

BLUE BOOK

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MAGAZINE

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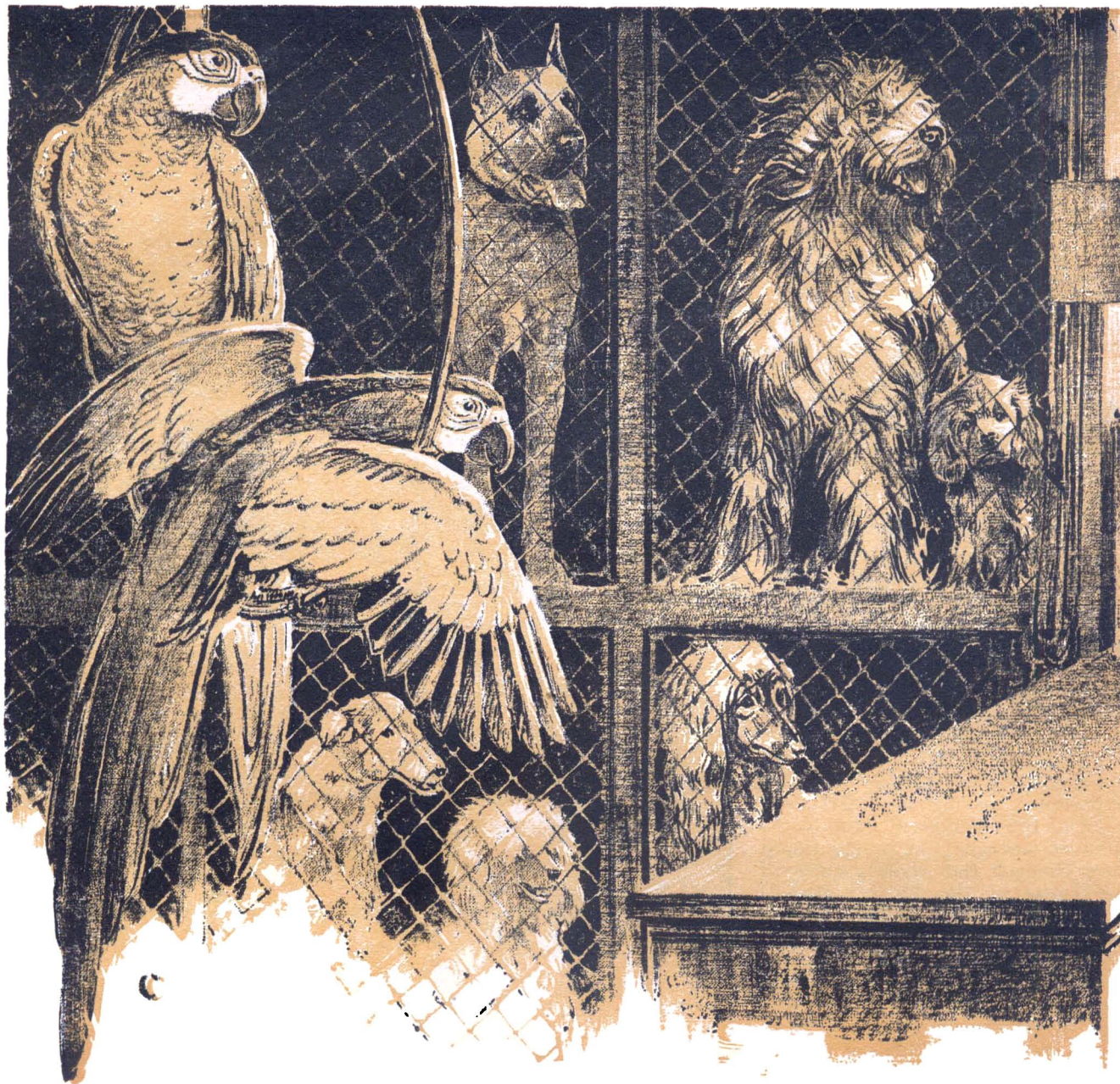
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The PET SHOP

THE faded sign read *John S. Beifrohns: Pets*. Keith Prentiss paused and stared at it and frowned. His lease said that he couldn't keep a pet—which only served to make Keith the more determined. It was his fancy to own one, he had the means to buy one, and he was not the sort to submit meekly to dictation. And in a world where dogs are the most popular of pets,

Prentiss meant to have one for his own.

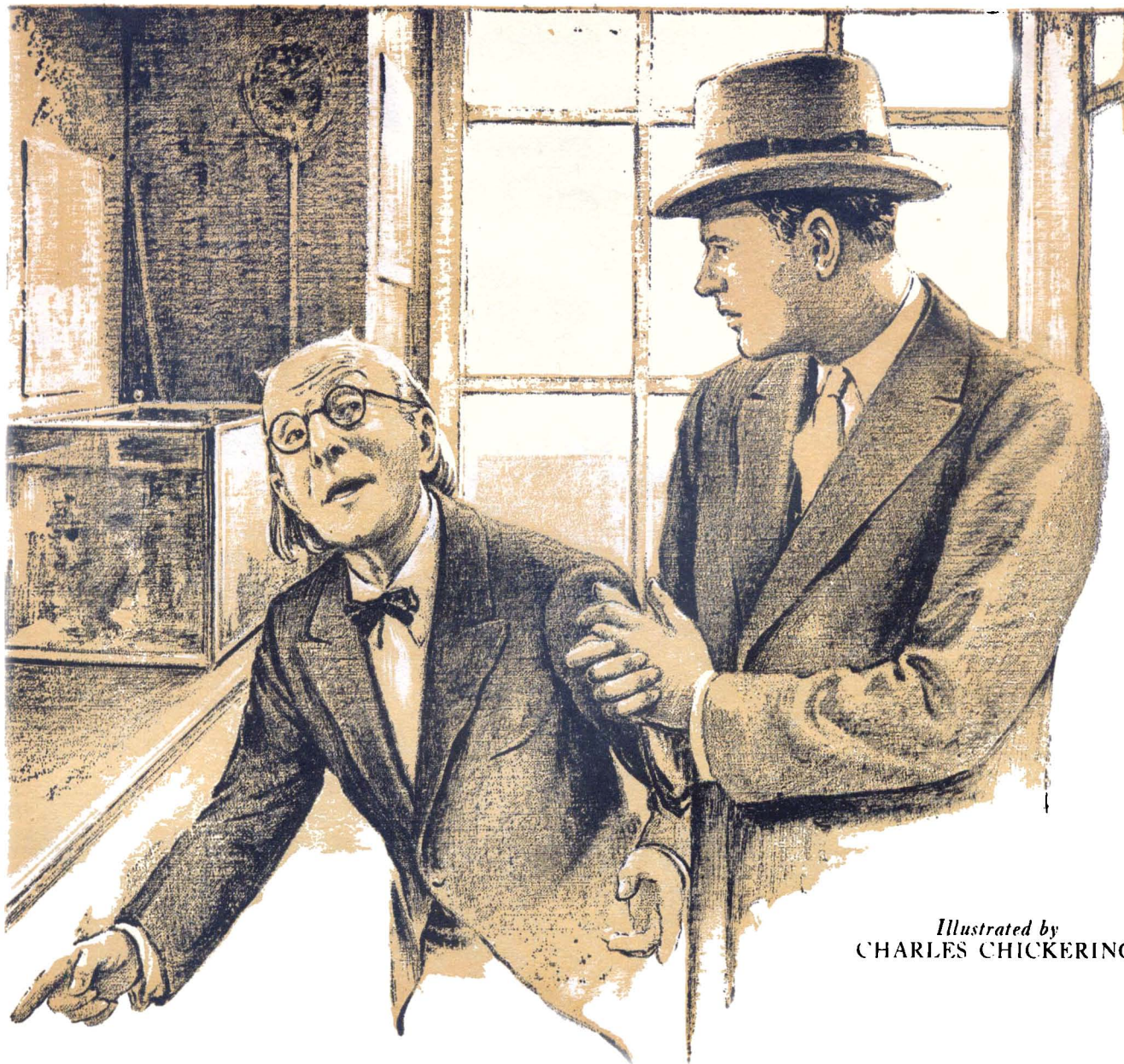
A crimson sun beamed brightly on the gray and dingy door as Prentiss turned and with abrupt decision stepped into the pet shop. . . .

As ancient and weathered as the shop itself was its proprietor. From the enshadowed well of the narrow but surprisingly deep shop he sham- bled forward as a tiny, invisible bell

tinkled announcement of a customer. He was a small man, shabby and unkempt, but in the eyes with which he questioned Prentiss' purpose there glinted a shrewd acumen, a curiously intent and keen appraisal of the man who stood before him.

"Yes?" he asked softly. "There is something I can do for you?"

"A dog," said Keith. "I want to buy a dog."



Illustrated by
CHARLES CHICKERING

SINCE WE PUBLISHED HIS "EXILES OF TIME" IN 1940, THIS SINGULARLY GIFTED WRITER HAS GIVEN US "THE MAGIC STAIRCASE," "THE SONG," "THE MASK OF MEDUSA" AND MANY OTHER WELL-REMEMBERED STORIES. THE WEIRD TALE WHICH FOLLOWS DESERVES TO STAND NEAR THE HEAD OF THAT FINE COMPANY.

by NELSON BOND

"Yes, sir. Had you any particular breed in mind? I have a very fine selection here. Scotties, cockers, bulldogs; or perhaps a Kerry Blue?"

"I hardly know." Keith glanced about him almost helplessly. His eyes, gradually accustoming themselves to the fusty gloom of the shop, identified shapes that had been vague outlines heretofore as cages, kennels, pens. From these emitted, with no great

clamor but as a dim, incessant undercurrent of sound, the muted mouthings of the inmate beasts: the fretful chirps of birds, the plaintive mews of cats, the mingled whines and nervous barks of dogs, all voicing impotent protest at this confinement uncomprehended and unlike.

"I hardly know," repeated Keith. "A house pet of some sort? An uncommon breed, perhaps? I rather like

things that are just a bit out of the ordinary."

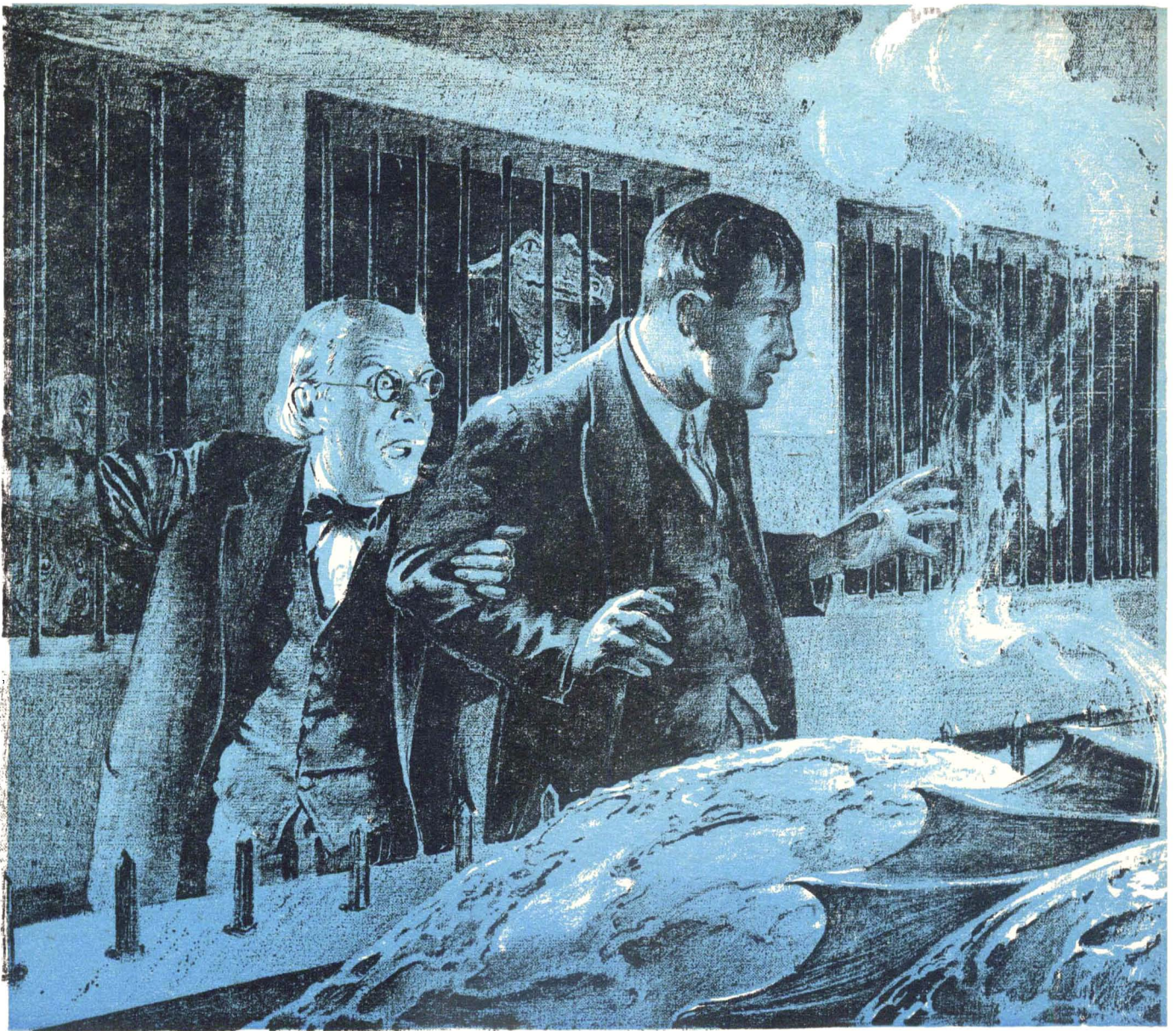
The semblance of a smile touched fleetingly the old man's lips.

"I see," he nodded. "But, then, what seems unusual to one may be another's commonplace. The purchaser; the purchase. The line between is but a passageway."

"I beg your pardon?" said Prentiss.

"Nothing. I am an old man, and I fear I talk too much. Now, let me see. An uncommon breed, you said? If you will follow me—"

HE led Keith past twin rows of screened enclosures, making no effort to influence his customer's decision, simply displaying his wares that Keith might make a choice. Which was no easy matter. Keith Prentiss liked dogs. All kinds of dogs. Each type and size had some appeal for him. He smiled in warm amusement at the antics of a kennel of spaniel puppies, nodded his



Keith thought he saw the pale form of a slim and naked girl. "Then that, too, is true?"

approbation of a clean-limbed Dalmatian which, as he paused to look at it, returned his gaze with a grave deliberation that matched his own. He muttered sounds of soothing to a quick, excited dachshund scrabbling futilely at the barrier between them. Then he shook his head in whimsical confusion at the proprietor.

"So many dogs," he sighed. "Where do they all come from? I've often wondered."

"From everywhere,"—the old man shrugged—"and nowhere. Who can say? You don't see one you like, then?"

"Many," acknowledged Keith. "But not *the* one. Do you know what I mean? I'd be happy with almost any one of them, but it's hard to decide."

"Something unusual, you said," mused the proprietor. "Well—let us look farther on."

He continued to lead the way toward the back of the shop. Keith followed, his dim surprise at the store's unsuspected depth lost in his greater wonder at the dealer's vast variety of offerings. Other than at important shows, he had never seen gathered in one spot so many different kinds of dogs. Here were displayed breeds so uncommon that some of them Keith had only heard of, and never before seen. Afghans and elk-hounds, Brussels and Samoyedes, schipperkes, Lhasa terriers, griffons; these were but a few of the rare breeds here represented.

"Your stock," said Prentiss, "is truly amazing. Do you actually have a demand for all of these?"

The owner smiled again. It was an oddly disturbing flexion of the lips, that shallow mirthlessness which was his smile. It was at once secretive and taunting, obsequious and derisive. "A

two-faced devil," thought Keith with a touch of pique. "Well, damn him! If he's laughing at me—"

But there was irreproachable respect in the owner's reply.

"Indeed yes, sir. There is a demand for every kind of pet if one has the proper—outlets." Beifrohns hesitated briefly on the word. Then he repeated, nodding thoughtfully, "For *every* kind."

"No doubt," agreed Keith absently. "I must confess the unusual ones appeal to me most strongly." Then, a trifle defiantly, "I suppose you think it's a sort of conceit that makes a man want to own an unusual pet? A form of exhibitionism?"

"Not at all, sir. A very common trait. Altogether human." They had reached that section Keith had earlier conceived to be the back of the shop. Now the owner pushed back a curtain,



There are such things as werewolves."

revealing a doorway to a passageway beyond. "Now, if you would like to see some *really* unusual pets," he said, "just come with me, sir—"

THE feter in the rearward shop was strongly animal. Indeed the whole effect, thought Prentiss, was rather that of a zoo than of a pet shop. The scents back here were sharper, the sounds more ominous, the larger cages wrought of sturdier bars.

In a pen to his right a creature snarled, lifting its head from a grisly, half-gnawed bone to glare at him with red and angry eyes. Keith stared at it, a grimace of sudden revulsion wrinkling his nostrils. He glanced swift query at his guide.

"A husky?" he suggested. "A wild dog?"

"Neither," replied the old man quietly. "A wolf."

"A wolf? But why? Surely no one would want a wolf for a pet?"

Beifrohn shrugged. "Perhaps not for a pet. But perhaps for—other reasons?" Again there was that cryptic hesitation in his words. "Men have made more than comrades of wolfkind in the past. A mighty nation boasted that its founders suckled at the dugs of one like this. Another race once deified its kind."

Prentiss frowned. "Surely you're not serious? The wolf that mothered Romulus was a legend, the Fenris wolf a monster out of myth."

"Perhaps," replied the old man. "And then again—perhaps not. Would you insist that *he* is but a myth?"

He nodded toward a creature in the next enclosure. Keith turned and looked. Then he gasped. The thing at which he stared in raw astonishment was no member of the family of

dogs. It was equine in form, smooth-limbed and graceful as a gazelle. Its color, too, was that of the desert beast. But there the similarity ended. For from this creature's forehead incredibly projected a long, slim, delicately convolute spike. The animal was—a unicorn!

Keith cried, "But this—" Then he stopped, because the protest leaping to his lips did not make sense. Meaningless to say the thing was impossible, for it was there before him. He said instead, "Where—where did it come from?"

The old man's answer was a variation on his former words.

"There is a source for every kind of pet if one has the proper outlets. And I have those, you know. This way and that; hither and yon."

There was a disquieting significance to the way he bobbed his head alternately toward the front and back of the shop. A thin prickle of unease tingled Prentiss' spine. The man, he thought, was obviously mad. And yet—the creature in this cage?

HE stretched a hand tentatively toward the unicorn. It shied violently, withdrawing to the other end of its pen, where it stood nervously atremble, watching Keith warily with its great, soft, curiously colorless eyes. The proprietor smiled thinly.

"I fear you cannot touch it," he murmured. "Only a virgin clad in cloth of gold—" He shrugged. "But of course you know the rites. Shall we go on?"

Keith wet his lips in brief uncertainty. An impulse deeper than his thinking mind warned him that he had seen more already than it was wise to see. But Prentiss had the questing type of mind, and now his curiosity was strongly aroused. He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "By all means, yes."

"It is only fair to tell you," said the proprietor, "that this is the turning-point. Beyond here is but one direction—forward. You may go back now, or go on." And then, as Keith made no reply, "Very well. It is yours to decide."

He moved forward, and as in a dream Keith Prentiss followed him. And well it was that in a dream he walked, else what he saw might well have turned his mind.

The cage beyond the unicorn contained a scaly thing twice the length of a man. It was, thought Keith at first, a giant lizard. But as they passed, it raised the milky veil of its saurian eyes; its thin, cruel mouth split in an angry hiss. And perhaps it was only a long red tongue that for an instant showed between those rows of fangs—but Keith thought otherwise. Fire alone has heat. And flame, too, has a long and crimson tongue.

Still farther down the passage stood a tank. Keith could not see into its noisome depths, but a ceaseless churning roiled its greasy surface, and to Keith it seemed that they were squamous coils which undulated through the bubbling spume in some slow, horror-pregnant movement.

He was still wondering if it were a kraken or some sea beast he had glimpsed when Beifrohn spoke again.

"A moment ago I think we spoke of wolves? Here is a type that you may find—amusing."

His choice of words was something less than apt. It was hardly an "amusing" shape which hunkered in the next cage. It sat and watched them slyly as they passed, gray canine form with scarlet mouth cleft in bestial simulacrum of a smile. It made no sound, but when they had moved on from abreast its enclosure, Keith heard a furtive scraping from that grilled pen. He turned, and in the vague light thought he saw standing the pale form of a slim and naked girl, hands gripping the bars.

He turned to retrace his steps. But the old man's staying hand was on his shoulder.

"No, my friend. There is no turning back," he said.

"But—a woman!" cried Prentiss. "There was a girl in that cage where first I saw a wolf!"

Beifrohn nodded. "Even so," he said gently. "But surely you are not again surprised?"

Keith whispered dazedly, "Then that, too, is true? There *are* such things as werewolves?"

"Mankind has less imagination than it dreams," said the pet-shop owner. "The marvel is not that so many men have told of these creatures, but that other men have doubted their descriptions. There are all types of beings. All are real. And none are wholly fabled."

"But—" protested Prentiss.

"There is an ancient saying, 'No smoke without fire.' So is it with your folk tales and your legends. Not a one is without its underlying truth.

"Like this one—" said the old man. "And yet there are those who will contend his like has never been."

And he nodded toward a triple-headed dog that rose, stiff-kneed, to simultaneously growl and bark and snap at them as they approached its kennel.

It was then, at last, that Prentiss began to understand and fear. What had sustained him until now he could not say. A dread-benumbing mixture of inquisitiveness and doubt, perhaps; the anesthesia of surprise and incredulity. But now, abruptly if belatedly, he began to comprehend what he had blundered into. The cold caress

of terror touched his heart; he halted in his tracks and set his jaw.

"See here," he said, "I've changed my mind. I think I've seen enough. I'm not sure I understand *what* I've seen, and I'm even less sure I want to. But I'll be going now."

The old man nodded quiet acquiescence. "Of course," he said. "But forward."

"No, thanks. I said I've seen enough. I—"

"Forward," repeated old Beifrohn. "You will recall my warning that in this passageway there is no turning back?"

Keith Prentiss glared at his guide defiantly.

"Oh, no? Your mistake, my friend. I'm going back the way I came—right now."

"It is you who are mistaken," sighed the proprietor. "But if you must, then you may make the trial."

And he stepped quietly aside as Prentiss whirled and took three strides to—

—To nowhere. For there was no passageway. Where but a moment before had stood twin rows of cages, now Prentiss found but a blank, impassive wall. The kennels and their contents were no more; the door through which he had entered the corridor had disappeared.

"You see?" said the man Beifrohn. "There is but one way—and that is forward."

"Ridiculous!" snapped Prentiss. "This is a trick of some kind. An optical illusion. If you think I can't find my way out of this damned mirror maze of yours—"

BUT the walls against which at first he pressed, then ultimately beat with frightened fists, were as solid and unyielding as his host's unchanging smile. And as he beat upon the impossible barrier with increasing panic, the ancient guide repeated, "I'm sorry, my friend. But you were warned. From this passageway there is no turning back."

"Passageway?" cried Prentiss. "What passageway is this? What devil's trap or den—"

"Then still you have not guessed?" There was that in the old one's eyes which was at once sympathetic and without human understanding. "This is the way between; the meeting-place. The single passageway that links the worlds."

"That links—the worlds?"

"Surely, my friend, you do not share that blindness of mankind which leads men to believe their little world to be the only plane on which life may exist?" Beifrohn shook his head sadly. "Has it not yet dawned on you that these pets of mine, so strange and new to you, are denizens of yet another world?"

"Look here. And here—" The old man led him on. "Have you before seen beasts the like of these?"

Numbly, dazedly, Keith Prentiss stared at the cages stretched before him, beholding creatures of which before he had heard only in wildest fantasy. A winged horse—and a horse with human head. A bird with serpent's tail; a cockatrice. Another creature with a lion's head, the body of a goat—and dragon's tail; from its maned withers grew a second head, capric in semblance.

There was a silver stallion in one stall, another held a browsing yearling bull. It had a jet-black coat, did this young bull, but on its forehead was a white triangular spot, on its right side a spot like a half moon. And with a dreadful awe Keith Prentiss knew that could he see beneath its hidden tongue he would find a knot the shape and size of a beetle.

KEITH turned, perplexed, to face his aged host. "Is it—" he began, then chose another pronoun, "Is *he* too for sale?"

Beifrohn shook his head. "No. Osiris waits for his appointed time. But when his hour strikes, he will appear, as was foretold."

Despite his horror, Keith moved slowly on. There was a dreadful fascination to this place. He knew he should turn back, or at least try. He was younger than his guide, and stronger; when the time came, he could force the old man to show him the way out. But intrigued by the wonders he beheld, mutely he followed forward.

Pet shop or madhouse, Keith could not say which, but that which he saw here was like a catalogue of myth. Sirens and cecrops, aegipanes and sphinx—their half-forgotten names sprang to his mind as each revealed itself within some cage. The chimera was there, and hydra, too; harpy and satyr, roc and nereid. Increasingly humanoid in form became the beasts as strangely brighter grew the passageway. From somewhere up ahead spilled shafts of light, a gleaming in the shadowed corridor that was not the warm, golden glow of sunlight, but an odd and luminous blue.

As if in answer to his unspoken query, his guide—or warden—spoke.

"See, it grows light. We approach the end," he said.

"The other end of the passageway?"

Beifrohn nodded. Prentiss stared at him, his eyes narrowing and thoughtful.

"And when we reach there—"

"You will see the other world," said Beifrohn. And almost gently, "It is a sight not granted to many."

Despite his lurking doubts and grave suspicions, a resurgence of curiosity suffused Keith Prentiss. The

chance to view another world? Madness, of course. But, then, all this was madness. There was—there must be—some reasonable and logical explanation for all this. At worst it was a hoax; undoubtedly the greatest and most meaningless hoax ever perpetrated upon an innocent victim, but a hoax, nevertheless. At the end there would be explanations. And laughter. Laughter to wash away all foolish fears. Meanwhile. . .

Brighter and brighter grew the light about him. And now the passageway, it seemed to Keith, began again to widen. He pressed forward eagerly, feasting his eyes on each new wonder to be viewed, outdistancing his slower-moving guide.

Then, suddenly, he reached a barrier. With abrupt surprise he discovered that those bars which he had mistaken for the uprights of a cage before him were in reality a barrier halting his progress. He turned to the right: the way was blocked with bars. And to the left. Again the way was barred. He turned to Beifrohns.

"I say," he called, "there's something odd here—"

And then he stopped, shocked into silence. Because behind him his aged guide was quietly fastening the metal gate through which he had entered this last enclosure. There came the grate of steel on steel as a key turned in a lock. Then slowly, deliberately, and with a curious sort of kindness, the old man bent and placed two earthen bowls within the cage wherein Keith Prentiss stood. One of the bowls held water, and one food.

With a scream that was less fear than rage, Keith hurled himself on the unyielding bars. He roared, he howled, he swore—to no avail. The old man walked away, forward toward the strangely unearthly blue light.

Keith's fury was a dreadful spectacle. His cries, his threats, roused all his fellow beasts. Within the shop, for quite some little while, there was that din which frequently occurs when some newcomer takes poorly to confinement.

But at the end, Keith's screams of protest died in plaintive, sullen whimpers. And later still, he laughed.

THE faded sign read *Janus Bifrons: Pets*. Gryll Kyrkind paused and stared at it and frowned. His lease said that he couldn't keep a pet—which only served to make Gryll the more determined. It was his fancy to own one, he had the means to buy one, and he was not the sort to submit meekly to dictation. And in a world where men are the most popular of pets, Kyrkind meant to have one for his own.

A cobalt sun beamed brightly on the gray and dingy door as Kyrkind turned and with abrupt decision trotted into the pet shop. . .

