

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1948

Cover by Boris Dolgov

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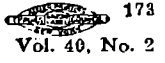
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*Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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# The Deadly Ratio

**B**ETTER not read it. I mean it. No—this isn't one of those "perhaps it will happen to you" things. It's a lot worse than that. It might very possibly be happening to you right now. And you won't know until it's over. You can't, by the very nature of things.

(I wonder what the population really is?)

On the other hand, maybe it won't make any difference if I do tell you about it. Once you got used to the idea, you might even be able to relax and enjoy it. Heaven knows there's plenty to enjoy—and again I say it—by the very nature of things.

All right, then, if you think you can take it. . . .

I met her in a restaurant. You may know the place—Murphy's. It has a big oval bar and then a partition. On the other side of the partition are small tables, then an aisle, then booths.

Gloria was sitting at one of the small tables. All of the booths but two were empty; all the other small tables but one were unoccupied, so there was plenty of room in the place for me.

But there was only one place I could sit—at her table. That was because, when I saw Gloria, there wasn't anything else in the world. I have never been through anything like that. I just stopped dead. I dropped my briefcase and stared at her. She had gleaming auburn hair and olive skin. She had delicate high-arched nostrils and a carved mouth, lips that were curved above like gull's wings on the down-beat, and full below. Her eyes were as sealed and spiced as a hot buttered rum, and as deep as a mountain night.

Without taking my eyes from her face, I groped for a chair and sat opposite her. I'd forgotten everything. Even about being hungry. Helen hadn't, though. Helen was the head waitress and a swell person. She was fortyish and happy. She didn't know my name but used to call me "The Hungry Fella." I never had to order. When I came

in she'd fill me a bar-glass full of beer and pile up two orders of that day's Chef's Special on a steak platter. She arrived with the beer, picked up my briefcase, and went for the fodder. I just kept on looking at Gloria, who by this time, was registering considerable amazement, and a little awe. The awe, she told me later, was conceived only at the size of the beer-glass, but I have my doubts about that.

She spoke first. "Taking an inventory?"

She had one of those rare voices which makes noises out of all other sounds. I nodded. Her chin was rounded, with the barest suggestion of a cleft, but the hinges of her jaw were square.

**I** THINK she was a little flustered. She dropped her eyes—I was glad, because I could see then how very long and thick her lashes were—and poked at her salad. She looked up again, half-smiling. Her teeth met, tip to tip. I'd read about that but had never actually seen it before. "What is it?" she asked. "Have I made a conquest?"

I nodded again. "You certainly have."

"Well!" she breathed.

"Your name's Gloria," I said positively.

"How did you know?"

"It had to be, that's all."

She looked at me carefully, at my eyes, my forehead, my shoulders. "If your name is Leo, I'll scream."

"Scream then. But why?"

"I—I've always thought I'd meet a man named Leo, and—"

Helen canceled the effects of months of good relations between herself and me, by bringing my lunch just then. Gloria's eyes widened when she saw it. "You must be very fond of lobster hollandaise."

"I'm very fond of all subtle things," I said, "and I like them in great masses."

"I've never met anyone like you," she said candidly.

"No one like you ever has."

"Oh?"

BY THEODORE STURGEON



*If you've ever fallen in love, if you ever hope to, read on carefully . . .*

I picked up my fork. "Obviously not, or there'd be a race of us." I scooped up some lobster. "Would you be good enough to watch carefully while I eat? I can't seem to stop looking at you, and I'm afraid I might stab my face with the fork."

She chortled. It wasn't a chuckle, or a gurgle. It was a true Lewis Carrol chortle. "They're very rare. 'I'll watch.'"

"Thank you. And while you watch, tell me what you don't like."

"What I *don't* like? Why?"

"I'll probably spend the rest of my life finding out the things you do like, and doing them with you. So let's get rid of the non-essentials."

She laughed. "All right. I don't like tapioca because it makes me feel conspicuous, staring that way. I don't like furniture with buttons on the upholstery; lace curtains that cross each other; small flower-prints, hooks-and-eyes and snap fasteners where zippers ought to be; that orchestra leader with the candy saxophones and the yodelling brother; tweedy men who smoke pipes; people who can't look me in the eye when they're lying; night clothes; people who make mixed drinks with Scotch—my, you eat fast."

"I just do it to get rid of my appetite so I can begin eating for esthetic reasons. I like that list."

"What don't *you* like?"

"I don't like literary intellectuals with their conversations all dressed up in over-quotes. I don't like bathing-suits that don't let the sun in and I don't like weather that keeps bathing-suits in. I don't like salty food; clinging-vine girls; music that doesn't go anywhere or build anything; people who have forgotten how to wonder like children; automobiles designed to be better streamlined going backwards than going forward; people who will try anything once but are afraid to try it twice and acquire a taste; and professional sceptics." I went back to my lunch.

"You bat a thousand," she said. "Something remarkable is happening here."

"Let it happen," I cautioned. "Never mind what it is or why. Don't be like the guy who threw a light-bulb on the floor to find out if it was brittle." Helen passed and I ordered a Slivovitz.

"Prune brandy!" cried Gloria. "I love it!"

"I know. It's for you."

"Some day you're going to be wrong," she said, suddenly somber; "and that will be bad."

"That will be good. It'll be the difference between harmony and contrast, that's all."

"Leo—"

"Hm?"

She brought her gaze squarely to me, and it was so warm I could feel it on my face. "Nothing. I was just saying it, Leo. *Leo.*"

Something choked me—not the lobster. It was all gone. "I have no gag for that. I can't top it. I can match it, Gloria."

Another thing was said, but without words.

There are still no words for it. Afterward she reached across and touched my hand with her fingertips. I saw colors.

I got up to go, after scribbling on a piece of the menu. "Here's my phone number. Call me up when there's no other way out."

She raised her eyebrows. "Don't you want my phone, or my address, or anything?"

"No," I said.

"But—"

"This means too much," I said. "I'm sorry if I seem to be dropping it in your lap like this. But any time you are with me, I want it to be because you want to be with me, not because you think it's what I might want. We've got to be together because we are traveling in the same direction at approximately the same speed, each under his own power. If I call you up and make all the arrangements, it could be that I was acting on a conditioned reflex, like any other wolf. If you call, we can both be sure."

"It makes sense." She raised those deep eyes to me. Leaving her was coming up out of those eyes hand over hand. A long haul. I only just made it.

OUT on the street I tried valiantly to get some sense of proportion. The most remarkable thing about the whole remarkable business was simply this: that in all my life before, I had never been able to talk to anyone like that. I had always been diffident, easy-going, unaggressive to a fault, and rather slow on the uptake.

I felt like the daydreams of the much

advertised 97-pound weakling as he clipped that coupon.

"Hey—you!"

I generally answered to that as well as anything else. I looked up and recoiled violently. There was a human head floating in midair next to me. I was so startled I couldn't even stop walking. The head drifted along beside me, bobbing slightly as if invisible legs carried an invisible body to which the visible head was attached. The face was middle-aged, bookish, dryly humorous.

"You're quite a hell of a fellow, aren't you?"

Oddly, my tongue loosened from the roof of my mouth. "Some pretty nice people think so," I faltered. I looked around nervously, expecting a stampede when other people saw this congenial horror.

"No one can see me but you," said the head. "No one that's likely to make a fuss, at any rate."

"Wh-what do you want?"

"Just wanted to tell you something," said the head. It must have had a throat somewhere because it cleared it. "Parthenogenesis," it said didactically, "has little survival value, even with syzygy. Without it—" The head disappeared. A little lower down, two bony, bare shoulders appeared, shrugged expressively, and vanished. The head reappeared. "—there isn't a chance."

"You don't say," I quavered.

It didn't say. Not any more, just then. It was gone.

I stopped, spun around, looking for it. What it had told me made as little sense to me, then, as its very appearance. It took quite a while for me to discover that it had told me the heart of the thing I'm telling you. I do hope I'm being a little more lucid than the head was.

Anyway, that was the first manifestation of all. By itself, it wasn't enough to make me doubt my sanity. As I said, it was only the first.

**I** MIGHT as well tell you something about Gloria. Her folks had been poor enough to evaluate good things, well enough off to be able to have a sample or two of these good things. So Gloria could appre-

ciate what was good as well as the effort that was necessary to get it. At twenty-two she was the assistant buyer of a men's department store. (This was toward the end of the war.) She needed some extra money for a pet project, so she sang at a club every night. In her "spare" time she practiced and studied and at the end of a year had her commercial pilot's license. She spent the rest of the war ferrying airplanes.

Do you begin to get the idea of what kind of people she was?

She was one of the most dynamic women who ever lived. She was thoughtful and articulate and completely un-phoney.

She was strong. You can have no idea—no; some of you do know how strong. I had forgotten. . . . She radiated her strength. Her strength surrounded her like a cloud rather than like armor, for she was tangible through it. She influenced everything and everyone she came near. I felt, sometimes, that the pieces of ground which bore her footprints, the chairs she used, the doors she touched and the books she had held, continued to radiate for weeks afterward, like the Bikini ships.

She was completely self-sufficient. I had hit the matter squarely when I insisted that she call me before we saw each other again. Her very presence was a compliment. When she was with me, it was, by definition, because that was where she would rather be than any other place on earth. When she was away from me, it was because to be with me at that time would not have been a perfect thing, and in her way she was a perfectionist.

Oh, yes—a perfectionist. I should know!

You ought to know something about me, too, so that you can realize how completely a thing like this is done, and how it is being done to so many of you.

I'm in my twenties and I play guitar for a living. I've done a lot of things and I carry around a lot of memories from each of them—things that only I could possibly know. The color of the walls in the rooming house where I stayed when I was "on the beach" in Port Arthur, Texas, when the crew of my ship went out on strike. What kind of flowers that girl was wearing the night she jumped off the cruise ship in Montego Bay, down in Jamaica.

I can remember, hazily, things like my brother's crying because he was afraid of the vacuum cleaner, when he was four. So I couldn't have been quite three then. I can remember fighting with a kid called Boaz, when I was seven. I remember Harriet, whom I kissed under a fragrant tulip poplar one summer dusk when I was twelve. I remember the odd little lick that drummer used to tear off when, and only when he was really riding, while I was playing at the hotel, and the way the trumpet man's eyes used to close when he heard it. I remember the exact smell of the tiger's wagon when I was pulling ropes on the Barnes Circus, and the one-armed roustabout who used to chantey us along when we drove the stakes, he swinging a twelve-pound maul with the rest of us—

"Hit down, slap it down, Haul back, snub, bub,

"Half back, quarter back, all back, whoa!"—he used to cry, with the mauls rat-tatting on the steelbound peg and the peg melting into the ground, and the snubber grunting over his taut half-hitch while the six of us stood in a circle around the peg. And those other hammers, in the blacksmith's shop in Puerto Rico, with the youngster swinging a sledge in great full circles, clanging on the anvil, while the old smith touched the work almost delicately with his shaping hammer and then tinkled out every syncopation known to man by bouncing it on the anvil's horn and face between his own strokes and those of the great metronomic sledge. I remember the laboring and servile response of a power shovel under my hands as they shifted from hoist to crowd to swing to rehaul controls, and the tang of burning drum-frictions and hot crater compound. That was at the same quarry where the big Finnish blast foreman was killed by a premature shot. He was out in the open and knew he couldn't get clear. He stood straight and still and let it come, since it was bound to come, and he raised his right hand to his head. My mechanic said he was trying to protect his face but I thought at the time he was saluting something.

Details; that's what I'm trying to get over to you. My head was full of details that were intimately my own.

IT WAS a little over two weeks—sixteen days, three hours, and twenty-three minutes; to be exact—before Gloria called. During that time I nearly lost my mind. I was jealous; I was worried, I was frantic. I cursed myself for not having gotten her number—why, I didn't even know her last name! There were times when I determined to hang up on her if I heard her voice; I was so sore. There were times when I stopped work—I did a lot of arranging for small orchestras—and sat before the silent phone, begging it to ring. I had a routine worked out: I'd demand a statement as to how she felt about me before I let her say another thing. I'd demand an explanation of her silence: I'd act casual and disinterested. I'd—

The phone did ring, though, and it was Gloria, and the dialogue went like so:

"Hello?"

"Leo."

"Yes, Gloria!"

"I'm coming up."

"I'm waiting."

And that was it. I met her at the door. I had never touched her before, except for that one brief contact of hands; and yet, with perfect confidence, with no idea of doing anything different, I took her in my arms and kissed her. This whole thing has its terrible aspects, and yet, sometimes I wonder if moments like that don't justify the horror of it.

I took her hand and led her into the living room. The room wavered like an underwater scene because she was in it. The air tasted different. We sat close together with our hands locked, saying that wordless thing with our eyes. I kissed her again. I didn't ask her anything at all.

She had the smoothest skin that ever was. She had a skin smoother than a bird's throat. It was like satin-finished aluminum, but warm and yielding. It was smooth like Gran' Marnier between your tongue and the roof of your mouth.

We played records—Django Reinhardt and The New Friends of Rhythm, and Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue* and *Tubby the Tuba*. I showed her the Smith illustrations from *Fantazius Mallare* and my folio of Ed Weston prints. I saw things and heard things in them all that I had never

known before, though they were things I loved.

Not one of them—not a book, nor a record, nor a picture, was new to her. By some alchemy, she had culled the random flood of esthetic expression that had come her way, and had her choices; and her choices were these things that I loved, but loved in a way exclusively hers, a way in which I could share.

**WE TALKED** about books and places, ideas and people. In her way, she was something of a mystic. "I believe that there is something behind the old superstitions about calling up demons, and materializations of departed spirits," she said thoughtfully. "But I don't think it was ever done with mumbo-jumbo—witches' brew and pentagrams and toads' skins stuffed with human hair buried at the crossroads on a May midnight, unless these rituals were part of a much larger thing—a purely psychic and un-ghostly force coming from the 'wizard' himself."

"I never thought much about it," I said, stroking her hair. It is the only hair that was not fine that I have ever touched with pleasure. Like everything else about her, it was strong and controlled and glowing. "Have you ever tried anything like that? You're some sort of a sorceress. I know when I'm enchanted, at any rate."

"You're not enchanted," she said gravely. "You're not a thing with magic on it. You're a real magic all by yourself."

"You're a darling," I said. "Mine."

"I'm not!" she answered, in that odd way she had of turning aside fantasy for fact. "I don't belong to you. I belong to *me!*"

I must have looked rather stricken, for she laughed suddenly and kissed my hand. "What belongs to you is only a large part of 'us,'" she explained carefully. "Otherwise you belong to you and I belong to me. Do you see?"

"I think I do," I said slowly. "I said I wanted us to be together because we were both traveling together under our own power. I—didn't know it was going to be so true, that's all."

"Don't try to make it any different, Leo. Don't *ever*. If I started to really belong to

you, I wouldn't be *me* any more, and then you wouldn't have anything at all."

"You seem so sure of these hazy things."

"They aren't hazy things! They're important. If it weren't for these things, I'd have to stop seeing you. I—*would* stop seeing you."

I put my arms tight around her. "Don't talk about that," I whispered, more frightened than I have ever been in my life before. "Talk about something else. Finish what you were saying about pentagrams and spirits."

She was still a moment. I think her heart was pounding the way mine was, and I think she was frightened too.

"I spend a lot of time reading and mulling over those things," she said after a quiet time. "I don't know why. I find them fascinating. You know what, Leo? I think too much has been written about manifestations of evil. I think it's true that good is more powerful than evil. And I think that far too much has been written and said about ghosties an' ghoulies an' things that go 'boomp' i' th' nict, as the old Scottish prayer has it. I think those things have been too underlined. They're remarkable enough, but have you ever realized that things that are remarkable are, by definition, rare?"

"If the cloven-hoofed horrors and the wailing banshees are remarkable—which they are—then what's commonplace?"

She spread her hands—square, quite large hands, capable and beautifully kept. "The manifestations of good, of course. I believe that they're much easier to call up. I believe they happen all the time. An evil mind has to be very evil before it can project itself into a new thing with a life of its own. From all accounts I have read, it takes a tremendously powerful mind to call up even a little demon. Good things must be much easier to materialize, because they fall in the pattern of good living. More people live good lives than such thoroughly bad ones that they can materialize evil things."

"Well then, why don't more people bring more good things from behind this mystic curtain?"

"But they do!" she cried. "They must! The world is so full of good things! Why

do you suppose they're so good? What put the innate goodness into Bach and the Victoria Falls and the color of your hair and Negro laughter and the way ginger ale tickles your nostrils?"

I shook my head slowly. "I think that's lovely, and I don't like it."

"Why not?"

I looked at her. She was wearing a wine-colored suit and a marigold silken kerchief tucked into the throat. It reflected on the warm olive of her chin. It reminded me of my grandmother's saying, when I was very small, "Let's see if you like butter," as she held a buttercup under my chin to see how much yellow it reflected. "You are good," I said slowly, searching hard for the words. "You are about the—the good-est thing that ever happened. If what you say is really true, then you might be just a shadow, a dream, a glorious thought that someone had."

"Oh, you idiot," she said, with sudden tears in her eyes. "You big, beautiful hunk of idiot!" She pressed me close and bit my cheek so hard that I yelped. "Is that real?"

"If it isn't," I said, shaken, "I'll be happy to go on dreaming."

SHE stayed another hour—as if there were such a thing as time when we were together—and then she left. I had her phone number by then. A hotel. And after she was gone, I wandered around my apartment, looking at the small wrinkles in the couch-cover where she had sat, touching the cup she had held, staring at the bland black surface of a record, marvelling at the way its grooves had unwound the *Passacaglia* for her. Most wonderful of all was a special way I discovered to turn my head as I moved. Her fragrance clung to my cheek, and if I turned my face just so, I could sense it. I thought about every one of those many minutes with her, each by itself, and the things we had done. I thought, too, about the things we had not done—I know you wondered—and I gloried in them. For, without a word spoken, we had agreed that a thing worth having was a thing worth awaiting and that where faith is complete, exploration is uncalled for.

She came back next day, and the day

after. The first of these two visits was wonderful. We sang, mostly. I seemed to know all her very favorite songs. And by a happy accident, my pet key on the guitar—B flat—was exactly within her lovely contralto range. Though I say it as shouldn't, I played some marvellous guitar behind and around what she sang. We laughed a lot, largely at things that were secret between us—is there a love anywhere without its own new language?—and we talked for a long time about a book called "The Fountainhead" which seemed to have had the same extraordinary effect on her that it had on me; but then, it's an extraordinary book.

It was after she left that day that the strangeness began—the strangeness that turned into such utter horror. She hadn't been gone more than an hour when I heard the frightened scramble of tiny claws in the front room. I was poring over the string-bass part of a trio arrangement I was doing (and not seeing it for my Gloria-flavored thoughts) and I raised my head and listened. It was the most panic-struck scurrying imaginable, as if a regiment of newts and salamanders had broken ranks in a wild retreat. I remember clearly that the little-claw susurrus did not disturb me at all, but the terror behind the movement startled me in ways that were not pleasant.

*What were they running from?* was infinitely more important than *What were they?*

SLOWLY I put down the manuscript and stood up. I went to the wall and along it to the archway, not so much to keep out of sight as to surprise the *thing* that had so terrorized the possessors of those small frightened feet.

And that was the first time I have ever been able to smile while the hackles on the back of my neck were one great crawling prickle. For there was nothing there at all; nothing to glow in the dark before I switched on the overhead light, nothing to show afterward. But the little feet scurried away faster—there must have been hundreds of them—tapping and scabbling out a perfect crescendo of horrified escape. That was what made my hackles rise. What made me smile—

The sounds radiated from *my* feet!



I stood there in the archway, my eyeballs throbbing with the effort to see this invisible rout; and from the threshold, to right and left and away into the far corners of the front room, ran the sounds of the little paws and tiny scratching claws. It was as if they were being generated under my soles, and then fleeing madly. None ran behind me. There seemed to be something keeping them from the living room. I took a cautious step further into the front room, and now they did run behind me, but only as far as the archway. I could hear them reach it and scuttle off to the side walls. You see what made me smile?

I was the horror that frightened them so!

The sound gradually lessened. It was not that it lessened in overall intensity. It was just that there were fewer and fewer creatures running away. It diminished rapidly, and in about ninety seconds it had reduced to an occasional single scampering. One invisible creature ran around and around me, as if all the unseen holes in the walls had been stopped up and it was frantically looking for one. It found one, too, and was gone.

I laughed then and went back to my work. I remember that I thought quite clearly after that, for a while. I remember writing in a *glissando* passage that was a stroke of genius—something to drive the dog-house slapper crazy but guaranteed to drive the customers even crazier if it could be done at all. I remember zoom-zooming it off under my breath, and feeling mightily pleased with myself over it.

And then the reaction struck me.

Those little claws—

*What was happening to me?*

I thought instantly of Gloria. *There's some deadly law of compensation working here*, I thought. For every yellow light, a purple shadow. For every peal of laughter, a cry of anguish somewhere. For the bliss of Gloria, a touch of horror to even things up.

I licked my lips, for they were wet and my tongue was dry.

*What was happening to me?*

I thought again of Gloria, and the colors and sounds of Gloria, and most of all, the reality, the solid normalcy of Gloria, for all her exquisite sense of fantasy.

I couldn't go crazy. I *couldn't!* Not now! I'd be—unfit.

Unfit! As terrifying to me, then, as the old cry of "*Unclean*" was in the Middle Ages.

"Gloria, darling," I'd have to say, "Honey, we'll just have to call it quits. You see, I'm off my trolley. Oh, I'm quite serious. Yes indeedly. The men in the white coats will come around and back up their little wagon to the door and take me away to the laughing academy. And we won't see each other any more. A pity. A great pity. Just give me a hearty little old hand-shake, now, and go find yourself another fellow."

"Gloria!" I yelled. Gloria was all those colors, and the lovely sounds, and the fragrance that clung to my cheek and came to me when I moved and held my head just so.

"Oh, I dunno," I moaned. "I just don't know what to do! What is it? What is it?"

"Syzygy."

"Hub?" I came bolt upright, staring around wildly. Twenty inches over the couch hovered the seamed face of my jovial phantom of the street outside Murphy's. "You! Now I know I'm off my—hey! What is syzygy?"

"What's happening to you."

"Well, what is happening to me?"

"Syzygy." The head grinned engagingly. I put my head in my hands. There is an emotional pitch—an *unemotional* pitch, really—at which nothing is surprising, and I'd reached it. "Please explain," I said dully. "Tell me who you are, and what you mean by this sizz-sizz whatever-it-is."

"I'm not anybody," said the head, "and syzygy is a concomitant of parthenogenetic and certain other low types. I think what's happening *is* syzygy. If it isn't—" The head disappeared, a hand with spatulate fingers appeared and snapped its fingers explosively; the hand disappeared, the head reappeared and smiled, "—you're a gone goose."

"Don't *do* that," I said miserably.

"Don't do what?"

"That—that piecemeal business. Why do you do it?"

"Oh—that. Conservation of energy. It works here too, you know."

"Where is 'here'?"

"That's a little difficult to explain until you get the knack of it. It's the place where reverse ratios exist. I mean, if something stacks up in a three to five ratio there, it's a five to three ratio here. Forces must balance."

I almost had it. What he said almost made sense. I opened my mouth to question him but he was gone.

After that I just sat there. Perhaps I wept.

AND Gloria came the next day, too. That was bad. I did two wrong things. First, I kept information from her, which was inexcusable. If you are going to share at all, you must share the bad things too. The other thing I did was to question her like a jealous adolescent.

But what else could be expected? Everything was changed. Everything was different. I opened the door to her and she brushed past me with a smile, and not a very warm one at that, leaving me at the door all outstretched arms and large clumsy feet.

She shrugged out of her coat and curled up on the couch.

"Leo, play some music."

I felt like hell and I know I looked it. Did she notice? Did she even care? Didn't it make any difference at all how I felt, what I was going through?

I went and stood in front of her. "Gloria," I said sternly, "Where have you been?"

She looked up at me and released a small, retrospective sigh that turned me bright green and sent horns sprouting out of my scalp. It was such a happy, satisfied little sound. I stood there glowering at her. She waited a moment more and then got up, switched on the amplifier and turntable, dug out the "Dance of the Hours," turned the volume up, added too much bass, and switched in the volume expander, which is quite the wrong thing to use on that record. I strode across the room and turned the volume down.

"Please, Leo," she said in a hurt tone. "I like it that way."

Viciously I turned it back up and sat down with my elbows on my knees and my

lower lip stuck out. I was wild. This was all wrong.

*I know what I should do, I thought sullenly. I ought to yank the plug on the rig and stand up and tell her off.*

How right I was! But I didn't do it. How could I do it? This was *Gloria!* Even when I looked up at her and saw her staring at me, saw the slight curl to her lip, I didn't do it. Well, it was too late then. She was watching me, comparing me with—

Yes, that was it. She was comparing me with somebody. Somebody who was different from her, someone who rode roughshod over everything delicate and subtle about her, everything about her that I liked and shared with her. And she, of course, ate it up.

I took refuge in the tactic of letting her make the first move. I think, then, that she despised me. And rightly.

A bit of cockney dialogue I had once heard danced through my mind:

"D'ye love us, Alf?"

"Yus."

"Well, knock us abaht a bit."

You see? I knew the right things to do, but—

But this was Gloria. I *couldn't*.

THE record finished, and she let the automatic shut off the turntable. I think she expected me to turn it over. I didn't. She said, "All right, Leo. What is it?" tiredly.

I said to myself, "I'll start with the worst possible thing that could happen. She'll deny that, and then at least I'll feel better." So I said to her, "You've changed. There's somebody else."

She looked up at the picture molding and smiled sleepily. "Yes," she said. "There certainly is."

"Uff!" I said, because that caught me right in the solar plexus. I sat down abruptly.

"His name's Arthur," she said dreamily. "He's a real man, Leo."

"Oh," I said bitterly. "I can see it. Five o'clock shadow and a head full of white matter. A toupée on his chest and a ver-nacular like a boatswain. Too much shoulders, too little hips, and, to quote Thorne Smith, a voice as low as his intentions. A man who never learned the distinction be-

tween eating and dining, whose idea of a hot time consists of—"

"Stop it," she said. She said it quite casually and very quietly. Because my voice was raised, it contrasted enough to have a positively deafening effect. I stood there with my jaw swinging like the lower gate of a steam-shovel as she went on, "Don't be catty, Leo."

It was a studied insult for her to use such a woman-to-woman phrase, and we both knew it. I was suddenly filled with what the French call *esprit d'escalier*—the wit of the staircase; in other words, the belated knowledge of the thing you should have said if you'd only thought of it in time, which you mumble frustratedly to yourself as you go down the stairs on your way out. I should have caught her to me as she tried to brush past me when she arrived, smothered her with—what was that corny line? "kisses—hard, toothraking kisses, that broke his lips and hers in exquisite, salty pain." Then I should have threatened her with pinking scissors—

And then I thought of the glittering, balanced structure of self-denial I had built with her, and I could have cried. . . .

"Why come here and parade it in front of me?" I shouted. "Why don't you take your human bulldozer and cross a couple of horizons with him? Why come here and rub my nose in it?"

SHE stood up, pale, and lovelier than I had thought a human being could be—so beautiful that I had to close my eyes. "I came because I had to have something to compare him with," she said steadily. "You are everything I have ever dreamed about, Leo, and my dreams are . . . very detailed. . ." At last she faltered, and her eyes were bright. "Arthur is—is—" She shook her head. Her voice left her; she had to whisper. "I know everything about you, Leo. I know how you think, and what you will say, and what you like, and it's wonderful, wonderful . . . but Leo, Arthur is something outside of me. Don't you see? Can't you see? I don't always like what Arthur does. *But I can't tell what he's going to do!* You—you share everything, Leo, Leo darling, but you don't—*take anything!*"

"Oh," I said hoarsely. My scalp was

tight. I got up and started across the room toward her. My jaws hurt.

"Stop, Leo," she gasped. "Stop it, now. You can do it, but you'll be acting. You've never acted before. It would be wrong. Don't spoil what's left. No, Leo—no no . . ."

She was right. She was so right. She was always right about me; she knew me so well. This kind of melodrama was away out of character for me. I reached her. I took her arm and she closed her eyes. It hurt when my fingers closed on her arm. She trembled but she did not try to pull away. I got her wrist and lifted it. I turned her hand over and put a kiss on the palm. Then I closed her fingers on it. "Keep that," I said. "You might like to have it some time." Then I let her go.

"Oh Leo, darling," she said. "Darling," she said, with a curl to her lip.

She turned to go. And then—

"*Argh!*" She uttered a piercing scream and turned back to me, all but bowling me over in her haste to get away from Abernathy. I stood there holding her tight while she pressed, crouched, squeezed against me, and I burst into laughter. Maybe it was reaction—I don't know. But I roared.

Abernathy is my mouse.

Our acquaintance began shortly after I took the apartment. I knew the little son-of-a-gun was there because I found evidences of his depredations under the sink where I stored my potatoes and vegetables. So I went out and got a trap. In those days the kind of trap I wanted was hard to find; it took me four days and a young fortune in carfare to run one of them down. You see, I can't abide the kind of trap that hurls a wire bar down on whatever part of the mouse happens to be available, so that the poor shrieking thing dies in agony. I wanted—and by heaven, I got—one of those wire-basket effects made so that a touch on the bait trips a spring which slams a door on the occupant.

I caught Abernathy in the contraption the very first night. He was a small gray mouse with very round ears. They were like the finest tissue, and covered with the softest fuzz in the world. They were translucent, and if you looked very closely you could see the most meticulous arrangement

of hairline blood-vessels in them. I shall always maintain that Abernathy owed his success in life to the beauty of his ears. No one with pretensions to a soul could destroy such divine tracery.

Well, I let him alone until he got over being frightened and frantic, until he got hungry and ate all the bait, and a few hours over. When I thought he was good and ready to listen to reason, I put the trap on my desk and gave him a really good talking-to.

I explained very carefully (in simple language, of course) that for him to gnaw and befoul in his haphazard fashion was downright antisocial. I explained to him that when I was a child I was trained to finish whatever I started to eat, and that I did it to this day, and I was a human being and much bigger and stronger and smarter than he was. And whatever was good enough for me was at least good enough for him to take a crack at. I really laid down the law to that mouse. I let him mull over it for a while and then I pushed cheese through the bars until his tummy was round like a ping-pong ball. Then I let him go.

THERE was no sign of Abernathy for a couple of days after that. Then I caught him again; but since he had stolen nothing I let him off with a word of warning—very friendly this time; I had been quite stern at first, of course—and some more cheese. Inside of a week I was catching him every other night, and the only trouble I ever had with him was one time when I baited the trap and left it closed. He couldn't get in to the cheese and he just raised Cain until I woke up and let him in. After that I knew good relations had been established and I did without the trap and just left cheese out for him. At first he wouldn't take the cheese unless it was in the trap, but he got so he trusted me and would take it lying out on the floor. I had long since warned him about the poisoned food that the neighbors might leave out for him, and I think he was properly scared. Anyhow, we got along famously.

So here was Gloria, absolutely petrified, and in the middle of the floor in the front room was Abernathy, twinkling his nose

and rubbing his hands together. In the middle of my bellow of laughter, I had a severe qualm of conscience. Abernathy had had no cheese since the day before yesterday! *Sic semper amoris*. I had been fretting so much over Gloria that I had overlooked my responsibilities.

"Darling, I'll take care of him," I said reassuringly to Gloria. I led her to an easy-chair and went after Abernathy. I have a noise I make by pressing my tongue against my front teeth—a sort of a squishy-squeaky noise, which I always made when I gave cheese to Abernathy. He ran right over toward me, saw Gloria, hesitated, gave a "the hell with it" flirt with his tail, turned to me and ran up my pants-leg.

The outside, fortunately.

Then he hugged himself tight into my palm while I rummaged in the icebox with my other hand for his cheese. He didn't snatch at it, either, until he let me look at his ears again. You never saw such beautiful ears in your life. I gave him the cheese, and broke off another piece for his dessert, and set him in the corner by the sink. Then I went back to Gloria, who had been watching me, big-eyed and trembling.

"Leo—how can you touch it?"

"Makes nice touching. Didn't you ever touch a mouse?"

She shuddered, looking at me as if I were Horatio just back from the bridge. "I can't stand them."

"Mice? Don't tell me that you, of all people, really and truly have the traditional Victorian mouse phobia!"

"Don't laugh at me," she said weakly. "It isn't only mice. It's any little animal—frogs and lizards and even kittens and puppies. I like big dogs and cats and horses. But somehow—" She trembled again. "If I hear anything like little claws running across the floor, or see small things scuttling around the walls, it drives me crazy."

I goggled. "If you hear—hey; it's a good thing you didn't stay another hour last night, then."

"Last night?" Then, "Last night. . . ." she said, in a totally different voice, with her eyes looking inward and happy. She chuckled. "I was telling—Arthur about that little phobia of mine last night."

If I had thought my masterful handling of the mouse was going to do any good, apparently I was mistaken. "You better shove off," I said bitterly. "Arthur might be waiting."

"Yes," she said, without any particular annoyance, "he might. Goodbye, Leo."

"Goodbye."

Nobody said anything for a time.

"Well," she said, "Goodbye."

"Yes," I said, "I'll call you."

"Do that," she said, and went out.

I SAT still on the couch for a long time, trying to get used to it. Wishful thinking was no good; I knew that. Something had happened between us. Mostly, its name was Arthur. The thing I couldn't understand was how he ever got a show, the way things were between Gloria and me. In all my life, in all my reading, I had never heard of such a complete fusion of individuals. We both felt it when we met; it had had no chance to get old. Arthur was up against some phenomenal competition; for one thing that was certain was that Gloria reciprocated my feelings perfectly, and one of my feelings was faith. I could understand—if I tried hard—how another man might overcome this hold, or that hold, which I had on her. There are smarter men than I, better looking ones, stronger ones. Any of several of those items could go by the board, and leave us untouched.

But not the faith! Not that! It was too big; nothing else we had was important enough to compensate for a loss of faith.

I got up to turn on the light, and slipped. The floor was wet. Not only was it wet; it was soft. I floundered to the seven-way lamp and cranked both switches all the way around.

The room was covered with tapioca. Ankle-deep on the floor, inches deep on the chairs and the couch.

"She's thinking about it now," said the head. Only it wasn't a head this time. It was a flaccid mass of folded tissue. In it I could see pulsing blood vessels. My stomach squirmed.

"Sorry. I'm out of focus." The disgusting thing—a sectioned brain, apparently—moved closer to me and became a face.

I lifted a foot out of the gummy mass,

shook it, and put it back in again. "I'm glad she's gone," I said hoarsely.

"Are you afraid of the stuff?"

"No!" I said. "Of course not!"

"It will go away," said the head. "Listen; I'm sorry to tell you; it isn't syzygy. You're done, son."

"What isn't syzygy?" I demanded. "And what is syzygy?"

"Arthur. The whole business with Arthur."

"Go away," I gritted. "Talk sense, or go away. Preferably—go away."

The head shook from side to side, and its expression was gentle. "Give up," it said. "Call it quits. Remember what was good, and fade out."

"You're no good to me," I muttered, and waded over to the book case. I got out a dictionary, glowering at the head, which now was registering a mixture of pity and amusement.

Abruptly, the tapioca disappeared.

I leafed through the book. Sizable, sizar, size, sizzle—"Try S-Y," prompted the head.

I glared at it and went over to the S-Y's. Systemize, systole—

"Here it is," I said, triumphantly. "The last word in the S section." I read from the book. "Syzygy—either of the points at which the moon is most nearly in line with the earth and the sun, as when it is new or full. What are you trying to tell me—that I'm caught in the middle of some astrological mumbo-jumbo?"

"Certainly not," it snapped. "I will tell you, however, that if that's all your dictionary says, it's not a very good one." It vanished.

"But—" I said vaguely. I went back to the dictionary. That's all it had to say about syzygy. Shaking, I replaced it.

SOMETHING cat-sized and furry hurtled through the air, clawed at my shoulder. I started, backed into my record cabinet and landed with a crash on the middle of my back in the doorway. The thing leaped from me to the couch and sat up, curling a long wide tail up against its back and regarding me with its jewelled eyes. A squirrel.

"Well, hello!" I said, getting to my

knees and then to my feet. "Where on earth did you come from?"

The squirrel, with the instantaneous motion of its kind, dived to the edge of the couch and froze with its four legs wide apart, head up, tail describing exactly its recent trajectory, and ready to take off instantly in any direction including up. I looked at it with some puzzlement. "I'll go see if I have any walnuts," I told it. I moved toward the archway, and as I did so the squirrel leaped at me. I threw up a hand to protect my face. The squirrel struck my shoulder again and leaped from it—

And as far as I know it leaped into the fourth dimension or somewhere. For I searched under and into every bed, chair, closet, cupboard and shelf in the house, and could find no sign of anything that even looked like a squirrel. It was gone as completely as the masses of tapioca. . . .

Tapioca! What had the head said about the tapioca? "She's thinking about it now." *She*—Gloria, of course. This whole insane business was tied up with Gloria in some way.

Gloria not only disliked tapioca—she was afraid of it.

**I** CHEWED on that for a while, and then I looked at the clock. Gloria had had time enough to get to the hotel. I ran to the phone, dialled.

"Hotel San Dragon," said a chewing-gum voice.

"748, please," I said urgently.

A couple of clicks. Then, "Hello?"

"Gloria," I said. "Listen; I—"

"Oh, you. Listen—can you call me back later? I'm very busy."

"I can and I will, but tell me something quickly: Are you afraid of squirrels?"

Don't tell me a shudder can't be transmitted over a telephone wire. One was that time. "I hate them. Call me back in about—"

"Why do you hate them?"

With exaggerated patience, she said carefully, "When I was a little girl, I was feeding some pigeons and a squirrel jumped right up on my shoulder and scared me half to death. Now, *please*—"

"Okay, okay," I said. "I'll speak to you

later." I hung up. She shouldn't talk to me that way. She had no right—

What was she doing in that hotel room, anyway?

I pushed the ugly thought down out of sight, and went and poured myself a beer. Gloria is afraid of tapioca, I thought, and tapioca shows up here. She is afraid of the sound of small animals' feet, and I hear them here. She is afraid of squirrels that jump on people, and I get a squirrel that jumps on people.

That must all make some sense. Of course, I could take the easy way out, and admit that I was crazy. But somehow, I was no longer so ready to admit anything like that. Down deep inside, I made an agreement with myself not to admit that until I had exhausted every other possibility.

A very foolish piece of business. See to it that you don't do likewise. It's probably much smarter not to try to figure things out.

There was only one person who could straighten this whole crazy mess out—since the head wouldn't—and that was Gloria, I thought suddenly. I realized, then, why I had not called all bets before now. I had been afraid to jeopardize the thing that Gloria and I shared. Well, let's face it. We didn't share it any longer. That admission helped.

I strode to the telephone, and dialled the hotel.

"Hotel San Dragon."

"748 please."

A moment's silence. Then, "I'm sorry, sir. The party does not wish to be disturbed."

**I** STOOD there looking blankly at the phone, while pain swirled and spiralled up inside me. I think that up to this moment I had treated the whole thing as part sickness, part dream; this, somehow, brought it to a sharp and agonizing focus. Nothing that she could have done could have been so calculated and so cruel.

I cradled the receiver and headed for the door. Before I could reach it, gray mists closed about me. For a moment I seemed to be on some sort of a treadmill; I was walking, but I could not reach any-

thing. Swiftly, then, everything was normal.

"I must be in a pretty bad way," I muttered. I shook my head. It was incredible. I felt all right, though a little dizzy. I went to the door and out.

The trip to the hotel was the worst kind of a nightmare. I could only conclude that there was something strange and serious wrong with me, completely aside from my fury and my hurt at Gloria. I kept running into these blind spells, when everything about me took on an unreal aspect. The light didn't seem right. I passed people on the street who weren't there when I turned to look at them. I heard voices where there were no people, and I saw people talking but couldn't hear them. I overcame a powerful impulse to go back home. I couldn't go back; I knew it; I knew I had to face whatever crazy thing was happening, and that Gloria had something to do with it.

I CAUGHT a cab at last, though I'll swear one of them disappeared just as I was about to step into it. Must have been another of those blind spells. After that it was easier. I slouched quivering in a corner of the seat with my eyes closed.

I paid off the driver at the hotel and stumbled in through the revolving doors. The hotel seemed much more solid than anything else since this horrible business had started to happen to me. I started over to the desk, determined to give some mad life-and-death message to the clerk to break that torturing "do not disturb" order. I glanced into the coffee room as I passed it and stopped dead.

She was in there, in a booth, with—with someone else. I couldn't see anything of the man but a glossy black head of hair and a thick, ruddy neck. She was smiling at him, the smile that I thought had been born and raised for me.

I stalked over to them, trembling. As I reached them, he half-rose, leaned across the table, and kissed her.

"Arthur . . ." she breathed.

"That," I said firmly, "will do."

They did not move.

"Stop it!" I screamed. They did not move. Nothing moved, anywhere. It was

a tableau, a picture, a hellish frozen thing put there to tear me apart.

"That's all," said a now familiar voice, gently. "That kiss did it, son. You're through." It was the head, but now he was a whole man. An ordinary-looking, middle-sized creature he was, with a scrawny frame to match his unimpressive middle-aged face. He perched on the edge of the table, mercifully between me and that torturing kiss.

I ran to him, grasped his thin shoulders. "Tell me what it is," I begged him. "Tell me, if you know—and I think you know. Tell me!" I roared, sinking my fingers into his flesh.

HE PUT his hands up and laid them gently on my wrists, holding them there until I quieted down a little. I let him go. "I am sorry, son," he said. "I hoped you would figure it all out by yourself."

"I tried," I said. I looked around me. The grayness was closing in again, and through it I could see the still figure of the people in the coffee-shop, all stopped in mid-action. It was one three-dimensional frame of some unthinkable movie-film. I felt cold sweat all but squirt from the pores of my face. "Where am I?" I shrieked.

"Please," he soothed. "Take it easy, and I'll tell you. Come over here and sit down and relax. Close your eyes and don't try to think. Just listen."

I did as he asked, and gradually I stopped shaking. He waited until he felt that I was calm, and then began talking.

"There is a world of psychic things—call them living thought, call them dreams if you like. Now, you know that of all animals, only human beings can reach these psychic things. It was a biological accident. There is something about humans which is tangent to this psychic world. Humans have the power to open a gate between the two worlds. They can seldom control the power; often they're not aware of it. But when that gate is opened, something materializes in the world of the humans. Imagination itself is enough to do it. If you are hungry, down deep inside, for a certain kind of woman, and if you picture her to yourself vividly enough, such a gate might

open, and there she'll be. You can see her and touch her; she'll be little different from a real one."

"But—there is a difference?"

"Yes, there is. She is not a separate thing from you. She is a part of you. She is your product. That's what I was driving at when I mentioned parthenogenesis. It works like that."

"Parthenogenesis—let's see. That's the process of reproducing without fertilization, isn't it?"

"That's right. - This 'materialization' of yours is a perfect parallel to that. As I told you before, however, it is not a process with high survival value. For one thing, it affords no chance to cross strains. Unless a living creature can bring into itself other characteristics, it must die out."

"Then why don't all parthenogenetic creatures die out?"

"There is a process used by the very simple, one-celled forms of life take care of that. Mind you," he broke off suddenly, "I'm just using all of this biological talk as symbolism. There are basic laws that work in both worlds, that work equally on the high forms of life and the low. Do you see?"

"I see. These are just examples. But go on about this process that the parthenogenetic creatures use to mix their strains."

"It's very simple. Two of these organisms let their nuclei flow together for a time. Then they separate and go their ways again. It isn't a reproductive process at all. It's merely a way in which each may gain a part of the other. It's called—syzygy."

"Oh," I said. "That. But I still don't—let me see. You mentioned it first when that—that—"

"When Gloria met Arthur," the man finished smoothly. "I said that if it were syzygy, you'd be all right. Well, it wasn't, as you saw for yourself. The outside strain, even though it didn't suit her as well as you did, was too strong. You got hurt. Well, in the workings of really basic laws, something always gets hurt."

"What about you? Who are you?"

"I am somebody who has been through it, that's all. You must understand that my world is different from the one you remember. Time itself is different. Though I

started from a time perhaps thirty years away, I was able to open a gate near you. Just a little one, of course. I did it so that I could try to make you think this thing out in time. I believed that if you could, you would have been spared all this. You might even have been able to keep Gloria."

"What's it to you?"

"You don't know, do you? You really don't know?"

I opened my eyes and looked at him, and shook my head. "No, I don't. I—like you, old man."

He chuckled. "That's odd, you know. I don't like me."

I CRANED around and looked over at Gloria and her man, still frozen in that strange kiss. "Will those dream-people stay like that forever?"

"Dream people?"

"I suppose that's what they are. You know, I'm a little proud of Gloria. How I managed to dream up anything so—so lovely, I'll never know. I—hey—what's the matter?"

"Didn't you understand what I was telling you? Gloria is real. Gloria goes on living. What you see over there is the thing that happened when you were no longer a part of her. Leo: she dreamed *you!*"

I rose to my feet and put my fists on the table between us. "That's a lie," I choked. "I'm—I'm me, damn you!"

"You're a detailed dream, Leo, and a splendid job. You're a piece of sentient psyche from another world injection-molded into an ideal that Gloria dreamed. Don't try to be anything else. There aren't many real humans, Leo. Most of the world is populated by the dreams of a few of them; didn't you know, Leo? Why do you suppose that so few of the people you met knew anything about the world as a whole? Why do you suppose that humans keep their interests confined and their environments small? Most of them aren't humans at all, Leo!"

"I'm *me*," I said stubbornly. "Gloria *couldn't* have thought of all of me! Gloria can't run a power shovel! Gloria can't play a guitar! Gloria doesn't know anything about the circus foreman who sang, or the Finn dynamite boss who was killed!"



"Of course not. Gloria only dreamed a kind of man who was the product of those things, or things like them. Have you run a shovel since you met her? You'd find that you couldn't, if you really tried. You've played guitar for no one but her since you met her. You've spent all your time arranging music that no one will ever see or play!"

"I'm *not* anybody's dream!" I shouted. "I'm not! If I was an ideal of hers, we would have stayed together. I failed with her, old man; don't you know that? She wanted me to be aggressive, and I wasn't."

He looked at me so sadly that I thought he was going to cry. "She wanted you to *take*. You were a part of her; no human can take from himself."

"She was deathly afraid of some things that didn't bother me at all. What about that?"

"The squirrels, and the sound of all the little feet? No, Leo; they were baseless phobias, and she had the power to overcome any of them. She never tried, but it was not difficult to create you without them."

I stared at him. "Do you mean to—Old man, are there more like me, really?"

"Many, many," he sighed. "But few who cling to their nonexistent, ghostly egos as you are doing."

"Do the real people know what they are doing?"

"Very few of them. Very few. The world is full of people who feel incom-

plete, people who have everything they can possibly want and yet are unhappy, people who feel alone in a crowd. The world is mostly peopled by ghosts."

"But—the war! Roman history! The new car models! What about them?"

He shook his head again. "Some of it's real, some not. It depends on what the real humans want from moment to moment."

I thought a minute, bitterly. Then I asked him "What was that you said about coming back in world-time, and looking through a little gateway at things that had happened?"

He sighed. "If you *must* hang on to the ego she gave you," he said wearily, "you'll stay the way you are now. But you'll age. It will take you the equivalent of thirty or so years to find your way around in that strange psychic world, for you will have to move and think like a human. Why do you want to do that?"

I said, with determination, "I am going back, then, if it takes me a century. I'm going to find me right after I met Gloria, and I'm going to warn me in such a way that I'll figure out a way to be with Gloria for the rest of her life."

He put his hands on my shoulders, and now there really were tears in his eyes. "Oh, you poor, poor kid," he said.

I stared at him. Then, "What's—your name, old man?"

"My name is Leo."

"Oh," I said. "Oh."

