

# fantastic

MAY

1957

Volume 6

Number 4

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
William B. Ziff (1898-1953) Founder  
Editorial and Executive Offices  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

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## FICTION

<b>SATAN IS MY ALLY</b> By Harlan Ellison.....	6
<b>THE METAL MARTYR</b> By Henry Slesar.....	30
<b>MONDAY IMMORTAL</b> By Ralph Burke.....	45
<b>THE VENGEANCE OF KYVOR</b> (Conclusion) By Randall Garrell.....	60
<b>HELL'S OWN PARLOR</b> By Paul Dallas.....	88
<b>MOURNERS FOR HIRE</b> By Ellis Hart.....	104

## FEATURES

<b>LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID</b> By The Editor.....	5
<b>SCIENTIFIC MYSTERIES</b> .....	121
<b>THE BOOK RACK</b> By Villiers Gerson.....	122
<b>ACCORDING TO YOU...</b> By The Readers.....	125
<b>IT SOUNDS FANTASTIC, BUT...</b> By Paul Steiner.....	129



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# HELL'S OWN PARLOR

By PAUL DALLAS

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*Exactly where is this place called Hell? Down below?  
Not necessarily. It may be right here — now — all  
around us. And each of us may be acting as our  
own judges, jurors, and executioners — day after day.*

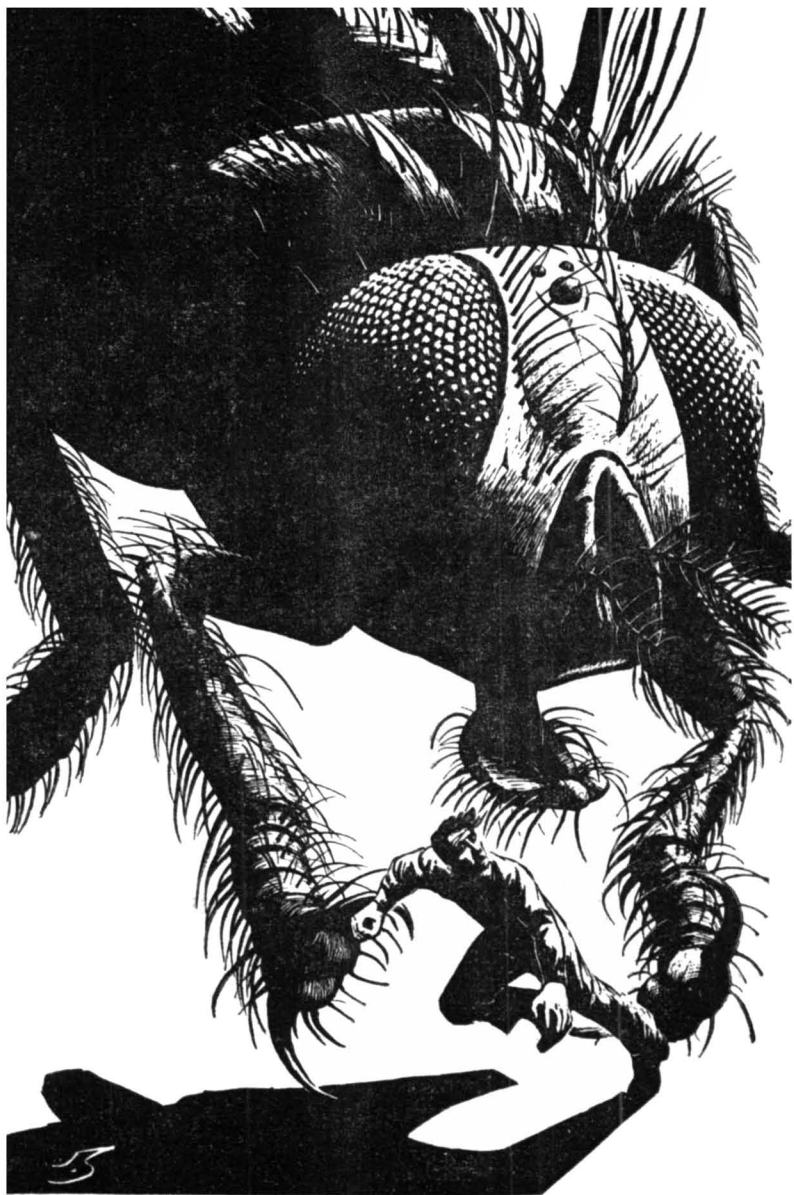
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THE pressure was enormous and it was impossible to withstand it. Even the mighty clyptic muscles, tensed though they were in fright, resisted only briefly and then fell back with a shudder as their wings were torn from them. The leg muscles, being weaker, knotted in pain and shivered as the legs were ripped two at a time from their moorings. Finally the wingless, legless body of the mutilated fly was thrown onto the tabletop, where it buzzed in helpless shock.

Orman Grayson gazed with satisfaction at his handiwork, carefully brushing the loose legs and gauzy wings from his fingertips. They showered gently on the impotent body of the fly, whose

desperate buzzing continued to broadcast the horror of the disaster which had engulfed it. It was a housefly, and Orman noted with interest the jagged bright blue mark on its back that formed an almost perfect Z. He poked at it with a stubby forefinger and sent the limbless body skidding across the polished mahogany.

The suffering of the truncated insect did not register particularly in Orman's mind, but for the moment he revelled in the power he had just demonstrated so convincingly. Right now, as far as that fly was concerned, and, for that matter, as far as Orman was concerned, Orman Grayson was God. The tabletop was his universe, and it suited his pleasure to



A man's sins will return to haunt him—come what may.

have it inhabited by this one fly; he could have others if he wished. In fact, it was for the purpose of stocking his various universes that he strung flypaper in likely places around his apartment. Elsewhere—in his office, for instance—he relied on the surprising speed with which his short, pudgy arms could sweep through the air, enabling him to catch his subjects on the wing.

Orman sat back and clasped his hands placidly, observing the futile little twitchings of his maimed vassal. His mind opened, taking in the larger situation. It was not easy to be God. In order to use power you had to acquire it first; and although he was now forty-five years old, he had really spent only the last twenty years gathering and building his power.

The idea of a benevolent God was ridiculous—the blathering of uninformed idiots. He himself had believed it for twenty-five years. His brother Tom, ten years older, could make one believe that God was all kindness and love. A righteousness softened by a deep sense of understanding had combined to make Tom a very unusual type of cop; unfortunately, these qualities had

also limited his rise in the force to the rank of detective-sergeant. His understanding had driven him to spending much of his off-time helping the little nobodies whose collisions with the machinery of law enforcement became large tragedies to families too poor and too unimportant to merit official consideration. His righteousness had limited his income to the totally inadequate salary of a detective-sergeant in the mid-thirties. And since he wouldn't take graft, he couldn't be reached by the mob and their hired politicians. Except that one day they reached him the hard way. "Unknown gunman kills cop," the papers said. And since no one knew just how he met his death, Tom's wife didn't even get much of a medal, although he was buried with the honors due a detective-lieutenant.

Orman blinked his eyes, dispelling his reminiscences and concentrating once again on his universe and subject. The fly with the blue Z stilled buzzed intermittently. Orman picked it up, listened to the noise and felt the vibration. Holding it firmly but gently between thumb and forefinger, he raised his other

hand and expertly flicked off its head. Neatly, he picked up the tiny head and dropped it in the ashtray. Then, drawing a sharp breath, he pressed his thumb and forefinger together viciously, instantly squeezing all life out of his subject.

Rubbing his fingers together, he deposited the flattened remains of the fly in the ashtray next to the head. He drew a tissue from his jacket pocket, wiped his fingers and threw the soiled paper into the wastebasket. Then, he heaved a sigh and stood up. Much as he despised it, he would have to spend an hour in his office now. An hour in the morning to get things rolling, an hour in the evening to sign papers and check the day's production, were the bare minimum, he felt. He straightened his tie, adjusted his cuffs, and strode from the room.

Orman walked purposefully through the main office towards his own inner sanctum. His face wore a preoccupied, distant look, and he barely nodded his acknowledgment to the chorus of "Good afternoon, Mr. Grayson," that sounded as he passed each desk. You couldn't head up an impor-

tant organization by back-slapping and being a good guy; prestige, respect, power—these were the qualities that counted.

He nodded briefly to his secretary at her desk just outside his office, and entered. He sat down behind his desk and his eyes darted across its surface, taking in the details. The outgoing basket was empty. The incoming file contained the two folders on the Melas Company which he had requested. In dead center, a neat stack of freshly typed letters waited for his signature. All was in order, as he knew it would be.

The intercom box winked at him and he depressed a tiny lever.

"Yes, Miss Adams?"

"Mr. Hinkley would like to see you, Mr. Grayson."

Orman consulted his watch. "I'll see him in exactly six minutes," he answered, and closed the circuit.

It was a typical maneuver—clever. To begin with, if his time was to be considered valuable by his employees, they must know that they couldn't just walk in whenever they felt like it. And in this particular case, Orman knew that Hinkley wanted a favor. The six minutes Hink-

ley would be kept waiting would turn him to jelly. Some men might be able to spend the time marshalling arguments and compelling reasons to present to the Boss; but not Hinkley. He was in his middle fifties, had been with this one company since its inception, and was therefore unemployable elsewhere. His wife's illness—she must have been ailing for almost two years now—had doubtless exhausted whatever reserve of cash the man had possessed; and now he wanted a favor. Orman knew what the request would be—Miss Adams was very good about that sort of thing—and he knew how desperate was Hinkley's position. The six minutes would turn him to jelly.

He checked off the remaining seconds and as the last second ticked away, there was a knock on his door.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened and a slight man with thin, graying hair came through. The first impression he gave was that he was unutterably weary.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Grayson," he said. "May I see you for a minute?"

"Certainly, certainly. What

can I do for you? How is your wife?"

"There's been no change, sir. As a matter of fact, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Well, if there's anything I can do to help, Hinkley, just let me know."

"Thank you, sir, that's very kind of you." The small man hesitated and cleared his throat. "Well, sir, Dr. Kelly wants her to go to Rochester to be examined at the Clinic. They may be able to help."

"Sounds like a very fine idea," Orman said.

"Yes, sir, I believe it is, but you see, what with the trip both ways, and her stay there, the whole thing will take a month. Since she's practically helpless by herself, I'll have to go with her."

"Yes, of course," Orman sympathized. "And I can tell you, we'll miss you. The office won't be the same without you."

"Thank you, sir, that's very kind of you."

Orman smiled and waved away the gratitude. "Not at all," he went on. "I'll have the cashier make up your pay. What with vacation time, separation pay and whatever you get back from the pension fund, it should come to a tidy little sum."

"Separation pay?" Hinkley asked. He was confused.

"Why, of course. After your years of service, you don't think we'd let you quit without showing some measure of our appreciation. You'll get two weeks pay."

Hinkley was stunned. "Quit?" he asked, his voice rising to a squeak. "I had no intention of quitting, Mr. Grayson. I just thought that . . ."

Orman's eyebrows plainly showed his surprise. "Not quitting? But Hinkley, I thought you said your wife would have to go away for a month, and that you were going with her?"

"I did, sir." Hinkley was desperately seeking to hold together the jagged edges of reality. "But I meant that since my vacation is coming up anyhow, I might just add two weeks to that, sir, and . . ."

Orman shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry," he said, "I misunderstood. This makes my problem very difficult. You see, I had intended to ask you to forego your vacation this year. The files are badly in need of a complete overhauling, and we just can't put it off any longer."

"But, Mr. Grayson, I over-

hauled the entire system last year instead of taking my vacation."

Orman touched his fingertips together. "Well, there you are," he said with a sigh, "you see how quickly they can get out of order. If you were to leave now, I'd just have to get another man to replace you. As you know, Hinkley, we always hire on a permanent basis—so I simply don't see any place you would fit into when you come back."

Hinkley squirmed uncomfortably. "But, Mr. Grayson, I never thought of quitting. I couldn't possibly quit now. Not with all the expenses I've had. If I could even have one week extra . . ."

Orman raised his hand, silencing the frightened man. "Come, come, Hinkley. I realize your position, and it's your decision to make. If you want to stay on and handle the overhaul yourself, why, that would be fine—but if you feel you'd rather have the money, we'll arrange it that way. As a matter of fact, considering the unusual conditions, I think we can make your separation pay three weeks."

"Oh, no, sir," Hinkley cried out in alarm, "why, that wouldn't even begin to pay for . . . I'm sorry, sir,"

he continued, getting a hold on himself. "I'll be glad to work through my vacation and straighten out the files," he concluded in defeat.

Orman smiled pleasantly. "Well, that's fine," he said. "Everything's settled then."

Hinkley nodded wordlessly and turned to leave. His hand was on the doorknob when Orman's voice came to him.

"Oh, and Hinkley. If there's any way I can help, let me know, won't you?"

"Yes, sir," Hinkley said. "Thank you, sir. That's very kind of you."

Orman watched the door close behind the beaten man and sighed heavily. It was a strain coming in to the office every afternoon. But there were compensations.

He had eaten on the way home. Now the evening was his to relax. He was stretched out in his adjustable armchair. The paper lay open on his outstretched legs, and his arms were at his side. He wasn't dozing exactly, just letting his thoughts drift.

In the little dining area, a bit to the left and behind him, Peter was singing at the top of his shrill voice. Peter was a canary. An extraordinary bird, Orman mused, closing

his eyes. He was easily frightened; a short stick thrust between the bars of his cage and poked at him would send him into a frenzy of fluttering and alarmed peeps. He lost dignity, feathers and wind in his terror. And yet, when things had calmed down, he would chirp and sing as loudly as ever. Magnificent spirit; it would take a while to crush.

The song came clear and sweet from the cage. And then clearer and sweeter than Orman had ever heard it before. While he listened to the rich tones which seemed to fill the entire room, deep within the framework of music a thin voice seemed to be speaking words.

He was so enveloped by the beauty of the canary's song, and he became aware of the voice so gradually, that it did not surprise him at all to hear it. Instead, with his eyes closed, he simply listened, as the voice gained in volume and the singing faded into the background. Finally the words themselves became distinguishable, and Orman found himself listening to them with interest. There was an indescribable agony in the voice, and the words seemed to be a sort of prayer.

". . . and so, I beseech you,



release me from this vale of suffering. Though great have been my wrongdoings, surely, I implore, my punishment has been as great. I knew so little, and now I have learned and endured so much. Hear my plea, I beseech you, and take me to your fold."

Suddenly, Orman was jarred loose from his reverie. He jumped. It was the phone; its harsh bells destroyed the pleasantness of the mood. He got up to answer. In his haste, he stumbled, barking a shin. He swore softly, paused to collect himself, and then lifted the instrument. It was the wrong number. For a moment, he was furious, and teetered on the edge of throwing a big fat tantrum, but then he remembered the business about the canary singing and the voice that had seemed to grow from the song. Had he dozed off? Had the voice been his own, echoing in a dream? No. No, he was sure that he had been awake. He had just happened to tune in on something that he had had no previous experience with. There could be no other explanation.

To settle the matter, he walked quickly to the dining area and Peter's cage. The bird was silent now. It had to be; it was dead. Lying on

the bottom of the cage, limp and very dead.

Orman was annoyed; this put a crimp into some few plans he had. He opened the door of the cage, gently lifted the still warm body and carried it out to the kitchen. He deposited it in the garbage pail, and that was that. But that night, Orman dreamed of Peter and his singing and his strange voice. And it bothered him.

As the cold, blue light of dawn oozed into his room, he dreamed that Tom awoke him as he used to so long ago, and he opened his eyes with a smile. His features were pleasant, almost boyish, as he lazily opened his eyes and continued the dream in the softly lit room. Tom would have the coffee hot, and soon they would take turns in the shower. These early morning breakfasts were great morale builders. Tom took the time to discuss any problems which troubled his younger brother, and he gave not only good solid advice, but real help. No worry was so trivial that Tom couldn't devote some time to it. It made each day start out bright and fresh and easy to conquer.

Orman's remaining senses slowly stretched and awoke

and became aware, and the stern reality of the day at hand filtered through. A humming sound and a fluttering came from the window; raising his head, he looked in that direction. One of the strips of flypaper had caught a large night-moth. It was strong enough to swing the long strip from side to side, but it was caught fast.

Orman let his head fall back and closed his eyes. He was not yet ready to face the normal grind and crush of the day. The humming of the captive moth lulled him back toward the shadow of the receding night, and he took advantage of the soothing sound to relax for a further few moments before rising. The noise spiralled into his ear and filled his consciousness, and down within the center of the low notes, a voice spoke words. Slowly, monotonously, the voice droned on, until Orman found himself listening, eavesdropping on the supplication of the frantic moth.

“. . . although I have richly deserved the sentence passed upon me, I humbly implore you to direct the mortal Orman Grayson, to whom I have been assigned, to act without undue delay, so that

I may be released to your command, where I so earnestly long to be.”

At the mention of his name, Orman sat up stiffly; then, remembering how he had lost contact with Peter when the phone rang suddenly, he deliberately forced himself to relax.

Casually, moving slowly and easily, he drew back the covers and got to his feet. He padded gently over to the corner where the trapped moth fluttered on the sticky paper and was relieved to find, as he bent forward to inspect his catch, that within the humming and the noise of the frantically beating wings, the voice was still distinguishable. Not that he heard this as he heard ordinary conversation. Rather he sensed the words; they registered as if they had been heard.

As he stared at the insect, the words stopped, but the feeling of being in tune with something strange continued, and he was puzzled. He looked the moth over carefully in the shallow light. It was nothing unusual; just a moth.

“Well, now, I wonder why you seemed to mention my name,” he mused.

“Because I have been assigned to you, Orman Gray-

son." The answer was clear, although again he could not hear any actual words.

His eyes narrowed in surprise, and he bent forward until he was in danger of pressing his face against the gluey paper.

"Did you speak to me?" he asked aloud.

There was no answer. Doubt seeped into his mind, and the silence which filled the room allowed it to grow until Orman was almost sure that he had been the victim of a daydream. He was about to shrug the matter off and return to bed, when a thought occurred to him, and he decided it was worthwhile making a test. Keeping his lips firmly pressed together, he formed the words in his mind, trying through sheer thinking power to broadcast his meaning. After several tries, he found he was able to create an idea in his mind without using words, even mentally. It took a great deal of concentration.

"Did you speak to me?" he thought.

"I only answered you." The reply flashed into his consciousness.

"Well, now, we're getting somewhere," he thought with satisfaction. "What do you

mean when you say you've been assigned to me?"

"I have been given this form and this life, which in turn have been placed in your hands. This is my atonement for the transgressions of my previous form and life."

"Do you mean to say that you are not just an ordinary moth?" Orman formed the question excitedly.

"I am a moth," came the answer.

"Yes, yes, but you were not always a moth, is that it?"

"Of course not; I was a mortal, as you are now."

"Then you died and came back as a moth?" Orman found this telepathic conversation stimulating.

"There is no death and no coming back. I merely was transferred into another form."

"And you say you were assigned to me. Who assigned you?" he asked.

"You are on the lists of those who can provide atonement."

"No, really?" Orman was pleased at the news. This confirmed an opinion he had long held that his was a power and a destiny beyond the common means of ordinary people. "So I am your master," he mused.

"You are not my master, Orman Grayson, you are my punishment," the moth said.

"Well, there is very little difference as I see it," Orman replied. "And since you were no doubt a very wicked man, I shall see that you are properly punished. After all, it is my duty."

"It is ordered."

He went to his dresser and returned carrying a pair of scissors. With these, he carefully snipped the flypaper just above and below the place where the moth was held fast. Disregarding the piece that fell to the floor and stuck to the carpet, Orman carried his prize out of the room and into his study. There he took a sheet of heavy white paper from a desk drawer and carefully placed the small sticky ribbon onto it. Switching on the bright desk lamp, he sat down and contemplated his handiwork.

The thought that he had been designated as an official hell swirled through his mind. He wondered briefly whether he had been born specifically with this role in view, or whether he had earned the position; not that it was an important point, because the main thing was that he was so appointed.

Still, it would be nice to think that he had had some part in earning the distinction. For the first time since the horrible night Tom had been viciously cut down from behind, he felt a fullness of purpose to his life.

"Now then," he said, addressing his mind to his victim, "there are things you must tell me. First of all, what is your name?"

"You can know me only as you see me."

"So." Apparently there were rules with which he was not familiar. He pressed gently on the moth's chest with the point of a pencil, sending the insect into a convulsion of frenzied activity. The light, reflecting deep within the moth's eyes, gave them a breathtaking beauty. He dug with the pencil point a few times, to make the head twitch and squirm, catching the light and illuminating the pinpoints of amber.

"You know," he said, "it doesn't seem altogether fair to me. I mean that the punishment for a whole lifetime should be condensed into fifteen or maybe thirty minutes. When I think of the many insects I have spent less than five minutes on, I'm afraid I did not do justice."

"You do not understand time," the moth said, its message carrying no trace of the suffering it was undergoing. "Even a lifetime may be a few hours, or many years, or even centuries. A clock tells you nothing of time, but reveals only the functioning of a piece of machinery built to work a certain way. If it runs fast or slow, an adjustment is required—but when it runs properly, it merely marks off the hours of the days that are given you. Those you cannot adjust. But a day or an hour or a minute carries as much time as has been packed into it, and this can vary. Your thirty minutes can be an eternity."

"I suppose it makes sense," Orman conceded. "But since I am involved in this thing, it would seem to be fairer if time were run on a basis that I was used to. In any case . . . I shall make you beg for mercy before I am through with you. Nothing personal, you understand; my duty, you know."

"It is not permitted to ask anything of you."

"Oh, it is not permitted, eh?" Orman said heatedly. "Well, we'll just see whether you feel like waiting for permission, or whether you'll beg me for mercy."

As he spoke, he jabbed angrily with the pencil. He regretted his action as soon as he did it, but it was too late. The sharp point had gone clear through the insect, gouging an enormous hole in its chest. By the time he realized what he had done, the moth was dead.

The heavy weight of extreme disappointment oppressed his mind, and he sat staring at the carcass of his late subject. After several bitter moments, he tried again to establish contact with the moth; there was the small hope that it might not be really dead. Some insects possessed almost miraculous powers of survival.

Straining to concentrate his thoughts, he called for it to answer him. He called again and again, pausing only to listen in silence for a reply. None came. Furious and tired from the strain of his mental exertions, Orman jabbed viciously at the empty body of the moth, piercing it from head to tail. Realizing the futility of his actions, he regained his self-control and dropped the pencil. As if from a great distance, so dimly that he could not be sure whether he had received a message or imag-

ined it, he heard a thin, mocking laugh. It was a happy laugh, but Orman was not amused.

But there would be another time. The thought helped make up for the terrible disappointment he had just experienced, and he heaved a sigh. Patience had always been one of his chief virtues.

The staff noticed his good humor as he made his way through the office. Once or twice he murmured a "Good morning"—with the result that as he passed through the door to his inner sanctum, he was followed by every pair of eyes in the place. He took his place behind his desk and used the intercom to ask Miss Adams to send Hinkley in to him.

Hinkley knocked and entered. He walked hesitantly across the room and waited in front of Orman's desk. He wore a puzzled expression and was obviously wondering what his boss might want with him.

After several minutes, during which Hinkley shifted weight from foot to foot, not daring to clear his throat for fear that it might be mistaken for a sign of impatience on his part, Orman

looked up from the papers he had been riffling through.

"Ah, Hinkley," he said warmly, "and how are you this morning?"

"Fine, thank you, sir," Hinkley answered.

"Well, that's wonderful." Orman was fairly booming with good spirits. "And Mrs. Hinkley?"

"She's very much the same, sir. No worse, at least. She's leaving for Rochester next Monday."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir. She's quite worried." Hinkley's face betrayed his own anxiety.

"It's very depressing. A woman in her condition should never make a trip like that alone. She should have the best of care." Orman shook his head sadly. The implication was brutal.

Hinkley said nothing. He wondered what Mr. Grayson was planning. He seemed in such a bright mood today that there was even a chance he might have had a change of heart.

"I'm sorry to see," Orman went on, "that you don't show a greater concern. Surely you could have worked things so as to care for this woman, who has stood by your side for so many years, in her hour of need."

"But, Mr. Grayson, the other day you said . . ."

"Hinkley, act like a man," Orman interrupted his protesting employee. "The duty is yours and yours alone. Face up to it, man. Don't blame others for your own shortcomings. And now," he consulted his watch, "I'm afraid I shall be very busy this morning, so I'll be grateful if you will return to your work."

"Yes, sir, certainly," Hinkley replied, as he retreated in confusion.

Orman watched a bewildered, thoroughly upset man leave his office. He sighed. Hinkley wouldn't get much work done today.

The fly, buzzing stupidly at the window, caught his attention. So close to freedom, and seeking it so frantically, it was doomed. Within sight of the clear outdoors, the invisible barrier of glass blocked the way, and it dashed itself repeatedly against the unseen wall. The irony of the fly's predicament amused Orman. That it should be caught so close to, and within sight of, the liberty it desired seemed a cute twist. Tearing a strip of cellophane tape from the dispenser on his desk, he walked over to the window. With one quick, ex-

pert movement, he covered the fly, sticking it to the glass. He left a little hump in the middle, so that the insect was not hurt, but securely imprisoned in its little transparent cage.

Now the buzzing grew louder. Orman stood perfectly still, concentrating, tuning in on the thoughts of the distraught fly. He began to catch the sense of the voice, and sent his own thoughts toward his victim.

"Surprised you, didn't I?"

"I knew it had to happen," the fly answered.

"Yes, I suppose you did. But it was neatly done, wasn't it?"

"It was done."

The simple, unruffled replies were irritating. It was almost as though the fly deliberately refused to admit the skilled generalship which had resulted in its capture. But stubbornness would avail it nothing in this case.

"You pretend not to be impressed, I see. But then maybe you don't know yet who I am."

"I know very well who you are, Orman Grayson. I know you."

"Hah! Not half so well as you will know me. What you know of me so far is only

general—but before I'm through with you, you'll know me in great detail. You will know me not for fifteen minutes, or thirty, but you, my friend, will be with me for days."

"It will be as it is ordered," the fly answered patiently. Apparently it did not intend to be shaken. "And I know you much better than you believe."

"You know me?" Orman was interested. He still did not understand too much about the nature of the system in which he had been appointed to a high position, and he was anxious to discover more about its workings. "How do you know me?"

"I know well your brother Tom."

Orman's heart jumped at the mention of the name. In his excitement, he almost lost contact with the insect, as he fought hard to hold back the torrent of words which threatened to flow from his lips. Breathing hard, he closed his eyes and focused his every thought on maintaining the contact.

"What do you know of Tom?" he asked through his mind. "Where is he? Does he speak of me? What does he say?"

"He was with you not long ago," the fly answered.

"Yes, yes, I know," Orman said eagerly. "It was early this morning, wasn't it? He was in my room, getting coffee ready like he used to. Will I see him again?"

Orman was trembling with excitement. The thought that he might establish contact with Tom himself was more than he could bear.

"You will never see him again."

"What do you mean, I'll never see him again? How do you know? You said he was in my room. Why won't he come again?" he asked angrily.

"The last time you saw him, he came to you, not to make coffee for you, but to complete his atonement. He was in your room as a fly. A blue Z was his mark of identification. You should remember him. You tore him apart."

"You lie! You lie!" Orman shouted. In his rage, he drew back his fist and, rushing forward, threw a wild, roundhouse punch at the fly on the windowpane. The fury which enveloped him prevented him from seeing the wastebasket. He tripped over it, just as he was swinging



around with his entire force behind the punch, and he plunged toward the window.

Hinkley was the first one into the office, attracted by the sound of the crashing glass. He saw the broken window, jagged pieces of glass framing the large hole. Carefully, he stuck his head through the opening and

looked down. Ten stories below, a crowd was gathering about a figure lying broken on the sidewalk.

He drew his head back and turned to face the employees who were coming into the room, chattering, wondering, questioning.

"It's Mr. Grayson," Hinkley said. "He's gone out."

**THE END**