

# UNKNOWN

25¢ FEB · 1943

FANTASY FICTION

## Worlds

### WET MAGIC . . . . . by Henry Kuttner

Beneath a Welsh lake, safe from the enemies of a thousand years, Morgan le Fay had waited—and with her was Excalibur, Arthur's magic sword. Another Arthur—Arthur Woodley, American, ex-Hollywood actor, currently an A. E. F. pilot—found her there. Not that he meant to—a pair of Nazi Stukas took care of that. They, Vivienne, and Merlin, that is—



### THE ANGELIC ANGLEWORM . by Fredric Brown

Charlie Wills had troubles. They began when the angleworm he was trying to collect for fishing bait sprouted wings, a halo, and flew heavenward. They included a duck where a duck couldn't be, a Rumanian coin—a remarkable series of peculiar events. Because of a most strange error—



### THE WITCH . . . . . by A. E. van Vogt

She was old and ugly and lonely, and she feared the sea and the night with a terrible horror. For she was of the sea—and she wanted just a bit more time to work her magic, the magic that would give her a new, younger body—



### THE ULTIMATE WISH . . . . . by E. M. Hull

She was crippled, twisted—twisted even more mentally than she was physically. Her world was made up of hates, lusts for revenge, savage passions, a deadly stew of mental poisons. And to her, by accident, came the power to make one and only one wish. What wish could she make that would yield her the greatest satisfaction?

# U N K N O W N W O R L D S

Contents for February, 1943, Vol. VI, No. 5

John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Asst. Ed.

## Novel

- WET MAGIC . . . . .** **Henry Kuttner 9**  
Arthur had no intention of seeking out Merlin when he started. But he found him. Thereafter he tried to avoid Morgan le Fay—yet, in the end, he sought out even that dread witch—

## Novelettes

- THIEVES' HOUSE . . . . .** **Fritz Leiber, Jr. 34**  
It was a fortress of the Thieves' Guild, but the assassins and thieves who filled it weren't the main worry of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. There were others who chilled even the evildest of the thieves.
- THE ANGELIC ANGLEWORM . . . . .** **Fredric Brown 49**  
Charlie had troubles, queer ones that began with an angletworm that sprouted wings and a halo. And ended only when he figured out what and why—and thereby a way to reach the Authority that caused them.
- NO GRAVEN IMAGE . . . . .** **Cleve Cartmill 79**  
Superstitious natives of all lands agree on one belief: the camera, the painter, the sculptor all steal part of a man's soul. Perhaps if a man were photographed enough—

## Short Stories

- THE ULTIMATE WISH . . . . .** **E. M. Hull 71**  
A new tale of an old plot—the use of a granted wish. Old in folklore, the problem is presented thus: how could a single wish best help a person twisted and ugly not only in body, but in mind?
- GUARDIAN . . . . .** **Michael Corbin 102**  
The "man" that stops you for a light for his cigarette—the "pedestrian" that ambles across the street and makes you stop—may be neither. A Guardian must save—but, when the Time & Sands Department says, must—
- THE HAT TRICK . . . . .** **Felix Graham 110**  
Dedicated to the proposition that men can and must believe they see only what they can understand—no matter what they do see.
- THE WITCH . . . . .** **A. E. van Vogt 118**  
She was old, old and afraid of the Night and of the Sea. She had reason to be, but the young people didn't believe that—not that they had reason to hold a deadly fear of her!

## Poem

- THE KA OF KOR-SETHON . . . . .** **Hannes Bok 33**

## Readers' Departments

- OF THINGS BEYOND . . . . .** **6**  
—AND HAVING WRIT—  
The readers speak their minds. . . . . 114
- ON BOOKS OF MAGIC . . . . .** **116**

Illustrations by: Cartier, M. Isip, Kolliker, Kramer and Orban.

NEXT ISSUE  
ON SALE  
FEB. 28th  
25c PER COPY



Printed in the U.S.A.

\* Bimonthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Allen L. Grammer, President; Henry W. Hutton, Vice President; Gerald H. Smith, Secretary and Treasurer. Copyright, 1942, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. The editorial contents of this magazine have not been published before, are protected by copyright and cannot be reprinted without the publisher's permission. All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.



# THE ANGELIC ANGLEWORM

By Fredric Brown

● When angleworms sprout angel wings and haloes before your eyes, and ducks appear from nowhere in hermetically sealed showcases—something more than an eye specialist is needed. But not many would have been able to figure the way to reach the proper specialist!

Illustrated by M. Ielp

## I.

Charlie Wills shut off the alarm clock and kept right on moving, swinging his feet out of bed and sticking them into his slippers as he reached for a cigarette. Once the cigarette was lighted, he let himself relax a moment, sitting on the side of the bed.

He still had time, he figured, to sit there and smoke himself awake. He had fifteen minutes before Pete Johnson would call to take him fishing. And twelve minutes was enough time to wash his face and throw on his old clothes.

It seemed funny to get up at five o'clock, but he felt swell. Golly, even with the sun not up yet and the sky a dull pastel through the window,

he felt great. Because there was only a week and a half to wait now.

Less than a week and a half, really, because it was ten days. Or—come to think of it—a bit more than ten days from this hour in the morning. But call it ten days, anyway. If he could go back to sleep again now, darn it; when he woke up it would be that much closer to the time of the wedding. Yes, it was swell to sleep when you were looking forward to something. Time flies by and you don't even hear the rustle of its wings.

But no—he couldn't go back to sleep. He'd promised Pete he'd be ready at five-fifteen, and if he wasn't, Pete would sit out front in his car and honk the horn, and wake the neighbors.

And the three minutes' grace were up, so he stamped out the cigarette and reached for the clothes on the chair.

He began to whistle softly: "I'm going to marry Yum Yum, Yum Yum" from "The Mikado." And tried—in the interests of being ready in time—to keep his eyes off the silver-framed picture of Jane on the bureau.

He must be just about the luckiest guy on earth. Or anywhere else, for that matter, if there was anywhere else.

Jane Pemberton, with soft brown hair that had little wavelets in it and felt like silk—no, nicer than silk—and with the cute go-to-hell tilt to her nose, with long graceful sun-tanned legs, with . . . dammit, with everything that it was possible for a girl to have, and more. And the miracle that she loved him was so fresh that he still felt a bit dazed.

Ten days in a daze, and then—

His eye fell on the dial of the clock, and he jumped. It was ten minutes after five, and he still sat there holding the first sock. Hurriedly, he finished dressing. Just in time! It was almost five-fifteen on the head as he slid into his corduroy jacket, grabbed his fishing tackle, and tiptoed down the stairs and outside into the cool dawn.

Pete's car wasn't there yet.

Well, that was all right. It'd give him a few minutes to rustle up some worms, and that would save time later on. Of course he couldn't really dig in Mrs. Grady's lawn, but there was a bare area of border around the flower bed along the front porch, and it wouldn't matter if he turned over a bit of the dirt there.

He took his jackknife out and knelt down beside the flower bed. Ran the blade a couple of inches in the ground and turned over a clod of it. Yes, there were worms all right. There was a nice big juicy one that ought to be tempting to any fish.

Charlie reached out to pick it up.

And that was when it happened.

His fingertips came together, but there wasn't a worm between them, because something had happened to the worm. When he'd reached out for it, it had been a quite ordinary-looking angleworm.

A three-inch juicy, slippery, wriggling angleworm. It most definitely had *not* had a pair of wings. Nor a—

It was quite impossible, of course, and he was dreaming or seeing things, but there it was.

Fluttering upward in a graceful slow spiral that seemed utterly effortless. Flying past Charlie's face with wings that were shimmering-white, and not at all like butterfly wings or bird wings, but like—

Up and up it circled, now above Charlie's head, now level with the roof of the house, then a mere white—somehow a *shining* white—speck against the gray sky. And after it was out of sight, Charlie's eyes still looked upward.

He didn't hear Pete Johnson's car pull in at the curb, but Pete's cheerful hail of "Hey!" caught his attention, and he saw that Pete was getting out of the car and coming up the walk.

Grinning. "Can we get some worms here, before we start?" Pete asked. Then: "'Smatter? Think you see a German bomber? And don't you know never to look up with your mouth open like you were doing when I pulled up? Remember that pigeons— Say, is something the matter? You look white as a sheet."

Charlie discovered that his mouth was still open, and he closed it. Then he opened it to say something, but couldn't think of anything to say—or rather, of any way to say it, and he closed his mouth again.

He looked back upward, but there wasn't anything in sight any more, and he looked down at the earth of the flower bed, and it looked like ordinary earth.

"Charlie!" Pete's voice sounded seriously concerned now. "Snap out of it! Are you all right?"

Again Charlie opened his mouth, and closed it. Then he said weakly, "Hello, Pete."

"For cat's sake, Charlie. Did you go to sleep out here and have a nightmare, or what? Get up off your knees and— Listen, are you *sick*? Shall I take you to Doc Palmer instead of us going fishing?"

Charlie got to his feet slowly, and shook himself. He said, "I . . . I guess I'm all right. Something funny happened. But— All right, come on. Let's go fishing."

"But what? Oh, all right, tell me about it later. But before we start, shall we dig some— Hey, don't look like that! Come on, get in the car; get some fresh air and maybe that'll make you feel better."

Pete took his arm, and Pete picked up the tackle box and led Charlie out to the waiting car. He opened the dashboard compartment and took out a bottle. "Here, take a snifter of this."

Charlie did, and as the amber fluid gurgled out of the bottle's neck and down Charlie's he felt his

brain begin to rid itself of the numbness of shock. He could think again.

The whiskey burned on the way down, but it put a pleasant spot of warmth where it landed, and he felt better. Until it changed to warmth, he hadn't realized that there had been a cold spot in the pit of his stomach.

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and said, "Gosh."

"Take another," Pete said, his eyes on the road. "Maybe, too, it'll do you good to tell me what happened and get it out of your system. That is, if you want to."

"I . . . I guess so," said Charlie. "It . . . it doesn't sound like much to tell it, Pete. I just reached for a worm, and it flew away. On white, shining wings."

Pete looked puzzled. "You reached for a worm, and it flew away. Well, why not? I mean, I'm no entomologist, but maybe there are worms with wings. Come to think of it, there probably are. There are winged ants, and caterpillars turn into butterflies. What scared you about it?"

"Well, this worm didn't have wings until I reached for it. It looked like an ordinary angleworm. Dammit, it was an ordinary angleworm until I went to pick it up. And then it had a . . . a— Oh, skip it. I was probably seeing things."

"Come on, get it out of your system. Give."

"Dammit, Pete, it had a halo!"

The car swerved a bit, and Pete eased it back to the middle of the road before he said, "A what?"

"Well," said Charlie defensively, "it looked like a halo. It was a little round golden circle just above its head. It didn't seem to be attached; it just floated there."

"How'd you know it was its head? Doesn't a worm look alike on both ends?"

"Well," said Charlie, and he stopped to consider the matter. How had he known? "Well," he said, "since it was a halo, wouldn't it be kind of silly for it to have a halo around the wrong end? I mean, even sillier than to have— Hell, you know what I mean."

Pete said, "Hmph." Then, after the car was around a curve: "All right, let's be strictly logical. Let's assume you saw, or thought you saw, what you . . . uh . . . thought you saw. Now, you're not a heavy drinker so it wasn't D. T.'s. Far as I can see, that leaves three possibilities."

Charlie said, "I see two of them. It could have been a pure hallucination. People do have 'em, I guess, but I never had one before. Or I suppose it could have been a dream, maybe. I'm sure I didn't, but I suppose that I could, have gone to sleep there and dreamed I saw it. But that isn't it. I'll concede the possibility of an hallucination, but not a dream. What's the third?"

"Ordinary fact. That you really saw a winged

worm. I mean, that there is such a thing, for all I know. And you were just mistaken about it not having wings when you first saw it, because they were folded. And what you thought looked like a . . . uh . . . halo, was some sort of a crest or antenna or something. There are some damn funny-looking bugs."

"Yeah," said Charlie. But he didn't believe it. There may be funny-looking bugs, but none that suddenly sprout wings and haloes and ascend unto—

He took another drink out of the bottle.

## II.

Sunday afternoon and evening he spent with Jane, and the episode of the ascending angleworm slipped into the back of Charlie's mind. Anything, except Jane, tended to slip there when he was with her.

At bedtime when he was alone again, it came back. The thought, not the worm. So strongly that he couldn't sleep, and he got up and sat in the armchair by the window and decided the only way to get it out of his mind was to think it through.

If he could pin things down and decide what had really happened out there at the edge of the flower bed, then maybe he could forget it completely.

O. K., he told himself, let's be strictly logical.

Pete had been right about the three possibilities. Hallucination, dream, reality. Now to begin with, it hadn't been a dream. He'd been wide awake; he was as sure of that as he was sure of anything. Eliminate that.

Reality? That was impossible, too. It was all right for Pete to talk about the funniness of insects and the possibility of antennae, and such—but Pete hadn't *seen* the danged thing. Why, it had flown past only inches from his eyes. And that halo had really *been* there.

Antennae? Nuts.

And that left hallucination. That's what it must have been, hallucination. After all, people *do* have hallucinations. Unless it happened often, it didn't necessarily mean you were a candidate for the booby hatch. All right then, accept that it was an hallucination, and so what? So forget it.

With that decided, he went to bed and—by thinking about Jane again—happily to sleep.

The next morning was Monday and he went back to work.

And the morning after that was Tuesday.

And on Tuesday—

## III.

It wasn't an ascending angleworm this time. It wasn't anything you could put your finger on,

unless you can put your finger on sunburn, and that's painful sometimes.

But sunburn—in a rainstorm—

It was raining when Charlie Wills left home that morning, but it wasn't raining hard at that time, which was a few minutes after eight. A mere drizzle. Charlie pulled down the brim of his hat and buttoned up his raincoat and decided to walk to work anyway. He rather liked walking in rain. And he had time; he didn't have to be there until eight-thirty.

Three blocks away from work, he encountered the Pest, bound in the same direction. The Pest was Jane Pemberton's kid sister, and her right name was Paula, but most people had forgotten the fact. She worked at the Hapworth Printing Co., just as Charlie did; but she was a copyholder for one of the proofreaders and he was assistant production manager.

But he'd met Jane through her, at a party given for employees.

He said, "Hi there, Pest. Aren't you afraid you'll melt?" For it was raining harder now, definitely harder.

"Hello, Charlie-warlie. I like to walk in the rain."

She *would*, thought Charlie bitterly. At the hated nickname Charlie-warlie, he writhed. Jane had called him that once, but—after he'd talked reason to her—never again. Jane was reasonable. But the Pest had heard it— And Charlie was mortally afraid, ever after, that she'd sometime call him that at work, with other employees in hearing. And if *that* ever happened—

"Listen," he protested, "can't you forget that darn fool . . . uh . . . nickname? I'll quit calling you Pest, if you'll quit calling me . . . uh . . . *that*."  
"But I *like* to be called the Pest. *Why* don't you like to be called Charlie-warlie?"

She grinned at him, and Charlie writhed inwardly. Because she was *who* she was, he didn't dare—

There was pent-up anger in him as he walked into the blowing rain, head bent low to keep it out of his face. Damn the brat—

With vision limited to a few yards of sidewalk directly ahead of him, Charlie probably wouldn't have seen the teamster and the horse if he hadn't heard the cracks that sounded like pistol shots.

He looked up, and saw. In the middle of the street, maybe fifty feet ahead of Charlie and the Pest and moving toward them, came an overloaded wagon. It was drawn by an aged, despondent horse, a horse so old and bony that the slow walk by which it progressed seemed to be its speediest possible rate of movement.

But the teamster obviously didn't think so. He was a big, ugly man with an unshaven, swarthy face. He was standing up, swinging his heavy whip for another blow. It came down, and the old

horse quivered under it and seemed to sway between the shafts.

The whip lifted again.

And Charlie yelled "Hey, there!" and started toward the wagon.

He wasn't certain yet just what he was going to do about it if the brute beating the other brute refused to stop. But it was going to be something. Seeing an animal mistreated was something Charlie Wills just couldn't stand. And wouldn't stand.

He yelled "Hey!" again, because the teamster didn't seem to have heard him the first time, and he started forward at a trot, along the curb.

The teamster heard that second yell, and he might have heard the first. Because he turned and looked squarely at Charlie. Then he raised the whip again, even higher, and brought it down on the horse's welt-streaked back with all his might.

Things went red in front of Charlie's eyes. He didn't yell again. He knew darned well now what he was going to do. It began with pulling that teamster down off the wagon where he could get at him. And then he was going to beat him to a pulp.

He heard Paula's high heels clicking as she started after him and called out, "Charlie, be careful—"

But that was all of it that he heard. Because, just at that moment, it happened.

A sudden blinding wave of intolerable heat, a sensation as though he had just stepped into the heart of a fiery furnace. He gasped once for breath, as the very air in his lungs and in his throat seemed to be scorching hot. And his skin—

Blinding pain, just for an instant. Then it was gone, but too late. The shock had been too sudden and intense, and as he felt again the cool rain in his face, he went dizzy and rubbery all over, and lost consciousness. He didn't even feel the impact of his fall.

Darkness.

And then he opened his eyes into a blur of white that resolved itself into white walls and white sheets over him and a nurse in a white uniform, who said, "Doctor! He's regained consciousness."

Footsteps and the closing of a door, and there was Doc Palmer frowning down at him.

"Well, Charles, what have you been up to now?" Charlie grinned a bit weakly. He said, "Hi, doc. I'll bite. What *have* I been up to?"

Doc Palmer pulled up a chair beside the bed and sat down in it. He reached out for Charlie's wrist and held it while he looked at the second hand of his watch. Then he read the chart at the end of the bed and said "Hmph."

"Is that the diagnosis," Charlie wanted to know, "or the treatment? Listen, first what about that

teamster? That is if you know—"

"Paula told me what happened. Teamster's under arrest, and fired. You're all right, Charles. Nothing serious."

"Nothing serious? What's it a non-serious case of? In other words, what happened to me?"

"You keeled over. Prostration. And you'll be peeling for a few days, but that's all. Why didn't you use a lotion of some kind yesterday?"

Charlie closed his eyes and opened them again slowly. And said, "Why didn't I use a— For what?"

"The sunburn, of course. Don't you know you can't go swimming on a sunny day and not get—"

"But I wasn't swimming yesterday, doc. Nor the day before. Gosh, not for a couple weeks, in fact. What do you mean, sunburn?"

Doc Palmer rubbed his chin. He said, "You better rest a while, Charles. If you feel all right by this evening, you can go home. But you'd better not work tomorrow."

He got up and went out.

The nurse was still there, and Charlie looked at her blankly. He said, "Is Doc Palmer going— Listen, what's this all about?"

The nurse was looking at him queerly. She said, "Why, you were. . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Wills, but a nurse isn't allowed to discuss a diagnosis with a patient. But you haven't anything to worry about; you heard Dr. Palmer say you could go home this afternoon or evening."

"Nuts," said Charlie. "Listen, what time is it? Or aren't nurses allowed to tell that?"

"It's ten-thirty."

"Golly, and I've been here almost two hours." He figured back; remembering now that he'd passed a clock that said twenty-four minutes after eight just as they'd turned the corner for that last block. And, if he'd been awake again now for five minutes, then for two full hours—

"Anything else you want, sir?"

Charlie shook his head slowly. And then because he wanted her to leave so he could sneak a look at that chart, he said, "Well, yes. Could I have a glass of orange juice?"

As soon as she was gone, he sat up in bed. It hurt a little to do that, and he found his skin was a bit tender to the touch. He looked at his arms, pulling up the sleeves of the hospital nightshirt they'd put on him, and the skin was pinkish. Just the shade of pink that meant the first stage of a mild sunburn.

He looked down inside the nightshirt, and then at his legs, and said, "What the hell—" Because the sunburn, if it was sunburn, was uniform all over.

And that didn't make sense, because he hadn't been in the sun enough to get burned at any time recently, and he hadn't been in the sun at all without his clothes. And—yes, the sunburn extended

even over the area which would have been covered by trunks if he had gone swimming.

But maybe the chart would explain. He reached over the foot of the bed and took the clipboard with the chart off the hook.

"Reported that patient fainted suddenly on street without apparent cause. Pulse 135, respiration labored, temperature 104, upon admission. All returned to normal within first hour. Symptoms seem to approximate those of heat prostration, but—"

Then there were a few qualifying comments which were highly technical-sounding. Charlie didn't understand them, and somehow he had a hunch that Doc Palmer didn't understand them either. They had a whistling-in-the-dark sound to them.

Click of heels in the hall outside and he put the chart back quickly and ducked under the covers. Surprisingly, there was a knock. Nurses wouldn't knock, would they?

He said, "Come in."

It was Jane. Looking more beautiful than ever, with her big brown eyes a bit bigger with fright.

"Darling! I came as soon as the Pest called home and told me. But she was awfully vague. What on earth happened?"

By that time she was within reach, and Charlie put his arms around her and didn't give a darn, just then, what had happened to him. But he tried to explain. Mostly to himself.

#### IV.

People always try to explain.

Face a man, or a woman, with something he doesn't understand, and he'll be miserable until he classifies it. Lights in the sky. And a scientist tells him it's the aurora borealis—or the aurora australis—and he can accept the lights, and forget them.

Something knocks pictures off a wall in an empty room, and throws a chair downstairs. Consternation, until it's named. Then it's only a poltergeist.

Name it, and forget it. Anything with a name can be assimilated.

Without one, it's—well, unthinkable. Take away the name of anything, and you've got blank horror.

Even something as familiar as a commonplace ghoul. Graves in a cemetery dug up, corpses eaten. Horrible thing, it may be; but it's merely a ghoul; as long as it's named— But suppose, if you can stand it, there was no such word as *ghoul* and no concept of one. Then dug-up half-eaten corpses are found. Nameless horror.

Not that the next thing that happened to Charlie Wills had anything to do with a ghoul. Not even a werewolf. But I think that, in a way, he'd have found a werewolf more comforting than the duck,



One expects strange behavior of a werewolf, but a duck—

Like the duck in the museum.

Now, there is nothing intrinsically terrible about a duck. Nothing to make one lie awake at night, with cold sweat coming out on top of peeling sunburn. On the whole, a duck is a pleasant object, particularly if it is roasted. This one wasn't.

Now it is Thursday. Charlie's stay in the hospital had been for eight hours; they'd released him late in the afternoon, and he'd eaten dinner downtown and then gone home. The boss had insisted on his taking the next day off from work. Charlie hadn't protested, much.

Home, and, after stripping to take a bath, he'd studied his skin with blank amazement. Definitely, a third-degree burn. Definitely, all over him. Almost ready to peel.

It did peel, the next day.

He took advantage of the holiday by taking Jane out to the ball game, where they sat in a grandstand so he could be out of the sun. It was a good game, and Jane understood and liked baseball.

Thursday, back to work.

At eleven twenty-five, Old Man Hapworth, the big boss, came into Charlie's office.

"Wills," he said, "we got a rush order to print ten thousand handbills, and the copy will be here in about an hour. I'd like you to follow the thing right through the Linotype room and the composing room and get it on the press the minute it's made up. It's a close squeak whether we make deadline on it, and there's a penalty if we don't."

"Sure, Mr. Hapworth. I'll stick right with it."

"Fine. I'll count on you. But listen—it's a bit early to eat, but just the same you better go out for your lunch hour now. The copy will be here about the time you get back, and you can stick right with the job. That is, if you don't mind eating early."

"Not at all," Charlie lied. He got his hat and went out.

Dammit, it was too early to eat. But he had an hour off and he could eat in half that time, so maybe if he walked half an hour first, he could work up an appetite.

The museum was two blocks away, and the best place to kill half an hour. He went there, strolled down the central corridor without stopping, except to stare for a moment at a statue of Aphrodite that reminded him of Jane Pemberton and made him remember—even more strongly than he already remembered—that it was only six days now until his wedding.



Then he turned off into the room that housed the numismatics collection. He'd used to collect coins when he was a kid, and although the collection had been broken up since then, he still had a mild interest in looking at the big museum collection.

He stopped in front of a showcase of bronze Romans.

But he wasn't thinking about them. He was still thinking about Aphrodite, or Jane, which was quite understandable under the circumstances. Most certainly, he was not thinking about flying worms or sudden waves of burning heat.

Then he chanced to look across toward an adjacent showcase. And within it, he saw the duck.

It was a perfectly ordinary-looking duck. It had a speckled breast and greenish-brown markings on its wing and a darkish head with a darker stripe starting just above the eye and running down along the short neck. It looked like a wild rather than a domestic duck.

And it looked bewildered at being there.

For just a moment, the complete strangeness of the duck's presence in a showcase of coins didn't register with Charlie. His mind was *still* on Aphrodite. Even while he stared at a wild duck under glass inside a showcase marked "Coins of China."

Then the duck quacked, and waddled on its awkward webbed feet down the length of the showcase and butted against the glass of the end, and fluttered its wings and tried to fly upward, but hit against the glass of the top. And it quacked again and loudly.

Only then did it occur to Charlie to wonder what a live duck was doing in a numismatics collection. Apparently, to judge from its actions, the duck was wondering the same thing.

And only then did Charlie remember the angelic worm and the sunless sunburn.

And somebody in the doorway said, "Pssst. Hey."

Charlie turned, and the look on his face must have been something out of the ordinary because the uniformed attendant quit frowning and said, "Something wrong, mister?"

For a brief instant, Charlie just stared at him. Then it occurred to Charlie that this was the opportunity he'd lacked when the angleworm had ascended. Two people couldn't see the same hallucination. If it was an—

He opened his mouth to say "Look," but he didn't have to say anything. The duck beat him to it by quacking loudly and again trying to flutter through the glass of the case.

The attendant's eyes went past Charlie to the case of Chinese coins and he said "Gaw!"

The duck was still there.

The attendant looked at Charlie again and said, "Did you—" and then stopped without finishing

the question and went up to the showcase to look at close range. The duck was still struggling to get out, but more weakly. It seemed to be gasping for breath.

The attendant said, "Gaw!" again, and then over his shoulder to Charlie: "Mister, *how* did you— That there case is her-hermetically sealed. It's airtight. Lookit that bird. It's—"

It already had; the duck fell over, either dead or unconscious.

The attendant grasped Charlie's arm. He said firmly, "Mister, you come with me to the boss." And less firmly, "Uh . . . *how* did you get that thing in there? And don't try to tell me you didn't, mister. I was through here five minutes ago, and you're the only guy's been in here since."

Charlie opened his mouth, and closed it again. He had a sudden vision of himself being questioned at the headquarters of the museum and then at the police station. And if the police started asking questions about him, they'd find out about the worm and about his having been in the hospital for— And, golly, they'd get an alienist maybe, and—

With the courage of sheer desperation, Charlie smiled. He tried to make it an ominous smile; it may not have been ominous, but it was definitely unusual. "How would you like," he asked the attendant, "to find yourself in there?" And he pointed with his free arm through the entrance and out into the main hallway at the stone sarcophagus of King Mene-Ptah. "I can do it, the same way I put that duck—"

The museum attendant was breathing hard. His eyes looked slightly glazed, and he let go of Charlie's arm. He said, "Mister, did you really—" "Want me to show you how?"

"Uh . . . Gaw!" said the attendant. He ran.

Charlie forced himself to hold his own pace down to a rapid walk, and went in the opposite direction to the side entrance that led out into Beeker Street.

And Beeker Street was still a very ordinary-looking street, with lots of midday traffic, and no pink elephants climbing trees and nothing going on but the hurried confusion of a city street. Its very noise was soothing, in a way; although there was one bad moment when he was crossing at the corner and heard a sudden noise behind him. He turned around, startled, afraid of what strange thing he might see there.

But it was only a truck, and he got out of its way in time to avoid being run over.

## V.

Lunch. And Charlie was definitely getting into a state of jitters. His hand shook so that he could scarcely pick up his coffee without slopping it over the edge of the cup.

Because a horrible thought was dawning in his mind. If something was wrong with him, was it fair to Jane Pemberton for him to go ahead and marry her? Is it fair to saddle the girl one loves with a husband who might go to the icebox to get a bottle of milk and find—God knows what?

And he was deeply, madly in love with Jane.

So he sat there, an unbitten sandwich on the plate before him, and alternated between hope and despair as he tried to make sense out of the three things that had happened to him within the past week.

Hallucination?

But the attendant, too, had seen the duck!

How comforting it had been—it seemed to him now—that, after seeing the angelic angleworm, he had been able to tell himself it had been an hallucination. *Only* an hallucination.

But wait. Maybe—

Could not the museum attendant, too, have been part of the same hallucination as the duck? Granted that he, Charlie, could have seen a duck that wasn't there, couldn't he also have included in the same category a museum attendant who professed to see the duck? Why not? A duck and an attendant who sees it—the combination could be as illusory as the duck alone.

And Charlie felt so encouraged that he took a bite out of his sandwich.

But the *burn*? Whose hallucination was that? Or was there some sort of a natural physical ailment that could produce a sudden skin condition approximating mild sunburn? But, if there were such a thing, then evidently Doc Palmer didn't know about it.

Suddenly Charlie caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall, and it was one o'clock, and he almost strangled on that bite of sandwich when he realized that he was over half an hour late, and must have been sitting in the restaurant almost an hour.

He got up and ran back to the office.

But all was well; Old Man Hapworth wasn't there. And the copy for the rush circular was late and got there just as Charlie arrived.

He said "*Whew!*" at the narrowness of his escape, and concentrated hard on getting that circular through the plant. He rushed it to the Linotypes and read proof on it himself, then watched make-up over the compositor's shoulder. He knew he was making a nuisance of himself, but it killed the afternoon.

And he thought, "Only one more day to work after today, and then my vacation, and on *Wednesday*—"

Wedding on Wednesday.

But—

If—

The Pest came out of the proofroom in a green smock and looked at him. "Charlie," she said,

"you look like something no self-respecting cat would drag in. Say . . . what's wrong with you? Really?"

"Ph . . . nothing. Say, Paula, will you tell Jane when you get home that I may be a bit late this evening? I got to stick here till these handbills are off the press."

"Sure, Charlie. But tell me—"

"Nix. Run along, will you? I'm busy."

She shrugged her shoulders, and went back into the proofroom.

The machinist tapped Charlie's shoulder. "Say, we got that new Linotype set up. Want to take a look?"

Charlie nodded and followed. He looked over the installation, and then slid into the operator's chair in front of the machine. "How does she run?"

"Sweet. Those Blue Streak models are honeys. Try it."

Charlie let his fingers play over the keys, setting words without paying any attention to what they were. He sent in three lines to cast, then picked the slugs out of the stick. And found that he had set: "For men have died and worms have eaten them and ascendeth unto Heaven where it sitteth upon the right hand—"

"Gaw!" said Charlie. And that reminded him of—

## VI.

Jane noticed that there was something wrong. She couldn't have helped noticing. But instead of asking questions, she was unusually nice to him that evening.

And Charlie, who had gone to see her with the resolution to tell her the whole story, found himself weakening. As men always weaken when they are with the women they love and the parlor lamp is turned low.

But she did ask: "Charles—you *do* want to marry me, don't you? I mean, if there's any doubt in your mind and that's what has been worrying you, we can postpone the wedding till you're sure whether you love me enough—"

"Love you?" Charlie was aghast. "Why—"

And he proved it pretty satisfactorily.

So satisfactorily, in fact, that he completely forgot his original intention to suggest that very postponement. But *never* for the reason she suggested. With his arms around Jane—well, the poor chap was only human.

A man in love is a drunken man, and you can't exactly blame a drunkard for what he does under the influence of alcohol. You can blame him, of course, for getting drunk in the first place; but you can't put even that much blame on a man in love. In all probability, he fell through no fault of his own. In all probability his original intentions were strictly dishonorable; then, when those

intentions met resistance, the subtle chemistry of sublimation converted them into the stuff that stars are made of.

Probably that was why he didn't go to see an alienist the next day. He was a bit afraid of what an alienist might tell him. He weakened and decided to wait and see if anything else happened.

Maybe nothing else would happen.

There was a comforting popular superstition that things went in groups of three, and three things had happened already.

Sure, that was it. From now on, he'd be all right. After all, there wasn't anything basically wrong; there couldn't be. He was in good health. Aside from Tuesday, he hadn't missed a day's work at the print shop in two years.

And—well, by now it was Friday noon and nothing had happened for a full twenty-four hours, and nothing was going to happen again.

It didn't, Friday, but he read something that jolted him out of his precarious complacency.

A newspaper account.

He sat down in the restaurant at a table at which a previous diner had left a morning paper. Charlie read it while he was waiting for his order to be taken. He finished scanning the front page before the waitress came, and the comic section while he was eating his soup, and then turned idly to the local page.

## GUARD AT MUSEUM IS SUSPENDED

Curator Orders Investigation

And the cold spot in his stomach got larger and colder as he read, for there it was in black and white.

The wild duck had really been in the showcase. No one could figure out how it had been put there. They'd had to take the showcase apart to get it out, and the showcase showed no indication of having been tampered with. It had been puttied up air-tight to keep out dust, and the putty had not been damaged.

A guard, for reasons not clearly given in the article, had been given a three-day suspension. One gathered from the wording of the story that the curator of the museum had felt the necessity of doing *something* about the matter.

Nothing of value was missing from the case. One Chinese coin with a hole in the middle, a haikwan tael, made of silver, had not been findable after the affair; but it wasn't worth much. There was some doubt as to whether it had been stolen by one of the workmen who had disassembled the showcase or whether it had been accidentally thrown out with the debris of old putty.

The reporter, telling the thing humorously, suggested that probably the duck had mistaken the coin for a doughnut because of the hole, and had

eaten it. And that the curator's best revenge would be to eat the duck.

The police had been called in, but had taken the attitude that the whole affair must have been a practical joke. By whom or how accomplished, they didn't know.

Charlie put down the paper and stared moodily across the room.

Then it definitely *hadn't* been a double hallucination, a case of his imagining both duck and attendant. And until now that the bottom had fallen out of that idea, Charlie hadn't realized how strongly he'd counted on the possibility.

Now he was back where he'd started.

Unless—

But that was absurd. Of course, theoretically, the newspaper item he had just read *could* be an hallucination too, but— No, that was too much to swallow. According to that line of reasoning, if he went around to the museum and talked to the curator, the curator himself would be an hallucin—"Your duck, sir."

Charlie jumped halfway out of his chair.

Then he saw it was the waitress standing at the side of the table with his entree, and that she had spoken because he had the newspaper spread out and there wasn't room for her to put it down.

"Didn't you order roast duck, sir? I—"

Charlie stood up hastily, averting his eyes from the dish.

He said, "Sorry-gotta-make-a-phone-call," and hastily handed the astonished waitress a dollar bill and strode out. Had he really ordered— Not exactly; he'd told her to bring him the special.

But eat duck? He'd rather eat . . . no, not fried angleworms either. He shuddered.

He hurried back to the office, despite the fact that he was half an hour early, and felt better once he was within the safe four walls of the Hapworth Printing Co. Nothing out of the way had happened to him there.

As yet.

## VII.

Basically, Charlie Wills was quite a healthy young man. By two o'clock in the afternoon, he was so hungry that he sent one of the office boys downstairs to buy him a couple of sandwiches.

And he ate them. True, he lifted up the top slice of bread on each and looked inside. He didn't know what he expected to find there, aside from boiled ham and butter and a piece of lettuce, but if he had found—in lieu of one of those ingredients—say, a Chinese silver coin with a hole in the middle, he would not have been more than ordinarily surprised.

It was a dull afternoon at the plant, and Charlie had time to do quite a bit of thinking. Even a bit of research. He remembered that the plant had printed, several years before, a textbook on ento-

mology. He found the file copy and industriously paged through it looking for a winged worm. He found a few winged things that might be called worms, but none that even remotely resembled the anglerworm with the halo. Not even, for that matter, if he disregarded the golden circle, and tried to make identification solely on the basis of body and wings.

No flying anglerworms.

There weren't any medical books in which he could look up—or try to look up—how one could get sunburned without a sun.

But he looked up "tael" in the dictionary, and found that it was equivalent to a liang, which was one-sixteenth of a catty. And that one official liang is equivalent to a hectogram.

None of which seemed particularly helpful.

Shortly before five o'clock he went around saying good-by to everyone, because this was the last day at the office before his two weeks' vacation, and the good-byes were naturally complicated by good wishes on his impending wedding—which would take place in the first week of his vacation.

He had to shake hands with everybody but the Pest, whom, of course, he'd be seeing frequently during the first few days of his vacation. In fact, he went home with her from work to have dinner with the Pembertons.

And it was a quiet, restful, pleasant dinner that left him feeling better than he'd felt since last Sunday morning. Here in the calm harbor of the Pemberton household, the absurd things that had happened to him seemed so far away and so utterly fantastic that he almost doubted if they had happened at all.

And he felt utterly, completely certain that it was all over. Things happened in threes, didn't they? If anything else happened— But it wouldn't.

It didn't, that night.

Jane solicitously sent him home at nine o'clock to get to bed early. But she kissed him good night so tenderly, and withal so effectively, that he walked down the street with his head in rosy clouds.

Then, suddenly—out of nothing, as it were—Charlie remembered that the museum attendant had been suspended, and was losing three days' pay, because of the episode of the duck in the showcase. And if that duck business was Charlie's fault—even indirectly—didn't he owe it to the guy to step forward and explain to the museum directors that the attendant had been in no way to blame, and that he should not be penalized?

After all, he, Charlie, had probably scared the poor attendant half out of his wits by suggesting that he could repeat the performance with a sarcophagus instead of a showcase, and the attendant had told such a disconnected story that he hadn't been believed.

But—had the thing been his fault? Did he owe—

And there he was butting his head against that brick wall of impossibility again. Trying to solve the insoluble.

And he knew, suddenly, that he had been weak in not breaking his engagement to Jane. That what had happened three times within the short space of a week might all too easily happen again.

Gosh! Even at the ceremony. Suppose he reached for the wedding ring and pulled out a—

From the rosy clouds of bliss to the black mire of despair had proved to be a walk of less than a block.

Almost he turned back toward the Pemberton home to tell them tonight, then decided not to. Instead, he'd stop by and talk with Pete Johnson.

Maybe Pete—

What he really hoped was that Pete would talk him out of his decision.

## VIII.

Pete Johnson had a gallon jug, almost full, of wine. Mellow sherry. And Pete had sampled it, and was mellow, too.

He refused even to listen to Charlie, until his guest had drunk one glass and had a second on the table in front of him. Then he said, "You got something on your mind. O. K., shoot."

"Lookit, Pete. I told you about that anglerworm business. In fact, you were practically there when it happened. And you know about what happened Tuesday morning on my way to work. But yesterday—well, what happened was worse, I guess. Because another guy saw it. It was a duck."

"What was a duck?"

"In a showcase at— Wait, I'll start at the beginning." And he did, and Pete listened.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "the fact that it was in the newspaper quashes one line of thought. Uh . . . fortunately. Listen, I don't see what you got to worry about. Aren't you making a mountain out of a few molehills?"

Charlie took another sip of the sherry and lighted a cigarette and said, "How?" quite hopefully.

"Well, three screwy things have happened. But you take any one by itself and it doesn't amount to a hill of beans, does it? Any one of them can be explained. Where you bog down is in sitting there insisting on a blanket explanation for all of them.

"How do you know there is any connection at all? Now, take them separately—"

"You take them," suggested Charlie. "How would you explain them so easy as all that?"

"First one's a cinch. Your stomach was upset or something and you had a pure hallucination.

Happens to the best people once in a while. Or—you got a second choice just as simple—maybe you saw a new kind of bug. Hell, there are probably thousands of insects that haven't been classified yet. New ones get on the list every year."

"Um," said Charlie. "And the heat business?"

"Well, doctors don't know everything. You got too mad seeing that teamster beating the horse, and anger has a physical effect, hasn't it? You slipped a cog somewhere. Maybe it affected your thermodermal gland."

"What's a thermodermal gland?"

Pete grinned. "I just invented it. But why not? The medicos are constantly finding new ones or new purposes of old ones. And there's *something* in your body that acts as a thermostat and keeps your skin temperature constant. Maybe it went wrong for a minute. Look what a pituitary gland can do for you or against you. Not to mention the parathyroids and the pineal and the adrenals.

"Nothing to it, Charlie. Have some more wine. Now, let's take the duck business. If you don't think about it with the other two things in mind, there's nothing exciting about it. Undoubtedly just a practical joke on the museum or by some-

body working there. It was just coincidence that you walked in on it."

"But the showcase—"

"Bother the showcase! It could have been done somehow; you didn't check that showcase yourself, and you know what newspapers are. And, for that matter, look what Thurston and Houdini could do with things like that, and let you examine the receptacles before and after. Maybe, too, it wasn't just a joke. Maybe somebody had a purpose putting it there, but why think that purpose had any connection with you? You're an egotist, that's what you are."

Charlie sighed. "Yes, but— But you take the three things together, and—"

"Why take them together? Look, this morning I saw a man slip on a banana peel and fall; this afternoon I had a slight toothache; this evening I got a telephone call from a girl I haven't seen in years. Now why should I take those three events and try to figure one common cause for all of them? One underlying motif for all three? I'd go nuts, if I tried."

"Um," said Charlie. "Maybe you got something there. But—"

Despite the "but—" he went home feeling cheer-



ful, hopeful, and mellow. And he was going through with the wedding just as though nothing had happened. Apparently nothing, of importance, had happened. Pete was sensible.

Charlie slept soundly that Saturday morning, and didn't awaken until almost noon.

And Saturday nothing happened.

## IX.

Nothing, that is, unless one considered the matter of the missing golf ball as worthy of record. Charlie decided it wasn't; golf balls disappear all too often. In fact, for a dub golfer, it is only normal to lose at least one ball on eighteen holes.

And it was in the rough, at that.

He'd sliced his drive off the tee on the long fourteenth, and he'd seen it curve off the fairway, hit, bounce, and come to rest behind a big tree; with the tree directly between the ball and the green.

And Charlie's "Damn!" had been loud and fervent, because up to that hole he had an excellent chance to break a hundred. Now he'd have to lose a stroke chipping the stymied ball back onto the fairway.

He waited until Pete had hooked into the woods on the other side, and then shouldered his bag and walked toward the ball.

It wasn't there.

Behind the tree and at about the spot where he thought the ball had landed, there was a wreath of wilted flowers strung along a purple cord that showed through at intervals. Charlie picked it up to look under it, but the ball wasn't there.

So, it must have rolled farther, and he looked but couldn't find it. Pete, meanwhile, had found his own ball and hit his recovery shot. He came across to help Charlie look and they waved the following foursome to play on through.

"I thought it stopped right here," Charlie said, "but it must have rolled on. Well, if we don't find it by the time that foursome's off the green, I'll drop another. Say, how'd this thing get here?"

He discovered he still had the wreath in his hand. Pete looked at it and shuddered. "Golly, what a color combination. Violet and red and green on a purple ribbon. It stinks." The thing did smell a bit, although Pete wasn't close enough to notice that and it wasn't what he meant.

"Yeah, but what *is* it? How'd it get—"

Pete grinned. "Looks like one of those things Hawaiians wear around their necks. Leis, don't they call them? Hey!"

He caught the suddenly stricken look on Charlie's face and firmly took the thing out of Charlie's hand and threw it into the woods. "Now, son," he said, "don't go adding *that* damned thing to your string of coincidences. What's the difference who dropped it here or why? Come on, find

your ball and let's get ready. The foursome's on the green already."

They didn't find the ball.

So Charlie dropped another. He got it out into the middle of the fairway with a niblick and then a screaming brassie shot straight down the middle put him on, ten feet from the pin. And he one-putted for a par five on the hole, even with the stroke penalty for a lost ball.

And broke a hundred after all. True, back in the clubhouse while they were getting dressed, he said, "Listen, Pete, about that ball I lost on the fourteenth. Isn't it kind of funny that—"

"Nuts," Pete grunted. "Didn't you ever lose a ball before? Sometimes you think you see where they land, and it's twenty or even forty feet off from where it really is. The perspective fools you."

"Yeah, but—"

There was that "but" again. It seemed to be the last word on everything that happened recently. Screwy things happen one after another and you can explain each one if you consider it alone, but—

"Have a drink," Pete suggested, and handed over a bottle.

Charlie did, and felt better. He had several. It didn't matter, because tonight Jane was going to a shower given by some girl friends and she wouldn't smell it on his breath.

He said, "Pete, got any plans for tonight? Jane's busy, and it's one of my last bachelor evenings—"

Pete grinned. "You mean, what are we going to do or get drunk? O. K., count me in. Maybe we can get a couple more of the gang together. It's Saturday, and none of us has to work tomorrow."

## X.

And it was undoubtedly a good thing that none of them did have to work Sunday, for few of them would have been able to. It was a highly successful stag evening. Drinks at Tony's, and then a spot of bowling until the manager of the alleys began to get huffy about people bowling balls that started down one alley, jumped the groove, and knocked down pins in the alley adjacent.

And then they'd gone—

Next morning Charlie tried to remember all the places they'd been and all the things they'd done, and decided he was glad he couldn't. For one thing, he had a confused recollection of having tried to start a fight with a Hawaiian guitar player who was wearing a lei, and that he had drunkenly accused the guitarist of stealing his golf ball. But the others had dragged him out of the place before the police got there.

And somewhere around one o'clock they'd eaten, and Charlie had been so cussed that he'd

insisted on trying four eateries before they found one which served duck. He was going to avenge his golf ball by eating duck.

All in all, a very silly and successful spree. Undoubtedly worth a mild hangover.

After all, a guy gets married only once. At least, a man who has a girl like Jane Pemberton in love with him gets married only once.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened Sunday. He saw Jane and again had dinner with the Pembertons. And every time he looked at Jane, or touched her, Charlie had something the sensation of a green pilot making his first outside loop in a fast plane, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. The poor guy was in love.

## XI.

But on Monday—

Monday was the day that really upset the apple cart. After five fifty-five o'clock Monday afternoon, Charlie knew it was hopeless.

In the morning, he made arrangements with the minister who was to perform the ceremony, and in the afternoon he did a lot of last-minute shopping in the wardrobe line. He found it took him longer than he'd thought.

At five-thirty he began to doubt if he was going to have time to call for the wedding ring. It had been bought and paid for, previously, but was still at the jewelers' being suitably engraved with initials.

He was still on the other side of town at five-thirty, awaiting alterations on a suit, and he phoned Pete Johnson from the tailor's:

"Say, Pete, can you do an errand for me?"

"Sure, Charlie. What's up?"

"I want to get the wedding ring before the store closes at six, so I won't have to come downtown at all tomorrow. It's right in the block with you; Scorwald & Benning's store. It's paid for; will you pick it up for me? I'll phone 'em to give it to you."

"Glad to. Say, where are you? I'm eating downtown tonight; how's about putting the feed bag on with me?"

"Sure, Pete. Listen, maybe I can get to the jewelers' in time; I'm just calling you to play safe. Tell you what; I'll meet you there. You be there at five minutes of six to be sure of getting the ring, and I'll get there at the same time if I can. If I can't, wait for me outside. I won't be later than six-fifteen at the latest."

And Charlie hung up the receiver and found the tailor had the suit ready for him. He paid for it, then went outside and began to look around for a taxi.

It took him ten minutes to find one, and still he saw he was going to get to the jewelry store in

time. In fact, it wouldn't have been necessary for him to have phoned Pete. He'd get there easily by five fifty-five.

And it was just a few seconds before that time when he stepped out of the cab, paid off the driver, and strode up to the entrance.

It was just as his first foot crossed the threshold of the Scorwald & Benning store that he noticed the peculiar odor. He had taken one step farther before he recognized what it was, and then it was too late to do anything about it.

It had him. Unconsciously, he'd taken a deep sniff of identification, and the stuff was so strong, so pure, that he didn't need a second. His lungs were filled with it.

And the floor seemed to his distorted vision to be a mile away, but coming up slowly to meet him. Slowly, but getting there. He seemed to hang suspended in the air for a measurable time. Then, before he landed, everything was mercifully black and blank.

## XII.

"Ether."

Charlie gawked at the white-uniformed doctor. "But how the d-devil could I have got a dose of ether?"

Pete was there, too, looking down at him over the doctor's shoulder. Pete's face was white and tense. Even before the doctor shrugged, Pete was saying: "Listen, Charlie, Doc Palmer is on his way over here. I told 'em—"

Charlie was sick at his stomach, very sick. The doctor who had said "Ether" wasn't there, and neither was Doc Palmer, but Pete now seemed to be arguing with a tall distinguished-looking gentleman who had a spade beard and eyes like a chicken hawk.

Pete was saying, "Let the poor guy alone. Dammit, I've known him all his life. He doesn't need an alienist. Sure he said screwy things while he was under, but doesn't anybody talk silly under ether?"

"But, my young friend"—and the tall man's voice was unctuous—"you quite misinterpret the hospital's motives in asking that I examine him. I wish to prove him sane. If possible. He may have had a legitimate reason for taking the ether. And also the affair of last week when he was here for the first time. Surely a normal man—"

"But dammit, he DIDN'T TAKE that ether himself. I saw him coming in the doorway after he got out of the cab. He walked naturally, and he had his hands down at his sides. Then, all of a sudden, he just keeled over."

"You suggest someone near him did it?"

"There wasn't anybody near him."

Charlie's eyes were closed but by the psychiatrist's tone of voice, he could tell that the man

was smiling. "Then how, my young friend, do you suggest that he was anesthetized?"

"Dammit, I don't know. I'm just saying he didn't—"

"Pete!" Charlie recognized his own voice and found that his eyes were open again. "Tell him to go to hell. Tell him to certify me if he wants. Sure I'm crazy. Tell him about the worm and the duck. Take me to the booby hatch. Tell him—"

"Ha." Again the voice with the spade beard. "You have had previous . . . ah . . . delusions?"

"Charlie, shut up! Doc, he's still under the influence of the ether; don't listen to him. It isn't fair to psych a guy when he doesn't know what he's talking about. For two cents, I'd—"

"Fair? My friend, psychiatry is not a game. I assure you that I have this young man's interests at heart. Perhaps his . . . ah . . . aberration is curable, and I wish to—"

Charlie sat up in bed. He yelled, "GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I—"

Things went black again.

The tortuous darkness, thick and smoky and sickening. And he seemed to be creeping through a narrow tunnel toward a light. Then suddenly he knew that he was conscious again. But maybe there was somebody around who would talk to him and ask him questions if he opened his eyes, so he kept them tightly shut.

He kept his eyes tightly shut, and thought.

There must be an answer.

There wasn't any answer.

An angelic angleworm.

Heat wave.

Duck in a showcase of coins.

Wilted wreath of ugly flowers.

Ether in a doorway.

Connect them; there *must* be a connection. It had to make sense. It had to **MAKE SENSE!**

Least common denominator. Something that connects them, that welds them into a coherent series, something that you can understand, something that you can maybe do something about. Something you can fight.

Worm.

Heat.

Duck.

Wreath.

Ether.

Worm.

Heat.

Duck.

Wreath.

Ether.

Worm, heat, duck, wreath, ether, worm, heat, duck, wreath—

They pounded through his head like beating on a tom-tom; they screamed at him out of the darkness, and gibbered.

### XIII.

He must have slept, if you could call it sleep.

It was broad daylight again, and there was only a nurse in the room. He asked, "What—day is it?"

"Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Wills. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Wednesday afternoon. Wedding day.

He wouldn't have to call it off now. Jane knew. Everybody knew. It had been called off for him. He'd been weak not to have done it himself, before—

"There are people waiting to see you, Mr. Wills. Do you feel well enough to entertain visitors?"

"I— Who?"

"A Miss Pemberton and her father. And a Mr. Johnson. Do you want to see them?"

Well, did he?

"Look," he said, "what exactly's wrong with me? I mean—"

"You've suffered a severe shock. But you've slept quietly for the last twelve hours. Physically, you are quite all right. Even able to get up, if you feel you want to. But, of course, you mustn't leave."

Of course he mustn't leave. They had him down as a candidate for the booby hatch. An excellent candidate. Young man most likely to succeed.

Wednesday. Wedding day.

Jane.

He couldn't bear to see—

"Listen," he said, "will you send in Mr. Pemberton, alone? I'd rather—"

"Certainly. Anything else I can do for you?"

Charlie shook his head sadly. He was feeling most horribly sorry for himself. Was there anything *anybody* could do for him?

Mr. Pemberton held out his hand quietly. "Charles, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am—"

Charlie nodded. "Thanks. I . . . I guess you understand why I don't want to see Jane. I realize that . . . that of course we can't—"

Mr. Pemberton nodded. "Jane . . . uh . . . understands, Charles. She wants to see you, but realizes that it might make both of you feel worse, at least right now. And Charles, if there's anything any of us can do—"

What was there anybody could do?

Pull the wings off an angleworm?

Take a duck out of a showcase?

Find a missing golf ball?

Pete came in after the Pembertons had gone away. A quieter and more subdued Pete than Charlie had ever seen.

He said, "Charlie, do you feel up to talking this over?"

Charlie sighed. "If it'd do any good, yes. I feel all right physically. But—"

"Listen, you've got to keep your chin up. There's



an answer somewhere. Listen, I was wrong. There is a connection, a tie-up between these screwy things that happened to you. There's got to be."

"Sure," said Charlie, wearily. "What?"

"That's what we've got to find out. First place, we'll have to outsmart the psychiatrists they'll sick on you. As soon as they think you're well enough to stand it. Now, let's look at it from their point of view so we'll know what to tell 'em. First—"

"How much do they know?"

"Well, you raved while you were unconscious, about the worm business and about a duck and a golf ball, but you can pass that off as ordinary raving. Talking in your sleep. Dreaming. Just deny knowing anything about them, or anything connected with any of them. Sure, the duck business was in the newspapers, but it wasn't a big story and your name wasn't in it. So they'll never tie that up. If they do, deny it. Now that leaves the two times you keeled over and were brought here unconscious."

Charlie nodded. "And what do they make of them?"

"They're puzzled. The first one they can't make anything much of. They're inclined to leave it lay. The second one— Well, they insist that you must, somehow, have given yourself that ether."

"But why? Why would anybody give himself ether?"

"No sane man would. That's just it; they doubt your sanity because they think you did. If you can convince them you're sane, then— Look, you got to buck up. They are classifying your attitude as acute melancholia, and that sort of borders on manic depressive. See? You got to act cheerful."

"Cheerful? When I was to be married at two o'clock today? By the way, what time is it now?"

Pete glanced at his wrist watch and said, "Uh . . . never mind that. Sure, if they ask why you feel lousy mentally, tell them—"

"Dammit, Peter, I wish I was crazy. At least, being crazy makes sense. And if this stuff keeps up, I will go—"

"Don't talk like that. You got to fight."

"Yeah," said Charlie, listlessly. "Fight what?"

There was a low rap on the door and the nurse looked into the room. "Your time is up, Mr. Johnson. You'll have to leave."

#### XIV.

Inaction, and the futility of circling thought-patterns that get nowhere. Finally, he had to do something or go mad.

Get dressed? He called for his clothes and got them, except that he was given slippers instead of his shoes. Anyway, getting dressed took up time.

And sitting in a chair was a change from lying in bed. And then walking up and down was a change from sitting in a chair.

"What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock, Mr. Wills."

Seven o'clock; he should have been married five hours by now.

Married to Jane; beautiful, gorgeous, sweet, loving, understanding, kissable, soft, lovable Jane Pemberton. Five hours ago this moment she should have become Jane Wills.

Nevermore.

Unless—

The problem.

Solve it.

Or go mad.

Why would a worm wear a halo?

"Dr. Palmer is here to see you, Mr. Wills. Shall I—"

"Hello, Charles. Came as soon as I could after I learned you were out of your . . . uh . . . coma. Had an o. b. case that kept me. How do you feel?"

He felt terrible.

Ready to scream and tear the paper off the wall only the wall was painted white and didn't have any paper. And scream, scream—

"I feel swell, doc," said Charlie.

"Anything . . . uh . . . strange happen to you since you've been here?"

"Not a thing. But, doc, how would you explain—"

Doc Palmer explained. Doctors always explain. The air crackled with words like psychoneurotic and autohypothesis and traumata.

Finally, Charlie was alone again. He'd managed to say good-by to Doc Palmer, too, without yelling and tearing him to bits.

"What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

Six hours married.

Why is a duck?

Solve it.

Or go mad.

What would happen next? "Surely this thing shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the bughouse forever."

Eight o'clock.

Six hours married.

Why a lei? Ether? Heat?

What have they in common? And why is a duck?

And what would it be *next time*? When would next time be? Well, maybe he could guess that. How many things had happened to him thus far? Five—if the missing golf ball counted. How far apart? Let's see—the angleworm was Sunday morning when he went fishing; the heat prostration was Tuesday; the duck in the museum was Thursday noon, the second-last day he worked;

the golf game and the lei was Saturday; the ether Monday—

*Two days apart.*

Periodicity?

He'd been pacing up and down the room, now suddenly he felt in his pocket and found pencil and a notebook, and sat down in the chair.

Could it be—*exact* periodicity?

He wrote down "Angleworm" and stopped to think. Pete was to call for him to go fishing at

and he'd left at . . . uh . . . eleven twenty-five and if it took him, say, ten minutes to walk the block to the museum and down the main corridor and into the numismatics room— Say, eleven thirty-five.

He subtracted that from the previous one.

And whistled.

*Two days, three hours, ten minutes.*

The lei? Um, they'd left the clubhouse about one-thirty. Allow an hour and a quarter, say, for the first thirteen holes, and— Well, say between two-thirty and three. Strike an average at two



five-fifteen and he'd gone downstairs at just that time, and right to the flower bed to dig— Yes, five-fifteen a. m. He wrote it down.

"Heat." Hm-m-m, he'd been a block from work and was due there at eight-thirty, and when he'd passed the corner clock he'd looked and seen that he had five minutes to get there, and then had seen the teamster and— He wrote it down. "Eight twenty-five." And calculated.

*Two days, three hours, ten minutes.*

Let's see, which was next? The duck in the museum. He could time that fairly well, too. Old Man Hapworth had told him to go to lunch early,

forty-five. That would be pretty close. Subtract it.

*Two days, three hours, ten minutes.*

Periodicity.

He subtracted the next one first—the fourth episode should have happened at five fifty-five on Monday. If—

Yes, it had been *exactly* five minutes of six when he'd walked through the door of the jewelry shop and been anesthetized.

Exactly.

*Two days, three hours, ten minutes.*

Periodicity.

## PERIODICITY.

A connection, at last. Proof that the screw events were all of a piece. Every . . . uh . . . fifty-one hours and ten minutes *something screwy happened*.

But why?

He stuck his head out in the hallway.

"Nurse. NURSE. What time is it?"

"Half past eight, Mr. Wills. Anything I can bring you?"

Yes. No. Champagne. Or a strait jacket. Which?

He'd solved the problem. But the answer didn't make any more sense than the problem itself. Less, maybe. And today—

He figured quickly.

*In thirty-five minutes.*

Something would happen to him in thirty-five minutes!

Something like a flying angleworm or like a quacking duck suffocating in an air-tight showcase, or—

Or maybe something *dangerous* again? Burning heat, sudden anesthesia—

Maybe something worse?

A cobra, unicorn, devil, werewolf, vampire, unnameable monster?

At nine-five. In half an hour.

In a sudden draft from the open window, his forehead felt cold. Because it was wet with sweat.

In half an hour.

What?

## XV.

Face up and down, four steps one way, four steps back.

Think, think, THINK.

You've solved part of it; what's the rest? Get it, or it will get you.

Periodicity; that's part of it. Every two days, three hours, ten minutes—

Something happens.

Why?

What?

How?

They're connected, those things, they are part of a pattern and they make sense somehow or they wouldn't be spaced an exact interval of time apart.

Connect: angleworm, heat, duck, lei, ether—

Or go mad.

Mad. Mad. MAD.

Connect: Ducks eat angleworms, or do they? Heat is necessary to grow flowers to make leis. Angleworms might eat flowers for all he knew, but what have they to do with leis, and what is ether to a duck? Duck is animal, lei is vegetable, heat is vibration, ether is gas, worm is . . . what the hell is a worm? And why a worm that flies? Why was the duck in the showcase? What about

the missing Chinese coin with the hole? Do you add or subtract the golf ball, and if you let  $x$  equal a halo and  $y$  equal one wing, then  $x$  plus  $2y$  plus 1 angleworm equals—

Outside, somewhere, a clock striking in the gathering darkness.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—

Nine o'clock.

Five minutes to go.

In five minutes, something was going to happen again.

Cobra, unicorn, devil, werewolf, vampire. Or something cold and slimy and without a name.

Anything.

Face up and down, four steps one way, four steps back.

Think, THINK.

Jane forever lost. Dearest Jane, in whose arms was all of happiness. Jane, darling, I'm not mad, I'm WORSE than mad. I'm—

WHAT TIME IS IT?

It must be two minutes after nine. Three.

What's coming? Cobra, devil, werewolf—

What will it be this time?

At five minutes after nine—WHAT?

Must be four after now; yes, it had been at least four minutes, maybe four and a half—

He yelled, suddenly. He couldn't stand the waiting.

It couldn't be solved. But he had to solve it.

Or go mad.

MAD.

He must be mad already. Mad to tolerate living, trying to fight something you couldn't fight, trying to beat the unbeatable. Beating his head against—

He was running now, out the door, down the corridor.

Maybe if he hurried, he could kill himself before five minutes after nine. He'd never have to know. Die, DIE AND GET IT OVER WITH. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY TO BUCK THIS GAME.

Knife.

There'd be a knife somewhere. A scalpel is a knife.

Down the corridor. Voice of a nurse behind him, shouting. Footsteps.

Run. Where? Anywhere.

Less than a minute left. Maybe seconds.

Maybe it's nine-five now. Hurry!

Door marked "Utility"—he jerked it open.

Shelves of linen. Mops and brooms. You can't kill yourself with a mop or broom. You can smother yourself with linen, but not in less than a minute and probably with doctors and interns coming.

Uniforms. Bucket. Kick the bucket, but *how*?

Ah. There on the upper shelf—

A cardboard carton, already opened, marked "Lye."

Painful? Sure, but it wouldn't last long. Get it over with. The box in his hand, the opened corner, and tilted the contents into his mouth.

But it was not a white, searing powder. All that had come out of the cardboard carton was a small copper coin. He took it out of his mouth and held it, and looked at it with dazed eyes.

It was five minutes after nine, then; out of the box of lye had come a small foreign copper coin. No, it wasn't the Chinese haikwan tael that had disappeared from the showcase in the museum, because that was silver and had a hole in it. And the lettering on this wasn't Chinese. If he remembered his coins, it looked Rumanian.

And then strong hands took hold of Charlie's arms and led him back to his room and somebody talked to him quietly for a long time.

And he slept.

## XVI.

He awoke Thursday morning from a dreamless sleep, and felt strangely refreshed and, oddly, quite cheerful.

Probably because, in that awful thirty-five minutes of waiting he'd experienced the evening before, he'd hit rock bottom. And bounced.

A psychiatrist might have explained it by saying that he had, under stress of great emotion, suffered a temporary lesion and gone into a quasi-state of maniac-depressive insanity. Psychiatrists like to make simple things complicated.

The fact was that the poor guy had gone off his rocker for a few minutes.

And the absurd anticlimax of that small copper coin had been the turning point. Look for something horrible, unnameable—and get a small copper coin. Practically a prophylactic treatment, if you've got enough stuff in you to laugh.

And Charlie had laughed last night. Probably that was why his room this morning seemed to be a different room. The window was in a different wall, and it had bars across it. Psychiatrists often misinterpret a sense of humor.

But this morning he felt cheerful enough to overlook the implications of the barred windows. Here it was a bright new day with the sun streaming through the bars, and it was *another* day and he was still alive and had another chance.

Best of all, he knew he wasn't insane.

Unless—

He looked and there were his clothes hanging over the back of a chair and he sat up and put his legs out of bed, and reached for his coat pocket to see if the coin was still where he'd put it when they'd grabbed him.

It was.

Then—

He dressed slowly, thoughtfully.

Now, in the light of morning, it came to him that the thing could be solved. Six—now there were six—screwy things, but they were definitely connected. Periodicity proved it.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

And whatever the answer was, it was not malevolent. It was impersonal. If it had wanted to kill him, it had a chance last night; it need merely have affected something else other than the lye in that package. There'd *been* lye in the package when he'd picked it up; he could tell that by the weight. And then it had been five minutes after nine and instead of lye there'd been the small copper coin.

It wasn't friendly, either; or it wouldn't have subjected him to heat and anesthesia. But it must be something impersonal.

A coin instead of lye.

Were they all substitutions of one thing for another?

Hm-m-m. Lei for a golf ball. A coin for lye. A duck for a coin. But the heat? The ether? The angleworm?

He went to the window and looked out for a while into the warm sunlight falling on the green lawn, and he realized that life was very sweet. And that if he took this thing calmly and didn't let it get him down again, he might yet lick it.

The first clue was already his.

Periodicity.

Take it calmly; think about other things. Keep your mind off the merry-go-round and maybe the answer will come.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and felt in his pocket for the pencil and notebook and they were still there, and the paper on which he'd made his calculations of timing. He studied those calculations carefully.

Calmly.

And at the end of the list he put down "9:05" and added the word "lye" and a dash. Lye had turned to—what? He drew a bracket and began to fill in words that could be used to describe the coin: coin—copper—disk— But those were general. There must be a specific name for the thing.

Maybe—

He pressed the button that would light a bulb outside his door and a moment later heard a key turn in the lock and the door opened. It was a male attendant this time.

Charlie smiled at him. "Morning," he said, "Serve breakfast here, or do I eat the mattress?"

The attendant grinned, and looked a bit relieved. "Sure. Breakfast's ready; I'll bring you some."

"And . . . uh—"

"Yes?"

"There's something I want to look up," Charlie told him. "Would there be an unabridged dictionary anywhere handy? And if there is, would

it be asking too much for you to let me see it a few minutes?"

"Why—I guess it will be all right. There's one down in the office and they don't use it very often."

"That's swell. Thanks."

But the key still turned in the lock when he left.

Breakfast came half an hour later, but the dictionary didn't arrive until the middle of the morning. Charlie wondered if there had been a staff meeting to discuss its lethal possibilities. But anyway, it came.

He waited until the attendant had left and then put the big volume on the bed and opened it to the color plate that showed coins of the world. He took the copper coin out of his pocket and put it alongside the plate and began to compare it with the illustrations, particularly those of coins of the Balkan countries. No, nothing just like it among the copper coins. Try the silver—yes, there was a silver coin with the same mug on it. Rumanian. The lettering—yes, it was identically the same lettering except for the denomination.

Charlie turned to the coinage table. Under Rumania—

He gasped.

It couldn't be.

But it was.

It was impossible that the six things that had happened to him could have been—

He was breathing hard with excitement as he turned to the illustrations at the back of the dictionary, found the pages of birds, and began to look among the ducks. Speckled breast and short neck and darker stripe starting just above the eye—

And he knew he'd found the answer.

He'd found the factor, besides periodicity, that connected the things that had happened. If it fitted the others, he could be sure. The angleworm? Why—sure—and he grinned at that one. The heat wave? Obvious. And the affair on the golf course? That was harder, but a bit of thought gave it to him.

The matter of the ether stumped him for a while. It took a lot of pacing up and down to solve that one, but finally he managed to do it.

And then? Well, what could he do about it?

Periodicity? Yes, that fitted in. If—

Next time would be—hm-m-m—12:15 Saturday morning.

He sat down to think it over. The whole thing was completely incredible. The answer was harder to swallow than the problem.

But—they all fitted. Six coincidences, spaced an exact length of time apart?

All right then, forget how incredible it is, and what are you going to do about it? How are you going to get there to let them know?

UNK—SM

Well—maybe take advantage of the phenomenon itself?

The dictionary was still there and Charlie went back to it and began to look in the gazeteer. Under "H—"

*Whew!* There was one that gave him a *double* chance. And within a hundred miles.

If he could get out of here—

He rang the bell, and the attendant came. "Through with the dictionary," Charlie told him. "And listen, could I talk to the doctor in charge of my case?"

It proved that the doctor in charge was still Doc Palmer, and that he was coming up anyway.

He shook hands with Charlie and smiled at him. That was a good sign, or was it?

Well, now if he could lie convincingly enough—

"Doc, I feel swell this morning," said Charlie. "And listen—I remembered something I want to tell you about. Something that happened to me Sunday, couple of days before that first time I was taken to the hospital."

"What was it, Charles?"

"I *did* go swimming, and that accounts for the sunburn that was showing up on Tuesday morning, and maybe for some other things. I'd borrowed Pete Johnson's car—" Would they check up on that? Maybe not. "—and I got lost off the road and found a swell pool and stripped and went in. And I remember now that I dived off the bank and I think I must have grazed my head on a rock because the next thing I remember I was back in town."

"Hm-m-m," said Doc Palmer. "So *that* accounts for the sunburn, and maybe it can account for—"

"Funny that it just came back to me this morning when I woke up," said Charlie. "I guess—"

"I told those fools," said Doc Palmer, "that there couldn't be any connection between the third-degree burn and your fainting. Of course there was, in a way. I mean your hitting your head while you were swimming would account—Charles, I'm sure glad this came back to you. At least we now know the cause of the way you've acted, and we can treat it. In fact, maybe you're cured already."

"I think so, doc. I sure feel swell now. Like I was just waking up from a nightmare. I guess I made a fool of myself a couple of times. I have a vague recollection of buying some ether once, and something about some lye—but those are like things that happened in a dream, and now my mind's as clear as a bell. Something seemed to pop this morning, and I was all right again."

Doc Palmer sighed. "I'm relieved, Charles. Frankly, you had us quite worried. Of course, I'll have to talk this over with the staff and we'll have to examine you pretty thoroughly, but I think—"

There were the other doctors, and they asked questions and they examined his skull—but whatever lesion had been made by the rock seemed to have healed. Anyway, they couldn't find it.

If it hadn't been for his suicide attempt of the evening before, he could have walked out of the hospital then and there. But because of that, they insisted on his remaining under observation for twenty-four hours. And Charlie agreed; that would let him out some time Friday afternoon, and it wasn't until twelve-fifteen Saturday morning that it would happen.

Plenty of time to go a hundred miles.

If he just watched everything he did and said in the meantime and made no move or remark which a psychiatrist could interpret—

He loafed and rested.

And at five o'clock Friday afternoon it was all right, and he shook hands all the way round, and was a free man again. He'd promised to report to Doc Palmer regularly for a few weeks.

But he was free.

## XVII.

Rain and darkness.

A cold, unpleasant drizzle that started to find its way through his clothes and down the back of his neck and into his shoes even as he stepped off the train onto the small wooden platform.

But the station was there, and on the side of it was the sign that told him the name of the town. Charlie looked at it and grinned, and went into the station. There was a cheerful little coal stove in the middle of the room. He had time to get warmed up before he started. He held out his hands to the stove.

Over at one side of the room, a grizzled head regarded him curiously through the ticket window. Charlie nodded at the head and the head nodded back.

"Stayin' here a while, stranger?" the head asked.

"Not exactly," said Charlie. "Anyway, I hope not. I mean—" Heck, after that whopper he'd told the psychiatrists back at the hospital, he shouldn't have any trouble lying to a ticket agent in a little country town. "I mean, I don't think so."

"Ain't no more trains out tonight, mister. Got a place to stay? If not, my wife sometimes takes in boarders for short spells."

"Thanks," said Charlie. "I've made arrangements." He started to add "I hope" and then realized that it would lead him further into discussion.

He glanced at the clock and at his wrist watch and saw that both agreed that it was a quarter to twelve.

"How big is this town?" he asked. "I don't mean population. I mean, how far out the turn-

pike is it to the township line? The border of town."

"Tain't big. Half a mile maybe, or a little better. You goin' out to th' Tollivers, maybe? They live just past and I heard tell he was sendin' to th' city for a . . . nope, you don't look like a hired man."

"Nope," said Charlie. "I'm not." He glanced at the clock again and started for the door. He said, "Well, be seeing you."

"You goin' to—"

But Charlie had already gone out the door and was starting down the street behind the railroad station. Into the darkness and the unknown and—Well, he could hardly tell the agent about his real destination, could he?

There was the turnpike. After a block, the sidewalk ended and he had to walk along the edge of the road, sometimes ankle deep in mud. He was soaked through by now, but that didn't matter.

It proved to be more than half a mile to the township line. A big sign there—an oddly big sign considering the size of the town—read:

## You Are Now Entering Haveen

Charlie crossed the line and faced back. And waited, an eye on his wrist watch.

At twelve-fifteen he'd have to step across. It was ten minutes after already. Two days, three hours, ten minutes after the box of lye had held a copper coin, which was two days, three hours, ten minutes after he'd walked into anesthesia in the door of a jewelry store, which was two days, three hours, ten minutes after—

He watched the hands of his accurately set wrist watch, first the minute hand until twelve-fourteen. Then the second hand.

And when it lacked a second of twelve-fifteen he put forth his foot and at the fatal moment he was stepping slowly across the line.

Entering Haveen.

## XVIII.

And as with each of the others, there was no warning. But suddenly:

It wasn't raining any more. There was bright light, although it didn't seem to come from a visible source. And the road beneath his feet wasn't muddy; it was smooth as glass and alabaster-white. The white-robed entity at the gate ahead stared at Charlie in astonishment.

He said: "How did you get here? You aren't even—"

"No," said Charlie. "I'm not even dead. But listen, I've got to see the . . . uh— Who's in charge of the printing?"

"The Head Compositor, of course. But you can't—"

"I've got to see him, then," said Charlie.

"But the rules forbid—"

"Look, it's important. Some *typographical errors* are going through. It's to your interests up here as well as to mine, that they be corrected, isn't it? Otherwise things can get into an awful mess."

"Errors? Impossible. You're joking."

"Then how," asked Charlie, reasonably, "did I get to Heaven without dying?"

"But—"

"You see I was supposed to be entering Haveen. There is an e-matrix that—"

"Come."

### XIX.

It was quite pleasant and familiar, that office. Not a lot different from Charlie's own office at the Hapworth Printing Co. There was a rickety wooden desk, littered with papers, and behind it sat a small bald-headed Chief Compositor with printer's ink on his hands and a smear of it on his forehead. Past the closed door was a monster roar and clatter of typesetting machines and presses.

"Sure," said Charlie. "They're supposed to be perfect, so perfect that you don't even need proof-readers. But maybe once out of infinity something can happen to perfection, can't it? Mathematically, once out of infinity *anything* can happen. Now look; there is a separate typesetting machine and operator for the records covering each person, isn't there?"

The Head Compositor nodded. "Correct, although in a manner of speaking the operator and the machine are one, in that the operator is a function of the machine and the machine a manifestation of the operator and both are extensions of the ego of the . . . but I guess that is a little too complicated for you to understand."

"Yes, I—well, anyway, the channels that the matrices run in must be tremendous. On our Linotypes at the Hapworth Printing Co., an e-mat would make the circuit every sixty seconds or so, and if one was defective it would cause one mistake a minute, but up here— Well, is my calculation of fifty hours and ten minutes correct?"

"It is," agreed the Head Compositor. "And since there is no way you could have found out that fact except—"

"Exactly. And once every that often the defective e-matrix comes round and falls when the operator hits the e-key. Probably the ears of the mat are worn; anyway it falls through a long dis-

tributor front and falls too fast and lands ahead of its right place in the word, and a typographical error goes through. Like a week ago Sunday, I was supposed to pick up an *angelworm*, and—"

"Wait."

The Head Compositor pressed a buzzer and issued an order. A moment later, a heavy book was brought in and placed on his desk. Before the Head Compositor opened it, Charlie caught a glimpse of his own name on the cover.

"You said at five-fifteen a. m.?"

Charlie nodded. Pages turned.

"I'll be—blessed!" said the Head Compositor. "*Angleworm!* It must have been something to see. Don't know I've ever heard of an *angelworm* before. And what was next?"

"The e fell wrong in the word 'hate'—I was going after a man who was beating a horse, and— Well, it came out 'heat' instead of 'hate.' The e dropped two characters early that time. And I got heat prostration and sunburn on a rainy day. That was eight twenty-five Tuesday, and then at eleven thirty-five Thursday—" Charlie grinned.

"Yes?" prompted the Head Compositor.

"Tael. A Chinese silver coin I was supposed to see in the museum. It came out 'teal' and because a teal is a duck, there was a wild duck fluttering around in an air-tight showcase. One of the attendants got in trouble; I hope you'll fix that."

The Head Compositor chuckled. "I shall," he said. "I'd like to have seen that duck. And the next time would have been two forty-five Saturday afternoon. What happened then?"

"Lei instead of lie, sir. My golf ball was stymied behind a tree and it was supposed to be a poor lie—but it was a poor lei instead. Some wilted, mismatched flowers on a purple cord. And the next was the hardest for me to figure out, even when I had the key. I had an appointment at the jewelry store at five fifty-five. But that was the fatal time. I got there at five fifty-five, but the e-matrix fell four characters out of place that time, clear back to the start of the word. Instead of getting *there* at five fifty-five, I got *ether*."

"Tch, tch. That one was unfortunate. And next?"

"The next was just the reverse, sir. In fact, it happened to save my life. I went temporarily insane and tried to kill myself by taking lye. But the bad e fell in lye and it came out *ley*, which is a small Rumanian copper coin. I've still got it,

for a souvenir. In fact when I found out the name of the coin, I guessed the answer. It gave me the key to the others."

The Head Compositor chuckled again. "You've shown great resource," he said. "And your method of getting here to tell us about it—"

"That was easy, sir. If I timed it so I'd be entering Haven at the right instant, I had a double chance. If either of the two e's in that word turned out to be the bad one and fell—as it did—too early in the word, I'd be entering Heaven."

"Decidedly ingenious. You may, incidentally, consider the errors corrected. We've taken care of all of them, while you talked; except the last one, of course. Otherwise, you wouldn't still be here. And the defective mat is removed from the channel."

"You mean that as far as people down there know, none of those things ever—"

"Exactly. A revised edition is now on the press, and nobody on Earth will have any recollection of any of those events. In a way of speaking, they no longer ever happened. I mean, they did, but now they didn't for all practical purposes. When we return you to Earth, you'll find the status there just what it would have been if the typographical errors had not occurred."

"You mean, for instance, that Pete Johnson won't remember my having told him about the angelworm, and there won't be any record at the hospital about my having been there? And—"

"Exactly. The errors are *corrected*."

"*Whew!*" said Charlie. "I'll be . . . I mean, well, I was supposed to have been married Wednesday afternoon, two days ago. Uh . . . will I be? I mean, was I? I mean—"

The Head Compositor consulted another volume, and nodded. "Yes, at two o'clock Wednesday afternoon. To one Jane Pemberton. Now if we return you to Earth as of the time you left there—twelve-fifteen Saturday morning, you'll have been married two days and ten hours. You'll find yourself . . . let's see . . . spending your honeymoon

in Miami. At that exact moment, you'll be in a taxicab en route—"

"Yes, but—" Charlie gulped.

"But what?" The Head Compositor looked surprised. "I certainly thought that was what you wanted, Wills. We owe you a big favor for having used such ingenuity in calling those typographical errors to our attention, but I thought that being married to Jane was what you wanted, and if you go back and find yourself—"

"Yes, but—" said Charlie again. "But . . . I mean— Look, I'll have been married two days. I'll miss . . . I mean, couldn't I—"

Suddenly the Head Compositor smiled.

"How stupid of me," he said, "of course. Well, the time doesn't matter at all. We can drop you anywhere in the continuum. I can just as easily return you as of two o'clock Wednesday afternoon, at the moment of the ceremony. Or Wednesday morning, just before. Any time at all."

"Well," said Charlie, hesitantly. "It isn't exactly that I'd miss the wedding ceremony. I mean, I don't like receptions and things like that, and I'd have to sit through a long wedding dinner and listen to toasts and speeches and, well, I'd as soon have that part of it over with and . . . well, I mean, I—"

The Head Compositor laughed. He said, "Are you ready?"

"Am I— Sure!"

Click of train wheels over the rails, and the stars and moon bright above the observation platform of the speeding train.

Jane in his arms. His wife, and it was Wednesday evening. Beautiful, gorgeous, sweet, loving, soft, kissable, lovable Jane—

She snuggled closer to him, and he was whispering, "It's . . . it's eleven o'clock, darling. Shall we—"

Their lips met, clung. Then, hand in hand, they walked through the swaying train. His hand turned the knob of the stateroom door and, as it swung slowly open, he picked her up to carry her across the threshold.

THE END.