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You were kind enough to express your liking for my demon Snulbug; so now we're calling up from the past another Boucher demon, Sriberegibit. A number of you will place the gory source of the curse which Srib wields; but I wonder if any of the more profound students of demonology are familiar with the classic work in which I discovered the names of Snulbug and Sriberegibit? — A. B.

Sriberegibit

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

“MAY I BE eternally cursed!” Gilbert Iles gasped.

The little man with the sketchy fringe of beard made further passes, reached out into the air again, and plunked a second \$20 gold piece down on the bar beside the first.

“It’s beautiful,” Iles announced solemnly. Hot buttered rum always made him solemn. “I’ve never seen such prestidigitation in my life. See: I can say ‘prestidigitation.’ That’s what comes of having trained articulation. That’s beautiful, too.”

The little man smiled. “You’re an actor, colleague?” he asked.

“Not officially. I’m a lawyer. I won the Shalgreen will case today; that’s why I’m celebrating. Did I tell you about that case?”

“No. Was it interesting?”

“Most interesting. You see, the presumptive heirs — But the hell with that,” Gilbert Iles decided with solemn capriciousness. “Show me some more prestidigitation.”

The water lapped peacefully at the piles under the bar. The sailor in the corner switched off the table light and let the clear moonshine bathe the blonde opposite him. The radio was turned so low that it was only a murmur. The man with the fringe beard made a peculiarly elaborate pass and ended up with a gold piece balanced on the tip of each of his five outspread fingers.

“May I be eternally cursed!” Iles repeated. Linda objected to strong language; for some reason she permitted *cursed* while damning *damned*. “But

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gold," he added. "How does that work? Does the government let you keep all that gold because it's a professional tool? Or are they phonies?"

"I know," said the little man sadly. "Laws never make any allowance for magic. And They never make any allowance for laws. I never can convince Them that Their gold isn't any earthly use to me. Oh well—" He made another pass and said a word that seemed to have no vowels. The seven coins on the bar vanished.

"Beautiful," said Gilbert Iles. "I'd like to have you around when the prosecution brings in some unexpected exhibits. How's about another drink on that?"

"No, thank you."

"Come on. I'm celebrating, I am. I can still say 'prestidigitation' because I've got trained articulation but I'm soaring up and up and up and I want company. Just because Linda stayed home with a headache, do I have to drink alone? No!" he burst forth in thunderous oratorical tones. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, how can you sit there unmoved and behold this rank injustice practised before your very eyes? Hearts of the hardest stone would melt, thaw and resolve themselves into a dew before—"

His rounded periods drowned out the radio and the lapping of the waves. The sailor looked around, puzzled and belligerent.

"I'm sorry," said the little man. "But I shouldn't ever take more than one. I take two, and things begin to happen. I remember that night in Darjeeling—"

"So—" Gilbert Iles's voice took on the tone of a hectoring cross-examiner. "You remember that? And what else do you remember? Do you remember the pitiful state of this defendant here, parched, insatiate, and driven by your cruelty to take refuge in the vice of solitary drinking? Do you remember—"

The sailor was getting up from his table. The bartender sidled up to the fringe-bearded man. "Look, Mac, if he wants to buy you a drink, O.K., so let him buy it."

"But, colleague, if things happen—"

The bartender glanced apprehensively at the sailor. "Things are going to happen right now if you don't shut him up. Well, gents," he added in louder tones, "what'll it be?"

"Gin and tonic," said the little man resignedly.

"Hot ruttered bum," Gilbert Iles announced. He heard his own words in the air. "I did that on purpose," he added hastily.

The other nodded agreeably.

"What's your name?" Iles asked.

"Ozymandias the Great," the prestidigitator said.

"Aha! Show business, huh? You're a magician?"

"I was."

"Mm-m-m. I see. Death of vaudeville and stuff?"

"Not just that. The trouble was mostly the theater managers. They kept getting worried."

"Why?"

"They get scared when it's real. They don't like magic unless they know just where the mirrors are. When you tell them there aren't any mirrors — well, half of them don't believe you. The other half tear up the contract."

The drinks came. Gilbert Iles paid for them and sipped his rum while he did an exceedingly slow take. Then, "Real!" he echoed. "No mirrors — May I be —"

"Of course there was some foundation for their worry," Ozymandias went on calmly. "The Darjeeling episode got around. And then there was the time the seal trainer talked me into a second gin and tonic and I decided to try that old spell for calling up a salamander. We wanted to see could we train it to play 'The Star Spangled Banner'; it would have been a socko finale. The fire department got there in time and there was only about a thousand dollars' damage, but after that people kept worrying about me."

"You mean, you are a magician?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"But a magician — When you said you were a magician, I thought you just meant you were a magician. I didn't dream you meant you were a magician."

"Only a white one," said Ozymandias deprecatingly.

"Then those coins — They came from —"

"I don't know just where they come from. You reach out with the proper technique and They give them to you."

"And who are They?"

"Oh — things — you know, colleague."

"I," Gilbert Iles announced, "am drunk. What else can you do?"

"Oh, any little odd jobs. Call spirits from the vasty deep, that kind of thing. Work minor spells. Once" — he smiled — "I taught a man how to be a werewolf of good will. And then" — his round face darkened — "there was that time in Darjeeling —"

"What could you do now to help me celebrate? Could you cure Linda's headache?"

"Not at a distance. Not unless you had something personal of hers — handkerchief, lock of hair? No? The falling off of sentimentality does play the devil with sympathetic magic. You want to celebrate? I could call up a couple of hours I know — nice girls, if a trifle plump — and we —"

Iles shook his head. "No Linda, no houris. I, sir, have a monogamous soul. Monogamous body too, practically."

"Do you like music?"

"Not very."

"Too bad. There's a first-rate spirit band that plays the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music. Let's see; we could —" He snapped his fingers. "Look, you're Taurus, aren't you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were born in May?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. Something about your aura. Well, how would you like to have a wish granted?"

"Which wish?" said Gilbert Iles. It was not an easy phrase even for trained articulation.

"Any wish. But think it over carefully first. Remember the story about the sausages. Or the monkey's paw. But for the next minute or two you can have any wish granted."

"Why?"

Ozymandias reached into the air and plucked a lighted cigaret. "Be deciding on your wish, because there isn't too much time. Wimps are flighty creatures. And while you're thinking, I'll give you a rough sketch. You see, there's a Taurine wimp in the room."

"A which?"

"A wimp — a wish-imp. You see, if the universe ran strictly according to coherent laws, it would be unchanging. This would be equally dull for God and for man. So there has to be chance and intervention. For instance, there are miracles. But those are important and don't happen every day. So there's the chance element that every man can, quite unconsciously, perform miracles. Haven't you sometimes had the most unlikely wish work out, contrary to all expectations?"

"Once in a thousand times."

"That's about the odds; more would produce chaos. Well, that was because there was a Taurine wimp around. The wimps aren't many; but they constantly wander about among men. When one of them overhears a wish made by a man under his sign, he grants it."

"And it works?"

"It works. If I had only run onto a Sagittarian wimp in Darjeeling —"

Gilbert Iles goggled, and took a long swig of buttered rum. "May I," he said solemnly, "be eternally cursed!"

Ozymandias gasped. "Good heavens! I certainly never expected you to pick a wish like that!"

That slight joggling of the air was the Taurine wimp giggling. It was always delighted by the astonishing involuntary wishes of people. As Puck was forever saying, "What fools these mortals be!" It giggled again and soared away.

Gilbert Iles gulped the rest of his rum. "You mean that . . . that exclamation counted as a wish?"

"It was phrased as one, wasn't it, colleague? May I be — That's the way you make wishes."

"And I am —" Without the buttered rums, the solid legal mind of Iles would have hooted at such a notion; but now it seemed to have an ominous plausibility. "Then I am cursed?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But how? Does it mean that when I die I'll —"

"Oh no. Cursed, not damned. A curse affects you in this life."

"But how?" Iles insisted.

"Should I know? You didn't specify. The wimp probably turned you over to the nearest demon. There's no telling what his specialty is."

"No telling? But you . . . you said you could call spirits from the vasty deep. Can't you call demons and find out about curses?"

"Hm-m-m." Ozymandias hesitated. "I could maybe. But if I made the least mistake and got the wrong kind of demon — Or if — It might even be a curse you'd sooner not know about."

Iles shook his head. "I want to know. A smart lawyer can handle anything. I don't know why curses and demons shouldn't be included."

Ozymandias drained his gin and tonic. "On your own head be it," he said. "Come on."

A mile up the beach you were in a primitive world. There was no light but the moon and no sound but the waves. You were restored to the condition of your first tailless forefather. There was no sign of civilization, only the awesome vastness of nature and its forces. Also you had sand in your shoes and it worried you.

The fringe-bearded little magician had built a pyre of driftwood and sprinkled on it a couple of powders from a case of phials in his pocket. Iles struck a match for him, but it snapped in two. Ozymandias said, "Never mind," and made a pass or two. The driftwood caught fire and burned with the flame of seven colors. Ozymandias said an incantation — not in the ringing and dramatic tones that Iles had expected, but with the casual mutter of any celebrant going through a familiar ritual. The flame leaped high. And the moon went out.

More precisely, they seemed to be cut off from its rays. They were in a globe of darkness at the core of which glowed the suddenly dying fire. And in that glow sat the demon.

He was of no particular height. It may have been the flicker of the dying flames; it may have been some peculiarity of his own. He kept varying from an apparent height of about two feet to around seven or eight. His shape was not too unlike that of a human being, save of course for the silver-scaled tail. His nails had the sheen of a beetle's carapace. One tusk seemed loose and he had a nervous habit of twanging it. The sound was plaintive.

"Your name?" Ozymandias demanded politely.

"Srierdegebit." The voice was of average human pitch, but it had an unending resonance, like a voice bouncing about in a cave.

"You are a curse-demon?"

"Sure." The demon espied Iles with happy recognition. "Hi!" he said.

"Hi!" said Gilbert Iles feebly. He was very sober now; he felt regretfully sure of that. And he was soberly seeing a curse-demon, which meant that he was soberly cursed. And he did not even know what the curse was. "Ask him quick," he prodded the magician.

"You have put a curse on my friend here?"

"He asked for it, didn't he?" He looked bored, and twanged his tusk.

"And what is the nature of that curse?"

"He'll find out."

"I command you to tell us."

"Nuts. That's not in my duties."

Ozymandias made a pass. "I command you —"

The demon jumped and rubbed his rump. "That's a fine thing to do!" he said bitterly.

"Want some more?"

"All right. I'll tell you." He paused and twanged. "It was just a plain old curse. Just something we've had lying around since the Murgatroyd family died out. I just took the first one I came to; he didn't seem to care."

"And it was —"

"The curse the witches used to use on their too virtuous puritan persecutors, remember? It's a nice one. In poetry, too. It goes like this." He twanged his tusk again to get the proper pitch, and then chanted:

"Commit an evil deed each day thou must
Or let thy body crumble into dust.

"Of course," he added, "it doesn't really crumble. That's for the rhyme."

"I've heard of that curse," Ozymandias said thoughtfully. "It's a tricky one in terminology. How have the Upper Courts adjudicated 'evil deed'?"

"Synonymous with sin," said Sriberegibit.

"Hm-m-m. He must commit a sin each day — 'day' meaning?"

"Twelve oh one a.m. till the next midnight starting tomorrow morning."

"He must commit a sin each day or else —"

"Or else," said the demon, with a little more cheerfulness than he had heretofore displayed, "I show up at midnight and strangle him." He coiled his tail into a garroting noose.

"Then you must be always near him to observe his actions and to carry out your duty if he fails. Very well. I lay this further behest upon you: Whenever he says your name, you must appear to him and answer his questions. Now begone!"

"Hey!" the demon protested. "I don't have to do that. It's not in my instructions. I — Yi!" He jumped again and rubbed his rump even more vigorously. "All right. You win."

"Begone!" Ozymandias repeated.

The moon shone bright and clear on the beach and on the embers of a driftwood fire. "Well," said the magician, "now you know."

Gilbert Iles shook himself. Then he pinched himself. Then he said, "I guess I really saw that."

"Of course. And now you know the nature of the curse. What do you think of it, colleague?"

Iles laughed. "I can't say it worries me. It's a cinch. A sin a day — I'm no angel. It'll take care of itself."

Ozymandias frowned and stared at the embers. "I'm glad you think so," he said slowly.

Gilbert Iles was always hard to wake up. He was especially so the next morning; but when he did finally open his eyes, he found the sight of Linda in a powder-blue housecoat a quite sufficient reward for the effort.

"My headache's all gone," she announced cheerfully. "And how is yours?"

He felt of his head and shook it experimentally. "Not a trace of a hang-over. That's funny —"

"Funny? You really did celebrate then? What did you do?"

"I went down to the beach and rode on things and then I went to a bar and got talking to a" — he paused and blinked incredulously in a rush of memory — "to an old vaudeville magician. He showed me some funny tricks," he concluded lamely.

"I'm glad you had a good time. And when you next win such a nice fat fee, I promise I won't have a headache. I hope. Now come on; even the man that won the Shalgreen case has to get to the office."

A shower, then coffee and tomato juice made the world perfectly sane

and plausible again. Tusked demons and tomato juice could simply not be part of the same world patterns. Neither could daily-sin curses and Linda. All Gilbert Iles's legalistic rationalism reasserted itself.

Taurine wimps — never phrase an unintended wish; it may be granted — silver-scaled tails that garrot at midnight — this was the damnedest drunken fantasy that the mind had ever framed.

Gilbert Iles shrugged blithely and whistled while he shaved. He broke off when he realized that he was whistling that tuneless chant to which the — imaginary, of course — demon had intoned the rimed curse.

He went through a perfectly normal and unperturbed day, with enough hard work to banish all thought of demons and wimps. An unexpected complication had arisen in the Chasuble murder case. The sweet old lady — such ideal jury bait — who was to appear as a surprise witness to Rolfe's alibi suddenly announced that she wanted two thousand dollars or she'd tell the truth.

This came as a shock both to Iles and to his partner Tom Andrews. They'd taken the witness in good faith and built the whole defense around her. This sudden unmasking meant first a long conference on whether they could possibly get along without her — they couldn't — then a guarded and difficult conversation with Rolfe in jail, and finally an afternoon of trying to raise the two thousand before her deadline at sunset.

Then Linda met him downtown for dinner and a movie, and they danced a bit afterward to make up for the celebration that the headache had marred. They even played the game of remember-before-we-were-married, and parked on a hilltop near home for a half-hour.

It was almost twelve thirty when they got home. It was one by the time Iles had conclusively said good night to his wife and retired to the study for a final check-over of the testimony of the prosecution witnesses at the preliminary hearing.

There, alone in that quiet pine-paneled room, he thought of the wish and the curse for the first time since his morning shave. It was now over an hour past midnight. All day long he had been too busy to devote an instant to sin. And his neck was still eminently unstrangled. He smiled, trying to figure out what curious combination of subconscious memories could have produced such a drunken nightmare. Creative imagination, that's what he had.

Then, just as a final touch of direct evidence, he said, "Scriberdegit!"

The demon sat cross-legged on the desk, his height fluctuating and the plaintive twang of his tusk ringing through the room.

Gilbert Iles sat speechless. "Well?" the demon said at last.

"Well —" said Gilbert Iles.

"You summoned me. What goes?"

"I — You — I — You're real?"

"Look," Sriberegibit expostulated. "Am I real? That's a fine thing to call me up to ask. Am I a philosopher? Are you real? Is the universe real? How should I know these things?"

Iles eyed the silver tail somewhat apprehensively. "But — it's way past midnight now."

"So what? Why should I bother materializing unless you summon me or unless I have to finish you off?"

"And you don't have to?"

"Why should I? You did your daily sin all right."

Iles frowned. "When?"

"You arranged to suborn a witness, didn't you?"

"But that . . . that's all in the day's work."

"Is it? Didn't something hurt a little inside when you decided to do it? Didn't you use to say to yourself when you were young that you weren't going to be that kind of a lawyer, oh no? Didn't you sin against yourself when you did that?"

Gilbert Iles said nothing.

"Can I go now?" Sriberegibit demanded.

"You can go."

The demon vanished. Iles sat in his study a long time that night, staring at the desk but not seeing the transcript.

"Tom, about Rolfe's phony witness, I'm not sure we ought to use her."

"Not use her? But the whole case'll blow up without her."

"Not necessarily. I think we're overreaching ourselves anyway with a plea of not guilty. If we lose out, it'll mean the gas chamber for him. But if we change the plea to guilty in a lesser degree, we can maybe get him off with five or ten years."

"And after we've paid out two thousand?"

"Rolfe paid that. And he can afford to."

"Nuts, Gil. You're not going ethical on me, are you?"

"Hardly. But it's not safe. She can't be trusted. She might go on strike for more yet. She might even sell out to the prosecution and arrange to break down on her cross-examination. She could blackmail us by threatening to confess to the Bar Association."

"Maybe you're right at that. When you put it that way — Here, let's have a snort on it. What else do you know?"

"Nothing much. Oh, I did pick up a choice little item on Judge Shackson. Do you know that in the privacy of his chambers —"

Gilbert Iles felt the cool balm of relief. He wasn't becoming one of these prigs who prate about ethics. God, no. But it was one thing to sin casually against yourself, and quite another to be reminded of it — to know consciously that you had sinned and thereby saved your neck.

Talking Rolfe into the change of plea was another matter. It was only accomplished after Iles had built an exceedingly vivid picture of the dear sweet old lady selling out on the witness stand and delivering Rolfe straight to the Death Row. Then there were officers to see and papers to file and the whole new strategy of defense to go over minutely with Tom Andrews.

He phoned Linda that he wouldn't be home, dined on sandwiches and spiked coffee in the office, and finally got home at 11, too tired to do more than hang up his clothes, brush his teeth, and bestow one half-conscious kiss on his wife before his eyes closed.

He woke up the next morning feeling badly puzzled, and wondered what he was puzzled about. It wasn't until about 10:30, in the midst of a conference with a client, that the worry struck him clearly. He hadn't had time to do a thing yesterday except the surely quite unsinful business of abandoning the perjured witness. And yet no silvery tail had coiled about his throat at midnight.

He got rid of the client as soon as he decently could. Then, alone in his office, he cleared his throat and said, "Sriberegebit!"

The wavering outline of the demon sat tailor-wise on his desk and said, "Hi!"

"You," said Gilbert Iles, "are a fake. You and your curse and your tail. Poo, sir, to you!"

Sriberegebit twanged at his tusk. His tail twitched hungrily. "You don't believe I'm really going to attend to you? Ha!"

"I certainly don't. The whole thing's a fraud. I didn't have time yesterday to work in a single sin. And here I am, safe and sound."

"You just underrated yourself," said the demon not unkindly. "Remember spreading scandal about Judge Shackford? That's getting around nicely, and it's going to cost him the next election. That'll do for one day."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of it as — Oh — But look, Srib. We've got to get this clear. What constitutes —" He broke off and answered the buzzer.

It was Miss Krumpig. "Mr. Andrews wants you to go over the brief on appeal in the Irving case. Shall I bring it in now, or do you have a conference? I thought I heard voices."

"Bring it in. I was just . . . ah . . . just rehearsing a speech." He clicked off.

"Well now," said Sriberegebit. "As to what constitutes —"

"Begone," Iles interrupted hastily as the door opened.

Miss Krumpig listened and frowned as she entered. "That's a funny noise. Sort of a plaintive twanging like. It's dying away now —"

She put the rough draft of the brief on his desk. As usual, she leaned over more and nearer than there was any good reason to. She had changed to a subtler scent and had discovered a blouse with the maximum combination of respectability and visibility.

Anyone employing Miss Krumpig should have had no trouble at all in contriving a sin a day.

"Will that be all now, Mr. Iles?"

He thought of Linda and the curse of a monogamous temperament. "No," he said firmly. "I'll think of something else." Miss Krumpig left the room trying to figure that one out.

For a week the curse took care of itself, with very little help from Gilbert Iles. He thought of a few sins for himself; but it is not easy to sin when your love for your wife and your newly stimulated professional conscience block the two simplest avenues. Saturday night he did manage to cheat undetected in the usual poker game and wound up with 31 ill-gotten dollars — which once the deadline was passed he proceeded to spend on a magnificent binge for the bunch of them. Another night he visited a curious dive that he had often heard rumors of, something in the nature of the more infamous spots for tourists in Havana. It was the one way of committing a sensual sin without infidelity to Linda. It was also a painful bore.

The other days, the days when he was too busy or too uninventive to achieve what he thought a sin, turned out all right, too. Like the day when the girl in the restaurant gave him change for a ten out of his five. He noticed the mistake and accepted the money as a gift from the gods, thinking nothing more of it. But Sriberegibit was sinfully delighted when the girl had to make up the difference, couldn't do it, and lost her job.

Then there was the pedestrian that he playfully scared, causing a heart attack. There was the boon companion whom he encouraged in a night's carousing, knowing subconsciously that it meant starvation rations for his children. There was the perfectly casual lie with which he got out of jury duty — a sin, Sriberegibit explained, against the State as representing his fellow man.

But these episodes all had their effect, and that effect was, for a cursed man, an awkward one. Gilbert Iles was as careless and selfish as the next man, but he was not constituted to do ill willfully. After the Judge Shackford business, he was rather careful as to the scandalous rumors which he spread. He drove carefully, he revised his statement on jury duty, he developed a certain petty financial scrupulousness.

And one midnight, driving home alone from an evening's business-sociability with a client, he felt cold scales coil about his throat.

Gilbert Iles did not have the stuff of a good sinner. His first reaction was to pull the car up to the curb; an automobile guided by a strangled corpse would be a frightful danger at large. And as he did so he managed with choking breath to gulp, "Sriberdegbibit!"

The elastic shape of the demon wavered on the steering wheel as the car stopped. Iles tried to shift away from it in the cabined limits of the coupé, but the silver tail held him fast. "Must talk!" he gasped. "One minute!"

Sriberdegbibit hesitated, then let his tail relax ever so slightly. "O.K.," he said. "I was starting in a minute earlier to make it slow and comfortable. I can do it faster right at midnight, but you won't like it."

"Comfortable!" Iles grunted. His hand slipped beneath the scaly coils and massaged his aching neck. "But listen." He was thinking faster than he had ever thought in front of a jury. "Our agreement — invalid under laws of this country — contract involving murder non-enforceable as contrary to general welfare."

Sriberdegbibit laughed and the tail twitched tighter. There was nothing plaintive or grotesque about him now. This was his moment; and he was terrible in his functional efficiency. "I'm not subject to the laws of this country, mortal. Our contract is by the laws of my kingdom!"

Iles sighed relief, as best he could sigh under the circumstances. "Then you can't strangle me for another hour."

"And why?"

"Contract under your kingdom . . . you admit . . . midnight now but only by daylight saving . . . laws of this country . . . to your kingdom it is only 11 o'clock."

Slowly the tail relaxed. "I would," said Sriberdegbibit mournfully, "draw a lawyer. But you'd better get busy before midnight."

Gilbert Iles frowned. Then he started up the car. "Down here on the boulevard there's a blind cripple sells newspapers. Works all night — I've often noticed him there. If I —"

"Now," said the demon, "you're getting the swing of it."

Gilbert Iles waited until a late streetcar had picked up the little herd of people waiting by the cripple. Then he started across the street, but his feet would not guide him to the blind vender. They took him first into a bar. He had three rapid drinks, his eyes fixed on the clock whose hands moved steadily from 12 toward 1.

"Don't let the time get you, Mac," the barkeep said consolingly after the third. "It ain't closing time till 2. You got all the time in the world."

"It's closing time at one," said Iles tautly, and felt his gullet tighten up at the memory of those scaly coils.

"You look kind of worried. Need some company?" This was from a girl with a red dress and a bad bleach. "Well, I do," she went on when he didn't answer. "You'll buy me a drink, won't you? Sure you will. The usual, Joe."

The hands went steadily around. The drinks came regularly. The girl moved her stool closer, and the red skirt glowed warm against his thigh. This would be such a simple way. The choice was clear: To sin against a total stranger who would suffer deeply from it, or to sin against your wife who would never know it. The problem was simple, but Gilbert Iles knew the answer before he even considered it. He rose at last from his stool.

"It's almost midnight," he said. "Closing time."

The barkeep and the girl in red stared after his lurching exit, and then stared wonderingly at each other. "You're slipping, Verne," said the barkeep.

"This time," said Verne, "I'll have a *drink*."

Gilbert Iles reached the corner. Another streetcar load was just leaving. Behind them they left the empty corner and the blind cripple. He sat on the sidewalk, his legs crumpled under him at implausible angles. His head with its black glasses moved slightly at each sound. Everything about him was very clear to Gilbert Iles. He could see that his left thumbnail was cracked, that he had a hairy mole high on his right cheekbone, that there was exactly \$2.37 in the cash box.

Iles shut his own eyes as he grabbed the cash box. He couldn't have said why, unless it was from some unconscious desire to even the odds between himself and his adversary.

Self-blinded, he seized the box. It was a low, foul, damnable act, and he was doing it to save his neck. Neither his closed eyes nor his many whiskies could blind him to the baseness of the act. Sin is not fun.

And as he grabbed he felt a choking grip on his neck.

His mind whirled. He couldn't be wrong. He had five minutes to spare. And this was certainly a — And then he realized that the grip was not of scales but of finger and thumb.

He opened his eyes. The vender towered over him. The dark glasses were gone, and the legs uncoiled from their double-jointed posture. The face with the hairy mole was transfigured by righteous wrath and the hand with the broken thumbnail was balled into a fist driving straight at Iles's face. It connected beautifully.

"You low scum of a rat!" the vender murmured. "Rob a blind man, will you?" *Thud*. "Steal a cripple's earnings, will you?" *Wham*. "Take advantage of a man's helplessness, will you?" *Crash*.

The accurate legal mind of Gilbert Iles gave one last flicker. "But you're not a —"

"You thought I was, didn't you?"

Guilt and the whiskies combined to rob Iles of any power to fight back. When it was over, his puffed lips formulated one question. "Whaddime-izzit?"

The vender deciphered it and looked at a concealed watch. "One ten."

"Thanks, brother," Iles groaned. The sodden pulp of his face managed to smile.

"Siberdegit!" he said when he was back in the car.

"I'm still here," said the voice that bounced through invisible caves. "You didn't dismiss me."

"Sorry. Can't see so good. My eyes . . . they swell — But it's after even your midnight, and I didn't manage to —"

The demon repeated the vender's own argument. "After all," he said consolingly, "you meant ill."

"And what," Linda demanded, "were you celebrating last night?"

Gilbert Iles rolled over in bed, sat up, and opened his eyes. Or rather he tried to open them. Through puffy slits he could barely see his wife and beside her the clock which said 1:30.

He gave a groan and started to jump out of bed. When he moved his muscles, the groan redoubled and he sank back on his pillow.

"You *are* in a state," said Linda. There was sympathy under the tartness of her voice.

"The time," Iles muttered. "The office — Tom —"

"Tom phoned about eleven. I told him you were laid up with a bad cold."

"But I ought to —"

"I thought you'd better sleep it off. And you're not going to any office today looking the way you do. I'd bring you a mirror to prove it, only it's no sight to greet a man before breakfast. But what was all the celebrating for? And I didn't have a headache last night."

"You see, dear —" Iles tried to articulate between swollen lips.

Linda smiled. "Don't try, darling. Sorry I asked. Tell me after breakfast — or never, if you don't want to. Everything'll be ready as soon as you are."

Every perfect wife is a perfect diagnostician. For this breakfast Linda had prescribed soft-boiled eggs, tomato juice, a very full pot of black coffee, the morning paper — in its virginal and unrumpled state — and solitude. She served his food but did not speak to him or come near him again.

After the fifth cup of coffee and the third cigaret, Gilbert Iles went in

search of his wife. He found her on the sun porch watering the ferns. She wore a bright printed jumper and the sun was alive in her hair.

"Linda—" he said.

"Yes, darling?" She scooped a magazine off the most comfortable chair and helped him as his creaking legs eased into it.

"I've got something to tell you, Linda."

She went on watering the ferns, but her hand trembled enough to scatter a few drops wide of their mark. "What is it? A new case?"

"No, it's — There's something about me you'll have to know, dear."

"How long is it? Three and a half years? And there's something I still don't know?"

"I'm afraid there is."

"Bad?"

"Bad."

"Worse than smoking in the bathroom?"

He laughed, but it hurt his mouth. "A little. You see, Linda, I . . . I'm living under a curse."

Water splashed on the floor. Then Linda forced herself to set the can down very steadily, take a cloth, and mop up the mess. Not till she had finished did she say, very lightly, "That's a fine thing to say. Here I wear my fingers to the bone slaving to make a nice home for you —"

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I know. It's just that — Well, it's a funny way of putting it. Tell me what's the matter."

"It isn't anything to do with you —"

Linda went over to the chair and put her arm around his shoulder. "Isn't it just?" she demanded fiercely. "Whenever there's something the matter with you, Gilbert Iles, it is something to do with me. You're me; don't you understand that?"

"My curse isn't your curse. You see, Linda, it's . . . I know it's hard to believe, but . . . well, I have to commit a sin every day."

Linda stared at him. Her face expressed a sort of grave average between laughter and tears. "You mean — Oh, darling, do you mean I'm not enough for you?"

He took her hand. "Nonsense. You're all I ever want."

"Then is it . . . I know you've been drinking a lot lately, but I thought . . . you don't mean it's . . . got hold of you, do you?"

"It isn't that. It isn't any particular kind of sin. It's just a sin. You see, I told you. It's a curse."

Linda regarded him seriously. "You did drink all that tomato juice and coffee, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you'd better tell me all about this from the beginning." She slid comfortably onto his lap and kept her ear close to his aching lips.

"It started," he began, "that night I was celebrating the Shalgreen case. It happened I met a —"

"But that's awful," she said when he had finished. "That's terrible. To think that all sorts of silly little wishes might be granted, do get granted — Oh my! The things I wished when I was in high school — I'll have to be careful."

"Then you do believe me?"

"Of course."

"I hardly dared expect — That's why I didn't tell you before. It's so fantastic."

"But you told me," she said simply, and leaned over to kiss him. "No, I'd hurt your poor lips."

"But what am I going to do? I can't go on like this. For one thing I never know what's going to count as a sin or not. But what's worse, I . . . I'm afraid I don't like to sin. Not when I know it, not when I think: This is sinning. You have to be a special kind of person for that; and I'm not. What are we going to do?"

"Mm-m-m," said Linda thoughtfully. "I know one thing. I'm going to keep wishing your curse'll be lifted and maybe sometime there'll be one of my wimps around."

"One chance in a thousand, the little man said."

"And then . . ." Linda hesitated. "There *is* another way."

"That my brilliant legal mind has been overlooking?"

"I don't think you've exactly been overlooking it; but maybe on my account . . . I don't know quite how to say this, Gil; but if there's one kind of sin you could do easier than another — maybe even one kind that would be sort of fun and you could save yourself that way . . . I mean, after all it *is* what people usually mean when they say 'sin,' isn't it, and you shouldn't let me stand in the way of —"

"Linda darling, are you trying to suggest . . . ?"

She gathered her breath. "I'd sooner share you with that Miss Krumpig than not have you at all," she blurted out, almost as one word. "There. I said it."

"I couldn't," he said flatly and honestly.

Her fingers lifted a kiss gently from her mouth to his swollen lips. "I'm glad. Because," she said with equal honesty, "I'm not quite sure if I really meant that or not. But I have one more idea."

"Yes?"

"Get out the car. We're going down to the beach and find your fringe-bearded magician and fight magic with magic."

The bartender at the beach said, "Naw, he ain't been around here since that night you was with him, and that's O.K. with me. Every time he'd grab him a cigaret out of the air, some drunk'd get to thinking that was some screwy gadget we had here and get sorer'n hell 'cause he couldn't grab 'em, too. Tell me, mister: How did he work that trick?"

"He was a magician," said Gilbert Iles. "Do you know where he lived?"

"Seems to me it was down the beach a ways at the Mar Vista. Have another round?"

"No, thanks. Drink up, darling."

The clerk at the Mar Vista said, "Little man with a fringe beard? He was registered under the name O. Z. Manders. Left here about ten days ago."

"Leave any forwarding address?"

"No. He left in quite a hurry. Got a cablegram, and *whoosh!* he was gone."

"A cablegram? You don't know what —"

"I just noticed it was from Darjeeling. That's in India, isn't it?"

The clerk at the travel office said, "Little man with a funny beard? Yes, he was here. I explained to him that in times like these you couldn't guarantee any kind of rush accommodations for travel — he'd have to take his chances. So he got mad and went away."

"Thanks." Gilbert Iles started to leave, but Linda held him back.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but how did he go away?"

The clerk stammered. "I . . . I don't know. How should I?"

"Please. We understand. Did he just vanish — *pouf!* — with smoke and stuff?"

The clerk said, "I am not a drinking man. But you seem sympathetic, madam. I assure you that he took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and spread it on the floor, where it grew to the proportions of a carpet. Then he said some strange word and I swear that I saw the handkerchief fly out the door with him on it. But if you ever mention that to my employers —"

"So that's that," Linda observed. "You said your little man kept talking about Darjeeling, and now he's had to go back there. We can't get any help from him."

"I hope," said Gilbert Iles, "he isn't too much of a problem to the coastal

antiaircraft batteries. What would happen to a spotter who reported a magic carpet? But now what can we do?"

Linda held her head high and resolute. "We're going to call up your demon and talk this over with him. If my husband has to commit a sin a day, I want to know just what kind of sins."

They drove for miles up and down the beach. It is not easy in full daylight to find a suitably quiet spot for calling up demons.

"People," Linda sighed at last. "They swarm —"

"Shall we go home?"

"But it's so nice here at the beach — I'm so glad to have a day off with you even if you have to be cursed and beaten to make it. I know! We can call him up in a hotel."

They drove back to the Mar Vista. There was something appropriate in calling up a demon in the magician's former home. The clerk was puzzled by their return and looked suspiciously at Iles's battered face.

"I'll bet," Linda whispered, "he thinks I got this wedding ring at the five-and-dime. I hope."

When they were alone in the drab and scantily furnished room, Gilbert Iles said: "Sriberegibit!"

The fluctuant form perched itself on the dresser.

Linda gave a little gasp. Iles took her hand. "Afraid, dear?"

"Heavens, no!" Her voice tried valiantly not to shake. "He . . . he's different sizes all over, isn't he?"

"In my kingdom," said the demon, "everything is in an eternal state of flux. It's only mortals who have fixed flesh; it must be very dull."

"I like it," Linda protested. "How could you buy stockings if your legs — But then you don't wear any, do you? Or anything —" She snuggled close to her husband. "See? I can talk back to him." But her voice was on the verge of sobs.

"What is it now?" said Sriberegibit mournfully. "Did you summon me just to show me to this female?"

Iles settled his wife onto the bed and stood facing the demon as he might have confronted a hostile witness. "I want to know what is a sin?"

"Why bother?" *Twang*. "You're doing all right."

"But I don't like it and I'm not going to take it much longer. Man's a free agent. That's what makes him Man."

"Ha," said Sriberegibit.

"I warn you, I'm going to break this curse as soon as I can. And in the meantime, I want to know just what I'm up against. What is a sin?"

"Well, you see," said the demon, "that all depends on what you believe. A sin is an offense against yourself, your God, or your fellow man."

"Then blasphemy is a sin?" Iles grinned and let loose a five-minute tirade. Linda covered her head with a pillow. Even the demon blinked once or twice.

"There." Iles brushed the palms of his hands together. "That should do for today."

Sriberdegit's tail twitched. "But you don't believe in God, do you?"

"Why, I conceive of —"

"Don't bluff now, dear," said Linda. "We've got to know things. And you know you don't really."

"No. I admit I don't."

"Then how," the demon asked plausibly, "can you possibly blaspheme? No, that kind of sin is out for you. So is sacrilege. You've got to believe, consciously or subconsciously, that what you do is a sin."

"Just a minute," Iles objected. "How about these egocentrics who think whatever they do must be right? Can't they ever sin?"

"They know all right. Down underneath. But this atheism makes you hard to find sins for. Now if you were a Catholic, you'd have it easy every Friday; you'd just eat meat. Or if you were a Jew, you could eat pork every day and let it go at that. But for you atheists —"

"Hold on. Isn't atheism itself a sin?"

"Not if it's honest and if it lets other people alone. If a man comes to the knowledge of God and then denies Him; or if he denies the right of other people to believe in Him — How about that? Want to start some religious persecution? That's a good one."

"I — Damn it, I couldn't do that."

"Well, let's see. You can't sin against your God. You can sin against yourself or against your fellow man. That leaves you lots of scope: abduction, adultery, arson, barratry, bigamy, burglary —"

"That's a start. Adultery and bigamy are out."

"If you really —" Linda tried to say.

"Out, I said. Barratry might do."

"What's that? It sounds dreadful."

"Inciting unnecessary litigation. Very bad legal ethics. But this demon, hang it all, has gone and aroused my professional conscience. I don't know — Burglary —"

"What was the first?" Linda demanded of the demon.

Sriberdegit was beginning to look bored with the whole thing. "Abduction." *Twang.*

"Abduction! That's it. You could do that, couldn't you?"

"Abduction? But what would I do with what I abducted?"

"That doesn't matter. Just abduct."

"But it's a serious infringement of the rights of the individual. I don't know that I could —"

"Gil darling, don't be a prig! Think what'll become of me if he . . . if that tail — Please, dear. You can do a little thing like that for me, can't you?"

No man can resist a pleading wife. "Very well," said Gilbert Iles. "I'll abduct for you."

"Is that all?" said Sriberegebit wearily.

"I think so, unless —" Suddenly Iles whirled, in the manner of one tearing away the last shreds of a witness' mask of hypocrisy. "Breaking an oath would be a sin, wouldn't it? Even for an atheist?"

"Atheists don't make oaths. They affirm."

"Then breaking an affirmation?"

"I guess so."

"Very well." Iles raised his right hand. "I hereby solemnly affirm that I shall commit a sin every day of my life." He dropped his hand to point straight at the demon. "Now every day that passes without a sin I will have broken my solemn affirmation."

"Gilbert!" Linda gasped. "You're wonderful."

Sriberegebit shook his head. "Uh-uh. It's like what you said about contracts. Unenforceable because contrary to good ends. That's a vow more honored in the breach than the observance. No go. Can I go now? Thanks."

Iles stared at the empty dresser. "Demons," he murmured, "are amazing. I never heard that quotation correctly used by a mortal. Do you suppose that Shakespeare — But I hope not."

"It was a brilliant try," said Linda consolingly.

"And now I start on a career of abduction —"

"Uh-huh. First we'll go ride on the merry-go-round and then you take me to dinner at a nice fish place and then home, then you go out and abduct."

"It's early for dinner," Iles said. "Even a little early for merry-go-rounds."

"It never is," Linda asserted.

"But as long as we have us a hotel room and the room clerk did give us that look . . ."

Linda laughed. "And you all tattered and torn, poor darling! Why, you're just like a private eye!"

"Only," she said later, "they never get three and a half years' practise, do they? Poor things . . ."

Gilbert Iles kissed his wife good night and watched her go into the house. It had been a perfect day. Aside from interviewing a tusk-twanging demon,

it had been an ideal, quiet, happy, marital day at the beach. He sighed, started up the car, and set off on an abduction prowl.

There was no use trying anything until night had really fallen. Meanwhile he drove around at random, surveying people. Casing the job, as a client had once called it. The ideal victim for an abduction should be alone and helpless. If not helpless, certainly not capable of battering Iles's picturesque face any further. He forced himself to look professionally upon possible victims — small children, old ladies.

He shuddered at himself. His mind, which should be devoted to the humane practise of his profession, twisting itself into these devious and stupid byways of sin. He was glad when the night grew dark. Now he could get it over with.

He turned the car onto an ill-lit side road. "The first person I see," he muttered, "after I count a hundred. *One — two — three —*" He narrowed his eyes so that they saw only the road ahead. "*Fifty-five — fifty-six —*" Nothing to it. Simply a snatch. And then? "*Ninety-nine — one hundred.*" He widened his eyes and fixed them on the first person along the all but deserted street.

It was a policeman.

"May I be —" Iles began, but stopped. Once was enough; he had sworn off that oath ever since the night in the bar. But a cop was too much. Not even practical. Make it two hundred. "*One oh one — one oh two —*" His eyes narrowed again. What do you do with a once-abducted victim? Where on earth do you — "*One ninety-nine — two hundred.*"

This time it was an old woman in a shabby gray coat, carrying a string bag that clinked. Gilbert Iles set his teeth and pulled the car up to the curb. He flung the door open and tried to remember every gangster picture he had ever seen.

"Get in the car!" he snarled.

The old lady got in. "That's awfully nice of you," she said. "Of course I'm only going to my daughter's, the one that's married to the fireman, and it's just a ways up the hill here but I'm not so young as I used to be and these hills hit me in the back sometimes. It's awfully nice of you to give me a lift. You know, young man, you look like the picture Cousin Nell sent us of that boy her second girl married. You haven't got any folks in Cedar Rapids, have you?"

Gilbert Iles gave up. Just a way up the hill he stopped the car in front of the indicated house, opened his own door, got out, and helped his passenger to alight. She had not stopped talking once. "—and I do thank you, young man, and I wonder" — she reached into the clinking string bag — "if you'd like a glass of this jelly I was bringing my daughter? It's Satsuma

plum and her Frank, he certainly does love it, but I guess he won't mind missing one glass. Here. You wouldn't like to come in and see that grandson I was telling you about? Of course he'd be asleep by now, but —"

"No, thanks," said Iles politely. "But give him my love. And thanks for the jelly."

As he drove off he muttered a full stream of what the demon had assured him could not be blasphemy, but which felt quite as satisfactory. Then back to the beginning. "*One — two — three —*" What would he run into this time? A detachment of marines? "*Ninety-nine — one hundred.*"

It was a man, alone. Iles pulled the car up just ahead of him, slipped out, and stood beside the walk waiting for him, his hand sinisterly thrust into his topcoat pocket.

"Get in the car!" he snarled.

The man looked at him, then burst out guffawing. "Iles, you old son of a gun! What a card! Wait'll I tell the boys down at City Hall! What are you doing wandering around here? Who waded into your face like that? Where's Linda? What a card! How's about a drink? There's a good joint near here. 'Get in the car! What a card!'"

"Ha ha," said Gilbert Iles.

What was all this? Were there really guardian angels, as well as wimps and demons, and was his deliberately frustrating his every effort at a serious sin? Well, there were still three hours to go. If he pretended to drop his abductive intention — Or can you fool a guardian angel? He didn't know.

He didn't care much either, after the third or fourth round. The politician was right; this was a good joint. The liquor was fair and the entertainers lousy; but there was a magnificent Negro who played such boogie-woogie as Iles had never heard before. Even curses and sins did not matter particularly when that boy really took it and lifted it out of this world.

In one ecstatic moment, Gilbert Iles's eye happened to light on the clock, and ecstasy vanished. It was almost 12:30.

"Sorry," he said hastily. "Got a date at one."

The politician leered. "And I thought you were a good boy. How about Linda?"

"Oh, that's all right. Linda told me to. Good-by." And he disappeared almost as rapidly as his friend the demon was wont to.

He turned up the first side street that presented itself. He didn't bother with the counting game this time. The minutes were short. His neck already twitched in anticipation of that garroting tail. Surely a trained lawyer's mind could find some way of breaking that curse. Surely — For one hesitant instant he wavered on the verge of discovery. His alcohol-sharpened intellect seemed, for one sharp moment, to see the solution of the whole problem.

Then his eyes caught sight of a figure on the sidewalk, and the solution went *pop!*

The routine was becoming automatic. You pull up to the curb, you fake the presence of a gun, and you snarl, "Get in the car!"

The girl drew herself up haughtily. "What do you mean, get in the car?"

"I mean get in the car. And quick!"

"Oho you do, do you? And why should I get in the car?"

"Because I said so." His arm snaked out — he could not help comparing it to a silver-scaled tail — seized her wrist, and dragged her in. He slammed the door and without another word drove off.

He could not see the girl at all well, but she used the scent which Miss Krumpig had recently discarded.

"Where are you taking me? What are you going to do with me?"

"I'm going to abduct you."

"I . . . I'll scream. I warn you. I'll scream. I'll —" Abruptly she lowered her voice and slid over in the seat until she was touching him. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

He did not care for the scent, but he was forced to admit that it had a certain effectiveness. "Who said anything about hurting you?" he said gruffly. "All I'm doing is abducting you."

On the other side of town from the beach, Gilbert Iles finally parked the car in a quiet street. The girl turned to him expectantly. The faint light of the dashboard cast heavy shadows around her face, giving it a half-seen allure that was almost beauty.

"Get out," he said firmly.

She gasped. "Get out — Oh, I get it. This is where you live." She got out and left the door open for him. He reached over and shut it.

"Consider yourself," he said, "abducted."

It was five after 1 as he drove away. The outraged yelp of the abandoned girl followed him. It was five after 1, and his neck was still whole. But he did not look forward to a lifetime career of abduction.

"Is your cold better?" Tom Andrews started to ask as his partner came into the office, but broke off and gaped at the colorful ruin of his face. "What in the name of seven devils have you been up to?"

"Just a spot of sin," said Gilbert Iles. "And it was only one devil."

"It'll wear off," said Andrews easily. "You take it easy today. I'll handle the appearance on the Irving appeal. You can't go into court . . . er . . . looking like that. A spot of sin, huh? You'll have to give me the address of that spot — for when I'm on vacation," he added pointedly.

Miss Krumpig gaped, too, when she brought in the morning mail. But

she politely covered her amazement with small talk. "Isn't it hot today, Mr. Iles? My! I wish I were at the north pole!"

Iles jumped. "Don't *do* that!"

"Don't do what, Mr. Iles?"

"Don't make foolish wishes. You never know what they'll lead to. Don't ever let me hear you do such a thing again!"

He spent a busy day working on papers and seeing no one; a nice, dull, drab day. He got home in good time, wondering what Linda would have for dinner and what sin he could manage to force himself to commit that night. Not abduction again; definitely not abduction. Barratry seemed promising; now just how could he go about —

Linda wore a warning frown as she greeted him. "People," she said. "Strange people. I don't think they're possible clients but they insist on seeing you. They've been here for hours and now there isn't any more beer left and —"

Iles felt a trembling premonition. "Stick with me," he said.

The premonition was justified. He couldn't have sworn to the face of the abducted girl, but that was certainly her scent. How could she — Then it clicked. Simple for her to have read his name and address on the steering rod. And beside her, surrounded by a barricade of empty beer bottles, sat the biggest man that Gilbert Iles had ever seen. He looked like a truck driver; but the truck, to be worthy of him, would have to be huger than anything now on the roads.

"There he is!" the girl shrilled.

The giant looked up, and with no wordy prolog drained the bottle in his hand and hurled it at Iles's head. It missed by millimeters and shattered on the wall. It was followed by the giant's fist, which did not miss.

Gilbert Iles found himself sitting on the table in the next room. His ears were ringing with more than Linda's scream.

"Attaboy, Maurice!" the abductee chortled.

Maurice grinned and visibly swelled. "That, was just a starter."

Linda stepped firmly in front of him. "This is a fine way to act! You come into my house and drink up all my beer and then you sock my husband! Why, a demon's a gentleman alongside of you. Take that!" And she slapped his vast round face. She had to stand on tiptoe to do it.

"Look, lady," Maurice mumbled almost apologetically. "Thanks for the beer, sure. And that may be your husband, but he insulted my sister. Now let me at him."

Gilbert Iles tried to get off the table, but his head swam and his knees wonkled. He folded his legs under him and sat like Sriberegebit, feeling as though he were changing size quite as persistently.

"Any jerk what insults my sister," Maurice announced, "gets what's coming to him. And that's me."

Linda half turned to her husband. "Did you, Gil? Oh — But you said you wouldn't. You promised you wouldn't."

"Did I what?" Iles held on to the table with both hands; it showed signs of turning into the fringe-beard's magic carpet.

"Did you in . . . insult her? And after yesterday afternoon —"

"I did not," Iles snapped. "I utterly deny it. I did not insult her."

"Oh, no?" The abductee advanced on him. "I've never been so thoroughly insulted in all my life."

"Oh, Gil —"

"Look, lady," Maurice protested, "I got a job to do. You go run along and get dinner or something. You won't like to watch this."

"But I did not! I swear it! I simply abducted her."

The girl's fingernails flashed at him. "Oh, yeah? That's what you said. You tell a girl you're going to abduct her and you carry her off way to hell and gone and leave her stranded and never do a thing to her and if that isn't an insult I'd like to know what is."

"And I ain't standing for it, see," Maurice added.

Linda sighed happily. "Oh, Gil darling! I knew you didn't."

Maurice picked her up with one enormous paw and set her aside, not ungently. "Stick around if you want to, lady. But that ain't gonna stop me. And thanks for the beer."

Gilbert Iles's intention was to slip off the other side of the table. But his wonkling knees betrayed him, and he slipped forward, straight into a left that came from Maurice's shoelaces.

The magic carpet rose, drifting high over the Arabian sands. All the perfumes of Arabia were wafted sweetly about it. The carpet had another passenger, a houri whose face was veiled but who was undisputedly Miss Krumpig. Though markedly affectionate, she kept calling him Maurice and telling him to go to it. Then out of a sandstorm emerged a jinni driving a truck. The truck drove straight at him and connected. The magic carpet turned into a handkerchief in the center of which there was a lake. Upon investigation he saw that this lake was blood and all from his own nose. He was an old man, an old man with a fringe beard, and who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? The jinni appeared again bearing an enormous mammoth tusk which twanged. The jinni raised the tusk and brought it down on his head. A woman's voice kept calling, "Darjeeling," or was it, "darling"?

There was a moment's pause, and Gilbert Iles heard the cry clearly. It was, "Darling, say it. Say it!"

He managed to ask, "Say what?" after spitting out a tooth or two.

"Say it! I can't, because it wouldn't work for me and I don't know what might happen but you say it and they'll go away because I've broken three vases on him and he just doesn't notice. So, oh, darling, *say it!*"

He was back on the carpet and so was the jinni. This time the jinni was wearing the tusk in his jaw and he looked amazingly like —

"Sribérdegbít!" Gilbert Iles groaned.

Then the jinni and the magic carpet and everything faded away to peaceful black.

Gilbert Iles opened his eyes in a darkened bedroom. There was an ice bag on his head and a smell of iodine and liniment clinging about him. He tried to move and decided it might be better to wait a day or so. He opened his mouth and heard something that sounded like a Voder in need of repair.

Through the hall door came in light and Linda. He managed to turn his head — and saw squatting on the bedside table the form of Sribérdegbít.

"Are you all right, dear?" Linda asked.

He said, "What do you think?" or a noise that meant as much, and then stared a silent question at the demon.

"I know," said Linda. "He won't go away unless you dismiss him. But it did work. When you said his name, there he was, and my! you should have seen Maurice and that woman clear out of there!"

"Sissies," said Sribérdegbít.

Undulant demons are more than a sick head can stand. "Begone!" said Gilbert Iles.

The demon shook his head. "Uh-uh. What's the use? I'd have to be back to strangle you in five minutes anyway."

Iles jumped, and every muscle ached with the motion. He managed to look at the bedside electric clock. It was 12:55.

"I didn't want to wake you," said Linda. "I never thought of that — You . . . you've been good today?"

He looked the question at the demon, who nodded dourly. "Like one of those cocky angels," he asserted.

"Then, you, What's-your-name, you're going to have to . . . to do things to him at 1 o'clock?"

"On the dot."

"But, Gil darling, can't you quick — I mean isn't there something you can do? I know you practically can't stir from where you are, but isn't there some way you can sin just in your mind? I'm sure there is. Work out a plan for barratry; doesn't planning a sin count? Can't you — Oh, Gil, you can't let yourself get garroted with a snake tail!"

Enforced physical inaction had stimulated Iles's mind. While Linda pleaded, he was performing intricate calculations worthy of a specialist in canon law. Now he summoned up every whit of his power of trained articulation to make his words clear. They sounded inhuman, but intelligible.

"Sriberdegit, is suicide a sin?"

"Oh, Gil dear, you wouldn't — Where would be the advantage —"

"Hush, Linda. Is it?"

"Yes. It's a sin against God or Man. It's a sin against the Giver of Life and against Life itself. It's what you'd call a real good solid sin."

"Very well. You may go, Srib."

"Huh? Like fun you say. It's 12:59 and a half, and here's where I come in." The tail twitched, then slowly began to reach out. Linda fought to repress a scream.

"Wait." Iles had never spoken so fast under such difficulty. "Suicide is a sin, right?"

"Right."

"If I refuse to commit a sin, I die, right?"

"Right."

"If I die through my own deliberate act, that's suicide, right?"

"Right."

"Then if I refuse to perform my daily sin, I am committing suicide, which is a sin. There, begone!"

The tail hesitated a fraction of an inch from Iles's throat. A very slow take spread over the demon's shifting face. He twanged his tusk twice. Then, "Why I . . . I'll be God *blessed!*" he said, and vanished.

"You know, darling," Linda said later, "it hasn't been so bad after all. You can take your vacation now and get all healed up again and then you'll never know you were ever cursed. In fact you'll be better than ever, because now you'll drive carefully and you won't spread scandal and you won't do anything shady in your profession and —" She paused and stared at him rapturously. "My! I have a brilliant husband!"

He nodded inarticulate thanks.

"That was the most beautiful thinking. Why now there won't be any stopping you. You'll go on and you'll be attorney general and governor and a justice of the supreme court and — No. No. I don't really want that. I wish —"

"Oh, oh!" Gilbert Iles groaned warily.

"I wish," she continued unchecked, "that we could just go on living quietly, but very, very, *very* happily."

There was a wimp present.