

STREET & SMITH'S

UNKNOWN

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER, 1940 VOL. IV NO. 4

The editorial contents of this magazine have not been published before, are protected by copyright and cannot be reprinted without the publisher's permission.

NOVEL

DARKER THAN YOU THINK . . . Jack Williamson . . . 9

The germs of the witch folk live today—and perhaps you yourself carry them! And man is losing the race—

NOVELETTE

TWO FOR A BARGAIN . . . Dorothy Quick . . . 104

Elsbeth hated that tight New England colonial town—and turned to witchcraft to punish it. But—

SHORT STORY

THRESHOLD . . . Henry Kuttner . . . 92

Applied psychology vs. demonology, and naturally the demon would come out the loser—wouldn't he? Or would he—

POEM

BLACK CATS . . . Cristel Hastings . . . 126

SERIAL

TYPEWRITER IN THE SKY . . . L. Ron Hubbard . . . 127

Conclusion

An author needed a character for a story—so he put his friend in a tale of Caribbean piracy. But the friend had to live that story!

READERS' DEPARTMENT

OF THINGS BEYOND . . . 5

Editorial Prophecy and Future Issues.

Illustrations by: Cartier and Isip

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
DECEMBER 27th
\$2 A YEAR
20c per COPY

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Monthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Allen L. Grammer, President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President; Gerald H. Smith, Treasurer and Secretary. Copyright, 1940, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. Entered as Second-class Matter, February 21, 1939, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions in Canada and Countries in Pan American Union, \$2.25 per year; elsewhere, \$2.75 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

Printed in  the U. S. A.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. • 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK

THRESHOLD

by HENRY KUTTNER

● A very nice bargain he made—murder without penalty—wealth—the payment the demon asked was a minor thing—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

It was quiet in the comfortable little apartment, twelve stories above the traffic of Central Park West. Venetian blinds reflected soft lights. Conventional prints were on the walls, a neutral-colored rug on the floor, and a decanter of whiskey was amber and crystal in Haggard's hand as he reflected ironically on the setting. Distinctly out of place, he thought, for an experiment in black magic.

He poured liquor for Stone, who had just arrived, out of breath and puffing nervously on a cigarette. The young attorney leaned forward in his chair and accepted the glass.

"You're not drinking, Steve?"

"Not tonight," said Haggard, with a twisted little smile. "Drink up."

Stone obeyed. Then he set down the glass and opened a brief case he had been holding on his lap. From it he took a flat, oblong parcel.

"Here's the book you wanted." He tossed it across the room.

Haggard didn't open the parcel. He placed it carefully on an end table, next to a capped thermos bottle standing there. His gaze lingered on the latter.

There was something innately cold about Stephen Haggard. Owner of a

struggling advertising agency, he seemed quite unmoved by the trials that beset others and were apparently unable to affect him. Handsome, thirty-four, with rather thin lips and very level black gaze, he moved imperturbably through life. The man seemed incased in a gelid sheathe of some frigid stuff. He was ice and iron.

And Stone was warmth and laughter, a husky, pleasant-faced fellow slightly younger than his host, with frankness not written but printed in block letters all over him. He said, "I had a hell of a time getting the book, even after I showed 'em the letter you gave me."

"That so?" Haggard asked. He was luxuriously inhaling a cigarette, lying back in his chair and seeming completely relaxed. "That book shop can get anything—but they kept me waiting for months on this item. Incidentally, thanks a million for picking it up for me."

"That's all right," Stone smiled, but his eyes were puzzled. "Rather a rush job, eh?"

"I've been waiting for the book a long time. And I had to get"—Haggard hesitated and turned his head very slightly in the direction of the thermos bottle—"something else." As though to forestall further questions, he rose. "I'll see if Jean's ready. She takes hours to put on her face."

"All women do," Stone grinned. "I ought to thank you for letting me take Jean out tonight."

"I'll be busy—" The rest of the sentence was lost as Haggard vanished



through the door. When he came back Stone had unwrapped the oblong parcel and was examining a vellum-bound book.

"CURIOSITY killed the cat," Haggard remarked. "I'll fix you another drink while you're reading."

Looking slightly sheepish, Stone put down the book. "Sorry. My curiosity. You said it was an essay on magic—"

"It is, but you can't read Latin, Russ. Jean says she'll be ready soon, so there's time for a couple of highballs, anyway. There!" The glass foamed and subsided. Haggard took the volume and sat down opposite his guest, idly thumbing the pages. "I'll read you a bit, if you like. There's a warning on the flyleaf. 'Let none but the pure in heart and the . . . *fortis*—strong in will—read this book; and let no man dan-

gerously attempt to—' Well, it goes on. If you perform black magic, you're in danger of being whisked off to hell by Baal and Beelzebub."

"Going to try the stuff?" Stone asked.

Haggard didn't answer. He held his hand out before him and regarded it intently. No tremor shook it.

"What's up? Been seeing little green men? That stuff about magic makes people potty sometimes—" Stone hesitated, flushing, and then grinned. "My usual tact."

The two men laughed together. Stone went on:

"I didn't mean you, of course. But I remember a fellow I was working with went nuts after shooting all his dough on fortunetellers and quacks. He kept screaming about the fires of hell and the devils that were coming for him."

Haggard was suddenly interested. "What sort of chap was he? I mean—intelligent?"

"Yeah, up to then. Nervous as a cat, though—"

"Nervous! Nerves lead to emotion, emotion to . . . to—"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Afraid of devils, was he?" Haggard's lips curved in a contemptuous smile.

Stone finished his drink. Liquor always made him argumentative. "Well, he was batty. But it wasn't very long ago that we had witch trials not too far from New York. People have always been afraid of devils."

Haggard started to laugh. "Sure. The stupid and the neurotic."

Stone stood up, crossed the room, and took the book of magic. He thumped through it rapidly. "Here's a picture I noticed—that's enough to scare any-

body who believed in it, even if it doesn't exist."

The sketch was that of a crowned, malefic head supported by ten multi-jointed and clawed legs. The title beneath it said "Asmodée."

Haggard was smiling again as he closed the book. "You're wrong, Russ. Even if Asmodeus existed, an intelligent man needn't be afraid of him—or it. Figure it out. What's a demon's resources?"

Stone poured a hasty shot. "Well—all sorts of magic. It could just wave a claw and you'd drop down to hell, eh?"

"Power," Haggard nodded. "If you stopped using your arm, what'd happen?"

"It would atrophy."

"Check. Devils had power—according to legend. But nobody ever admitted they were very smart. Why should they need to develop their brains? They could accomplish every desire by waving a claw, as you say. Wishing," said Haggard, grinning, "will make it so."

"A gorilla isn't very smart, but you wouldn't last long in a wrestling match with one."

"I'd use a gun," Haggard said logically. "Devils have only power. We've got our brains. Science, psychology—hell, if Faust had gone to Harvard he could have tied Mephisto's tail into knots."

"I'm a Yale man myself," Stone murmured and got up as Jean Haggard floated into the room.

She was slim and cool and lovely, in a fragile, blond manner. In her evening gown and wrap she looked devastating.

Oddly enough, for a brief, unguarded second, a deadly viciousness showed in Haggard's eyes as he glanced at his wife. Instantly it was gone.

Jean's smile flashed. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Russ. And I'm sorry to inflict myself on you tonight at this short notice."

"My fault," Haggard grunted. "Got to work. No use Jean sticking around to listen to my moans. Enjoy yourselves, comrades."

THEY SAID they would and departed. Haggard put the safety lock on the door. Then he came back, stared at the book, opened it, and hurriedly found a page. He read it with a tight smile.

The formula was there.

He went to the phone and dialed a number.

"Phyllis? This is Steve. . . . I know; I couldn't phone before. Sorry. . . . Tonight? I'm tied up. . . . I told you—"

There was clicking silence.

"I'm sorry, darling. I can't. Jean will be back any minute. Tomorrow night, eh? I . . . I may have a surprise for you."

Evidently the answer was satisfactory, for Haggard whistled as he hung up and went into the kitchen. He returned with a good-sized mixing bowl.

This he placed in the center of the carpet. Then he uncapped the thermos and carefully poured its sluggish contents into the bowl. A thin steam arose. The blood had maintained its heat. Fresh blood, of course, was necessary, though the Jersey farmer had asked annoying questions when Haggard paid him. "But don't you want the pig, mister? Jest the blood? What—"

Why did freshly spilled blood play such an important part in these ceremonies, since mythology's beginning, Haggard wondered. He turned to the book and began reading. Latin phrases rattled crisply from his lips. He was

conscious of a slight nervous tension, and purposefully made himself relax. No emotions. No neuroses. No hysteria. Just—logic.

Logic against demons.

The level of the blood was being lowered. A rim of it showed now around the inside of the basin. Where was it going? Oddly enough, Haggard wasn't surprised, though all along he had felt himself to be skeptical of this fantastic business.

The bowl was empty of blood. And the incantation was finished.

Haggard blinked. The lights—had they flickered? It wasn't imagination. They were dimming—

"Rot," he said very softly. "Imagination, glamour, autosuggestion. Electricity depends on current; ghosts can't affect a dynamo."

The lights were bright again. But again they faded. Haggard stood in a pallid darkness, looking down at the vague shadow of the bowl at his feet. It seemed to move—

It pulsed and did not hold its shape. It grew larger. It was a blot of black shadow, a sloping funnel at the bottom of which Haggard saw something green. It was like looking into the wrong end of a telescope. Quite tiny and far away, yet vividly distinct, a room with green walls and floor became visible below. It was empty.

The funnel grew larger. Haggard felt the floor unsteady beneath the soles of his shoes. Vertigo gripped him as he swayed.

If he fell—

"I am," he said quietly, "looking down into a green room. There may be a hole in the carpet and in the floor. Mr. Touhey downstairs may have re-decorated. All this is scarcely prob-

able. Therefore what I see isn't real. It's an illusion."

But it was shockingly real. Haggard had difficulty in maintaining his balance. He didn't close his eyes to shut out the sight, though. Instead, he went on: "In this floor is wood and steel, perhaps concrete. They are solids. They cannot be made to vanish except by physical means. Therefore what I see is an illusion."

THE VERTIGO was gone now. Haggard looked down without alarm. He looked suddenly into a face that was all teeth and bristling hair. Clawed talons reached up at him. Saliva slavered from the gaping mouth.

Haggard didn't move. The talons hesitated an inch from his face. They twitched menacingly.

"You see," said the man, "I'm not at all frightened. Come—" He stopped short. He had almost said, "Come up," and that would mean the oral admission of the illusion.

"Come where we can talk comfortably."

The gaping hollow in the floor and the green room at its bottom were gone. The apartment was quite normal again. The bowl stood empty on the carpet. A short, squat man stood before Haggard, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other.

His naked body was hairy and muscular, and his brutal face seemed normal enough, save for a curiously lateral compression of the skull. Forehead and chin slanted back. The lips were compressed tightly over buck teeth.

"Well, sit down," Haggard said, and set the example.

Sullenly the other obeyed, glowering under black brows. There was a silence.

"Are you dumb?" Haggard asked fi-

nally, with blatant disrespect. Almost he regretted the question, for when the demon spoke, his teeth were visible. They were the sharp, terrible fangs of a carnivore.

"Are you not afraid of me?" The voice was deep and resonant, and Haggard thought that in the past many men had trembled before it. He chuckled.

"No use to waste time. I'm not afraid, no. What's your name, first of all?"

The demon didn't quite know how to take this. He started to get mad, but thought it over instead. At last he grunted, "You couldn't pronounce it. Call me 'Baal.' Among the Assyrians that meant 'Lord.'"

"Good as any. All right. Have you ever met a man before who wasn't afraid of you?"

Baal's eyes were veiled, and they were amber cat's-eyes. "Why should I answer that?"

Haggard realized that he was getting tense again, and relaxed. "You needn't, then. First I want you to realize that you're not dealing with a stupid lout you can frighten with a roar. I want something from you. I'm willing to pay for it." Haggard waited for the demon's reaction.

He almost grinned at sight of the triumph on Baal's brutal face. "A bargain—a pact! Well, I have done that before, mortal. I have powers; they can serve you, at a price."

"What price? My . . . my soul?" Haggard knew himself to be ridiculous as he asked.

"Your what?" Baal inquired. "Oh, I remember. Mortals always wanted to buy my gifts with what they called 'souls.' I remember what I told the Prophet Alikaaam: 'Gift horses may not be sound in gait and limb. Show me

this valuable soul of yours and we'll bargain.' Naturally he couldn't show it to me, though he said it was inside his body." The demon laughed hoarsely. "You can't catch me with an old trick like that. I don't want this precious soul of yours. I want you!"

"Why?"

"To eat," Baal explained. "Human flesh is . . . well, it has an indescribable taste. To a being like me, your meat would provide hours of ecstasy."

Haggard nodded. "Very material—but I get the point. If I agree, what powers have you to give?"

The demon's eyes evaded the man's. "Oh—money. Enough for you to live on in comfort, perhaps. Don't overestimate me—"

"And don't underestimate me. Evolution gave you the specialization of power. I want money, yes, but a great deal of it."

Baal frowned. "Well—I can arrange that. But you must understand that while I have power, it's limited. I can bestow on you only two gifts. The law of compensation makes more impossible. I don't know why, but that's the way it works."

Haggard scrutinized his guest. The statement was apparently true, he decided.

"If I receive a gift from you, how do I know something unpleasant won't come of it? If I ask for a pudding, I don't want it on the end of my nose."

THE DEMON shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "It doesn't work that way. I don't understand it, but you won't have any trouble. The gifts will come naturally. My intervention won't be suspected."

Haggard glanced at his wrist watch

and took a deep breath. "All right. I want one million dollars."

"Done."

"Second, I want my wife eliminated without scandal to myself—but I want her to suffer."

"Done."

"Then what?"

"Then I eat you."

Haggard stood up. "Sorry. It doesn't appeal to me. The deal's off."

Baal's jaw dropped. He put out a long-nailed hand.

"Now wait. I didn't mean I'd eat you immediately. Some little time, of course, for you to enjoy yourself—"

Inwardly Haggard exulted. But he did not show it. Psychology was working. "The question arises," he said gently, "why you didn't eat me when you first appeared. For some reason this was impossible. Don't interrupt me! I'm trying to remember—"

"We'll come to some arrangement," Baal said hastily.

"—just what happened. You wanted to eat me. You wanted to get me into a position where that would be possible to you. You . . . of course! You tried to get me to fall into that imaginary pit. That green room. Sure!" Haggard went on, hurriedly making up a convincing lie. "That's just what de Galois wrote—that you couldn't eat a human unless he first entered your green room."

"He wrote that about me?"

"Yes."

"How did you know he referred to me?" the demon asked, with unexpected shrewdness. "Baal isn't my real name."

"He described you," Haggard said blandly. "So I'm not in any danger, unless I enter your green room."

"If you make a pact, you must keep it," Baal rapped out. "Besides, you

couldn't hope to escape the might of my powers."

But Haggard knew how to press a bargain. "I want more concessions. I weigh over two hundred pounds on the hoof, so I should be a tasty morsel."

"What do you want?"

"Well—a fair chance."

"Doors," said Baal, after a pause. "A jinni I knew once . . . well, how do you like this? I'll put three doors in your path. Doors each of a different color. The first one will be blue, and beyond it is one wish. When you pass the second door, which will be yellow, your second wish will come true. And beyond the third door—"

"Yes?"

"I shall be waiting to eat you."

"What color—"

But Baal grinned. "I am not stupid. If you knew that, you'd never go through a door of that color. It's neither blue nor yellow."

Haggard said suddenly, "It's a deal."

"Not quite," the demon disagreed. "After you have passed the first two doors, I shall put my seal on you." He smiled. "Don't touch your head; I don't mean horns. It's like a witch mark. That's one of the rules, too, though I don't know why."

"What sort of seal?"

"I'll take some power away from you—some minor physical power, perhaps—but it won't cause you trouble or pain or even embarrassment. Maybe I'll give you a wart on your back. Or put a gray streak in your hair. I just can't help it," he shrugged as Haggard started to protest. "That's one thing I can't alter. My powers won't work unless I meet certain requirements."

Haggard pulled at his lower lip. "I suppose it's no use asking who issues those requirements?"

"How should I know? Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal."

The two shook hands. Baal looked around thoughtfully. "Well, I'll be leaving." His gaze lingered on the Venetian blinds.

Haggard said, "Can you visit me again? You can? Then why not do so? I'd like to talk to you—after all, I don't see a demon every day."

Baal said doubtfully, "I don't—"

"You don't drink whiskey, I'm sure, but I'll have fresh blood for you every time."

"Fine," the demon agreed, baring his fangs—and vanished.

HAGGARD STOOD perfectly motionless for three minutes. Then he held out his hand and looked at it. Quite steady.

He took the bowl to the kitchen and carefully cleansed it of blood. He locked the book of magic in his desk. Finally, he poured a drink.

No need to be on guard just now. Psychology had triumphed over mere demoniac power. Two doors to triumph.

Three doors to doom.

The first door—blue. The second—yellow. Beyond them, Haggard's wishes. But the color of the third door?

The third primary color, red? Scarcely. That would be too obvious, even to a person of Baal's apparent mentality. Haggard did not make the mistake of underrating the demon. Baal was cunning. Green, then—the color of the creature's lair? That, too, was undesirably obvious.

Perhaps the color might be duplicated. The third door might be also blue or yellow. Well, there was time enough to think of that, and already Haggard's brain had worked out a soundly logical method of discovering the truth. First, though, he'd have to

make friends with Baal. Provide him with blood and interest him in modern life. Disarm him—

The room was stuffy. Haggard threw open the windows, but the air itself was sultry with early summer. Below, the park was a blotch of shadow beyond the bright ribbon of the street. Jean and Russ Stone would not be in till late. There was time for a walk.

He took the elevator down, nodding to the sleepy Negro who operated the car, and stepped out into the night. At the Seventy-second Street entrance he turned into Central Park, grateful for the relief of a cool breeze. Idly he wandered, his thoughts busy with plans. Thus Haggard did not notice the shadowy figure beside him till a low voice commanded, "Put up your hands, bud. Quick!"

Instinct rather than logic made Haggard act. He whirled toward the shadow, lifting his hands in a gesture that was never finished. Something crashed against his skull, and the lights went out.

He woke up in a hospital bed. He said, "What's happened?" and the nurse fled to return with a doctor. The latter tested pulse and temperature, and, after a while, talked to Haggard, explaining much.

"Amnesia?" the patient asked. "How long have I been here?"

"About a month. It wasn't amnesia. Concussion. Your wife's here."

When Jean came in, Haggard caught the tail end of a whispered command from the doctor. He peered intently at his wife as she sat down composedly by the bedside.

"Yes. I'm fine—came out of it as suddenly as I went into it. Jean, the doctor ordered you not to tell me something. What?"

"N-nothing."

UN—7

"I'll only worry until I know." Haggard, through years of living with a woman he detested, had become familiar with her temperament. He used psychology on her now, and at last Jean capitulated.

"The firm—your advertising agency. It burned down the day after you were hurt."

"It's insured." Only after thinking of that did Haggard ask, "Was anyone hurt?"

"No. But—" She hesitated.

"Well?"

"The insurance—lapsed. I don't know anything about it. Russ Stone investigated; he did everything he could. You're bankrupt."

Haggard's smile was like ice. "I'm bankrupt. Not the plural. Love, honor and cherish. For better or worse. Well, I'm glad you told me, Jean. You'd better go now."

WHEN the doctor appeared, there was an argument. Haggard at last had his way. Physically he had been well for a long time, and he was completely cured. He was released from the hospital, with injunctions to be careful.

Careful? What had gone wrong? Baal's powers were untrustworthy. Or—or had the whole thing been due to imagination? No; Haggard knew he was not the type to experience hallucinations. Well—he was bankrupt.

He taxied to look at the razed place where his advertising firm had once stood. Struck by a thought, he entered a drugstore and telephoned his brokers.

"Mr. Strang, please. . . . This is Mr. Gardner. . . . Yes." Haggard had used a false name from the beginning of his dabblings in the stock market. Jean had a way of finding out too much—and Phyllis needed a good deal

of money. Briefly, Haggard wondered about Phyllis, what she had thought when he failed to appear on the night following the accident. He'd phone her next. Strang was speaking.

"Gardner! For God's sake! Where've you been? I've tried every way I knew to get in touch with you—"

"What's wrong?"

"Can you come up here immediately?"

Haggard frowned. The brokers had never seen his face; he'd always used the mails. But this— "All right," he agreed. "I'll be right up."

He found the building, entered an elevator, got off at the twenty-second floor, and walked along a marble corridor. He opened a door and walked into a reception room. The office clerk said, "Can I help you, sir?"

Haggard didn't answer. He was staring at something behind the clerk.

It was a blue door.

The office was furnished in blue-and-tan leather. It was perfectly logical for the door to be of that hue. *Beyond it—*

Beyond it, Haggard sat down facing a gray-haired, plump man—Strang.

"What have you to tell me?" Strangely, he was all ice now.

"Do you remember that consolidated stock—the oil field—you bought a month ago?"

"Yes."

"The bottom dropped out of it the day after, and I tried to phone you. I was told the building had burned down. No one knew of a man named Gardner who had been there."

"The bottom dropped out?"

"For a week. Then the drillers struck a lake of oil. In your absence I acted for you, Mr. Gardner. I had advance information. The stock you now hold is worth, roughly, one million dollars."

There was more talk, but it meant little to Haggard. He was thinking of the blue door through which he had passed to attain his first desire.

Two doors were left—

For the time, Haggard kept his good fortune secret. He lived quietly on in the apartment with Jean, waiting for further developments. Occasionally he saw Phyllis, though now he detected flaws in the girl that had not been apparent before. His passion for her was dying. ~~But~~ his hatred for Jean flamed afresh. ~~He~~ was too much like his wife, and egotists cannot live together.

But Haggard rented another apartment surreptitiously, with a definite purpose in mind. He furnished it carefully and one night poured blood into a bowl that stood on the carpet. Baal came.

Somehow, conversing with the demon was not unpleasant. It made Haggard realize the superiority of his own brain. Baal was like a child—no, a savage, interested in everything. He tried smoking, and tasted liquor, but liked neither. Games delighted him, though. Yet there are few games limited to two persons. It was some time before Haggard could plausibly propose the scheme he had in mind.

This was a word-association test. Baal liked it at first, but soon grew bored before Haggard had had time to lull the demon's possible suspicions. He vanished sleepily, and Haggard cursed. He had to learn the color of the third door.

Well—it was late, yet he wasn't sleepy. During the past few weeks he had spent less and less time at the original apartment, usually staying at his new place overnight. But somehow the place did not attract him now. A walk—

Carefully he avoided the park. He

turned into a bar for a drink, and there met several friends. Influential men, who might have avoided a bankrupt had they been sober. They lived out of town and, when the bar closed at two a. m., cursed in bitter chorus.

"Hell of a time—we're just starting—"

Haggard remembered that his own apartment was but a few blocks away. He suggested it to the others. "I've got plenty of Scotch there."

So they all went to the apartment overlooking Central Park. A strong smell of paint greeted them. The elevator boy said sleepily, "They're re-decorating, Mistah Haggard. Ain't seen you for a while, suh?"

Haggard didn't answer. A queer, inexplicable, tight feeling was in his stomach as the elevator shot up. He glanced at his three companions. They seemed to notice nothing amiss.

They got out in the hall. Odor of turpentine and paint was strong. The color scheme, Haggard decided, was atrocious. He paused before his door. It had been repainted.

It had been repainted yellow.

Very quietly Haggard took out his key, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. He walked into the room, his companions behind him. He switched on the light.

Russ Stone stood blinking confusedly. Jean, in a blue negligee, cried out and made a futile gesture.

"Gentlemen," Haggard said quietly. "You're witnesses to this. Adultery is legal cause for divorce. I'll need your evidence later—"

It was as simple as that. Haggard had wanted his wife eliminated without scandal to himself, but he had wanted her to suffer. And certainly Jean's ego

would suffer horribly under the publicity that would ensue. Finally, Haggard would be free, in possession of a million dollars. He could have Phyllis without complications, if he still wanted her—a point on which he was doubtful. He faced only the future, in which the third door lay.

Phyllis was pleased when he told her. "Come over tomorrow night and we'll have a party," she smiled. "I'm moving—getting a better place. Here's the address. And thanks for that last check, Stevie."

"It's a date. Tomorrow night."

Yet Haggard knew he had no time to lose. He had an appointment to keep, and kept it, the next night, in the apartment he had rented surreptitiously. Baal came in response to the blood sacrifice. He was in good humor.

"I never discuss business," he grinned, baring the menacing fangs. "Play that record I like—the 'Bolero.'"

Haggard found the black disk. "You said after I passed the first two doors you'd put your seal on me. What—"

Baal wouldn't answer; he was experimenting with a magnetic toy that had always fascinated him. Haggard's eyes narrowed. He'd have to wait.

Two hours later he proposed the word-association test and Baal agreed, not realizing its significance. Haggard had prepared a convincing set of pseudo-rules for the "game." He sat with a watch in his hand, eyeing it intently.

"Music."

"'Bolero.'"

Two seconds elapsed between key word and response.

"Smoke."

"Fire."

Two and a half seconds.

"Cigarette."

"Water."

Baal, Haggard remembered, had yelled for a glass of water after trying a cigarette. The time was two seconds on this.

"Toy."

"Fast."

Logical response, Haggard thought, after a glance at the magnetic gadget. It worked that way. He went on carefully with a string of meaningless words, lulling Baal's suspicions and establishing the normal time of response. Only twice did the demon hesitate for any noticeable period.

"Food."

A very long pause—ten seconds. Then: "Eat." Baal had discarded the natural association word and substituted a harmless one—one that would reveal nothing. Had he first thought of Haggard or—the color of the third door?

"Open."

"Book." But five seconds had elapsed. Not quite long enough for Baal to think of a completely harmless word, but long enough to substitute a second for the first. Haggard remembered that, and presently said:

"Book."

The seconds ticked past. Baal was silent. At last he said, "Dead."

Haggard continued, but his mind was working furiously. The logical response to "book" would be, probably "read." Yet Baal's subconscious had warned him against that word. Why?

There were, of course, two ways of pronouncing it—in the present and in the past tense.

"Necktie," Haggard threw in suddenly. He caught Baal's startled glance at his own throat, and the demon's pause.

"Choke."

Haggard was wearing a red necktie. Inwardly exulting, he threw in a few

more key words to clinch the question, and finally stopped, realizing that now he knew the color of the third door. It was red. Beyond it lay doom—but Haggard would never open a red door, or go near one. Baal had lost, though the demon did not even realize it. Demoniac power was no match for applied psychology!

Haggard lost interest in the proceedings, though he disguised his feelings well. But it seemed hours before Baal yawned and vanished, with a casual nod.

THE ROOM was empty. And that was unendurable. With relief, Haggard remembered his appointment with Phyllis. He'd take her out—no, he'd bring her champagne, and they'd celebrate. Phyllis wouldn't know the real reason, of course, but—that didn't matter.

With two bottles of champagne under his arm, Haggard dismounted from a taxi half an hour later. He tipped the cabman lavishly and stood for a second looking up at the purple, star-sprinkled sky. A warm wind blew on his face. A million dollars—and freedom, not to mention revenge on Jean. Haggard touched his forehead with an odd gesture. Beyond that frontal bone lay his brain, stronger than demons or their power.

"*Cogito, ergo vici,*" he paraphrased silently. And turned to the steps of the apartment house.

The elevator boy let him off at the third floor and gestured down the corridor. "She just moved in today, sir. Right there."

Haggard walked along the passage, hearing the low whine of the descending elevator. 3-C. This was it. A door, he noticed, painted a soft gray. He'd be noticing such things from now

on. Watching for a red one that he must never pass.

He took out the key Phyllis had given him and inserted it in the lock. Then he turned the knob and opened the door.

He looked into a bare room whose walls and ceiling and floor were green. Baal, naked and hairy, stood quietly waiting. Haggard didn't move, yet an invisible wind bore him forward. Behind him the door crashed shut.

Baal smiled, showing his teeth. "Our bargain," he said, "Now I shall exact the fee."

Haggard had turned into ice. He heard himself whisper, "You didn't keep the bargain. It was a red door—"

Baal said, "How did you learn that? I didn't tell you. Yes, it was a red door, the third one."

Haggard turned around and walked a few steps. He put his finger on the gray, smooth surface of the door, incongruous in contrast with the green walls about it. "It's not red."

Baal was walking forward, too. "Have you forgotten the witch mark? After you passed the second door, I took a minor physical power away from you—"

He drew the back of his hairy hand across his mouth. Haggard heard the faint click of teeth and whispered, "Applied psychology—"

"I know nothing of that," said Baal. "I have only my powers. It was part of our bargain that I deprive you of a minor physical power. The door is not gray. It is red. You are color-blind—"

THE END.