tossed aside their swords to grapple with us. We met them with bayonets—or started to.

When Strangler Hazlitt saw the devil that

had chosen him throw away his sword. he leaped up at him barehanded, calling him dirty names. I could hear bones snapping even above the other noise. Hod used his belt knife to carve a big hole in one devil's belly, and Bernie knocked his boy ten feet away with a right uppercut.

Bernie's no slug.

By that time my devil had got past my bayonet. As he reached for me with his hands I went for my knife, but it was a long time later before I knew what happened.

I figured I was out for about a half hour. I came to just like waking up, and thought at first the devils had got reinforcements. But right away I noticed that six of them had holes in their foreheads—and were acting as if they didn't even feel them. Ten were on their feet, holding their swords, and one was sticking Hod in the groin to bring him to. The one Hod had gutted was sitting down, with his belly wrapped up in strips of a shirt—Johnny's—and Strangler's opponent had wood splints on both arms. But they were all alive, and they all had wet-looking punctures in them here and there.

We found out pretty soon what a death march was like. It was hard, sometimes, to realize we were already dead. Right after we'd started to walk, I asked Bernie what had happened.

He talked around a new cigar. "It's like this judo stuff, Slim," he explained. "Only they know spots I never heard of. They poke you, and you're out like that."

"They must want us alive," I reasoned.

"Bright boy," said Bernie.

"Wonder how come we couldn't kill 'em?" said Bones.

Bernie waved a hand. "They're dead as we are—in a way."

We all let it go at that until one of the devils explained things. I don't know why, but it made us feel better when we found they could talk our lingo. They had been jawing among themselves in some jerky jargon, when one of them suddenly spoke to Bernie.

"You are group leader?"

Tex's jaw dropped a yard, but Bernie didn't even seem surprised. "I'm the boss, by vote," he said, and didn't even look at the speaker.

Their leader's name was Rotan. Bones seemed to understand most of what Rotan told us about where we were, and explained it to us when we stopped for the first rest. Rotan had tossed off some fairly big words.

"Rotan says nobody on this world is really dead," said Bones. "In fact, he says everybody is kinda super-alive—including us, now that we're here. He says there's gotta be some kind of special conditions for mortals to cross

their dimensional threshold—whatever that means—and that our people have been poppin' through and clutterin' up Hell for a long time." Bones used to read a lot, but he can't think on his feet like Bernie can.

Strangler grunted. "So what? What's the score?"

"So we're slaves," said Bernie, and winked. "So if we don't do what these monkeys tell us, they'll damn well make us wish we had."

"How can they make us?" demanded Hod. "We can't be killed any more, can we?"

"We can still feel pain," Bernie reminded him, "and what would happen if our heads was cut off?"

"You are intelligent," said Rotan. He had sneaked up on us, and was looking at Bernie with a funny gleam in his eye. "You will see Satan."

Every day we walked toward the sun, which made it seem to rise higher in the sky. Bones said the planet rotated at the same speed as it traveled around the sun, but anyone could see that the damn thing just hung there and got hotter.

We took turns carrying the gutted devil on a litter made of branches.

On the third day—going by our watches—the devil with the broken arms took off his splints, and the one with the carved belly tossed aside his wrappings and started to walk—and there wasn't even a scar where Hod had operated.

The devils wore only a kind of breechcloth and leather harness, all yellow, and pretty soon we threw away everything but our helmets, one shirt and pants apiece, belts, socks and shoes. We'd been forced to abandon our guns, but had kept our belt knives with no argument. Bernie gave orders to keep wearing our helmets, and as our shoes wore out he made us go barefoot for longer and longer times, until our feet got tough enough to throw away the footwear.

There was no chow problem—as far as quantity went. There was a juicy kind of thing like a coconut that grew wild, and we ate them. We got sick of the sight of them, but we never were given anything else on that trip. Johnny and Tex got into an argument over what would happen if we just stopped eating altogether, but they never did settle it.

On the ninth day we saw the first of civilization—big rolling farms, ditch-irrigated from wells, and what looked like ordinary people working in the fields, sun-tanned and as near naked as the devils. They didn't even bother to look at us. We came to a village that was what I imagine the old towns of knights and yeomen and stuff was like—stone buildings, a sort of small castle and a lot of grass-thatched

huts. Everything was of different shades of red.

The country began to be pretty heavily populated. There were wide dirt roads. Members of the devil race lounged here and there, and I got the idea they were supervisors. We didn't see any animals, people carried things in sacks and baskets. There was evidently plenty of manpower. And womanpower. And it was because of the latter that we really got into trouble.

We were resting near a group of farmers when Tex called something eager to a cute half-bare brunette working alongside the road. She just looked scared and kept on yanking up red vegetables, and one of our guards grunted something to Tex. But Tex had his mind on the chick. He got up and darted over. The devil drew his sword and went after him. Bernie and I, who were closest, followed the devil.

Tex had almost reached the girl when the devil whapped him with the flat of his blade. It didn't seem to hurt Tex much, but it peeced him. He landed a fast left and was following with a roundhouse right when the devil lashed out with his sword. It cut off Tex's right hand at the wrist.

I jumped fast and got in a good solid groin kick from the rear, and Bernie grabbed the devil's sword and swung it. There was a lot of hollering behind us as the devil's head rolled along the ground, and then one of his buddies must have reached me, because I went down for the count again.

DURING the next month we learned what Hell was all about. We were forced to wear leg chains, walk twice as far between rests, and got less than half our regular amount of food and no water except when we happened to stop near 'one of those ungodly deep wells and hauled up a helmet full. Our tongues swelled up, we lost weight, the ankle bracelets cut into our skin till we trailed blood half the time and hurt so bad we could hardly make it. I began to wish I could die again, but after each rest the skin on my ankles was half grown back. Tex's bandage finally fell off his wrist—and damned if there wasn't the start of another hand, which was just beginning to sprout.

We dragged along, hitting more and bigger towns and wider roads, until we approached a stone-walled city that filled the horizon. The sun was now directly overhead, and it must have been a hundred and twenty in the shade. With no shade.

Bernie nodded toward the city. "That's it, boys," he panted.

"What's what?" Johnny gasped.

"That's gonna be home for a while," said Bernie. He was right. Bernie seemed to know all the answers, and I always figured he should have been a second loner.

They prodded us through the crowded, narrow streets, and then, as the part of my brain that was only half dead began to appreciate some of the smooth female population, they took us up to a huge red castle, over a bridge across a ditch, and finally inside. It was some cooler in there, and by the time we got pretty far underground and shoved into a big dungeon it was almost comfortable—except for the smell.

Bernie stretched out on the stone floor while our chains were being taken off. "Kinda poor headquarters," he said to me. "but it'll do for a start."

I thought he'd slipped a cog, but I was too tired to care right then—and I was wrong.

After we'd heaved aside our helmets and slept awhile, Bernie called a huddle. "Listen," he said. "you guys keep your knives around on the back of your belts and act like you ain't even got 'em. We want them devils to forget about 'em till we're ready to show our hand."

"Hell, Bernie," said Hod. "What good are knives? These rascals got swords!"

"You just do what I say," said Bernie. "You remember when Bones shot that devil in the head?"

Bernie looked disgusted. "How about that—ain't you guys got no sense at all?" When nobody answered, he went on. "Look. When you stuck something into their brains, it knocks 'em out for a while, don't it? Okay. Now," he said carefully, "when I give the word, you stab up under the chin right into the brain. Then you just grab the sword and cut off the head, like the one we got back on the road."

"My God!" said Strangler, looking interested. "That's a damn good idea!"

I tried to show how smart I was. "Why don't we just line up on either side of the doorway, and when the guard comes with chow we jump him?"

Bernie wagged his head as though he had a bad taste in his mouth. "We ain't gonna touch that guard," he said. "He's gonna be our buddy-buddy."

It just went to show how smart Bernie is. He palled up to the devil that kept bringing our chow, and if he got a gleam in his eye when he looked at the key hanging from the yellow belt, the devil didn't notice it.

His name was Werj, and he could talk as good English as Rotan and the others had. One time Bernie asked him how o me.

"Speak any mortal language," said Werj. "Have long to learn." He'd gotten so he'd

fold his long length into a corner, wrap up well in his yellow cloak to keep warm, and answer questions by the hour.

"How old are you, Werj?" asked Bernie.

Werj shrugged. "Ever. Since born. Six Satans."

We all pricked up our ears. Bernie followed it up. "You mean five of your kings have died?"

Werj shrugged again. "New Satan remove other Satan. New Satan sit on throne. No difference."

He didn't seem to care much.

"Remove," said Bernie. "How do you mean, remove?"

"Cut off head. Burn parts." He stood up. "I go now."

We looked at Bernie with renewed respect.

We learned a lot from Werj. He seemed lonesome and glad to have someone to jaw with. We didn't let it get us, though—he was still a warrior, seven feet tall, plenty of beef and ugly as sin.

And cold-blooded. Bones figured it out first. The temperature was just right for us, but we noticed Werj always kept himself wrapped up in his cloak, and he said he didn't like to stay underground too long at a time, nor go near the Rim.

Bones got the drift of that, too. It seemed that the other side of this world was cold because the sun never hit it. Hell evidently took up half the planet, surrounded by a cool twilight zone called the Rim, where the devils never went. People kept dropping in all over the place, and there were patrols always scouting the border regions.

Most people were put to work farming, mining, quarrying and a lot of other kinds of labor, but Werj said we were locked up because Bernie had eliminated one of the master race. He didn't seem mad about it, himself—in fact, I got the idea that all devils were pretty much indi even to everything. They sure weren't like people.

WHEN Tex's new hand had grown to about the size of a baby's we were taken before Satan.

A whole slew of guards came for us, dressed in black harness with jewels that glittered in the oil-lamp light. When we reached the upper levels of the castle the daylight damn near blinded us, and the heat hit us hard. We were taken through long corridors and big halls filled with human servants hurrying about. There were rugs on the floors and ornaments on the walls.

The throne room was really something. There was even a fountain throwing water into the air—and a whole flock of really choice

gals sitting around on the floor and on stone benches. Their harness was barely visible.

Tex whistled. "Boy!" he said. "this ain't Hell!" Tex has always been sort of one way when it comes to women.

But it was Satan himself that nearly floored us—he was a human!

The throne was big, but Satan was just an ordinary looking guy, about middle age, with thinning dark hair neatly parted on the side. His skin was kind of pale, as though he didn't get out in the sun much, and he was paunchy. But his black harness was so covered with jewels it looked like it was alive, and he had a gold crown on his head. There were eight blondes hanging around him, and a line of guards several yards away on each side of the throne platform, as though Satan didn't trust even his own ghouls to get too close. One of the blondes was fanning him.

We were brought right up to the platform and our guards dropped to their knees. Bernie did the same thing, and we followed his lead. Then the guards got up and backed off, and we stood up and waited.

Satan looked at Bernie. "What's your name?" he snapped. There was a funny look in his eye, and you could tell by his voice that he was used to being head man.

"Bernie Hynes, your majesty," said Bernie, as cool as if he was answering a mess sergeant.

Satan got all excited. He shoved a blonde out of the way and glared at Bernie.

Bernie got a little pale and his jaw tightened, but he didn't say anything.

"You are all guilty of murdering one of the master race and plotting against our rule!" Satan yelled.

Something about that sounded familiar, but Bernie spoke up quick. "Gosh, your majesty," he said. "I didn't think you was one of the master race." He looked innocent as a babe—a young one.

Satan pulled up, dignified. "I," he said, "am a smaller, fairer member of the master race." Then he changed again, and got that wild look. "For your crimes, you will all be utterly disposed of!"

Bernie put his hands behind his back and made a cutting motion across his wrist with one finger. We got ready.

"But your majesty," said Bernie, "how can we be killed again?"

Satan put on a nasty smile. "You need not die. You will merely be peeled, at first. Starting with your feet, you will be—"

Bernie screamed—a high, blood-curdling yell like a wounded panther. It used to be pretty effective in an attack, and it almost worked now. The blondes were paralyzed, and we reached the platform, with Bernie in the

lead, before Satan recovered. But when he did, we learned some more about Hell.

Satan just waved his hand—and we ran into a solid wall. It wasn't visible, but it was like running head-on into the side of a truck tire. You got the idea it yielded a little, but it didn't.

Even Bernie was so confused that we just stood there while the guards surrounded us with bare swords and took our knives.

Satan was fit to be tied. He turned reddish-purple, stamped his feet, and then grabbed a shawl off his throne and began to rip it with his teeth. He couldn't talk, but he made throwing motions with one hand, and the guards took us back to the dungeon and locked us in again.

We all felt pretty low, but Bernie recovered first and got us to thinking. "Listen," he said, "didn't Satan *agum* kinda like we oughta know him?"

"His talk was sort of familiar," I said, "like something I've heard before. And his face . . ." I tried to concentrate.

"Yeah—yeah," said Bernie, urging me on, "his face. Slim. Suppose he had-a *mustache*?"

Bones jumped to his feet. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hitler!"

There was no doubt about it. Satan was Hitler. We kicked it around awhile, and then Bernie told us how he'd doped it out. "When I saw Satan was a human, I remembered what Werj told us about them six Satans takin' over each other. I don't know much about history, but it seemed to me that guys like Caesar and Napoleon and Hitler would be the type to knock each other off if they got to Hell."

"Seems like," said Hod, "if all them guys and their soldiers—besides a lot of others—came to Hell, there'd be even more people here."

Bone looked thoughtful. "I dunno. There's no lakes and oceans here, which leaves a lot more room for people than Earth had, even when only half the planet is used."

"The point," Bernie said heavily, "is why people come to Hell, instead of going somewhere else." That stopped us. "The reason," Bernie went on, "is that natural fighters come here."

He sat back and looked halfway pleased with himself.

But Tex shook his head. "Nope. That ain't right. All them slick dolls weren't never no soldiers!"

Bernie spit like he used to when he had cigars. "Didja ever figure there's more'n one way to fight? When a guy starts on the bottom of the heap, he's gotta fight everybody and everything to get his head above water—some-

times all his life, if he's got it in him to last." He stood up and leaned against the iron door. "But that ain't important—when I seen Satan I recognized him from pictures, and then—well, it all added up. Besides, Hitler was the last big warden to get knocked off, wasn't he?"

THAT THERE was no arguing that. We chewed it over, and Werj brought us some chow, and then we began to worry about what was going to happen next.

"That business he did wavin' his hand," said Strangler. "Damn it, a man can't get nowhere fightin' stuff like that."

Bernie seemed pretty low. "I know. That kinda beats me—and we ain't got all year to get goin', either. That peelin' deal . . ." He swung on Bones. "Bones, you used to read a lot of different stuff. You ever hear of anything like whatever stopped us?"

Bones put his head in his hands. "Nope," he sighed. "Everything's so damn different here! People don't die, they can't hardly be killed, they grow new parts, like a frog—it's just a bunch of miracles."

Bernie sat up straight at that, and then he started to laugh and pound Bones on the back. "Bones," he said, "you done it, boy—you done it!"

Strangler took off in a low tackle, and J jumped Bernie from behind, pinning his arms. He swore like a topkick, but we got him down and Hod put a hand on his chest and tried to soothe him.

"Take it easy, Bernie," he said, real quiet. "Everything's gonna be—"

"Listen," said Bernie, "if you damn fools will get off me, I can do some thinkin'."

We let him up. He walked over to a corner and just stood there awhile with his back to us, and then he began to wave his hand every so often, like Satan had. We all sat there and watched him, looking at each other every now and then without saying anything. Bones took off his belt and took a turn around his wrist. He motioned at Bernie and raised his eyebrows at the rest of us. We nodded, but Bones whispered, "Not just yet," so we waited.

When Bernie turned around he was smiling. "Strangler," he said, "jump me again." I started to take off my belt.

"Naw," said Strangler. "I ain't mad, Bernie. C'mon over and siddown a while."

"Strangler," said Bernie, "you jump me. I ain't gonna get rough. If you don't, I'll pin your ears back."

Strangler shrugged his big shoulders and got up. We all moved with him, and when he lowered his head, spread his arms and rushed, we were right alongside him.

Bernie waved his hand at us.

I heard Strangler's neck crack just before I almost brained myself against a wall I could n't see. By the time we all recovered, Bernie was feeling of Strangler's neck. Strangler just laid there, looking around with his eyes, like he couldn't move.

"Busted," said Bernie. "Didn't mean to do that."

"What happened?" asked Johnny. His nose had started to bleed, but quit right away.

We used several belts to wrap around Strangler's neck, for support, while Bernie told us about it.

"Bones gimme the idea when he said *miracles*—and that things was so different here. All you gotta do," he said simply, "is wave your hand and think there's a wall. Just think hard."

"Wonder if I could do it," said Hod.

"You better be able to," said Bernie, "because we ain't got much time left." He laid hold of one end of a wooden bench. "You try it," he said. "I'll make it easy for you." And he swung the bench at Hod's head.

Hod looked surprised, then he waved his hand quick. The bench cracked against something and broke off the legs at one end.

We set the good end of the bench against the side of the dungeon and eased Strangler up against the incline and sat around to keep him company.

"You'll be able to move all right again before too long," said Bernie. "The rest of you guys better practice makin' walls."

We took turns throwing pieces of bench legs at each other and stopping them with walls. There was nothing to it, when you knew how. Once a piece bounced off a wall and almost hit Strangler—and damned if he didn't stop it with a wall without being able to move. We looked at him kind of surprised, and he made a croaking noise like he was laughing.

"I guess it's all in the mind," said Bones, "and waving your hand just sorta helps concentrate." He looked at Bernie. "I wonder why all the other people in Hell don't figure it out."

Bernie chuckled. "I asked my poppa something like that, once. He said, 'Bernie, everything is simple after somebody else thinks of it first.'"

"They won't peel us now!" said Johnny.

"Nope," said Bernie, "but how you gonna keep from starving?"

We all looked blank.

"Look," said Bernie patiently. "So they come after us. So we put a wall across the door. So they leave us here."

Tex groaned, and we all didn't feel so good. "We got walls," said Tex, "but we still can't escape!"

"Can't we?" said Bernie sarcastically.

"Not from down here!" I said.

"Okay," said Bernie. "So we'll get rid of the opposition when they take us back upstairs."

I looked at him. "Bernie," I said, real soft, "Hitler's got a wall, too."

"Has he?" Bernie got up and came over to where I was standing. "Put up your wall, Slim, 'cause I'm gonna sink one up to the wrist in your belly!"

I could see he meant it, and threw up a wall quick—except that Bernie nailed me with a fast right which knocked me against the door. He hadn't put much into that punch, though.

Bones got excited. "Say, Bernie—can you do that with Hitler's wall?"

Bernie went over beside Strangler and told us to come in close. "Boys," he said. "We got a lead pipe cinch. Nobody in Hell but Hitler and us knows how to get rid of walls."

Johnny scratched his head. "Bernie," he said, kind of bashful, "I ain't sure I know how to do it, myself."

I was about to admit I didn't either, but Bernie gave us the low-down. "Nuthin' to it," he said. He looked at Bones. "Bones, how do you make your wall?"

"Well," said Bones, "actually, I just imagine it's there."

"Okay," said Bernie. "When you wanna get rid of a wall, all you gotta do is imagine it ain't there." He laid down beside Strangler to take a nap. "Try it."

It worked. Werj brought us chow again and then Bernie told us his plans. He figured that any time anyone learned how to get rid of walls, one more Satan got shoved down the drain by the guy who knew how—which he said we were going to do to Hitler. Barring accidents. We had just begun to feel sort of perky when the devils with the black harness came for us again.

That fouled Bernie's plan up a little bit, because Strangler couldn't walk yet, and we had to carry him to the throne room.

THE place looked like Hitler was throwing a party. There were tables loaded with chow, a sort of orchestra making a loud din, and a chorus line giving out in the center of the big room. Them gals didn't have very much on.

There was a lot of devils around that looked like big brass, and they had devil females with them. It was the first time we'd seen their women. They didn't have such bad shapes, but their faces were no better than the men's.

In front of the throne was a big tray of burning charcoal, and above it was a cauldron big enough to hold a man. There was a chain

hanging from a tripod by which anything could be lowered into the cauldron. In the cauldron oil was bubbling.

We could feel the heat from the tray even where we were standing. Hitler was soaking with sweat, and the skin of his blondes glistened.

Everybody but Hitler's personal guard had



a drink in their hand and were stamping in time to the music. I looked at all the swords and wished we had our knives back.

"He must've figured peelin' was too good for us," whispered Bernie. "We'll hafta leave Strangler lay, but he can make him a good umbrella." Strangler winked to show he understood. I was kind of nervous, and Bones was chewing his lip.

Finally Hitler held up his hand. The music stopped and we started that business of going in front of the throne to bow.

Hod and Johnny timed it just right, laying Strangler down as the guards kneeled and then Bernie yelled, "Hike!"

We all sprang toward the platform. Hitler jumped up with a wild, strangled shout and waved his hand. Bernie plowed on ahead and we stayed right beside him, two on one side, three on the other.

The blondes faded behind the throne. The guards snatched out their swords and tried to close in just as Bernie reached Hitler. We threw up a solid wall around the throne and stood by.

Bernie never hesitated. Hitler had jerked a long dagger out of his belt, but Bernie smashed him square in the face with all two hundred and eighty pounds behind his big fist. Blood squirted around his hand and Hitler's head pounded against the throne so hard that the back of his skull caved in. His gold crown rolled along the floor and I caught it with my toe and picked it up.

Bernie lifted Hitler by the harness and held him dangling while he got his breath. After

the guards had run into our wall and backed at it a few times they'd just stood and watched. All eyes in the room were on Bernie. He nodded toward the cauldron. We formed a sort of corridor with our walls and he waddled along it with Hitler. When he reached the cauldron he gave his load a boost with his knee, grunted, and heaved it into the boiling oil. Then he picked up Strangler gently and carried him back to the throne.

I handed the crown to Bernie while I waddled up a shawl and made a pillow for Strangler, and Bernie hung the thing on his head while he helped me—and damned if everybody in the room didn't kneel down. . . .

We didn't do much but eat and sleep for what must have been two weeks. Bernie put Werj in charge of the castle guard, and after we'd rested up he figured he'd reorganize Hell a little before we took off.

Bernie got to be pretty popular. We rounded up a lot of technicians and scientists, and, finally got wheeled carts and a whole slew of labor-saving tools and gadgets built and distributed.

After that Bones was anxious to get going. He came in once while I was talking to Bernie, sat down and waved for one of the new girls to come over and fan him. "Listen," he said, kind of eager, "when we leave, why don't we go and see what's out around the Rim country?"

Bernie took the red cigarette out of his mouth. One of the scientists had found something pretty much like tobacco. "What for?" he asked.

Bones accepted the goblet of red wine a girl handed him. "Well," he said, "there's half a world out there we don't know nothing about, and a lot of it would still get some light from the sun."

I signaled the rope brunette with the back scratcher to go away. "So, what?" I said. "It's probably cold, too."

"That's just the point," said Bones. He watched while a girl put a stool under his feet. "Remember all the stories we used to hear about Heaven? Everything was white, wasn't it? Maybe the white stuff was snow—after all, Hell wasn't exactly the way we'd heard."

Bernie leaned his head back so the girl with the atomizer wouldn't get perfume in his eyes. "I dunno," he said. "You figure we'd be better off in Heaven?"

Bones waited while his goblet was filled again. "Well," he said, "maybe not . . . maybe not." He heeled.

"Besides," said Bernie, "I got our red boys watchin' for certain other guys to show up. We got plenty of oil."