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All Stories Complete



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The CAT-SNAKE

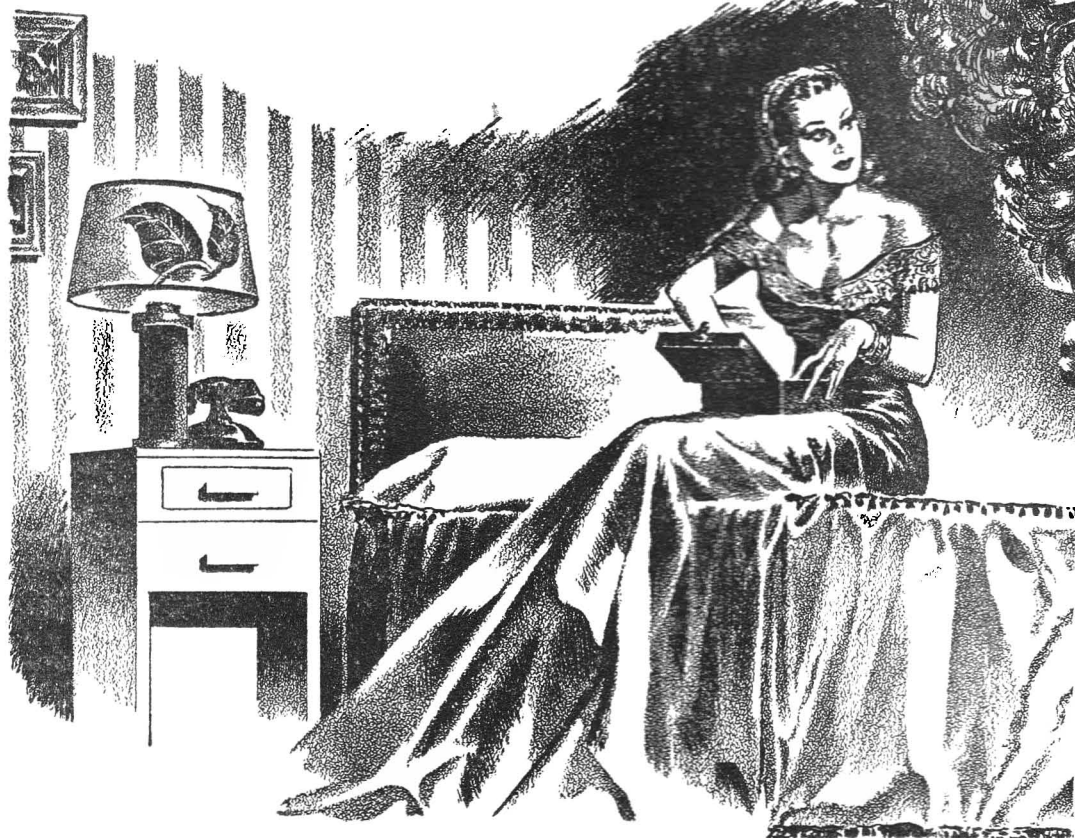
by FRANCES M. DEEGAN

Isabel couldn't be blamed for her pets—for she was a part of them . . .

MY FRIEND, George Bendler, broke his leg . . .
I don't know how else to start. I've been sitting here trying to think of an opening sentence that would convey some hint of the events that were to follow. I can't think of any, because actually there was no hint. Dr. Devore told me to sit down and write it in my own words, so . . .

My friend, George Bendler, broke his leg.

He called me on the evening of Wednesday, March 19th. I was puttering at my book on "The Idiosyncrasies of Time" and welcomed the interruption.



The smoke was increasing rapidly in volume, and I staggered back aghast at the horrendous sight before me . . .



Sharp

He said, "Harry, I broke my leg."

I said, "Fine! I'll be right over. What kind of liquor do you want me to bring? I haven't sat up with a sick friend since last Saturday."

"Listen, you clown!" George said. "I'm suffering. I'm laid up for days—maybe for weeks. You've got to meet a train. It's Isabel. She just won a scholarship at the Club Frivole for being the best acrobatic dancer in Suter-ville. You'll have to take care of her. She's awfully shy, and I'm—"

"You're shy, too, chum," I said. "A couple, three screws. What started you on this binge?"

"Binge be damned!" George croaked. "I'm lying here all plastered up with a trained nurse. I'm going to sleep in five minutes."

Sure enough I could hear some woman yammering.

"Don't be silly," I said. "This is no time to go to sleep."

"I have to! She said so," George yelled. "She gave me a shot, and she's getting mad. She—"

"Mr. Crown?" said a harsh female voice. "This is Mrs. Feeny. I can't let George talk to you if you're going to upset him like this. He is still suffering from shock and possible concussion. He fell down a flight of concrete stairs this afternoon, and his leg has just been put into a cast. In his present condition any excitement will be extremely harmful."

"Oh," I said. "Oh. Well that's different. What's he trying to say?"

"If you'll promise not to antagonize him," she grated, "I'll let him tell you."

"Well, okay," I said. "But I can't help it if he doesn't make sense."

"Hello," said George hollowly.

"You have my sympathy, friend," I said. "They must have been fresh out of glamour girls when they sent for her."

"NEVER mind that," George muttered. "It's Isabel I'm worried about. She gets in at 9:10 tomorrow morning and she's never been in Chicago before. She'll be scared."

"Who is this timid belle?" I asked. "And how did she get mixed up with a hot spot like the Frivole? If you know what we're talking about?"

"I'm just as surprised as you are," said George senselessly. I wasn't surprised yet. I was still floundering around trying to cope with his sick mind. "Isabel is my kid sister—step-sister. I haven't seen her for ten years, but she was always a queer little kid. Awfully shy and—not backward, but different some way."

"Okay," I said patiently. "And she pops off a train at 9:10 tomorrow morning, and you want me to meet her. Where do you want me to put her?"

"They got a suite for her at the Blake Hotel," George mumbled. "But you'll have to stay with her, Harry. People scare her to death, especially strangers."

"I'm people," I said reasonably. "Likewise a stranger. How do you think she'll react when I try to snare her at the station and bear her off to a mysterious suite at the Blake?"

"She'll be all right with you, Harry, because you're a friend of mine. Take good care of her . . ."

"That's all," said a husky whisper. "The poor boy is dozing off now."

I said, "Listen! If this is a gag—"

"Sh-h. We mustn't disturb him. You heard what he said. You're to meet his little sister tomorrow morning and take her to the Blake Hotel. Goodnight, Mr. Crown."

I had a drink. Then I had another drink. I wondered what had made George fall downstairs when he was supposed to meet his little sister Isabel.

I called the Blake, and there was a

reservation for a Miss Isabel Bendler who was arriving at 9:10 A.M. at Union Station.

I called the Club Frivole and talked to Martin Berne, the manager, and there was a feature spot in the show for a Miss Isabel Bendler, to be billed as Nila, Descendant of Egyptian Kings.

I hung up and thought about it, and had a bright idea.

It was entirely possible that in ten years a kid sister who was neither backward nor forward might develop into something interesting. Otherwise how would she rate a feature spot at the Club Frivole—as an Egyptian princess, at that?

I WAS up bright and early on Thursday morning. I arrived at Union Station with plenty of time to spare, the train from Suterville was on schedule, and the passengers duly de-trained and went on their individual ways. Nobody lingered, male or female, looking as if he or she expected to be met. I chased a conductor who was in a hurry, and asked him about the Bendler belle from Suterville.

He started to get out his list of passengers, and then stopped and looked at me. "Oh," he said. "You mean the snake woman. She's back in the baggage car. You better go and get her."

Fortunately I had gone temperately to bed the night before. The thought of snakes didn't terrify me much. I went back to the baggage car.

She was up on a baggage truck, sitting on top of a big box. She looked wild. She looked like something out of the deep woods that had wandered into town by mistake. And not only that. There was a big red setter in the open door of the baggage car. An elderly man had him on a leash, and he was hanging on for dear life. The man was mad, but his dog was furious, he

was in the last stages of hysterical fury, and his bark was thin and cracked like a worn-out record. His frenzied paws kept trying to launch him at the baggage truck.

A baggage man was waving his arms and yelling, "You'll just have to wait a minute, Mister! We'll bring up another truck—"

"This dog is ruined!" the man roared. "I've got to get him to a hospital immediately. You've destroyed a champion, do you hear? I'll sue the road! I'll—"

"Let's go," said the baggage man wearily. He signalled to an assistant, who began to haul the half-filled baggage truck toward the station.

"Out of the way, there, you!" the baggage man barked at me. "Hey! Get off there, you fool!" He started running after the truck as I vaulted up.

"Shut up!" I yelled back. "I'm in charge of this—"

The man in the baggage car was still roaring, and his dog was still barking. A station policeman and several other people were coming toward us to investigate the uproar.

I waved my arm at the policeman, and said, "Little trouble back there, officer. You better see about it."

The baggage assistant was walking backwards, so he could see what went on. I said, "Turn around there, Charlie, and let's get this thing rolling." I held up my wallet and let him see me take out a bill. He turned around and got rolling.

Isabel looked at me with wild green eyes. She had dun color hair pulled back in a knot, and she was dressed like a dummy in a second hand store. A brown skirt that came well below her knees, even when sitting down, a shapeless brown coat, a mannish felt hat, and ground-gripper oxfords.

I said, "I'm Harry Crown, Isabel.

George had an accident yesterday. He broke his leg. He sent me down to get you."

She just looked at me with those fixed green eyes.

"I'm a friend of George's," I said. "He told me to take care of you."

Nothing happened. Not a flicker of expression. Not a sound out of her. It wasn't irritating, it was eerie. I decided to ignore her. I turned my back and watched where the truck was going.

We got her through the baggage room all right. The baggage check was attached to the big box, not to her, and the box had to go along with us. She made that plain without saying anything.

I DON'T know how she got down off the truck. I wasn't watching. All at once she was standing beside the truck and the assistant baggage smasher had a queer look on his face.

She pulled the stub of the baggage check out of her pocket and put it down on the edge of the truck. He picked it up and handed it to the man behind the counter, and wrestled the box off the truck. I slipped him a dollar. He didn't thank me. He looked dazed.

A cab driver helped me move the box out to his cab, and Isabel went right along with the box. The top of it was fastened with a padlock, and there were small holes drilled here and there in the sides. After a while I began to notice a funny smell in the cab. It was a musty, unfamiliar odor, and although it was not very strong, I decided that it was definitely unpleasant. I told the driver to go around to the service entrance of the Blake.

The suite was nice. Sitting room, bedroom and bath, facing the lake. It was furnished with conservative taste, nothing modernistic. The large sitting

room had a real fireplace with a small fire burning cozily. There were flowers, roses and tulips, attractively arranged in both rooms.

The lake was gunmetal gray with small whitecaps marching in to batter the ice-sheathed shore. There was nothing else to see, just an unlimited expanse of gray water blurring into a gray sky somewhere in the distance.

Isabel stood at a sitting room window looking at it for a long time. The box was beside her. I sat near the fire and smoked and waited, and wondered. I didn't time her, but she must have stood there without moving for at least thirty minutes.

I said, "Isabel. Take off your hat and coat and sit down. Are you hungry?"

She didn't move.

I said, "If you want to be alone, just say so. But you don't have to be afraid of me."

She turned around then and came toward me, and for the first time I was struck with her rippling grace, a continuous flow of movement that was completely out of place under those dowdy clothes.

She paused in the middle of the room, and stared at me glassy-eyed. She lifted her head a little and her nostrils quivered. I didn't move. She looked like she was ready to scamper up the curtains if I so much as lifted a hand.

I thought, this is ridiculous! George ought to be horsewhipped for letting her come here. George, and whoever booked her into the Club Frivole.

My next thought brought a rush of sympathy for her. The owner of the Frivole was a smart operator. Denny Kean had never been known to buy a pig in a poke. He must have been fully aware of what he was doing when he signed Isabel up for a feature spot, so there was only one answer. Comedy.

They were going to shove the poor kid out on the floor under the merciless lights, and let her flutter around and break her heart—for laughs!

She must have recognized the sympathy in my face. Her lids drooped until her eyes were sleepy slits, and her wariness relaxed. When she spoke, her light voice had a faint humming vibration.

She said, "Will you stay with me?"

"Yes, sure," I said carefully. "I'll stay as long as you need me."

She inclined her head gently, and was gone with that undulating rhythm that was totally incongruous in those clothes.

I THOUGHT she had gone into the bedroom to hang up her hat and coat, and I congratulated myself on my tactful handling of the situation. She was gone quite a while, and in the meantime the porter called from downstairs, and said he had Miss Bendler's baggage.

It was the first time I had thought of it, and I asked him where he had got it. It seemed her things had been checked at Suterville, and the claim stubs mailed to the hotel. Whoever had shipped Isabel and her baggage had known better than to let her handle it herself. It made me madder than ever. It made the whole thing look like a dirty put-up job, and I decided to do something about it. My decision was considerably reinforced when I put down the phone and turned around.

She had come back into the room and stood there watching me with those eyes. She had let down her long hair, and was wearing nothing but a bath towel.

I don't remember what I did—gaspd, probably. Anyway it frightened her and she started running, in the wrong direction. She was headed for

the hall door, and I had no choice. I tackled her and brought her down with only inches to spare.

She snarled and writhed and clawed until I clipped her on the ear. Then she tried to bite, and I had to get rough. I knew a bellhop would be up any minute with her luggage. It was no time to be gentle. I got a grip on both arms and yanked her to her feet. She wailed like a lost banshee, and I shoved her into the bedroom and slammed and locked the door. She could turn the bolt on her side too, but I wasn't worried about that at the moment.

I was shaking and sweating and having cold chills all at the same time. I tried to light a cigarette, and my hands jerked so violently I couldn't connect the match with the cigarette. I thought suddenly of the hall door in the bedroom, and then realized it must still be locked.

The bellhop knocked and came in loaded down with an assortment of battered bags. He marched straight across to the bedroom.

"Here! I snapped. "Just put them down."

He dropped them in a heap in front of the bedroom door and went out fast, snagging a dollar bill as he passed me. I realized then that I must look a little unnatural. I did. I glanced into the mirror above the fireplace and saw a frenzied individual with his hair on end and his face scratched from ear to ear.

I went over and locked the hall door and came back to the fire. I wanted to bathe my bleeding face, but I sat down to calm myself before attempting to invade the bedroom in order to reach the sanctuary of the bath. The cushion behind me squirmed and began to slither up toward my neck. I yelled and leaped, and nearly fell into the fireplace.

The reptile slid smoothly up the back of the chair and draped itself there. The

head lifted and it stared at me with obsidian eyes and stuck out its forked tongue. I thought of snake bite and tottered over to the phone. The operator said, "Oper-ator?" and I dropped the phone. I couldn't have a drink brought up with a snake charging around loose.

I looked across the room at the box, and twitched with fright. There was another one pouring itself over the side from under the lid. She had taken the padlock off when I wasn't looking. The situation required immediate action. I stamped to the bedroom door, threw the bolt, and flung it open.

SHE had been standing there with her face against the door, but I didn't knock her down. She was too quick on her feet. The bath towel was back in place, and she no longer looked wild. Her head tilted slowly to the side, and those green eyes widened and narrowed at me, widened and narrowed, as if to convey a message. Her lips were slightly parted, but no sound came out. The appeal was in her attitude, and in her eyes.

"Your snakes are loose!" I said hoarsely. "Go and put them back—every one of them!"

"N-n-o-o," she hummed ingratiatingly. She slid close to me and arched her neck, and moved her head from side to side so that it barely brushed my sleeve.

My hand went up involuntarily and stroked her hair. It was fine and soft, but very thick; and a queer thrill, half fear and half ecstasy, shocked my senses.

"You little devil!" I said thickly.

She twisted under my hand and ran into the sitting room. Her hands touched the mantel, and with one lithe surge of co-ordinated motion she was standing up there, reaching over the mirror and pulling down a snake that was headed

for the ceiling. I shuddered as she wrapped it loosely about her neck, and the next instant I knew why the assistant baggage man at the station had looked dazed.

She dove off the mantel head first, landed on all fours, and bounced to her feet, all in one flash. The snake remained perfectly still, and she began to prowl about the room, examining everything.

"Will you please," I said, "pick up your pets and put them away?"

She kept on with her prowling and paid no attention to me.

"Isabel!" I shouted, and clapped my hands loudly.

She jumped like a raw nerve and slid her eyes around at me.

"Put those snakes in the box, and then get dressed!" I ordered. "You're going right back where you came from!"

She wailed like she had her tail caught in the door, and ran toward me. I jumped back and slammed the bedroom door. She scratched at it and squalled pitifully. I wondered how soon the management would institute an investigation.

"Get away from me with that poisonous viper!" I yelled. "If you don't put it down, I'll—I'll kill it!"

She went right on yowling.

"Isabel! Be quiet! I won't send you back, if you'll do as I tell you. Be a good girl now, and . . ."

There was silence, and she moved away from the door. I waited and heard faint rustlings. I opened the door cautiously.

She was crouching over the box, pawing in the straw that half filled it, and no longer wore the snake. I watched her pull a small black case out of the box and open it. She was on her feet suddenly in one effortless flow of motion, crossed the room, and held out

the case to me.

I looked at the contents and then looked at her. Her eyes were eager now, and she continued to stand there, holding the case out to me.

"I see," I said, but of course I didn't. It meant something important to her, but I didn't know that. I reached for the case, and she let me have it.

The snakes were momentarily forgotten and I started forward into the sitting room, and then looked around warily. They were still enjoying their freedom. One was coiling itself around a fat vase of tulips, and the other occupied the armchair. I couldn't see any more. I glared at Isabel, and she made a little cooing trill and ran to the chair to stroke the serpent reposing

there, as if to demonstrate its amiable disposition.

I KNEW as much as I cared to know about snakes, which was practically nothing, except that they crawled, coiled, and sometimes rattled and stung. The two now on view looked very similar, but I couldn't identify them. They were about four feet long and three inches in diameter, with iridescent scales in deep shades of blues and greens.

I said, "What are they? What kind of snakes?"

Isabel indicated the one she was stroking, and said, "Silissu." Then she glided over to the flower fancier, and said, "Sassisac. See?"



She was crouching in front of the box, and I knew that she was opening it . . .

"Uh-huh," I said. "Silly Sue and Sassy Sack. That still doesn't tell me the antidote in case they get vicious. Let's go into the bedroom."

She wouldn't follow me until I had dragged her five shabby bags inside. She began opening them and piling junk on the floor. Books, dishes, a couple of clocks, an electric curling iron, kitchen cutlery, a hand mirror . . . the most outlandish assortment of props any feature dancer ever carried.

Out of the last bag she pulled a long green robe and slipped it over her head after dropping the bath towel. She wrapped various loose ends of the robe about her in strategic places, and made a final twist to fasten them. It was classically simple, and wickedly classic, but it suited her flowing movements. She picked up the little black plastic case again and brought it to me.

I set the case down on the bed and sat beside it to examine the contents. Isabel slithered around me and curled up on the other side of the bed.

The case was divided into three compartments, each with a separate lid. When the case was opened a spring released the inner lids simultaneously.

In the first compartment, bedded in silky fibers, was a large medallion, beautifully wrought in greenish metal and studded with blue and green gems. If they were genuine sapphires and emeralds, the thing was worth a small fortune. I touched it, but it was securely anchored.

The second compartment held six jewel-like containers, three green and three blue. Their facets glistened, but their contents were invisible.

In the third there was a green metal cylinder, its surface worked in an intricate design of cabalistic symbols. I lifted it out and it was surprisingly light. Isabel reached a supple arm and snared it out of my hands. She pressed

a blue jewel near one end and the top flew up. There was a roll of green silk inside, and she pulled it out and handed it to me.

It was a scroll, but the material was neither paper nor parchment. It was a green silky tissue with a tensile strength to withstand the roughest handling. I unrolled it, and after several preliminary signs and symbols which meant nothing, I recognized a skillfully drawn chart of the heavens. I examined it from all angles and found nothing familiar about it. If the chart had been drawn from observation, it must have been observed at some distant time or place far remote from my own experience. Beneath the chart I encountered the totally incomprehensible text. It seemed to be made up of closely inscribed ideographs, unlike anything I had ever seen.

I looked at Isabel, and she was curled there watchfully, with her elbows pulled under her, and her head resting on her arms.

I said, "I can't read this. What is it?"

SHE pushed her palms against the bed and arched her torso in a feline stretch, then reached for a gleaming green container and held it out to me.

It looked like an expensive perfume bottle. I snatched it and pulled out the stopper. A thin wisp of smoke spiraled up. I tried to put the stopper back, and in my confusion dropped it and didn't see where it had gone.

I was watching the neck of the emerald bottle, and the smoke was increasing rapidly in volume and spreading layers of mist in the room. A sweet, piercing odor choked me and penetrated to my brain. I was getting drunk faster than any human capacity should permit. I'd have been terrified if I hadn't been so absorbed in my drunkenness.

Isabel reached into the case and turned the medallion like the dial of a *combination lock*. She laughed gleefully. It was infectious. I laughed with her. We laughed and laughed. It was a joyous duet . . . until I heard the rumbling, like approaching thunder.

"Too cold to rain," I objected. "Quit thundering, will you?"

Isabel had slipped away in the murky room, and I clung to the bed dizzily, breathing the sweet, intoxicating fumes. An eerie terror struggled somewhere deep inside, but my drugged senses smothered it, and buried it in thick folds of Lethean fog.

"Isabel," I murmured. The thunder had stopped and I was alone in the fog.

I have no idea how long I lay there. Queer images were going through my brain, disconnected pictures that were accompanied by voices, and neither the pictures nor the voices made sense.

Gradually, I became aware that one of the voices was Isabel's. I recognized the childish lightness of tone with its humming vibration, and then I realized that all the voices had that musical quality.

Little by little Isabel's voice dominated the others, until they were merely a murmuring background. She was pleading with some one. That went on for quite a while, and finally she got an answer, and if I had been Isabel I wouldn't have enjoyed it. She was being told off with authority. A deep, mellow voice was passing judgment on her and it sounded rugged.

The murmuring voices rose mournfully and faded as the mellow tones began an oration of regret. Then I knew he was speaking to me. He was apologizing, not in words, but with the vibrant tones of his voice. I understood him perfectly.

"You understand me well," he chanted. "You have an affinity for our race, and for that reason my misbegotten daughter took advantage of you. Contrary to natural laws, she has allowed you to acquire knowledge out of your time. She has done a reckless and foolish thing and you will be obliged to suffer for it, but so shall she. I tell you this because you have helped my wicked daughter pass through the time jog and the act has left a spiritual imprint which can never be effaced. Because she disobeyed instructions she became lost in time, and there was only one way to return to our world from where she was when the time jog occurred."

I MUST have asked a question without knowing it, because his humming voice rose in intensity and fixed my attention as he explained:

"You are unaware of the time jog which occurs at irregular intervals, and during which our race can pass through any era while time stands still. Actually time is jogged backward over a period of several hours, and then repeats itself and goes smoothly on. Everything that occurs during the first passage of those hours is wiped from memory, except in a few rare cases in which the same incidents are not repeated. These individuals imagine afterwards that they dreamed the experiences which actually occurred. If the experience is vivid, they are apt to become victims of some mental disorder."

Images of major catastrophes, of births and deaths, and other vital events went vaguely through my mind, and he answered:

"All those things are repeated during the time jog. When time jumps back, the occurrence as well as the memory is wiped out. In the future your people may learn to take advantage of it, just

as we do. You will be able to project yourself into any era of the past or future, and learn much while time is suspended; but there is danger that you will be caught there, as my undutiful daughter was caught in your time cycle, and had to age and die, and wait for the next time jog. For us there is no death, except in our own time."

Another question drifted through my mind, and he answered:

"My time is far in the past, long before the great flood which destroyed our continent and all but scattered remnants of our culture which had been transplanted to other lands. We believe that our race has long since died out, but we continue to search for a trace of it. Some day modern man may uncover it, and then we shall try to rebuild our civilization in the future. Meanwhile, be assured that your suffering will be no worse than that of my foolish daughter."

Incoherent questions crowded my mind, but he was already intoning the recessionary.

"Remember that time is a hard taskmaster," he chanted. "If you lose a few minutes, you must run all day and never quite catch up. If you are ahead of time, you must wait idly until time and its train of events arrive. May the Cat-Snake protect you . . ." The murmuring voices rose in a paean of sound. "And bring you long life and wisdom. . . ."

I HAD a terrific headache. It was like nothing I had ever suffered before. I reached for the thermos on the night stand and dragged it toward me. It slipped out of my fingers and crashed on the floor. I opened my eyes and light seared them with sharp pain. I rolled over slowly, with infinite care, and levered my head off the pillow. This time I opened my eyes gradually. The first

thing I saw was the clock. It said Thursday, 10:25 a.m. There was something wrong about that, something that bothered me, but I couldn't remember what it was.

My head sank back on the pillow and I lay there suffering the tortures of the damned. Little by little memories began to seep into my consciousness. The first vague trickle increased and made way for what followed, until my mind was flooded with vivid remembrance.

My first voluntary thought was that I couldn't remember returning home. I raised myself on one elbow and looked around the room. My clothes were in a familiar heap on the floor. I looked at the clock again. It still said Thursday, but the time was now 11:15.

"I can't stand this," I said aloud. "I've got to get this straightened out."

I crawled out of bed and staggered down the hall to my living room, fell into a chair, and reached for the phone.

There was a quart whiskey bottle on the floor beside my pet armchair. It was nearly empty.

"I only had two drinks!" I muttered indignantly. I was sure of it. I had opened a fresh bottle, taken two drinks, and called the Blake Hotel.

I picked up the phone and called the Blake Hotel.

"Gimme the room clerk," I mumbled, and heard her answer briskly.

"Have you a Miss Isabel Bendler registered there?" I asked.

"Bendler? One moment, please." It didn't take her long. She came back with a convincing, "No, we have no one by that name registered."

"Have you got a reservation for her?"

"No, we have not."

"Sure you have! You had a reservation yesterday—or today—what day is today anyway?"

"This is Thursday, March twen-

tieth," she said reprovingly.

"Well, she was supposed to arrive at 9:10 this morning from Suterville, and you had a—"

"I'm sorry, we have no reservation for Miss Isabel Bendler."

"Listen!" I said desperately. "Did you have any dreams last night?"

"I'm sorry, I can give you no information about Miss Isabel Bendler."

And that was that. It was too early to call the Club Frivole. I called George Bendler. A pleasant young voice answered.

She said, "Mr. Bendler is resting now. May I take a message?"

"Where's Mrs. Feeny?"

"Mrs. Feeny has left. She was on night duty."

"Where can I call her?"

"I'm afraid you can't. She took a plane this morning for the coast. She's going out there to be married."

"Mrs. Feeny is already married!"

"Widowed," said the amused young voice. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You can tell me where to get in touch with her."

"I'm sorry. I don't know her well. Perhaps Dr. Granger can tell you. Doctor will be here in about an hour."

"I'll be there, too," I said, "if my head doesn't explode on the way."

I LOOKED at the whiskey bottle, but decided it couldn't do me any good. The hangover I had bore no resemblance to the mild jitters I had previously experienced. I was shattered, mentally and physically. I should have gone back to bed.

Getting dressed required prodigious patience and fortitude. But there was one thing that strengthened my resolve to solve the mystery. My face was covered with scratches, and still smeared with dried blood.

I made it to George's apartment

building in a taxi, reeled into his bedroom and collapsed in a chair. George was awake, Dr. Granger was there, and the day nurse was a blond honey, but I didn't care.

I said, "Where's Isabel?"

They looked at me and they looked at each other. Dr. Granger came over and examined my face. He said, "You look like you've had a hard night. Don't you think you'd better sleep it off?"

I said, "Where's Mrs. Feeny?"

"She left this morning," said Dr. Granger. "I can't give you her new address."

"Why not?"

"See here!" he said sternly. "What is it you want?"

"George," I said, "where's your step-sister? Where is Isabel?"

"He's drunk," said George a trifle enviously. "I haven't any sister, and he never saw Mrs. Feeny."

"I talked to her last night on the phone!" I said shrilly. "I talked to you too, and you told me to meet your stepsister at 9:10 yesterday morning and take her to the Blake Hotel. And I did! Snakes and all!"

"Oh, brother!" George murmured. "If you've got any of that stuff left, you better pour it down the drain and throw away the bottle."

"Just a minute," said Dr. Granger professionally. He tipped my head back and examined my eyes, and I squirmed with pain. "Mumph!" he said non-committally. "Miss Bailey, the number three, double."

She went away and came back with a glass, half filled with water.

I said, "I'll drink the water, but I don't want any of your medicine. It won't do me any good."

I drank the water. It was bitter. I threw the glass at Miss Bailey and missed.

I was weak. I didn't have a chance.

I woke up in Dr. Horatio Devore's sanitarium. He's very sympathetic. He doesn't call me a liar, or try to convince me I had a touch of delirium tremens and scratched myself. He thinks it goes deeper than that. He thinks I'm a psycho with delayed action, that I fooled the Army doctors and went to pieces a year after I was discharged. But I know he's wrong!

There is still a long road to travel before I can convince him, but in my own mind a number of questions have been answered. I know why Isabel was carrying that junk with her. She was taking artifacts of the present back into the past. I know that green scroll must have contained instructions for using the time jog. The medallion was a dial for tuning in her period of time. She needed a convoy through the time jog—somebody who would not have her locked up on sight—and I was elected.

As a result of her meddling, my unfinished book on "The Idiosyncrasies of Time" lies neglected. How can I work

on a treatise purportedly dealing with immutable facts while I remember so vividly my hectic experience during the time jog? I am determined to solve that riddle, and have therefore taken up the study of psychiatry, with Dr. Devore's permission and encouragement.

It so happens that this institution is co-educational, and during one of my walks about the grounds I participated in a little incident which prompted my new study.

Two of the nurses were trying to deal with a recalcitrant patient. They were having no luck. She was defying them with angry catcalls, and they fully expected her to break her neck. She was up in a tree.

I said, "Isabel! Get down from there at once, or I'll tell your father!"

She got down and streaked for the women's quarters with the nurses galloping after her.

The Cat-Snake people have a subtle sense of justice.

THE END