

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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PENELOPE

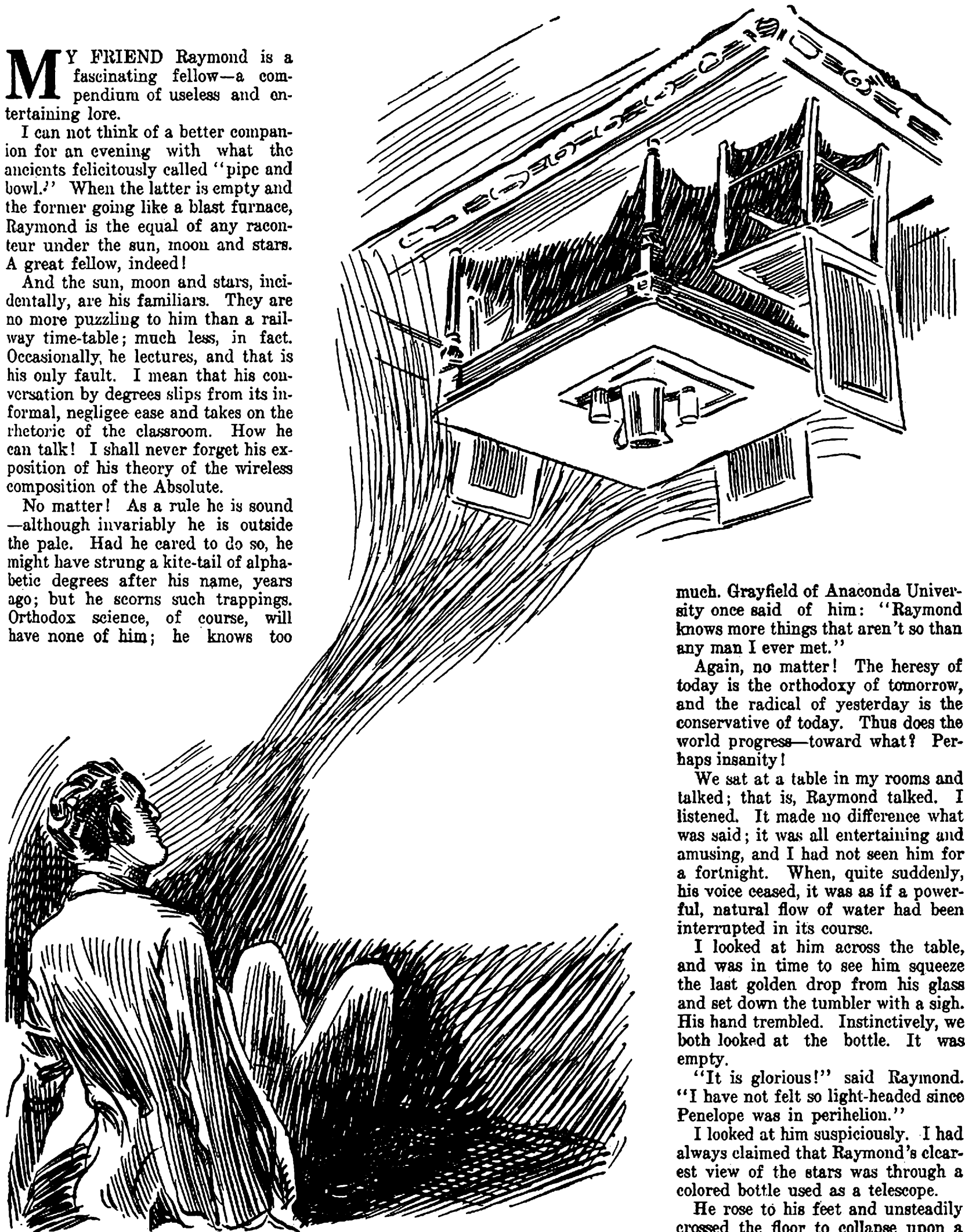
By Vincent Starrett

MY FRIEND Raymond is a fascinating fellow—a compendium of useless and entertaining lore.

I can not think of a better companion for an evening with what the ancients felicitously called "pipe and bowl." When the latter is empty and the former going like a blast furnace, Raymond is the equal of any raconteur under the sun, moon and stars. A great fellow, indeed!

And the sun, moon and stars, incidentally, are his familiars. They are no more puzzling to him than a railway time-table; much less, in fact. Occasionally, he lectures, and that is his only fault. I mean that his conversation by degrees slips from its informal, negligee ease and takes on the rhetoric of the classroom. How he can talk! I shall never forget his exposition of his theory of the wireless composition of the Absolute.

No matter! As a rule he is sound—although invariably he is outside the pale. Had he cared to do so, he might have strung a kite-tail of alphabetic degrees after his name, years ago; but he scorns such trappings. Orthodox science, of course, will have none of him; he knows too



much. Grayfield of Anaconda University once said of him: "Raymond knows more things that aren't so than any man I ever met."

Again, no matter! The heresy of today is the orthodoxy of tomorrow, and the radical of yesterday is the conservative of today. Thus does the world progress—toward what? Perhaps insanity!

We sat at a table in my rooms and talked; that is, Raymond talked. I listened. It made no difference what was said; it was all entertaining and amusing, and I had not seen him for a fortnight. When, quite suddenly, his voice ceased, it was as if a powerful, natural flow of water had been interrupted in its course.

I looked at him across the table, and was in time to see him squeeze the last golden drop from his glass and set down the tumbler with a sigh. His hand trembled. Instinctively, we both looked at the bottle. It was empty.

"It is glorious!" said Raymond. "I have not felt so light-headed since Penelope was in perihelion."

I looked at him suspiciously. I had always claimed that Raymond's clearest view of the stars was through a colored bottle used as a telescope.

He rose to his feet and unsteadily crossed the floor to collapse upon a

couch. In an instant he was asleep and snoring. It was the promptest performance by the man that I had ever seen, and I was lost in admiration. But as my wife was due at any moment, I withheld my wonder and shook him into wakefulness. After a bit he sat up with a stare.

"Give us an arm, old chap," he murmured; and after a moment: "The heat here is awful."

I assisted him to his feet, and we ricocheted to the balcony upon which long doors opened at the front of the room. The light breeze impinged pleasantly upon our senses. We were two floors up, and from somewhere below ascended the strains of a banjo played pianissimo.

Raymond draped a long arm across my shoulders and, thus fortified, closed one eye and looked into the heavens. The other arm described an arc and developed a rigid finger, pointing upward.

"Look!" he said. "It is the star Penelope!"

I restrained an inclination to laugh. "Which?" I asked, although it was quite clear that Raymond was drunk.

He indicated, and I allowed myself to be persuaded that I saw it. Penelope, I learned later, is a small star of about the thirtieth magnitude, which, on a clear night and with a powerful glass, may be picked up midway between the constellations of the Pleiades and Ursa Major. It is a comparatively insignificant star, and that Raymond actually saw it I still greatly doubt.

But the sight, real or fancied, was tonic. It was as if that remote point of fire had thrilled him with a life-ray. He straightened, sobered, became grave. The pointing finger was withdrawn.

"Diccon," he said, giving me a familiar and affectionate pseudonym, "I have never told you of my connection with the star Penelope. There are few that know. Those whom I have told have looked upon me as mad. If I have concealed from you this, my strangest adventure, you must believe that it was because I valued your opinion of my sanity. Tonight——"

Again he turned his gaze upward, and I pretended to see that distant star. His voice became reminiscent, introspective.

"Penelope," he whispered, "Penelope! Only yesterday it seems that you were under my feet!"

He suddenly turned.

"Come," he commanded. "Come into the house. I feel that I must tell you tonight."

HASWELL [began my friend Raymond], I shall not ask your belief; to you the tale will seem incredible. I shall ask only your attention and—your sympathy.

The star Penelope is my natal star. Born under its baleful influence, I have been subjected to that influence ever since. You will recall that my father before me was deeply interested in astronomy, so deeply that his researches gained him the jealous enmity of the world's greatest scientists—"Mad Raymond," they called him.

You will also recall that he died in an asylum; but, my dear Haswell, he was no more mad than I. But there is no denying that his astounding knowledge, and the equally astounding inferences and deductions he drew therefrom, made him a marked man in his day. It is dangerous to be a hundred years ahead of one's fellows.

My father discovered the star Penelope, and—as if a strange pre-natal influence thus had been brought to bear upon his parenthood—it was my natal star. The circumstance was sufficient to enlist his whole interest, after my birth, in the star Penelope. He had calculated that its orbit was so vast that fifty years would be required to complete it. I was with my father when he died, and his last words to me were:

"Beware of Penelope when in perihelion."

He died shortly afterward, and it was little enough that I could learn of his thought; but from his dying whispers I gathered that with Penelope in perihelion a sinister influence would enter my life. The star would then possess its greatest power over me for evil. The exact nature of its effect I think he could not himself foretell or even guess, but he feared a material change that would affect not only my mental but my physical being.

My father's warning was uttered ten years ago, and I have never forgotten it. And through the long, silent nights—following his footsteps—I watched the relentless approach of the star which was to have so fateful an influence upon my destiny.

Three years ago I insensibly became aware of its proximity. As it came nearer it seemed that little messengers were sent forth to herald its coming. Like a shadow cast before, I recognized—I felt—the adumbrations of its power. Little whispers of its influence crossed the distances and reached me before its central intelligence was felt in all its terror.

I struggled against it, as a man frantically seeks to escape the coiling tentacles of a monster irresistibly drawing him nearer. I feared

that I would commit some dreadful crime, or that I would go mad—knowing that either would have been a relief. And there was no one to whom I could tell my appalling apprehensions. The merest whisper of my situation would have branded me a lunatic.

Two years ago I set myself the task of calculating the exact time when the star Penelope would attain its perihelion with our sun, and a long series of computations assured me that on the twenty-sixth day of the following October Penelope would be in the zenith.

That was a year ago last October. Perhaps you will recall that for a week I was absent from my usual haunts? When you saw me later you asked where I had been, and remarked that I was looking peaked. I said I had been out of town, but I lied. I had been in hiding in my rooms—not that I believed four walls could avert the impending disaster, whatever it might be, but to avert from my friends and from the public the possible consequences of my deeds.

I shut myself in my study, locked the door, and threw the key out of the window. Then, alone and unaided, I sat down to await the moment and the catastrophe.

To divert my mind, I attacked a problem which always had bothered me and which, indeed, still remains unsolved. In the midst of my calculations, overcome with weariness and lack of sleep, I sank into a profound slumber. My dreams were hideous. Then, suddenly, I awoke, with a dizzy feeling of falling.

How shall I tell you what I saw? It seemed that while I slept the room had been entered and cleared of its furniture. No vestige of impedimenta remained. Even the carpet was gone, and I was lying at full length on the floor, the boards of which had been replaced with plaster and whitewash.

The room seemed stifling, and, remembering that I had left the window slightly down for ventilation, I stood up and walked across to it. It stood close down, almost against the floor—an extraordinary removal—and whoever had emptied the room also had closed the window at the top and opened it at the bottom. I had to kneel down to lean out across the sill.

I am telling all this calmly. Perhaps you will imagine the state of my mind, however. I was far indeed from calm. There are no words to tell you my bewilderment. But if I had been amazed by the condition of the room, I was confounded when I looked out into the night. I was literally so frightened that I could not utter a sound.

I had looked down, expecting to look into the street; and there were the stars shining below me, millions of miles away. And yet the noises of the street fell distinctly on my ears. The earth seemed to have melted away beneath my dwelling, which apparently hung upside down in the sky; but the sounds of traffic and human voices were all about me.

A horror that made me dizzy had crept over me, but, gripping the narrow sill with both hands, I twisted my face fearfully upward. Then for the first time a scream left my lips.

Above me, not thirty feet away, was the street filled with its accustomed hum and populated with people and with traffic—all upside down.

Men and women walked the pavement, head downward, as a fly walks the ceiling. Automobiles rolled past in frantic procession, their tops toward me, their wheels miraculously clinging to the overhanging roadway.

You, by this time, will have comprehended what had happened. I did not. Frightened, bewildered, half-mad, I drew in my head and fell back upon the whitewashed floor; and then, as I lay there upon my back, I saw what I had not seen before. On the ceiling of the room, clinging to it, head downward as the motors had clung to the street, was the missing furniture of my study.

It was arranged precisely as I had left it, except that it was *upside down* and appeared to have changed sides. The heavy desk at which I had sat hung directly over me, and with a gasp of terror I jumped aside; I thought that it would fall and crush me. The missing carpet was spread across the ceiling, and the tables and chairs reposed upon it; the books on table and bookcase hung easily from the under-surface, and none fell.

I pulled out my watch, and it slipped from my hand and shot upward the length of the chain. When I had recovered it, I looked at the hour, and everything that I wished to know flashed over me.

It was midnight, and Penelope was in perihelion!

The influence of my natal star had overcome the pitiful attraction of the earth, and I had been released from earth's influence. I was now held by the gravity of the star Penelope. The earth remained as it had been; the house was not upside down; only I! And I had thought I had fallen from my chair! Ye Gods, I had *risen* from it—as *you* would understand it—and had crashed against the ceiling of my room!

I sat there, upside down from the earth point of view, upon the ceiling of my study, and considered my position. Then I stood up and paced

back and forth across the ceiling, and as I moved coins and keys fell from my pockets and dropped downward—upward—as you will—to the floor of the room.

One thing was clear. I had averted a very serious disaster by clinging to the window-frame when I looked out. With that fearsome influence upon me, a moment of overbalancing would have pulled me over the edge, and I should have been precipitated into the awful depths of space which gleamed like an ocean beneath my window.

Mad as was the thought, I wondered what time would be required for my cometlike flight to the shores of the star Penelope. I saw myself speeding like a meteor across those tremendous distances to plunge at last into the heart of the Infinite mystery. Even while I shook with the sick horror of the thought, it was not without its allure.

The heat of the room was great, for heat rises and I was on the ceiling. A human desire to leave the study and go outside seized me, and, perilous as I knew the action to be, I resolved to try it.

I walked across to the door of my study, but it was so high above my head that I could not grasp the knob. I remembered, too, that I had locked the door and thrown away the key. Fortunately, the transom was open, and as this was nearer to me I made a spring and grasped its frame. Then, painfully, I pulled myself up and managed to climb through, dropping to the ceiling on the other side.

It was dark in the corridor, and as I crossed the ceiling I heard footsteps ascending the stairs, which were above and to one side of me. Then a candle flickered around the bend, and my landlord came into view, walking head downward like the rest of the world.

In his hand he grasped what, as he came nearer, I made out to be a revolver. Apparently he had heard the strange noises from my part of the house and was intent on inquiring their meaning. I trembled, for I knew that if he caught sight of me, upside down as he would think, against the ceiling, he would instantly shoot me—supposing he did not faint from fright.

But he did not see me, and after prowling about for twenty minutes he went away satisfied, and I was left to make my way out of the house as best I could.

I felt curiously light, as if I had lost many pounds of weight, which indeed must have been the case; and I made very little sound as I trod the ceilings toward the back of the house, where I knew there was a fire-escape leading to the street. The door into

the rear room was open, and I clambered over the obstacle interposed by the top of its frame and entered the chamber, crossing quietly to the window.

I dared not look down as I climbed through the aperture, but once I had seized the ironwork of the fire-escape I felt more at ease; then carefully I began my strange *upward* climb toward the overhanging street. To any one looking up I would have seemed to be a whimsical acrobat coming down the ironwork on his hands, and I suppose I would have created a sensation.

At the bottom my difficulties began, for I could not hope to remain on the earth without support; walking on my hands would not solve the puzzle. The pull of Penelope was exactly the pull of the earth when one hangs by his hands from a height. With fear in my heart, I began my extraordinary journey, toward the street, taking advantage of every inequality in the foundation of the house, and often I was clinging desperately to a single little shelf of brick, for while ostensibly I was walking on my hands, actually I was hanging at a fearful height in momentary danger of dropping into the immeasurable abyss of the sky beneath me.

An iron fence ran around the house, and at one point it was close enough for me to reach out a hand and seize it. Then, with a shudder, I drew myself across onto its iron pickets, where, after a bit, I felt safer.

The fence offered a real support, for the iron frame about its top became a narrow but strong rest for my feet. But the fence was not particularly high, and as I progressed the earth, owing to the inequalities of the ground, often was only a few inches above my head. Anyone stopping to look would have seen a man—a madman, as he would have supposed—standing on his head against the iron fence, and occasionally moving forward by convulsive movements of his rigid arms.

The traffic had thinned, and there seemed to be few pedestrians on my side of the thoroughfare. A wild idea seized me—to negotiate the distance to your home, Haswell, clinging to the fences along the way. I thought it could be done, and you were the only person to whom I felt I could tell my strange story with a hope of belief.

Had I attempted the journey, I should have been lost without a doubt; somewhere along the way my arm sockets would have rebelled, my grasp would have torn away, and I would have been plunged into the depths of a star-strewn space and become a wanderer in the void speed-

ing toward an unimagined destiny. As it happened, this was not to be.

I had reached the end of the side fence, and was just beginning to make my way around to the front, when I was seen by a woman—a young woman, who came along the street at that moment. I knew nothing of her presence until her muffled scream reached my ears. Seeing me standing apparently on my head, she thought me a maniac.

To me she seemed a woman upside down, and I looked into her face as one looks into a reflection in the depths of a pool. A street lamp depended from the pavement above me and not far from my position of the moment, and in its light I saw that her face was young and sweet. I wonder, Haswell, if there can be any situation, however incredible, in which the face of a lovely woman will not command attention? I think not.

Well, it was a sweet face—and she did not scream again. I said to her: "Please do not be frightened. I am not crazy, although I do not wonder that you think so. Preposterous as it may seem, I am for the time being in a normal position; were I to stand upon the earth as you do, I would—"

I was going to say that I would vanish from her side, but I realized that this would be too much for her.

"I would be suffocated," I finished. "The blood would rush to my head, and I would die."

Then she spoke, and her voice was filled with tenderness. It was easy to understand that she believed me quite mad; but she did not fear me.

"You are ill," she said. "You need assistance. May I not go for help? Is there not someone you would like summoned?"

Again, Haswell, I thought of you. But would she carry a message? Would she not, instead, go for the police? Was she not even now meditating a ruse by which I might be captured before I did myself an injury? And I knew now that I could not continue by myself. Sooner or later I would be forced to drop, or I would certainly meet—not a handsome young woman but a policeman. My mind was quickly made up. I said to her:

"Thank you, my dear, for your offer; but you are in error. There is nobody who can help me now; per-

haps there never will be. But this is my home here, behind me, and rather than frighten people I shall go back as I came and stay within doors. But I appreciate your kindness, and I am glad that you do not believe me mad and that you are not afraid of me. It may be that some day I shall be cured of this strange trouble, and if that day comes I should like to meet you again and thank you. Will you tell me your name?"

Then she told me her name, flutteringly, and—I almost screamed again.

Her name, Haswell, was *Penelope!* Penelope Pollard!

I all but let go of the railing that supported me, and as I wavered and seemed about to fall she gave a low cry and, turning, ran away into the darkness.

She had gone for help. I knew it, and shortly I knew that I would be the center of an embarrassing and probably a jeering crowd. And so I turned and went back. The return journey was worse than the forward journey had been, but after an agony of tortured limbs and straining sinews I found myself back in my study, and there, thoroughly worn out, I fell prone upon the floor—or the ceiling—in a corner, and went instantly to sleep.

Hours later, when I awoke, I was lying on the carpeted floor of my study, and the sun was pouring in at my window as it had done in past years. Again I was subordinate to the laws of terrestrial gravity. I fancy that as the influence passed I slid gradually down the wall until, without shock, I reached the floor.

My landlord was beating upon my door, and after a dazed moment or two I rose and tried to let him in. But as I had thrown away the key, I had to pretend that I had lost it and had accidentally made myself a prisoner. When he had freed me, I asked him if there had been any inquiry after me, and he told me there had not. So it seemed that my fair friend of the night before had not returned with a posse of bluecoats. I was grateful and I determined at the first opportunity to look her up.

From that day forward I looked for her—Penelope Pollard. I traced Pollards until I almost hated the name. There were Sylvias and

Graces and Sarahs and Janes and all the thousand and one other epithets bestowed on feminine innocence, but never a Penelope—never, Haswell, until last week.

Penelope!

Last week I found her. And where? Haswell, she lives within three doors of my own home. She had lived there all the time. She had seen me many times before my fateful night, and she had seen me often afterward—always walking the earth normally like other human beings, save for that one astounding evening. She was willing to talk, and glad to discuss my case; she is a highly intelligent girl, I may say. She has since told me that on that evening she believed me to be drunk. It amused her, but it did not frighten her. That is why she did not go for help; she believed it to be a drunken whim of mine to walk around on my hands, and that it would pass in its own time.

That, Haswell, is the story of my amazing connection with the star Penelope. You will understand that nearly fifty years must pass before it will again be in perihelion, and by that time, probably, I shall be dead.

I am very glad of it; one such experience is enough. Perhaps also you will understand that I would not have missed it that once for all the worlds in all the solar systems.

"I THINK your friend was right," I remarked, after a long silence. "You certainly were drunk, Raymond. Just as certainly as you are drunk tonight. Or did the whole thing happen tonight, as you went along?"

"Drunk?" he echoed. "Yes, I *am* drunk, Haswell—drunk with a diviner nectar than ever was brewed by man. Drunk with the wine of Penelope—the star Penelope. I have kept the best part of the story until the end. Next week Penelope and I are to be married. I am here tonight by her permission for a last bout with my old friend Haswell. It is my final jamboree. Congratulate me, Diccon!"

Of course, I congratulated him, and I did it sincerely; but the whole story still vastly puzzles me. Mrs. Raymond is a charming woman, and her name certainly is Penelope. But does that prove anything?