

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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Alex Schomburg  
*Cover Design*

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the  
whispering  
gallery

by . . . William F. Temple

Frederic sought only the golden  
apple atop the cathedral's dome.  
He had no forewarning that the  
grim shadow was lying in ambush.

Now, if you will just come  
this way . . .

The voice was sibilant and in-  
sinuating. It hinted at wonders  
which would make all you had seen  
so far become thin and flat and for-  
gotten. Marvels unmatched lay just  
around the corner and the voice  
knew the way.

But Frederic was five years old  
and therefore he knew what voices  
really said and it wasn't always  
what the words would have you be-  
lieve. This voice said, really, "I hate  
you all, especially the boy, and this  
is the way out and I shall be glad  
to see the last of you."

The voice had no intention after  
all of leading the way up the secret  
staircase to the golden ball.

This guide was a tall lean fellow,  
with yellow sunken cheeks and eye-  
sockets so deep and shadowed you  
could not be sure whether there  
were eyes in their recesses or not.  
Not unless you looked hard into  
them, that was, and so far Frederic  
had not found the courage to do  
so and make sure.

He peeped up at the guide's face  
only now and again from the cor-  
ners of his own eyes and the sight  
of the strangely small nose—(as if  
the original had been pared down  
to the bone)—and the almost lip-

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*It is with true pleasure, which we trust will be shared by most of you, that we wel-  
come the first appearance of William F. Temple in the pages of PANTASTIC  
UNIVERSE. For he is one of the very best of that exceedingly able little group of  
British writers who have done so much for us of late. And his story speaks for itself.*

less mouth, with the big white teeth that seemed set in a sort of satanic grin that would always be there whatever the outward facial mask expressed, had frightened his timid glance away every time.

If only this man had been like the jolly Beefeater in the fancy dress who had shown him the room in the Tower of London where the little Princes had been murdered. The Beefeater would have taken him up to the golden ball and perhaps given it to him. Especially if he had known that Frederic had wanted it for years. Since yesterday morning.

Yesterday was the magic morning when Jim was driving him around London in the open tourer. Just him and Jim. They were caught for a few minutes in a traffic jam in Fleet Street and their car was facing east.

"Gosh," said Frederic, pointing over the bonnet, "that must be the biggest building in the world!"

The chauffeur looked tolerantly up at the Cathedral.

He said, "It looks big from here because it's standing on top of a hill—Ludgate Hill. But it's not so big really. It's hardly knee-high to the Empire State and you've been up that."

Frederic craned his neck. The great gray dome swelled up like an enormous bubble above the twin flanking towers and on top of the dome stood another high tower with a golden gallery around its base. And right at the top of this tower was a golden ball with a golden

cross planted on it like a tree. All the golden things glittered in the sunlight but the ball gleamed brightest of all. It seemed to give a light of its own rather than reflect.

"Don't be stupid, Jim," said Frederic, scornfully. "Anybody can see it's higher than the Empire State. It's the biggest thing I've ever seen. What a lovely golden ball that is! I wish I had it to play with. I wonder if it—comes off?"

"Would you like me to climb up there and unscrew it for you?" Jim asked quizzically.

"Would you?" said Frederic eagerly. "*Would you?*"

Jim laughed. There was a time when he would have sighed and muttered under his breath, "These rich folk are all alike—big kids and little kids. But all kids. Get me this, get me that—look, the moon shines pretty—get me that."

But he had served them for a long time now and he had grown philosophical. They weren't happy, these people—they were poor. They were always wanting something—not only to have something but to go somewhere, see something new, have someone praise them, reassure them, do things for them. When they were little kids the world was too big for them and they tore around it in deadly fear of missing any of it before they died.

And when they were big kids, with dulled eyes and desensitized palates, the world was too small.

It was a pile of cinders which they prodded wearily, hoping against hope that one day they might uncover something that gleamed bright and new and fascinated the attention. Like the dimly-remembered silver ring hanging from the hood of the baby carriage. Like the golden ball atop St. Paul's Cathedral on a sunny day in your fifth year.

"Jim! You're not listening."

"Yes I am, Freddy. See here, son, when you're small you get all balled up over sizes and heights and distances. I remember when I was a kid telling my Ma that telegraph posts were just the tallest things in the world, higher than any old church steeple. But when I grew up I saw I hadn't been talking sense."

"Get me the ball, Jim," said Frederic gravely.

"I'm trying to tell you, son—it's too big. Why, half a dozen grown-up men could get inside it."

"Why, it's no bigger than an apple! Perhaps it *is* an apple—a golden apple. The golden apple in the story."

"What story?"

"Oh," — impatiently — "the one Mr. George told me about Paris giving Aphro — Aphrodotty" — he hadn't got the name right but it didn't matter — Jim wouldn't know — "a golden apple for a prize. I've always wanted a golden apple. I wonder if it *is*, Jim? Do you think it *is*?"

Jim Bates opened his mouth, then closed it again. He had often done

that in the service of the Staggs. Mrs. Staggs frequently found the truth unpleasant. Her son also obstinately believed what he wanted to believe. There wasn't much use fighting against it. The rich were always right—if you wanted to keep your job.

"I don't know, Freddy. I don't suppose I shall ever know."

"Why not climb . . . ?"

"Chauffeurs aren't allowed in churches," said Jim hastily but firmly, as though it were a thing everybody knew. And Frederic, who knew that there were many holy sanctums in his native Boston where chauffeurs weren't allowed entry, said "Oh," disappointedly as the jam broke and the car rolled forward.

"Jim, perhaps I—"

More haste and firmness. "We must go back to the hotel now. Your mother said you're to be back at one for lunch."

And the tourer swung sharply left at Ludgate Circus and angled back through side-streets to Holborn and the straight run to the hotel at Marble Arch, and though he kept looking back Frederic could not see St. Paul's again for the shops and office buildings. He couldn't understand how such little buildings could block out such a towering magnificence as St. Paul's.

*Perhaps they're jealous, he thought. They're getting together and trying to stop anyone from seeing St. Paul's because it makes them look so unimportant beside it.*

"But I *can't*, Frederic—not this afternoon. We're having tea with Lady Cornford."

"Can we go tomorrow then, Mom?"

"No. We're going home tomorrow."

The corners of Frederic's mouth turned down. His eyes began to water.

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Stagg and her self-harassed mind darted about seeking to forestall the shrieks which would have drowned the orchestra in the hotel restaurant.

She consulted the clock-face which was always in that mind's eye by which she lived, by which she moved, always aiming to fit the social events and the sightseeing in so that there would be no awful gaps in which she might be left to reflect upon herself.

"Well, look, I could just spare half an hour—no more. We should have to come away right after that."

Frederic smiled. "Thanks, Mom." Half an hour was an enormously long time—easily long enough to reach the golden apple. For by now he was almost sure that it was an apple.

It was a long time but Skeleton-face, as Frederic silently named the lank guide, wasted it. When he had taken the little party around the various chapels and the choir and shown them the Grinling Gibbons carvings and the altar, Frederic hoped that now they would go up to the golden ball.

But the quiet cold sibilant voice

said, "Now, if you will just come this way . . ."

And it lured them downstairs among the vast piers of the crypt and it seemed reluctant to leave this place. It kept them staring at the huge and horrible iron funeral carriage that had brought Wellington's body here, while it gave them endless precise details about the manufacture of this ugly thing. It hissed over the tomb of Nelson, and of Wren himself, and over the resting places of the silent multitude of bishops, and artists, and military and naval men.

This cold gloom was the natural habitat of the voice and Frederic felt that it wanted none of them to leave, it wanted them all to stay here. It would talk smoothly and quietly until they were lulled to sleep and then, somehow, it would get them lying stiff and dead with the others under the hard heavy stone floor.

So just as the voice was saying, "This is the sepulchre of Archdeacon—" Frederic cut in with a wail.

"I wanna go upstairs!"

That was where the voice began to hate him.

"Now, if you will just come this way . . ."

They went upstairs, past a notice saying *To the Golden Gallery and Ball* and up some more stairs, up and up and up.

As they mounted behind the steady-paced guide all the party began to lose their breath and make little sighs and smiling grimaces at

each other. Except Frederic, who was tense with excitement and anticipation.

Maybe this guide wouldn't *give* him the ball—(which, of course, was really an apple)—but if Mom saw how much he wanted it she would buy it for him. It didn't matter how much it cost—Mom was the richest lady in the world. She could buy him the whole Cathedral if she wanted to. But he only wanted the apple.

The richest lady in the world gasped, "Oh dear! I didn't know it was going to take as long as this."

They got to the top of the winding staircase and with his heart throbbing in his breast Frederic followed the guide through the only doorway there.

"Ooh!" they all said as they found they were all insects perched precariously on a narrow rim immediately beneath the arching interior of the great dome, that only an iron railing stood between them and the spreading gulf beneath. Far, far below other insects crawled over the black-and-white checkerboard of the floor. They were in a vast but bounded universe.

Frederic peered up to where the browning murals curved together and met around a spider's gallery and realized that although he was very high up the golden apple was at least as high again above him still. There must be another staircase somewhere that led up through the dome. Perhaps a hidden secret staircase.

He hesitated and tried to go back

but the heavy grown-ups pressed all about him and carried him forward. And then they stopped, because the guide had stopped.

Skeleton-face said, "This is the famous Whispering Gallery. It has peculiar acoustic properties which I shall now demonstrate to you. If you would kindly move around to the opposite side of the Gallery and stand listening against the wall . . ."

"I don't want—" began Frederic. But Mrs. Stagg grabbed his hand and said in a low irritated whisper, "Oh, come on!"

The group moved slowly along the curving ledge with the fearful drop on its right-hand side, at which some of them dared not look and others only vouchsafed fleeting sidelong glances. There was a hush over everything.

Frederic was impatient and wanted to run. But this was a place where you neither ran nor shouted. The great Cathedral stood impassive and suffered these insects to crawl over it so long as they moved slowly and reverentially. Frederic felt that if he shouted the Cathedral would start angrily and shake all these invading creatures out of its crevices.

At last they reached the side of the Gallery opposite the doorway, beside which the guide had remained standing, dwarfed by distance. They arranged themselves in a line, kneeling with one knee on the seat, putting one ear close to the wall.

Frederic did not put his ear very close. He had no wish to hear that

voice again. Nevertheless he heard it, distinct and loud, as if the guide were standing beside him—yet he could see him, a thin little shape a long way off, with all the width of the dome between them.

"I am speaking only in a whisper, yet you hear me clearly. The inward diameter of this dome is one hundred eight feet and the outer diameter one hundred forty-five feet. The eight murals which you see on the inner surface of the dome were painted by Sir James Thornhill and represent episodes in the life of St. Paul . . . ."

The voice went on about St. Paul and Frederic sensed that its owner had no great liking for the saint—there was a new sneering undertone. The voice wanted to have done. So did Frederic. On an impulse, Frederic put his mouth close to the wall and said shrilly, "We don't want to stay here. We want to go up to the golden apple."

"Frederic!" exclaimed his mother, shocked and alarmed. Her voice became amplified to that of an angry giantess and boomed hollowly all about them.

The guide's voice had stopped. There was a moment's awful silence, which Mrs. Stagg spent with a guilty flush spreading over her cheeks.

Then—"Now, if you will just come this way . . . ."

The voice was sibilant and insinuating. It hinted at wonders which could make all you had seen so far become thin and flat.

But Frederic was five years old and therefore he knew that the voice really said, "I hate you all, especially the boy, and this is the way out and I shall be glad to see the last of you."

The voice had no intention after all of leading the way up the secret staircase to the golden ball.

The party shuffled round the great semi-circle back to the door—and Skeleton-face, who stood awaiting them like Charon. Frederic kept his eyes on his own feet and would not look up. For he knew that deep in those dark eye-sockets somewhere above his head animosity burned like a flame and if the other people hadn't been there . . . He was glad now that he was in the middle of a bunch of grownups. They were his unconscious protectors.

Huddling close he watched his feet and his mother's feet descending the stairs. And presently they were crossing the black-and-white floor, then the dirty black steps outside the Cathedral, and then—hurriedly—the sidewalk.

Then he saw the running-board of the car and looked up and there was Jim grinning at him and the fear in him unfroze.

"Get in, Frederic, don't just stand there," said his mother, pushing him. "Go as fast as you dare, Bates—we're ten minutes late now. What will Lady Cornford think?"

Frederic had not shone before the Lady. He had been silent and, when pressed, sulky. And, when pressed again, rude—very rude.

When they got back to the hotel Mrs. Stagg decided on disciplinary measures. "You will go straight to bed now, Frederic. And you are *not* to look at your picture-books in bed. I've had more than enough of you today."

The boy who had caused his mother to shout in a cathedral and look small, who had been rude to an English Lady and again made his mother look small, was left alone in the bedroom with his guilt.

He felt no remorse, only an intense aching regret that tomorrow they would be leaving London and the golden apple behind. Forever, probably. Someone else would come along and take the golden apple away while he was on the silly ship or back at silly school in Boston.

He got out of bed and went to the window. The buses swung dizzyly in and out of Park Lane and for awhile he watched them and the little people down there who dodged them and took sanctuary in green Hyde Park. It was summer and there was still an hour or two of daylight left.

He decided nothing. It was as if someone else had taken over his body suddenly and made it act with purpose. He found himself putting on his street clothes, buttoning them up.

Then he was opening the door quietly, surveying the passage, and then he was at the open window at the rear of the building, scrambling through it, and then he was watching his feet descending the webby iron steps of the fire-escape

just as they had descended the staircase in St. Paul's.

The feet seemed to know the way though it was easy enough. It was almost a straight road back to St. Paul's. But it was a very long road and the feet were very tired when they got there and climbed the dirty steps in the pale rose light coming up the hill from the sinking sun.

He entered to the sound of far-off singing. There, down at the end of the great nave, candles burned on the altar and before them two lines of people in white surplices sang sweetly together and the organ made quiet thunder over their heads. There were other people too, watching them, in the dim pink light reflected from the windows below the dome.

In fact they were so intent on their watching and the choir was so intent on its song that no one noticed him stealing down a side aisle, between the chairs and up the stairs which led to the Whispering Gallery.

The old verger who took the entrance money was no longer there and this gave Frederic heart. All the guides would have gone home by now, Skeleton-face among them. Now all he had to do was to find a place to hide for just a little while until the choir and the congregation had gone home too, leaving St. Paul's—and the golden apple—to him alone.

Up the stairs there was a corridor leading to the library and in that corridor he had noticed a cer-

tain secluded alcove. He hoped he could reach it soon for his legs were aching and very tired . . .

When he awakened, his shoulders and legs were painful with cramp for the alcove was small even for him. Rubbing them he went exploring in the dark. Soon he had other places to rub, for there seemed to be a lot of things to bump into and they were all hard. What chance had he of finding the secret staircase to the apple? It must be well hidden and hard to detect even in the daytime. He wished he had thought to bring his torch. But then he hadn't intended to fall asleep and stay here until after dark.

He was not afraid for the ball shining in the sunlight shone still in his memory and he felt that it was even now shining there in actuality somewhere above him. When he reached it and unscrewed it—(but it was an apple, really, and he would just pick it)—it would continue to glow and light his way back down the stairs and along the streets to the hotel. He bumped and blundered along the wall like a blow-fly on a window-pane and all at once fell through a doorway. As he lay there his foot, extended behind him, discovered the top of a stairway.

And then, quite distinctly, he heard slow steady footsteps coming up that dark stairway.

He caught his breath and picked himself up. He must not be discovered now. He went on through the doorway and so emerged into

a very dim yellow light. He was in the Whispering Gallery, uncertainly lit by a moon striving first to pierce a veil of nimbus cloud and then the dusty window-panes of the Cathedral.

He hesitated. There was only this one door, which was the sole entrance and exit to the Gallery. The footsteps were louder now and began to echo. He fled from them, keeping close to the seat along the curving wall in a stumbling yet stealthy sort of run, trying to make no noise in a place which he knew magnified sound in a terrifying way.

Yet he was still not really frightened—only excited.

It was a long way around to the place diametrically opposite the door, the place where they had all stood listening in the afternoon, but it did not seem quite so far this time because he could run. There he sat on the seat, hunched up against the wall, trying to make himself so small as to be invisible and holding his breath lest the same treacherous wall caught the small sound of his presence and flung it around in revealment.

A threadbare patch in the flat cloud passed under the moon and the spacious murals on the dome overhead suddenly stood out distinctly with an odd stereoscopic effect. And the dark little oblong of the doorway on the far side of the Gallery became visible.

Below, in the immense well of the Cathedral, he saw now that here and there an electric candelabrum glowed, each casting its little circle

of light, frayed and thin at the edges—a few tiny wide-scattered oases in a black desert.

But now he watched the distant doorway opposite—and waited.

His vision became a little blurred with the intensity of his gaze. Presently it seemed that a small vertical strip of the dark rectangle had detached itself and floated away from the main body. And then this little black stroke became still. He rubbed his watering eyes and looked again. There was no doubt about it. The thin black shadow was quite separate from the frame of the doorway.

Then the cloud thickened under the moon again, the murals became blurs, the doorway and the shadow merged into common blackness and only the small glints of electric light far below retained their clarity and shape.

He hoped the shadow would go back through the doorway. He sat, still hunched, gripping the edge of the seat. He was trembling a little but was not really afraid.

Then his heart leapt into his throat as a voice spoke right beside him. A sibilant chill voice, cloaking malice with a surface politeness—"Now, if you will just come this way . . ."

He shrank and cowered. His trembling became a violent shaking as fear passed through him like a series of electric shocks. A pain gripped his stomach and he pressed both hands against the place, doubled up. He could not control his breathing now—it came in loud

rapid gasps, as if he had just been plunged into cold water.

For ages, it seemed, he sat tied in a knot of pain, gazing terror-struck through the railing at the points of light below—remote as stars—dreading to look up at Skeleton-face standing over him, unable to face the cavernous eye-sockets and the white fixed grin, shrinking from the imagined touch of a thin hand.

But no hand touched him.

Then the smothered moon broke free to throw a wealth of silvery light about him and it was apparent that there was no one standing over him. He peeped under his eyelids—over there. The shadow remained small and distant by the door. It was so perfectly still that a hope suddenly struck him it was not a man at all but just the shadow of some ordinary thing he had not noticed before. Yet it had seemed to move . . .

He watched it, relaxing gradually as the thin shadow remained stiff and stationary as a gatepost.

He told himself, not in so many words but with the rough apprehension of the imperfectly articulate, that he had been frightening himself with an imagined bogey-man.

But he had not imagined that voice. That had been real enough. Still, there was probably an explanation any grownup could make clear to him. He supposed that everything you said in a Whispering Gallery went echoing around the Gallery for ever and ever be-

cause there was no way for the sound to get out—it was like a fly caught under an upturned bowl. He expected that the echoes became rarer and rarer as time went on until you hardly heard them at all.

All he had heard was a belated echo of the words Skeleton-face had kept using in the afternoon.

Then he jumped again, as the same freezing voice said right alongside him, "*If you will just come this way . . .*"

The palms of his hands became sticky with sweat, and his scalp prickled. But he told himself that it was all right. The shadow hadn't moved. It was only that old echo again.

He noticed it had dropped a word this time. How could the sound of that word, "*Now*," have escaped? Why, of course, it would have slipped out through the doorway as the echo went past on its travels. That was how echoes died, losing a piece every time they went slowly round. It would have to be something like that, otherwise everything everybody ever said would have gone on sounding for ever and it would be like a great crowd shouting all the time.

Well, it wasn't any good just sitting there. He'd have to start looking for the staircase to the golden apple. His mother might already have discovered he had left the hotel and she would guess where he had gone and come after him.

He stood up slowly, not taking his eyes off the shadow by the

door. It remained still. If he went to the left he would approach the doorway from the side away from the shadow and wouldn't have to go past it at all. *Well*, he thought, *I must go now*. He took a deep breath.

And then the clouds made a sudden rush at the moon and all but extinguished it. The silvery light ceased abruptly as if it had been switched off. It was darker than ever.

He paused, irresolute, his courage evaporating. He could not go around the Gallery in this darkness. He might not be able to distinguish the doorway when he came to it and he might go past it to where the shadow was. But that was silly—if there was no light there could be no shadow.

Nevertheless fear was stronger than reason. He stood there, clutching the iron railing and looking down at the little lights below. Suddenly he wished he were down there in the safe steady light that did not go out and leave you trapped on a high shelf and at the mercy of unseen shadows.

But if he were down there, he would be further away from the shining golden apple. If he were to attain that prize he must be courageous and bear the nervous ordeals that lay on the path to it. To deserve the apple you must be brave.

His fingers tightened on the railing as the mouthless voice said near at hand in the dark, "*You will just come this way . . .*"

This time it sounded less like a request than a command. "You will come this way . . ." It was as if the voice knew that it was losing some of the words it could use and was trying to counterbalance the loss with greater persuasion.

Frederic thought, *It's quite all right, really. If I stay here long enough the echo will have no more words left, it will die out altogether. Perhaps the shadow will go with it. Perhaps the shadow has nothing to do with it.*

However he was glad when the bright moonlight suddenly flooded the dome again. At least he was glad until—

He screamed as he saw that the shadow had moved in the darkness, had advanced nearly halfway towards him around the Gallery and was still coming on steadily.

He turned and fled in the opposite direction. As he blundered along the curving path, sometimes banging a knee against the endless seat, sometimes slipping and grabbing the railing for support, he cast a terrified glance across the moonlit spaces to see where the shadow had got to.

It had ceased to pursue its original course around the Gallery. It had turned back, was moving swiftly the other way to head him off before he could reach the door. And it was moving faster than he could.

He spun around, choking with terror, little thin screams coming from him as he ran. This time he did not blunder or slip. Self-preservation told him that he could af-

ford no mistakes and the sheer desperate will to live made his feet fly with speed and precision.

For now he knew—he did not know how he knew but he knew—that the shadow was the shadow of Death. And Death wanted to take him and put him with the other dead people under the cold floor of the crypt.

He was back to where he had been, diametrically opposite to the doorway. And the shadow too was back to where it had been, by that doorway. He collapsed on the seat, whooping for breath but keeping his staring eyes on the shadow. It seemed to have returned to complete immobility.

Then the voice came again, quietly this time, almost coaxingly, "*Just come this way . . .*"

It seemed to imply that if he were just to go along to it everything would be all right and there would be nothing to worry about.

But he knew it was a trap. He would not go. He would hang onto life as long as he could because there was still hope. The voice had lost two of its words this time. Perhaps it had called after him as he ran from it and haste and terror had deafened him to it.

The great dome overhead was almost radiant now with light from the unshielded moon and the human figures crowded in the arches of the murals were a tense silent audience looking down on the narrow circular track where Frederic had to run for his life.

He believed they were watching

him and he wondered whether they were on his side. St. Paul seemed to be. He stood up there, one hand pointing upwards towards the spider's gallery at the apex of the dome, towards the golden apple. "That's the way you want to go, Frederic," said his expression.

"I know, I know," whispered the boy. "But how do I get up there?"

And the voice of Death spoke again, calling, "*Come this way . . .*"

"No!" cried Frederic, starting to his feet and going a few paces. The shadow glided in the same direction too, coming around to meet him. He ran back and the shadow stopped as if it were watching him, weighing his intention, then moved back to cover the doorway.

And so Frederic stopped again. It was plain that he could never reach the doorway safely whichever way he went, for the shadow had the advantages of position and speed of movement and could always get there first. Was there to be no end to this horrible game?

*Yes, he thought desperately, there must be an end when the echo dies. And that must be soon now.*

He pressed his hot brow against the cool iron railing. There were, he noticed now, mosaics just under the Gallery itself, between the arches which fell away from beneath them into bottomless gloom, and they all pictured angels flying confidently. What mattered it to them that they were at a fearful height. They were borne by their trusted wings.

He thought, *If only I had wings!*

*I could escape Death. More than that—I could fly up there and pick the golden apple.*

His forehead burned and droplets of sweat trickled slowly down the iron bars. His head ached as though a fever had come upon him and the angels seemed to advance and recede before his blurring gaze as if they had come quite away from the wall and were indeed flying over the back wall.

He watched them for some time, feeling dull and heavy-headed, and they seemed to be aware of him and smile at him and indicate by their slow weaving motions that it was quite easy to fly. Anyone could do it. *He could do it if he only tried.*

Then suddenly he remembered the shadow and looked up at the opposite side of the Gallery. And it was gone!

Then he caught a movement away to the right and there was the shadow, much taller, well past the crucial halfway mark on its way to him. It had taken advantage of his preoccupation with the angels to chance leaving the doorway to come around after him.

It had won the awful game. Even if Frederic ran his hardest for the door the shadow had gained enough ground to overtake him easily before he reached it.

It was too near. It was Skeleton-face, all right. He could see the dark eye-cavities turned steadfastly upon him, the gleam of teeth, as the tall thin figure approached.

He scrambled up onto the rim

of the railing before him, which was not easy for the rim was turned back inwards. But he mounted to the top of it and balanced there like a wire-walker. He looked up. Somewhere up there, beyond the dome, was the glittering prize he would never now reach.

But St. Paul still pointed upwards like an inspiration. "Have faith!" he seemed to say. "Have faith!"

And the angels seemed to be calling in chorus, "Have faith, Frederic, and you can fly like us. Have faith and you can fly up to the apple."

Frederic teetered, arms outstretched, on the edge of cavernous space below and above. He took a quick peep sideways. Skeleton-face was almost upon him, lipless mouth open to speak.

*"This way . . ."*

"You can fly. You can fly. Have faith," called the angels together.

"I have faith. I'm coming," said Frederic with a new strength and began to extend a foot quite steadily and calmly.

*"Frederic!"* It was his mother's voice, loud with alarm.

A warm relief flooded right over him. Mom had found him, had got here just in time. She would save him from Skeleton-face—she would pay him to go away. She could pay anything, she was so rich.

He looked eagerly around but he couldn't see her. There was only Skeleton-face reaching for him.

And then he realized with a sudden horrible sinking of all his energies that the cry was only the echo

of his mother's exclamation of the afternoon. It must have been slowly circling the Gallery ever since. He was sick with disappointment.

And then bony hands reached for his ankles and he leapt outwards into space.

It wasn't a leap of faith. It was merely a leap to avoid Death.

In confusion and wretchedness he fell past the angels, fell into darkness. The lights of the candelabras grew bigger as he fell and they illumined something that lay below them.

A golden disk.

He was turning as he fell and couldn't obtain more than fleeting glimpses of it but he could see that he was heading straight for it.

Could it be that somehow, in a way he couldn't understand, he was succeeding after all? That he was to reach—

The golden disk flashed up hugely now and dazzled his eyes.

The verger on the night watch had happened just by chance to glance up and catch what looked like a tiny figure balanced on the tail of the Whispering Gallery. He tried to shield his eyes from the immediate light of the candelabra over his head and see past it more clearly up into the moonlit dome.

It was a figure and even as he watched it jumped out into space.

*"My God!"* he said, and rushed forward.

A thin shout came from above—  
*"Way . . .!"*

He stopped, uncertain.

The figure fell down past the mosaics, past the golden organ pipes, past the red canopy over the high pulpit, arching ever outwards to the center of the floor as it came.

He saw it hit the large circular brass plate let into the floor, immediately over Nelson's tomb, immediately under the ball and cross 365 feet above. And he hid his eyes.

When he looked again a delta of red rivulets was spreading from the crumpled little shape that lay on the brass plate in the center of the star with the long black and faded pink points—bright red trickles which matched the scarlet of the altar screen.

It was a small child, a boy. Dead—naturally.

He sought his fellow verger on the watch and brought him to the scene. Only it wasn't quite the same. The brass ring shone clean and bright—and clear. There was no body. There was no blood.

The second verger put his arm about the other, who had suddenly begun to shake, and led him to the chairs by the lectern.

"Sit down and rest, Alex," he said. "Don't worry. It's all right. It once happened to me."

Alex looked at him in slow surprise, his lower lip quivering, his hands shaking like those of a very old man.

"Nor are we the only ones," said the second verger. "It happens—every so often."

"When did it first—*really*—happen? Don't tell me it didn't."

"Over twenty years ago. It was a boy named Stagg—an American boy. He had strayed from his hotel, somehow found his way here and got up—there. His mother was distracted when she found him gone. But he had been here in the afternoon and for some reason wanted very much to return. And he was due to go home the next day. So she guessed he might have come here. But she got here just too late—he was already on the rail, just as you and I saw him. She shouted his name. But he fell."

"Do you think she startled him? He was performing some idiotic balancing trick and—"

"Did it look like that to you?"

Alex looked unseeingly at the golden lectern with the big golden eagle bearing the Bible on its back and wings outstretched and eyes staring keenly up at the dome.

"He jumped," he said in a low voice.

"Nobody knows why."

"But he saw me," Alex said. "He must have seen me and thought he was going to hit me. He shouted 'Way!'"

"*Someone* shouted 'Way!' I heard it too when the thing happened to me. But it didn't sound like a boy's voice. He was only five, you know."

"If it wasn't he who was it?"

The second verger shrugged his shoulders and became absorbed in removing a few hairs that clung to his black cassock.

Without looking up he said, "There have been many temples on this site. Before this was Old St.

Paul's and before that a Saxon church stood on this spot for nearly five hundred years, and long before that the Romans had a temple here—a Roman altar of stone was uncovered here in eighteen-thirty.

"I remember reading about that in the chronicles. There was a carved representation of Diana on it, was there not?"

"Yes. Diana, Goddess of the Hunt."

Alex looked at the other sharply. "Was it a—a sacrificial temple?"

The second verger pursed his lips, picked up a long brown hair carefully by the ends, held it up to the light of the candelabra and regarded it without answering.

"What did you say the name of the boy was?" pursued Alex.

"Stagg," said the other, letting the hair drift gently down—it floated away under a chair. Then he looked straight at Alex and said firmly, "Which may be a coincidence or it may not. We shall never know. The one thought that really terrifies me about this affair, the thought I don't want to face, is this—does that poor child have to suffer his frightful experience over and over again, every time it happens? Is he caught in some vicious circle of time and unable to escape?"

"I don't think so," said Alex. "What's past is past. We have merely, by some trick of time, been given a glimpse of that past. Like

looking at an old film in which the characters go through the motions but are only unfeeling shadows."

"For our souls' ease," said the other, soberly, "we must believe that."

They sat brooding, two tiny figures side by side under the great dome in the little pool of light from the candelabra. Each was grateful for the other's company. For all around them black shadows filled the enormous arches and the silent chapels and the long, empty passages. Under their feet, spreading beneath the thick walls into the ancient churchyard besieging them in the night and into the burial grounds below that, were the bones of the innumerable dead. The great and the small. The famous and the forgotten. The human and the—possibly non-human.

Before them the golden eagle of the lectern, rising on its claws with excitement, gazed eagerly and unwaveringly up at the Whispering Gallery as if it were absorbed in watching a tense and perpetual drama . . .

*"Now, if you will just come this way . . ."*

*The voice was sibilant and insinuating. It hinted at wonders which would make all you had seen so far become thin and flat and forgotten. Marvels unmatched lay just around the corner and the voice knew the way . . ."*