

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1947

Cover by Boris Dolgov

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

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LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

# Venturer of the Martian Mimics

## I

**T**HE only certain feature was that the vessel in which he came resembled a huge opalescent egg. Even the egg was of indeterminate hue; its surface was a weird, shifting mixture of lights and shadows, gleams and evasions and fleeting darkneses that danced and blended and swirled into oneness with the sooty clouds, the lowering sky, and the eternal void that had belched this cursed thing forth. But, in shape, it was an egg.

From this mystic ovoid crept a thing that might have been an iridescent python, if for the space of a single minute it had been content to remain an iridescent python.

It was not so simple to identify. Fixation of contours or permanency of form was no characteristic of this alien newcomer which may have been made of the very stuff of thought. Its changes had the sharpness and rapidity of a purely mental process.

It spurted from the egg in a long, writhing column wrought from the flames of hell. Then it looped upon itself with the disgusting sinuosity of a mutilated worm, turned from a fiery red to a deep, morbid blue, became a relatively tranquil but still ominous ring of azure. Came a moment of quiescence during which strange, extramundane senses probed the surroundings with what might have been surprise, interest, or cold speculation.

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*Is there life on Mars and if so what outre form—or forms—might it take?*



That condition lasted exactly twenty seconds and not one instant more. The ghastly, glowing ring shrank in its horizontal plane, swelled in the vertical, bloomed to a ball of pale yellow moonshine practically invisible in the strong light of day. Then, with shocking vim, it popped into nothingness, leaving a blasphemous vacancy in the maw of the cosmos. But below its former place stood a small flowering shrub—a shrub that had not been there before.

To one side a fascinated rabbit, sole witness of the whole amazing performance, crouched stiff and still in thrall of intense fear. As if deliberately to boost its terror to the very verge of death, the shrub squirmed grotesquely, sucked its leaves and branches into itself, reduced and lumped itself until it had assumed the shape, form and all the fine details of another rabbit. It bounced across to the terrified watcher, nosed its paralyzed body contemptuously, then shot into the shadow of the egg.

Like the instrument of some unearthly

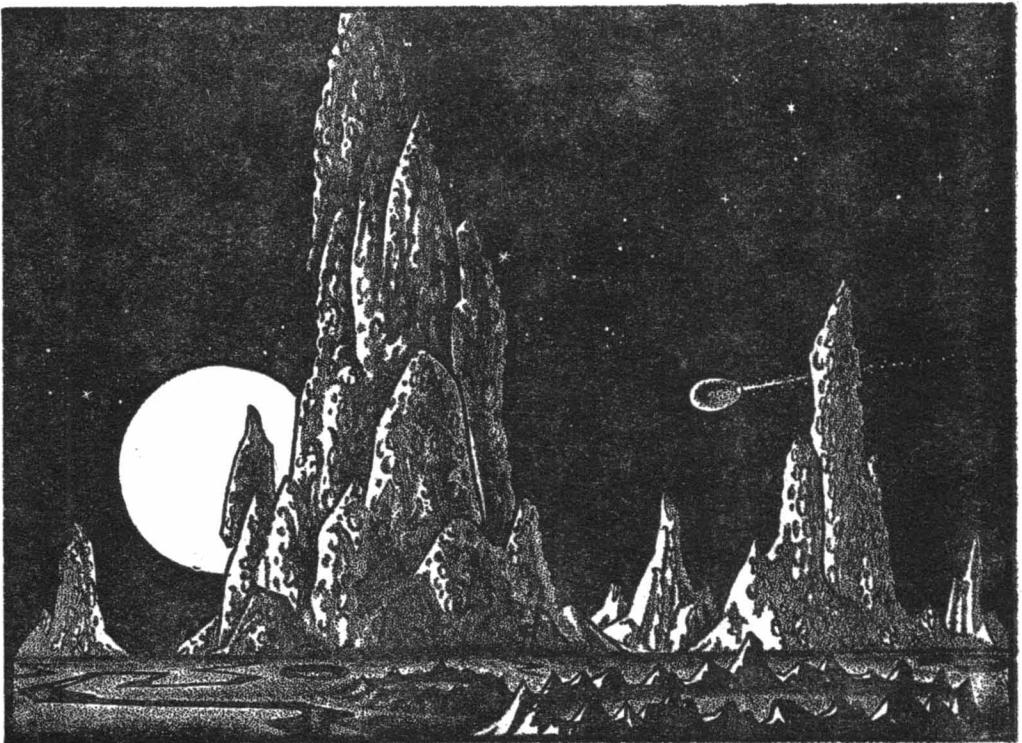
super-magician, the imitation rabbit changed again. First it was there, sitting upright, front paws dangling, long ears erect. Next it had flashed back to the shape of the fiery invader which originally had dominated the scene.

Disregarding the world around him, Spiro the Spy, chosen venturer of the Martian Mimics, made a sinuous motion, thrust a fine, scintillating fiber into the egg, felt delicately around, then withdrew. He waited a moment. The egg trembled. Weird shadows on its surface rioted fantastically. Then the alien vessel boosted itself skyward at tremendous speed and in complete silence. A tall, gyrating pillar of leaves and dust climbed in its wake, was easily out-distanced, collapsed back to earth as the egg smacked a hole through the clouds.

The hellish passenger it had borne twisted upon himself a couple of times, glowed and sparkled with feral luster, then writhed away. Twenty minutes after he had

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*BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL*



gone, the fascinated rabbit shuddered from nose to tail, patted the ground with a weak, still-numb paw. A little later it managed a clumsy hop.

OLD JOSH HAWKINS rumbled, "Hey! C'm here, Soldier!" Soldier promptly abandoned his quest for beautiful smells, trotted the correct one yard behind Old Josh's worn and dirty pants. The pair went through the gate and into the field.

Wrinkling his aged, watery eyes, Old Josh looked at the sheep. He fumbled in a pocket, drew out a large, crimson handkerchief ornamented with white polka dots, wiped his eyes, blew his nose loudly. Soldier sat down, lolled his tongue, stared upward with questioning gaze. Old Josh had another and clearer look at the sheep.

"Something wrong with them woollies," he asserted.

"Yuff!" commented Soldier, moderating his voice in manner becoming to his station.

To the eye of anyone who wouldn't know a tup lamb from any other kind of lamb, there was nothing the matter with the sheep. It was merely that the flock had clustered tightly and fearfully into the farther angle of the field, the biggest and strongest animals on the outside, the lambs and bearing ewes penned between them and the two lines of fence forming the corner. It was an old technique developed when flocks were circled in the night by things that slavered.

One sheep, either abnormally stupid or unusually individualistic, stood apart from the flock. It was halfway up the field, watching the arrivals. Down in that distant corner the huddled mass also watched with idiotic but anxious eyes. There came to the ears of Old Josh a chorus of appealing bleats ranging from adult basses to the weak, faltering mewings of the lambs. He knew sheep with the thoroughness of one who has stank of them these sixty years come Thanksgiving—but he didn't know that these bleaters, in their sheeplike way, were praying.

All the same, that one, lone animal irritated him. Its very aloofness plucked at his sheep-sensitive nerves. Perhaps deep within his wool-coated mind stirred the ancient quake of his animal-mastering ancestors: the fear that some day their mastery might

prove incomplete, might be challenged. Or maybe he sensed in that solitary animal's independent stance a sudden defiance of the age-old herd instinct, of human overlordship, of Soldier, and of himself. So he pointed a knotty but still adept finger at the sheep that chose to stand alone. He chirruped between his teeth.

Soldier responded with the swiftness of a perfectly controlled automaton. Muzzle forward, ears back, eyes fixed on the object of his attention with almost hypnotic intensity, he slid forward belly-low in the grass. The dog was far too old a hand to rush forward barking. The proper way is to slide wolfishly around and intimidate. Soldier proceeded to hand out some suitable intimidation.

The sheep said, "Bah!"

Soldier stopped his forward snaking. His ruff stood up as a furry collar. He stared straight into eyes that were not like the inane eyes of the flock and saw therein a certain something that had been seen by nothing on Earth excepting one helpless rabbit. He commenced to back away, his beseeching whine reaching Old Josh in canine protest.

"Dang it!" swore Old Josh. "Everything's just plain cussed this day! Thrusting two fingers into his mouth, he tried to drive the dog into action by sheer power of his commanding whistle.

The shrill, authoritative sound screamed across the hill and wailed away down the valley. Soldier half yelped, half whined. His body hunched curiously as his rear portion obediently tried to slink forward while his front insisted on going back. The distant flock bawled and mewed and shuffled agitatedly. The single sheep stood its ground and glared.

Old Josh took one impatient step forward. The lone sheep took three. Then Old Josh decided he really did need those glasses he'd been thinking of getting for the last ten years. The danged animal wasn't a sheep at all. It was a dog, a strange dog, and the very twin of Soldier. No wonder the latter had behaved so queerly.

But Soldier's sharp mind worked differently. He'd been about to discipline something posing as a sheep when the thing had

changed into the likeness of another dog—and both had eyes of fire drawn from a source unthinkable. Soldier waited not upon the order of his going. He departed with extreme alacrity, his frantic feet touching the ground at three-yard intervals. A hole in the fence marked his exit.

Old Josh gaped at the hole. The hole gaped back at Old Josh. Then he did something he'd never done these sixty years, whether Thanksgiving were coming or not—he deserted his jittery sheep. Taking one horrified look at the dreadful eyes, he turned and ran.

The thing followed him. He looked back, saw it loping out through the gate and along the road. Cold perspiration ran down his spine as he pelted along at the best pace his old legs could make. His breath came in wheezy gasps while in his mind still stood those vampire eyes which seemed to thirst for the substance of his very soul. He took another wild glance over his shoulder, saw his tracker maintaining its distance. Dog-like, the thing lolled its tongue, but the crimson organ licked out with the length and brilliance of a devouring flame.

Squirming and yelping in his frantic eagerness to get inside, Soldier was waiting at the cottage door. When Old Josh reached and opened it, Soldier dived through the gap, sought the farthest and darkest corner of the room, tried to embed himself in the wall. From somewhere out back, Tinker and Tailor moaned in horrid chorus.

The dog that wasn't a dog now stood in the gateway staring toward the open door. Old Josh decided there was no time to get around the back and unleash Tinker and Tailor. With his rheumy eyes intent upon the thing in the path, Old Josh cautiously felt behind the door, got his shaking hand on cold metal.

In one swift movement, he stuck his shotgun through the gap of the doorway and let go with both barrels. The heavy charges of buckshot went down the path on a wave of thunder that drowned the slam of the door and the noise of hurriedly thrust bolts. He hadn't done himself any good: in that brief instant after he'd fired he'd seen that the path and the gateway were empty and that there wasn't anything at all

where there ought to have been the body of a dead dog.

With the reloaded gun in his hand, he went around and made sure that all the windows were fastened securely on the inside. Then he poked up the fire, treated himself to a stiff shot of corn, sat down to think things over. He'd been thinking them over for half an hour when, out back, Tinker and Tailor screamed together. He'd never heard a dog scream before. It was a godawful sound. He had to take Soldier in his lap and nurse him back to sanity.

Tinker and Tailor were quiet after that. Old Josh wondered why they were so silent. He sniffed, fancied he could smell scorched hair. Something padded softly past the nearest window, below the level of the sill, where he couldn't see it. Soldier went nuts again.

THE fire was still blazing, and the corn half consumed, when daylight faded. Old Josh picked up the gun, went to a window, gazed into gathering twilight. He was slightly drunk, and mumbled steadily to himself in a dull monotone. He saw nothing weaving in the evening mists outside; no shape of menace, no formless fantasm lusting to add his divine spark to its own diabolical fire. He pulled the shades, lit the oil-lamp, had a good drag at the corn jug.

Three hours of silence and much potent alcohol had eased his fears to some extent. He was, he solemnly reflected, getting old. He'd lived by himself too long and had become queer. Maybe if he'd married the Widow Jenson he'd not have been chased around by figments of his own imagination. He dozed before the bright, warm fire. At one moment, Soldier groaned and Old Josh automatically snatched at his gun. But he was only half awake, and his hand soon relaxed its hold. Outside, a ghastly moon climbed into the ragged sky.

He was sound asleep when a thin line of peculiar, flickering light seeped through the narrow gap between the bottom of the door and the stone step. The light waxed stronger, glowing and fattening as if it were creeping in with the silent, secretive flow of some phosphorescent liquid.

The invading luminescence had become

a purple puddle, humping itself toward globulosity, when Soldier opened an eye and saw it. He moaned softly, tried to move, failed. The fearsome globule flicked out an immaterial tentacle and silenced him forever. The dog rolled onto its side, all four legs twitching spasmodically, a thin whiff of burned hair rising from its carcase.

Old Josh knew nothing of this. He had always been a noisy sleeper and now was excelling himself. With eyes closed and mouth open, he gasped, swallowed, mumbled and snorted before the fire whose crackling embers had lulled him into unconsciousness. Now and again his legs jerked, his hands gestured, as if such futile motions served to emphasize the unspoken sentiments of his dreams.

It was a bad dream he was having. And a startlingly vivid dream. A veritable nightmare that beaded his back with sweat. In the depth of his slumbers it seemed to him that something had occupied the opposite chair. He wasn't sure whether it was Soldier, a sheep, or a rabbit. Now it shone blindingly, shifted identities, and became a caricature of himself.

Whatever the thing was, it settled in the chair, laughed in a chilly, pseudo-human voice, and proceeded to cross-examine him. Old Josh strongly resented the persistent questioning, but found himself unable to do anything about it. The inexorable voice went on and on, asking the most idiotic questions about the most commonplace things, and all that Old Josh could do was answer to the best of his ability.

For what purposes were sheep used? Could many other animals be domesticated? Were any animals intelligent? Why did Old Josh wear clothes? What was the weapon with which he had blown some absurd pellets of lead down the garden path? What other kinds of weapons were in general use? Was he of average intelligence, or were there superior minds in the world? Did he know of methods of illumination better than the crude lamp he was using? Electricity . . . ah! . . . was that used for any purpose other than illumination?

Thus it went on. He struggled against it. He disliked this sardonic treatment of

an education that wasn't as good as it might have been. He objected to being treated like a child's primer, to be opened and read for the sake of some kindergarten knowledge. Finally, he resented the downright foolishness of some of the questions, the answers to which everybody knew.

"Dogs dislike cats—what are cats?"

## II

THE doctor looked down at the body of Old Josh Hawkins and said, "I don't care if a thousand people claim to have seen him since then. I say he died about two o'clock this morning and that his death was from natural causes." He glanced at his watch. "He's been dead about fourteen hours."

Police Officer Kelly felt far from satisfied. There was nothing surprising about the old sheepman's demise, especially when you considered his age. But there were one or two strange features about the case that needed clearing up before it could be considered neat and tidy. Kelly liked his jobs to be neat. In addition to which, he was and always had been a very suspicious man.

"But look here, Doctor Lanigan," he protested. "Jeff Anderson swears he saw Old Josh waiting for the first bus out of the village at seven-thirty this morning. Three people say they saw Old Josh getting off the bus at the depot at seven-fifty. A few more say they noticed him wandering around. They noticed him particularly, because he was acting strangely. He was looking around like a visitor who'd never seen the place before, and when a couple of them spoke to him he wouldn't answer."

"Two o'clock," declared Doctor Lanigan stubbornly.

"If he got a lift back here, or even if he walked, he must have been alive around eight to have reached home again."

"He was dead long before then," asserted the medico, flatly. "The evidence puts it beyond dispute." He closed his bag with the air of one whose position is unassailable. "And let me tell you, Kelly, corpses don't go gallivanting around and catching buses."

"Let me ride down to the village with you," requested Kelly. "There's something

fishy somewhere. I'm going to ask some questions." He heaved his heavy frame into the doctor's car, and added, "Why should Josh's three dogs have popped off with Heck? Did they die around two o'clock? Heck of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"You'll have to get a vet to examine them," said Lanigan. "I admit that it's very strange that the dogs should have died too. Maybe Josh went queer at the end, and finished them off himself."

"I'll get a vet all right!" growled Kelly.

THEY sped down to the village, the doctor silent and certain, the police officer surly and dissatisfied: As they were passing the tiny post office, Kelly let out a yell, waved frantically to an ambling pedestrian. Doctor Lanigan braked his car to a stop.

"Jeff," said Kelly, as the walker came up, "tell the doctor what time you last saw Old Man Hawkins."

"I told you once." Jeff Anderson's frown showed that already he was sick of the subject. "It was seven-thirty. He had a date with the first bus."

"Impossible!" Lanigan snapped.

"And for why?" demanded Anderson, his frown changing to a scowl.

"He was dead. What's more, he'd been dead several hours."

"That's what you think," said Anderson succinctly. "I saw him, the whole medical profession not-with-standing!" And with that shot, he turned to go.

It was the doctor's turn to scowl. Police Officer Kelly chewed his bottom lip and looked bothered. The pair stared at each other.

"Say, Jeff, did Old Hawkins look any different from usual?"

Jeff lounged back, considered a moment, said, "Only that his face fungus was yellow."

"Yellow!" ejaculated Lanigan. "What color is it usually?"

"Brown," answered Jeff Anderson. "A dirty, terbacery brown." He swivelled on one heel, made off with an air of finality.

Again the pair in the car gaped at each other. Utter bafflement showed on both men's faces.

After a while, Kelly remarked slowly and thoughtfully, "Jeff's no speechmaker,

but he's got good, sharp eyes. If he says they were yellow, then they were yellow."

"Well?"

"And the bush on Josh's dead face was stained a nice, ripe, fruity brown. You saw those whiskers yourself!"

Lanigan began to breathe words in a soft, low voice, then he said, more loudly, "Hawkins tried to clean up his beard for the first time in donkey's years. He turned it yellow. Then he came down to the village and caught a bus. After that, he returned home, carefully stained his whiskers their former color and finished up by dying several hours after he was already dead. It's pure baloney! Anderson's been drinking!"

"What, so early in the morning?" Kelly objected. "Besides, others saw Old Josh."

"Then you'd better get the opinion of another medical man," growled Lanigan. He accelerated his car with savage determination, whizzed it down the road to where Kelly's home bore the modest sign: POLICE. With a faint touch of sarcasm, he added, "Snoop around a bit and see if Old Whiskers has a twin brother who'll inherit."

Kelly winced, heaved his brawny form out of the car. Then he noticed a familiar figure waiting by the gate. It was Art Calder, booking clerk at the local depot.

"What is it, Art?"

"The boys tell me you're asking questions about Old Josh," replied Art. "So I thought I'd better come down from the depot and say my piece." He blinked nervously, licked his lips. "Josh caught the eight-fifty-five express for London. I sold him his ticket. I saw him get on the train."

Despite his middle age, Doctor Lanigan was a healthy, active man. He proved it by the way he stopped his engine and vaulted from the car in one dexterous twist. He stood chest to chest with the uneasy Art, thrust forward an aggressive face.

"You are prepared to swear that it was Hawkins and no other?"

"Of course, Doc.," Art assured. He fidgeted under his questioner's intent gaze. "I couldn't mistake that dodderer."

Lanigan turned to Kelly. "You know Hawkins far better than I do. You positively identify that body as his?"

"I do," swore Kelly, certainty in his voice, and stupefaction on his face.

"Right!" Doctor Lanigan shoved thumbs into vest pockets, lumped his jaw and peered shrewdly at his puzzled companions. "I admit my error. Kelly, I want Hawkins and the dogs brought in for post mortem examination. It's going to be thorough and complete, believe me!" He turned to Art. "And I want you to phone along the line to the terminus, trying all intervening stations, and find out whether any collector has taken that ticket you issued."

"Sure," agreed Art. "It won't take long to get that information."

"You'd better report this to county headquarters," the physician told Kelly. "Evidently this affair isn't as simple as it looks. None of us really know just what happened or how it happened." He looked from one to the other. "But to me it's mighty like murder."

"Ugh!" grunted Art Calder. He shuddered as he thought of a killer in his little office, with only the glass plate between them. He had pushed his hand through the hole in that glass. If death had clasped his hand. . . .

THE post mortem was official and, as Lanigan had promised, very, very thorough. Old Josh had been electrocuted as efficiently as any condemned gangster. So had his dogs. They'd died in the night—two dogs first, Soldier later, Old Josh last—somewhere between one-thirty and two-thirty in the dark hours before the haunted dawn. They'd died beneath a funereal sky which had released no lightning, had done no more than spread its sable pall across the scene of agony. There the quartet had gasped their last and scented the air with their final burns, man and animals alike, in an oil-illuminated cottage a full seven miles from the nearest power lines.

It was impossible. Nevertheless, it had happened.

The dumbfounded investigators had just reached the conclusion that, since all the signs were those of electrocution, there was no other possible diagnosis, idiotic as that one might seem, when news came in about the ticket. It had been handed in at Euston Station by a well-groomed, prosperous look-

ing individual, presumably a business man.

Ten minutes after the ticket had been surrendered a questing porter found a corpse. It was reposing in one corner of an empty coach. It seemed to be asleep, and blissfully unconscious of its own complete nakedness. The porter nudged the cadaver which promptly flopped over with all the horrible abandon of empty clay. By a most remarkable coincidence, it was that of a well-groomed, well cared-for individual, presumably a business man. A twin, in fact, of the gentleman who had given up the ticket bought by the twin of Old Josh.

The twin of Old Josh was not on the train.

Chief Inspector McKechnie was thinking about this mixture of twins as he sat at his desk in Scotland Yard and stared beneath bushy eyebrows at Doctor Lanigan and Police Officer Kelly. The inspector was big and shrewd: he looked like a bull buffalo with no illusions.

"I'm glad you two came along so promptly. The evidence you've been able to give shows clearly that there is some extremely mysterious but quite definite connection between the death of Hawkins and the body found at Euston."

He paused, thought a moment, then went on, "The body on the train has been identified as that of Wilson C. Fairbrother, a broker of some prominence. He appears to have died by electrocution strange as that may seem."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lanigan.

"Something very cock-eyed links these two tragedies," McKechnie continued. He rested heavy elbows on his desk, propped his big jaw with hamlike fists. "Hawkins, by all accounts, got on that train but never got off it. Fairbrother's double got off it but we've failed to turn up any evidence that he ever got on it in the first place. So what?" They waited for him to tell them. "So the conclusion to be drawn is childishly obvious: the man who caught the train while cleverly impersonating Hawkins was one and the same individual as the man who left the train in the guise of Fairbrother."

"But—" began Lanigan.

"Where is the motive?" said McKechnie, finishing the question for him. He spread



his large, capable hands in a gesture of disgust. "There's the weak spot! Fairbrother was carrying little money, had no known enemies. And, according to you two, Hawkins was a harmless old cuss without a cent in the world. Added to which, I quite fail to see why any killer should chose to masquerade as his victims. It doesn't make sense."

"It's pointless," agreed Lanigan.

"It's nutty," Kelly rumbled.

"YOU'VE hit the nail right on the head!" Chief Inspector McKechnie wagged an emphatic finger. "It's so crazy that that in itself is a lead. Until more satisfactory data comes in I'll make a rough guess that we're bedevilled by an insane actor, an unsuccessful individual who's overdue for the nuthouse, a would-be screen star with delusions of grandeur and a persecution complex."

"Somehow," put in Lanigan, doubtfully, "I can't imagine any make-up artist as supremely good as this one would have to be. Why, he was positively identified as Old Josh by folk who've known the old geezer for years. One of them was a small-holder to whom Josh had sold a dry cow, and out in the country you don't forget the man who sells you a big mouth and no milk. That's not mere acting ability—it's genius too good to believe!"

"I can hardly believe it myself," McKechnie retorted. "In fact I'll admit I've difficulty in converting myself to my own theory. But, at present, it appears to be the only one that'll fit the known facts. I'm wide open to receive a more plausible alternative."

"There isn't one, unless . . . unless . . ." Lanigan broke off, looked confused.

"Unless what?" McKechnie prompted.

"Nothing, really. I was toying with notions of the supernatural. It's too foolish to be worthy of consideration." Lanigan pondered gloomily, then spoke up with a note of sudden defiance that surprised himself. "The more I think of the whole affair, the more I'm convinced that we're facing something never before faced in the history of crime."

"I've faced some damn funny things in my time," said McKechnie reflectively, "but

all the lot of them proved astonishingly straightforward after I'd traced them to the bitter end. Three times does it—I'll concede that I've got a humdinger in my mitts directly something just as whacky links up with these two jobs."

He didn't know it, of course, but item number three was on its way to him right then. It came from Bermondsey, running along wires, through telephone exchanges, into the switchboard of Scotland Yard, thence to his desk. His phone yelled for attention.

McKechnie whisked up the phone, holding the earpiece as if it were an underweight dumb-bell. He rammed the thing against a big area of ear.

"Well? I'm busy—can't you deal with him. Oh, all right then, put him on." He sat for a moment, tapping his teeth with a silver pencil. "Yes, yes, go on, I'm listening." Then he uttered, "What!" several times, his voice rising one note higher each time. An expression of slow surprise crept into his normally phlegmatic features. Finally, he said, "I'd like you to come up right away. How soon? In about half an hour—good!"

Breathing heavily, he cradled the phone. He ignored the others, searched hurriedly through the deep litter of papers on his desk. In the end he found what he sought in the pocket of his raincoat, hanging in one corner. It was the morning paper. Spreading it over the mess on his desk, he scanned it eagerly.

"When you opined that we are facing something too tough to laugh off, you were a paragon of veracity and the holiest of prophets," he informed Lanigan. He jerked a beefy finger at the paper, then at the phone. "We got Fairbrother identified by running his picture in the morning papers. Now this chap rings up and says, 'My name's Onions, and it ain't funny!' After which he says that he recognizes the photo as that of a man who made news yesterday afternoon, a mere half-hour after that train drew in at Euston."

"Made what news?" put in Kelly, curiously.

Holding up the sheet, McKechnie pointed to a small paragraph headed: FIRE VICTIM VANISHES.

"The caller says he was one of the several witnesses. He's coming here to tell precisely what he saw." He permitted himself an unofficial grimace. "I've a lousy idea that what Mr. Onions intends to tell us will clear up this case just like stirring a mud-bottomed pond."

## III

MR. ONIONS proved to be an emaciated individual with a straggling, black mustache and bat's ears. He had watery eyes that never looked with love on anything other than booze. His derby hat was decidedly cute, his attire had plenty of zoot and exuded a faint smell of horse manure. McKechnie mentally classified him as a race-course tipster, a stable hanger-on or a bookie's tout.

"I was coming over Lambeth Bridge, reported the equine-odored Mr. Onions, "when I saw this stallion whose picture's in the papers. He was trotting toward me, making a good pace, and I wouldn't have noticed him particularly if it hadn't been for his eyes."

"What about his eyes?" encouraged McKechnie.

"So help me, they were awful!" said Mr. Onions fervently. "They made you feel as if all your insides were missing. Directly I noticed them I said to myself, 'There's a fiend straight from the guts of Hell!'"

The speaker didn't look capable of any thought so dramatically expressed, yet it was plain to see that he'd been considerably shaken. He eyed his listeners with the apprehensive air of a known liar who, for once, is voicing the gospel truth and doesn't expect to be believed.

"Directly I thought that to myself," Mr. Onions continued, "he stabbed me with a look I could feel. Then he bust into flames." He stopped, took a long breath, added, "Strike me dead if it ain't the truth!"

"And what then?"

"He flamed like a bale of hay. Half a dozen people came running. They were too late. There wasn't anything."

"What d'you mean, there wasn't anything?" prompted McKechnie.

"The flame just went. It puffed out.

Then there was nothing. We all searched around but couldn't find even a pants button. A cop came along and took all our names. He searched around too. He found nix."

"Go on."

Onions licked his lips, began to look desperate. "Last night a kid reporter called at my house. He put all the stuff down in his book, grinning while he did it. I hope he backs all the sitters! Then he left, saying he'd interview the other witnesses. So they stuck that bit about it in the paper."

"We're very much obliged to you, Mr. Onions," said McKechnie, smoothly. He leaned back in his chair, let his speculative eye wander over the silent Lanigan and Kelly. Then he studied the ill-at-ease Onions. He continued the thoughtful and deliberate study so long that the subject began to fidget. Suddenly he said, "I've a firm idea that you've been holding something back. Don't be afraid to tell us—we won't laugh at you."

"It's crazy," protested Onions, not bothering to deny McKechnie's guess.

"My dear man, you couldn't recount anything crazier than the cases we're stuck with right now!"

SHUFFLING his feet around, Onions was half ashamed, half apologetic. He hesitated, pulled at one of his bat ears, met McKechnie's penetrating eyes, blinked his own uncertainly.

"It was only a delusion."

"Never mind—out with it."

"Well, just as this flame went out, I thought for a moment that it looked like the ghost of an old hayseed with a beard."

"Hah!" snapped McKechnie.

"But it was only my fancy, because it was a flame. Then, for a second after the flame went, I thought I saw a big purple cabbage with squirming things like snakes sticking out from between its leaves." With astonishing bellicosity, Mr. Onions went red in the face and shouted, "See if you can believe that!"

"I do," McKechnie replied evenly.

Onions was dumbfounded by this ready acceptance. He stared around with the bewildered air of one who finds such faith far more surprising than the story.

"Did the other witnesses see the same?"

"No. I asked them. They thought I was drunk. But I was sober—cold sober." Then, in added justification, "I was much nearer than them. In fact there wasn't anything nearer than me except for a fool of a dog."

"A dog?" put in Lanigan. "Did you notice it before this incident happened?"

"Can't say I did," admitted Mr. Onions. "It was messing around my feet just afterward. It popped up in the general excitement, like dogs do."

"Thanks," approved McKechnie. He was about to add something more when a knock at the door silenced him. A uniformed policeman inserted his head and spoke in tones of mock solemnity.

"Inspector, a druggist out in Balham says he's caught a werewolf. It's got his poet's bones, and he wants to know what we're going to do about it."

"Werewolf? Poet's bones?"

"Yes, sir."

McKechnie's heavy frame shuddered from head to feet. He stood up slowly, stared at the now grinning cop, the gaping Onions, the puzzled Kelly, and the apparently day-dreaming Lanigan. Then he said, "When I get out of bed I'm going to swear off late suppers." He offered Kelly a hairy forearm. "Pinch me."

Kelly pinched. McKechnie blinked and rubbed the arm. His temper finally evaporated, and he roared at the cop in the doorway.

"Tell that guy in Balham we're on our way there. Get the car out."

"Yes sir." The other's grin vanished. He gulped twice, departed dazedly.

"Werewolf!" said McKechnie insanelly. "Damn!"

THE druggist was one Georges Papazoglous, a Greek. He lay prostrate in the room behind his small, unpretentious store. Perspiration beaded his plump, olive face which was being carefully fanned by a buxom wench of strong resemblance to himself. He sat up as McKechnie's elephantine tread made the floor-boards squeak. McKechnie was wearing a deep scowl that boded ill for whoever was behind this sudden flood of twaddle, the like of

which had never been known in the peculiar annals of Scotland Yard.

"In da yard," announced Papazoglous, waving a fat and sweaty hand. "I find him in da yard. I shut da door. I bolt da door. I lock da door. An' then I phone the police." He lay down again. The girl resumed her fanning. Papazoglous uttered a string of names of persons considered holy in the Levant. "You kill him, my god, such quick!"

McKechnie considered the fateful door. Werewolf, bunkum! Fine fool he'd have looked, coming along with a stake, a mallet, and the conventional bouquet of garlic. All that had brought him, in fact, was a queasy feeling behind which lay that incident concerning the "fool of a dog." Maybe it was the same dog.

IT WAS the same dog. McKechnie didn't know that, of course, but his whim had not led him astray. So he stood there with a mere couple of inches of wood between him and that eerie something that was neither human nor divine, that alien invader who was Spiro the Spy. Instinct did not warn him that the deadliest peril on earth waited just beyond that door. Inwardly, he felt that he had been somewhat stupid in giving his personal attention to a futile happening that could have been investigated by the cop on the beat. But, having been stupid, he might as well be thorough about it.

With the uniformed driver of his car standing ready behind him, he unlocked, unbolted and opened the door. He went into the yard. It was a small, brick-floored yard holding a tumbledown fuel-shed, half a dozen skeleton crates marked: *Non-returnable*, three old and very dirty carboys with the word: *Acid* faintly discernible through their grime, an ashan stuffed with crumpled cardboard cartons, a greenish-black shrub-tub harboring a thing that looked like a weary castor-oil plant, and, finally, a rusty, neglected bicycle. Nothing else.

McKechnie snorted loudly, said, "Well, where's your blasted dog?"

Springs creaked as Papazoglous heaved himself off his sofa. He appeared at the door, his eyes wide and round. The eyes searched the yard cautiously, apprehensively.

They went wider and rounder. Nothing! It took half a minute for the sheer nothingness to sink in. Then Papazoglous began to wave his hands to the accompaniment of a veritable flood of words in his native language. Disgusted, McKechnie went in, pushing past the excited Greek.

"Speak English," he said curtly.

"I finda man in my store," shouted Papazoglous, semaphoring frantically. "I catch him pokin' aroun', lookin' at da bottles, bustin' up da packets. I come at him an' shout, 'Hey, you!' an' he run like hell t'rough to yard, me after him. When I get to yard, he is a dog." He crossed himself, mopped perspiration. "Maria, I swear it! He is a dog—so!" He lowered a flat hand to show the animal's height. "Wit' eyes like tiger. They burn. God, how they burn!"

"He's not there now."

"Doan' care. Was there when I phone! A werewolf; Christos yes! I lock door an' phone."

Pensively, Papazoglous gazed through the window at the silent, undisturbed yard. The girl who had fanned him came through with a bucket of water, put it down while she opened the door to the yard.

"Helena," breathed Papazoglous, in a voice strangely low and tense, "from where have we got this plant in da yard?"

"Ain't no plant," contradicted Helena.

"Helena, you got eyes, hah?"

"Ain't our plant, anyway," declared the unruffled Helena. "Maybe somebody dumped it." To show her contempt for the subject under discussion she lifted her bucket, took aim, tried to douse the plant.

McKechnie shouted, "Great heavens!"

Papazoglous' scream went skidding half-way down the street.

THE water sloshed out in a sloppy, glistening arc. It never reached the plant. It merely curved toward it, the motion of the liquid column appearing absurdly slow by contrast with the speed of the amazing reaction.

Like some dreadful djinn released from a bottle after one thousand brooding years, the plant writhed its leaves, contorted itself in mock agony, then shot up to a height of ten feet. Here, for a moment almost too brief to register on the shocked vision of

the onlookers, it poised and wavered in the form of a long, leering, caterpillarish thing of extreme horror and supreme obscenity. Next, it was a flaming snake twisting grotesquely in mid-air a few feet above its former haunt. Even as the sluggish water splashed upon the now empty tub, the snake had closed in upon itself, solidified hardened, become a large black cat with optics that were pools of extra-mundane hate.

Displaying all the agility characteristic of the feline tribe, the big cat ran along the top of the wall on which it stood, turned once to sear the watchers with the utter evil of its stare, then dropped from sight. Its black tail vanished, and for an instant something spawned beyond that wall, a leafy, rich-hued object that might have belonged to a huge, purple cabbage. But that, too, went—a vision so brief that it might have been only the figment of a sickly dream.

The clatter of Helena's bucket was the final shock to nerves already stretched to the limit. Even the steel-hard McKechnie jumped. Her face a ghastly white, Helena had flopped in the doorway, falling without a murmur. McKechnie picked her up, bore her indoors. Papazoglous was back on his sofa. He was incoherent, hysterical, and looked like a corpse. The driver who had brought McKechnie used a quarter of an hour and much *sal volatile* to get the Greek into talkative condition.

"Now," demanded McKechnie, firmly, "where do the poet's bones come in?"

"Da right finger bones of eternal Homer," moaned Papazoglous, dully. "So real, so true, what you call authentic. Mine family have them for centuries."

"That," declared McKechnie, contorting his face, "makes everything as plain as daylight. I see it all, now. It is a revelation to me." His voice went harsh. "What the devil have these tomfool relics of yours to do with the matter?"

Papazoglous winced, pointed a trembling finger at an ornately decorated silver casket standing on the sideboard. "I put them in a place ver' safe, or so I t'ink. This man, he snatch da casket an' run. I chase. He drop it. I lock door, save bones, make call to you."

"So," said McKechnie, "he didn't know what the silver box contained. He took it because it appeared to hold the most valua-

ble item in the place, such as . . . such as . . ."

"Such as which?" Papazoglous asked.

"I don't know." McKechnie's irefulness swiftly gave way to a morbid mood. "It's now obvious that we're trying to deal with something likely to have standards very different from ours, something with totally different notions of what is valuable and what is not. It might," he went on, with a touch of ghoulish satisfaction, "think blood more precious than gold."

"Maria!" shouted Papazoglous, frantically. "Take me from this accursed place!" He lay back, rolled his eyes until only the whites showed, sweated from every pore.

#### IV

THE bulbous-browed experts ended their profound argument, not because the discussion was settled to the entire satisfaction of all, but for the better and peculiarly British reason that it was now time for tea. They claimed their black Homburg hats, departed with pedantic dignity. War Minister Stevenson, carefully folded the plans over which the dispute had raged, just as carefully placed them in a small but exceedingly heavy steel box, double locked the box, handed it to the pair of watchers at his side.

The two accepted their charge as if it held the Crown Jewels. They left the room, one cuddling the box in a beefy embrace, the other fondling a lump of metal in his right-hand jacket pocket. Solemnly they paraded downstairs, descending several floors below ground level. Here, a uniformed attendant swung aside an immense steel grille, permitted them to enter. They crossed a small, metal-sheathed room, and stopped before the great, circular door of an underground vault.

Producing a bunch of keys, the attendant selected four of them, inserted them in a certain order, twisted each of them to a certain degree. After that, he spun dials and did other complicated things. All this took a full minute, during which the waiting pair stood braced and silent. The attendant pressed a hidden button, a concealed dynamo whined distantly, the door emitted the juicy sounds of metal moving in a bath of oil.

Then its seven-ton bulk swung ponderously open.

Carrying the box through the steely maw, the escort unlocked one of a long row of metal compartments, slid the box inside and locked it up again. The compartment bore a label inscribed with a seemingly meaningless code; but in another building near at hand, similarly barred and bolted from curious eyes, was a code-book in which this label was registered opposite a brief entry: *Thorsen's Five Thousand Mile Atomic Rocket.*

Still with rocklike pose and equal dumbness, the guardians watched the attendant lock the vault, re-set the dials, extract the keys, shut and secure the grille. Then, and only then, did they go, their thick-soled boots clumping along the passage towards the stairs.

At ten o'clock in the evening, a large black cat slipped through a side door in the Ministry building, dodged a scrubwoman's mop, scampered past the police guard at the nearer end of a long passage, and sinuously evaded the guard at the other end. Like a sable shadow, unseen, unheard, it padded through a room in which the former guardians of the box were boredly perusing the evening papers. It reached the stairs, paused a moment, stared round with eyes that burned ferociously. Then it fled down the stairs.

Behind the grille, the relief attendant was settling down with his book. Some weird instinct made him lift his eyes: he saw the big cat trotting daintily along the passage towards him, and thought of the lethal current flowing through the grille.

"Ssskztz!" he hissed, dropping his book and trying to shoosh the animal away. The cat came nearer. "Scram!" he said, frantically. "You'll be burned to a cinder."

The cat took no notice. It reached the grille, hesitated, eyed it calculatingly, then snaked easily through the bars. Upstairs, a fuse exploded with a bang that brought the lounging guards to their feet. But the attendant did not see the invading cat on his side of the grille. He saw it sliding through the voltage-loaded bars, easily, unharmed, its flaring optics like tiny windows in hell. Then the lights went out; the cat bulged, mixed and swirled in a veritable kalei-

doscopic display of fantastic forms. It was a figure of indescribable horror when the strength went out of his legs and consciousness departed from his mind.

An old, old man pottered around in the gloom, a wrinkled gaffer with yellow-brown whiskers. He fiddled with the door of the vault, trying its dials and exploring its key-holes with strangely sensitive fingers that seemed to have ears at their ends. Once, he turned to the unconscious attendant, placed fingers on the man's forehead as if casually consulting the sleeping brain. Then he found the keys, inserted and turned them in the proper manner, turned the necessary dials and went through all the other functions in the correct way. Finally, he pressed the button. Nothing happened. The hidden dynamo refused to respond; the immense, air-tight door emitted no sounds, stirred not an inch.

At that point, one of the upstairs guards replaced the fuse, power returned, the lights sprang on. Another guard, following the prescribed routine, started down the stairs, his gun held slackly in one hand. He was yawning as he went. Fuses come and fuses go, but he'd go on forever.

The living dummy of Old Josh *saw* current rush back along the wires, gave the button another push. The door of the vault made its usual sounds and drifted open. He went inside, studied the steel compartments with an air suggesting that he could have looked them over just as easily in complete darkness. He was engrossed in the mysterious labels when the guard arrived.

**B**BROAD-SHOULDERED and muscular, the newcomer was a tough individual constitutionally incapable of wild excitement. Keeping clear of the grille, his hard eyes took one swift look at the supine attendant, the open vault, the Josh-like figure inside. Without batting an eyelid, without the slightest change of expression, he whipped up his heavy weapon and pulled the trigger. He did it with the slick motions and cool confidence of one who knows himself to be an excellent marksman. His bullets went *blat-blat-blat*, their echoes roaring throughout the confined space, thundering along the passage and racing up the stairs.

The missiles lanced through the body of the uncanny intruder, pinged off the walls of the vault. They might just as well have been peas. The target turned, stared at the marksman, showed him a face from which the hairy fringe had vanished, a face—aye, even a figure and clothes—more resembling those of a prosperous business man. Or was it a squirming cabbage? Or a monstrous abortion resembling nothing in the tomes of terrestrial zoology? Or. . . .?

"God!" breathed the guard, suddenly. "He looks like *me!*" His struggling fingers got home the second clip he'd been trying to shove into his gun. But he had time to let only two rip before a hellish blast swept through the grille, took him in its terrible embrace, and frizzled his very soul.

Aroused by the uproar in the depths, a second guard came charging down the stairs, a uniformed policeman close upon his heels.

Both held weapons ready in their hands. At a noisy gallop, they took three bends, descended three flights, and on the fourth bend met the guard who had first gone down.

He was racing upward at a speed which vied with their own. He passed them, gasped something they failed to catch, waved his weapon downward to indicate urgency, and continued full pelt up the stairs. The two carried on, managing to increase their speed by a fraction. Reaching the passage, they dashed along it, and found the body lying outside the grille. Flat on its back, its brawny face wearing a queer flush, its eyes rolled upward under the lids, it was clay from which all life had gone.

"Gallaher!" oathed the plainclothes man. He gaped at his companion. "It's Gallaher!" His dazed gaze went around, found the attendant's sleeping form beyond the grille, the open door of the vault. "But, damn it, *we just passed Gallaher on the stairs!*"

At that moment, the man who wasn't Gallaher strolled nonchalantly along the street, stepped into a dark doorway, and looked up at the starlit sky. The object of his attention was a low-hanging orb faintly tinged with pink. What thoughts lingered within his brain—if he had a brain

—or what sensations filled his being—if he had any real being—could not be told.

Passers-by noted, without suspicion, the shadowy watcher in the gloom. An automobile sped down the street, its headlamps momentarily casting his reflection upon an adjacent window. The reflection was not that of the dead Gallaher, but of a mere nonentity, one who, that morning, had rubbed shoulders with a camouflaged thing from the unexplored void, and had passed on, blissfully unaware.

AT THE stroke of midnight, he was in Battersea Power Station. An engineer discovered him walking silently along the diamond-patterned steel plates of the overhead catwalk, pausing now and then to lean over the tubular side-rails and peer at the banks of huge turbo-alternators. This picture of polished metal and of enormous power held in control seemed to fascinate the intruder. The engineer spat on his hands, picked up the useful steel handle of a tube-cutter, sprinted up the gangway and faced the interloper on the catwalk.

"What the blazes are you doing here?"

Aggressively, he poked the other in the middle with the length of steel. The metal made contact. A terrific shock flashed through its length, lifted the engineer off his feet, flopped him backward. He went down like a bundle of rags, his face contorted with agony.

No ordinary individual could have absorbed that torrent of force and lived. Electrical engineers aren't ordinary people. This one merely surrendered both strength and consciousness, feebly aware of what was happening, dimly realizing that what he had encountered was an electric eel in human shape. Absurdly enough, just as his brain was about to lapse into stunned sleep, he fancied that the eel looked more like an enormous flower, a huge, fleshy lily of flaming crimson which bowed and waved over his body in mockery of life.

At the entrance to the power station, two employees on night shift stood chatting. A big door eased open, letting into the cold air of night a smell of hot copper and a shrill whine of energetic machines. Through the door came a cat, a dirty, mangy, wary thing typical of back alley vermin. It leered

at them before it scuttled furtively into the night. The two watched it without interest. One sucked his cigarette. The other stared contemplatively into the darkness.

"Hey!" said the second, after a while. "That big door takes some shoving. How did that cat push it open?"

"Ever heard how rats steal eggs?" asked the other. He launched into a lecture on the subject of animal tricks, drawing plentifully upon his imagination. He conceived nothing resembling that damnable thing which had just slunk into anonymity.

"DOCTOR," said Chief Inspector McKechnie, "I hate to believe it because it smacks of lurid literature. But I've got to hand it to you." He leaned forward, his chair squeaking under his bulk. "I'm forced to believe that your guess is dead right!"

"Let's go over the data again," suggested Doctor Lanigan, imperturbably.

"All right." McKechnie lugged out a file and raked through the thick wad of papers it contained. "As you suggested, we got the cooperation of every leading news agency in the world. We asked them to give us as full details as possible of every reported incident that might come under the general headings of fantastic, supernatural or supernormal. Cutting out the resulting flood of spiritualistic stuff, and all the stunts of sensation seekers, we've plenty of interesting data left."

"In a mere couple of months," observed Lanigan.

"Yes, it's only a couple of months since Josh Hawkins became the first victim. Then Fairbrother. Why was he stripped naked? Why did we find his clothes miles back along the line? Then that Greek—his case converted me more than anything. I saw what I saw!" He looked hard at Lanigan. "And when you've seen something like that you're ready to believe almost anything."

"You've missed out Onions."

"Yes. His story ought to mean plenty. Then there was that raid on the War Ministry's documents. They'd been looked at, but none were taken. Not one document missing!" He leafed through his papers. "Next, that incident in Battersea. Afterwards, nothing more until that report from

France about the vanishing man who was found inspecting the transmission system of Radio Lyons. Then that similar report of a strangely elusive spy in a certain aircraft factory. Later, the same uncapturable individual roaming around a famous armament plant."

"The same entity," opined Lanigan, positively. "The times and movements all link up nicely."

"Then that fool story from Portugal about the trespasser in an observatory. He wouldn't or couldn't explain himself. His captor started to drag him to the police station and, when part way there, found himself leading a horse. He let it go." McKechnie permitted himself an amused snigger. "Things have gotten very crazy when we have to admit that even that yarn might be true."

"Anything is possible," declared Lanigan.

"Now, apparently, he—or it—is back in England." McKechnie turned over more papers. "Caught last Wednesday enjoying a private tour through the *Daily Courier* plant. The reporter who challenged him is still in hospital." Slapping down the papers, he made an expression of deep disgust. "Which means more insane antics to drive me mad. Say your piece again—I like to hear my convictions made more convincing."

"He's a Martian," obliged Lanigan, speaking very seriously. "Nothing known on this world of ours has such perfect power of mimicry. His natural form might be anything. He's been seen masquerading as ten or more entirely different types of human beings, and as about six weird forms of life which obviously he is in the habit of imitating, but which are not native to this planet. I have a wild idea that he and his kind may have no such thing as a natural form of their own, and at every moment of their existence are imitating some form with which they are familiar, particularly those on which they prey."

"I'd like to see him mimic a corpse," said McKechnie.

"His uncanny but natural ability functions with such wonderful perfection," Lanigan continued, "that when he doubles as a human being his impression is perfect

even to the clothes. He removed Fairbrother's attire and studied it for the sake of gaining perfection. He came very near to perfection at his first attempt, looking so like Hawkins that a close acquaintance saw only a slight difference in the color of the beard."

"Go on."

"He arrived, as far as we can discover, coincidentally with Mars' nearest approach to Earth. No other planet is in so favorable a position. Since then, Mars has been gaining distance rapidly. If he leaves it much longer, it'll be too late for him to return. I think he's making ready for departure."

"I agree," said McKechnie, his voice both reluctant and lugubrious. "What's turning my hair white is the problem of how to catch something that might be anything, and how to hang a man who's liable to turn into heaven-alone-knows-what while dangling in mid-air."

Downstairs was waiting a reporter with something on his mind that might save the bothered McKechnie's hair. With the fatalistic patience of newspapermen, he sat waiting for his interview and pondered the strange case of the vaudeville star who really and truly could give the public exactly what they wanted.

## V

THE pert, smartly-tailored usherette conducted them to their seats, handed them a program apiece. Doctor Lanigan bent forward, gazed intently over the balcony edge to the empty stage, in front of which musicians were tuning up. Violins made vague half-tones; an oboe chortled like a fat man laughing at he knew not what. The trap drummer vibrated his sticks in an experimental roll, then put them down and looked bored.

McKechnie twisted his burly form within his inadequate seating space, and surveyed with slightly bellicose gaze the portion of the audience to the rear. He spotted a pair of abnormally muscular gentlemen squatting six rows back, favored them with a knowing nod. The recipients rewarded him with stares of disarming blankness.

"I'm afraid that reporter sold us a pup,"



he grunted. He tried to cross his pillar-like legs, found that there wasn't enough space between the rows of seats, and looked at Lanigan as if it were his fault.

"We'll see," said Lanigan, philosophically.

Clapping announced the arrival of the conductor. The orchestra broke into *Blaze Away* with fire and enthusiasm that contrasted strangely with their disinterested expressions. They finished. A peroxide blonde took the stage. More clapping. The blonde sang *My Heart Belongs To Daddy*, at the same time giving the bald-headed occupants of the front stalls a taste of her high-octane libido. McKechnie sniffed his disgust, had another desperate try at crossing his legs. Failing, he glowered down at the blonde.

The turn ended, leaving some of the stallholders with pepped glands. Three Orientals came on, bowed deeply, politely, with well-drilled precision. They juggled with chromium-plated steel hoops. After a while, they combined acrobatics with the juggling. With a bowed farewell, they gave place to a second-rate comedian. McKechnie craned his neck to survey the pair of powerful persons sitting six rows behind him. They looked at him as if he were a pane of glass.

An hour later, the illuminated numbers placed at both sides of the stage glowed with the figure twelve.

"Now!" breathed Lanigan.

The manager took the center of the stage. He had expensive dentures, a carnation, and much suavity.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, very smoothly, "as already announced, Miss Mitzzy la Monte, the Songbird of the South, is unable to appear tonight owing to an indisposition. I am sure that we all sympathize with Miss la Monte in her temporary trouble." He paused, registered reverent sorrow. "But, at extremely short notice,"—another pause while he switched to pleasurable anticipation—"we have booked for you a single performance of the most remarkable exhibition ever to be shown upon the stage."

"Pfah!" snorted McKechnie, shoving violently at the back of his seat without gaining a single inch.

"A performance which has astounded the Continent!"—gestures of heavenly delight—"and now to be shown in this country for the first time!" Comporting himself with seemly mien, the manager reached the wings, turned, waved a dramatic hand at the empty stage. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, loudly, "we have great pleasure in introducing to you—Spiro, the Master of Mystery!"

All the lights went out.

FEMININE squeals saluted this sudden plunge into deep darkness. For ten seconds the stage was a silent area of deeper black within the general gloom. Then, with startling swiftness, a column of peculiarly scintillating light sprang from the center of the stage, bent itself into a vertical ring, whirled like a monster catherine wheel. The trap drummer rolled with gradually rising vigor. The catherine wheel spun, flickered, coruscated, then quickly fattened into globularity. The drum rolled louder.

The globe stood for a brief while, mysterious lights and shadows playing over its surface in baffling pursuit. Then the whole illumination sank into the sub-surface, the globe contracted slightly and vanished to the accompaniment of a tremendous bang from the bass drum. The lights sprang up. The audience blinked at the stage.

Spiro, the Master of Mystery, stood poised on the stage at the precise point where his display of light-magic had popped into nothingness. Cool, composed, he stood and studied his audience, his expression somewhat saturnine. He had all the assurance and self-possession of an accomplished and famous theatrical performer.

A girl joined him from the wings; a slender, shapely girl attired in scanty, attractive uniform of the kind usually favored by illusionists' assistants. Two stage-hands brought on a folding cabinet, opened it out, turned it round and round to give a complete view of all its sides, then erected it.

Doc Lanigan handed his opera glasses to McKechnie, saying, "Last heard of in Spain and Portugal, eh?" McKechnie levelled the glasses, had a look at the Master of Mystery. He saw a lean, handsome, sardonic face with olive skin, blue-black hair, jet-black eyes. It was a characteristic

face, one that his astute mind had no difficulty in classifying.

"I see what you mean," he observed, shrewdly. "An Iberian type." Lanigan nodded silently. "Or maybe it's the girl," added McKechnie. He shifted the glasses, examined the girl's oval, delicate features, noting that she, too, was of Spanish type.

Forcing himself halfway round in his seat, he lowered a significant eyelid. The burly couple sitting farther back suddenly found nothing to detain them, left their seats, departed with the slightly sullen air of men who have yet to see something new. With grim determination, McKechnie got his legs crossed by half rising in his seat. The entire row shook when he flopped back.

On the stage, the girl assistant directed the attention of the audience to the cabinet. With impressive sangfroid, Spiro, the Master, walked into one side of the contraption and out the other side. Or was it the assistant who walked out? Deathly silence pervaded the theater while onlookers stared in amazement at the two girls now occupying the stage. Identical twins, identically dressed.

Somebody said, "Whoo-oo!" and broke the spell. The audience roared its applause.

The magical twin curtsied gracefully, strolled back through the cabinet. Spiro emerged. The audience thundered. The stage-hands came back, pulled the cabinet to pieces in full view of the audience. Then they packed it flat and bore it off. They returned with a full-length mirror, stood it in the middle of the stage. Near it, they placed a brightly-plated, tubular frame supporting a curtain of black velvet.

**SPIRO** went behind the curtain, becoming lost to the direct view of the audience, but his sardonic reflection still visible in the long mirror. His girl assistant waved a small glass stick, murmured some meaningless abracadabra in a low but audible voice. The reflection in the mirror dissolved, became a wild medley of blurred colors and shapes, then, with astounding rapidity, resolved itself into the mirrored image of a rose-bush laden with large, lush blooms.

The audience bellowed approval. Mc-

Kechnie fidgeted around like a man hardly able to wait for a time not yet ripe. Lanigan sat in brooding silence, his eyes straining toward the stage.

More abracadabra, more changes. A prickly cactus which swiftly solidified into an ornate Chinese vase and then, before astonishment had time fully to register, just as swiftly became an Egyptian ewer of graceful design. A few more such demonstrations, then Spiro came from behind the curtain, waited for the frenzied clapping to die down. He spoke for the first time, his voice sharp and penetrating.

"The true explanation of these illusions is a very simple one. It is a discovery of my own which no other magician can duplicate." His features set in a hard grin as he uttered that last word. "But I am now going to attempt a feat considerably more difficult, a feat for which I require your cooperation." Again the grin. "Under cover of darkness, I shall try to offer for your inspection some miraculous reproductions of anything nominated by any member of the audience."

Somebody gasped, several clapped. Spiro bowed in mocking appreciation, and said, "Thank you!"

"Show me," challenged a skeptic in the stalls, "a roc's egg." The lights went out, came on. There was the egg—a huge one. "A giraffe," demanded another. Titters sounded in the following darkness. But he got his giraffe. The animal shuffled awkwardly on the stage, thrust its long neck high over the footlights, blinked at the audience.

"Seen them in the zoo," whispered Lanigan. Pulling out his big, white handkerchief, McKechnie nodded understandingly.

The excited audience continued to call its choice, getting in return a fantastic series of impressions ranging from a pedant's demand for a Brazilian ant-eater to a humorous call for "a five-foot cucumber." One ultra-rapid sample of mimicry was that of a famous political character in a typical pose. It brought deafening cheers.

McKechnie blew his nose, flourishing his handkerchief discreetly. Downstairs, in the left-hand aisle, a gentleman whose jacket almost creaked across his shoulders saw the handkerchief out of one corner of his eye.

He turned his attention to Spiro, placed hairy hands to his mouth, and bull-bellowed a request that resounded all over the theater.

"Show me a Martian!"

The result was stupefying. Lanigan had expected that Spiro would retain his composure and ask the burly caller whether he'd recognize a Martian if he saw one. McKechnie had anticipated being fobbed off with a grotesque imitation of something that might be anything or, more probably, something that not exist except in the alien invader's fertile mind.

What Spiro did do was to turn upon the burly baiter a face of such demoniacal hatred that men quailed and women screamed. His eyes became whirlpools of living fire dredged from an unknown cosmic hell. They seared, and one could almost hear the hiss of their flaming. With pantherish agility, he leaped headlong into the audience, and waded through shrieking people toward that impertinent Terrestrial who had dared to mention a Martian.

## VI

BACK at the switchboard, the imperturbable electrician shifted his gum, pulled over a knife-switch, gave his wad another chew. Once more the theater was plunged into blackness, its lowermost portion becoming a sultry pit from which arose a bedlamic uproar of yells, screams and oaths.

His face crimson with excitement, McKechnie bawled a series of violent oaths, strove mightily to get his legs uncrossed. Nearly uprooting the seat in his frantic struggle, he did much to increase the panic of his immediate neighbors. The voices in the pit rose crescendo. With a final tremendous feat of acrobatics, he got himself unstuck, and plowed his way through the milling crowd, leaving behind his big, powerful form a wake wide enough to allow Lanigan to follow without discomfort.

They reached the manager's office just as that worthy got to the switchboard and restored the lights. There were three policemen outside the office.

McKechnie said, "Let nobody in! Nobody! Not even the manager! Not even my twin brother!" They nodded.

Inside the office waited the pair of muscle-bound individuals who had been seated behind McKechnie and Lanigan at the time the show commenced. They had between them a dark-haired, slender, tearful and very frightened girl.

"I think she's safe enough," McKechnie remarked. "He's abandoned her, in view of what's happened." He seated himself by hooking a thick thigh over one corner of the desk. "Now talk—and talk fast."

"He picked me up in Lisbon," said the girl fearfully, and in excellent English. "He said I was attractive and could have a job as his assistant. I would travel much and see the world. He was going to put on his first, experimental show here before commencing his tour abroad."

"Go on."

"He said he'd made a lifelong study of mass hypnosis. He said that the Indian Rope Trick was not a real performance, but merely mass hypnosis, and that anyone perfecting the art could far surpass the world's most famous illusionists, performing more spectacular feats, more easily, with less bother. He claimed that he didn't need the complicated apparatus and expert trickery of ordinary magicians, and could get better results by sending his psycho-waves along the optical nerves of a crowd, making them see whatever he chose to depict as vividly and convincingly as if it were with their eyes."

"Think there's anything in it?" asked McKechnie of Lanigan.

"I doubt it," responded the doctor, thoughtfully. "It is a very plausible explanation, and one well calculated to lull the girl's suspicions. But I've a hunch that his changes are real, physical ones."

"He was going to put on a show in Paris," the girl went on, "but it rained that night and he said he wouldn't go out. So he came to London. He visited Mitzy, and I think he bribed her to abandon one performance so that he could put on his show."

"Yes, a reporter told us about a few sample illusions he put over to clinch the booking." McKechnie turned to one of the guards. "What about you?"

"I dodged him in the general furore caused by the lights going out," answered

the phlegmatic one. "Like you told me, I didn't bother about him, and concentrated on helping Bill to grab the girl and rush her here."

"Good," McKechnie approved. He turned an inquisitive eye upon Lanigan.

"This was his last quest," declared Lanigan, speaking very slowly, very deliberately. "I am doubtful about his alleged powers of mass hypnosis, but I think his last job was to make a study of mass psychology. He revealed some of his abilities, Martian abilities, strange, extra-mundane talents the like of which don't exist in this world; and he got the human reaction to them—the reaction of humanity in the mob."

"Ah!" punctuated McKechnie, with a grunt.

"He is sensitive to human reactions," Lanigan persisted. "Even the comparatively stupid Onions made him respond to suspicion. And he has a photographic mind." He studied his listeners. "That's why documents have been inspected but not taken away. Machines and apparatus have been examined but not drawn. He has gathered into his amazing intellect all the knowledge for which he came, including that of how we alien, two-legged creatures behave in herds."

He jerked a thumb toward the ceiling. "Up there a planet is moving rapidly upon its appointed path. It waits for no man, no thing."

"You mean he's about to beat it with all he's got?"

"I'm convinced of it!" Lanigan let his hands rest gently on the girl's shoulders. "My dear, did this person, this creature, tell you when and from where he would take you abroad?"

"Why, yes." Her pale face went a shade paler. "He'd hired a private plane. We were going to Ireland, thence to America by Transatlantic Clipper." Her whisper was almost inaudible as she described the precise point of departure and the time.

"See," breathed Lanigan. "He even intended to take back a sample!"

been the very same rabbit which had received the fright of its life two months before.

Overhead, the sky was heavy, brooding, and the color of molten lead.

From his hidden vantage-point on the side of the hill, Doctor Lanigan peered through powerful binoculars at the little knoll that made a lump in the middle of the valley. His glasses swept slowly across the field of view, saw nothing. He might have been alone, far from all human life, but he knew that around the locality were half a hundred anxiously waiting men, some of them concealed within a few yards of his own refuge.

Four hours of this, not to mention the long watch already put in by other patrols, lying and waiting for an event that might never come; silently, patiently, determinedly biding a culmination that perhaps was not to be. There were two and a half thousand million human beings in the world. There was one who wasn't human. And the defeat of an unimaginable menace rested solely upon the supposition that this one entity would appear at this one small spot within the limit of a certain time. On what a thin, fragile thread could human fate and progress be suspended!

All the same, Doctor Lanigan felt that this eerie, elusive foe would be compelled to risk the trap. He, the enemy, had a rendezvous with Mars, and willy-nilly must make the connection or remain isolated for a long time upon an awakened and hostile world. No planet could stand in its orbit even to save a faraway son. So, weary with the strain of waiting, but still full of confidence, Lanigan watched the valley and the knoll.

Half an hour later, a lonely figure wandered along the track toward the knoll. Its pace was indolent, careless, well calculated to disarm the suspicion of any concealed onlooker. At a range of a little over two hundred yards, Lanigan scanned the stroller carefully. He saw a nondescript man of medium build, attired like a farm-hand. A sun-burned face was partly exposed beneath a cap, the large peak of which effectively concealed the eyes. Did those hidden optics have the dull, disinterested stare of an idle, innocent mind? Or were they secretly blaz-

**A** RABBIT scuttled furtively across the space surrounded by small, insignificant shrubs. It might or might not have

ing with the feral hatred of a hunted werewolf?

Even as Lanigan wondered, the cap tilted when the wearer lifted his head, and for the briefest instant the watcher glimpsed a deep, boiling glow of crimson like that concealed within the heart of a ruby which bears a perpetual curse. It was enough! Lanigan jogged a field telegraph key lying in the moss at his side. A mile higher up the valley, a ready hand turned a waiting wheel, floodgates opened in a concrete dam, an artificial lake poured outward in glad release.

Spiro saw the wall of water rushing madly toward him, the white horses of its foaming crest like an irresistible charge of liquid cavalry. He looked to the left, but there was the swiftly flowing stream that fed the little valley, its volume already swollen, its surface rising rapidly. He looked to the right, glaring ferociously toward the hidden onlookers. But the knoll was his only link with the empire beyond the skies. He raced to the knoll, dashed madly up its slope. The raging waters surrounded the hillock just as he got clear. They swirled around its base, began swiftly to climb toward its crest.

The figure of the thing that was not a man changed as it fought up to the crest. It faded, lumped, distorted, became an upward-rolling ball obscenely fringed with quivering spines and gesticulating tentacles. Then a glowing, fiery python; then a humping, caterpillarish monstrosity of fast and disgusting motion. There were vague suggestions of other fearful forms during and in between its many changes.

"GO ON," muttered Lanigan to himself, his eyes straining at the rising waters. "You hate water like hell. It stands at the top of your long, long list of things to be hated. You fear water as you fear nothing else in the whole of creation. There is little of it on Mars, and what little there is you'd rather be without—for it is death to you and your immaterial kind. All your exploits were in dry weather—I checked up, on that! You were unheard-of on the wet days. You fled headlong from Helena's fateful bucket. You abandoned your Paris show because it was raining."

The swirling tide was now lapping within three feet of the crest which the fugitive had reached. He was a python again. Even now he could escape, even now there was an absurdly easy means of evading his fate—if only he could keep calm and think of it.

"Change as much as you like," said Lanigan in a tense whisper. His forehead was damp with excitement and anxiety. "You cannot be anything! You cannot be a fish! Nothing you can mimic will save you, except. . . ." He sweated furiously in his frantic effort to suppress the dangerous suggestion. What if that susceptible creature picked up his thought, and promptly took the easy way out? He was betting entirely on its psychology being similar to the human in one cogent respect—it could be betrayed by its own utter fear, could be made the victim of its own panic. "You cannot escape, unless. . . ." Again he had to kill the treacherous notion.

The flood lapped over the crest. With a sinuous motion, the form of scintillating snakiness escaped the watery grasp, floated momentarily a few feet above the surface. It writhed frantically in mid-air while far, far in the very depths of his mind Lanigan seemed to hear a weird, thoroughly abnormal susurration like a final wail of activated matter before it vanished forever from the burned-out cosmos. It was a horrible sound: a fundamental chord broadcast from the nethermost end of time and space. It was the voice of impending death!

Then the twirling, flaming shape fell back. It struck the hungry waters. They boiled and foamed as if they'd swallowed a one-ton lump of sodium. The opposite hill shivered and quivered as Lanigan saw it through a column of released gases.

"Not true levitation," he said, "but temporary suspension. He made an ultra-slow jump! God, that I should have lived to see the like!"

Getting to his feet, he stared solemnly at the still violently disturbed waters, noting the wild, agitated bubbling as they continued to react viciously upon whatever was left of the thing that had no counterpart on Earth. McKechnie joined him, his ears filled with the termagant sounds and sizzlings from below.

Even as they stood, something plummeted through the sky, plunged headlong into the water-filled valley. Optical retention left them with a vague impression of a strange, egg-like body builded of mist and random dreams. But it was real enough. It struck with a mighty splash, and the hungry waters reacted upon it ferociously.

"The mental connection was broken," observed Lanigan, meditatively. "He had it parked"—he gestured toward the silent, sghast sky—"somewhere up there. He died—and down it came."

"Humph!" said McKechnie. He fondled his heavy gun, glanced over the now visible group of watchers, most of them armed. His expression was regretful. "I'd have liked to have taken a pot at him."

"Without effect," Lanigan pointed out. "He's been shot at before, and a lot of good

it did." He pondered a moment, looking to the north where, only a mile away, Josh Hawkins had kept a lonely vigil without avail. "We've learned a few useful things, I guess. We've learned, for instance, that Martians are as susceptible to fear as ourselves. Note that all his frantic changes were into unrecognizable and therefore undoubtedly Martian types. Under extreme pressure of fear, his mind followed a well-beaten track."

"I don't get the point," said McKechnie.

Lanigan smiled. "From what has happened, we can make a safe bet that there are no birds on Mars. Filled with fear, his mind became entirely Martian, forgetting all its acquired Terrestrialism. Think—*he could have been a bird!*"

"Great heavens," rumbled the startled McKechnie. "So he could!"