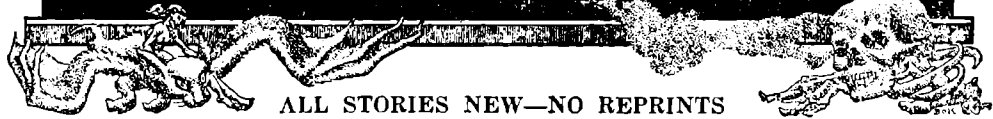


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1942

NOVELETTES

THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH	H. P. Lovecraft	6
<i>Malignant Nightmare—Dancing in Grotesque, Fantastic Saraband— Surges Through the Streets of a Horror-Ridden Seaport!</i>		
PARASITE MANSION	Mary Elizabeth Counselman	73
<i>A Curse—Vicious, Soul Destroying—Was Upon the Beautiful Old House</i>		
WHO CAN ESCAPE	Seabury Quinn	104
<i>Death Seems so Certain, so Final—But the Land of the Unquiet Dead Has Many Exits . . .</i>		

SHORT STORIES

THE WHITE LADY	Dorothy Quick	34
<i>For a Mere Cock and Bull Yarn—the Tall Trees Ghost Did a Remarkably Thorough Job of Haunting!</i>		
DEATH THUMBS A RIDE	Robert Arthur	49
<i>Introducing the Very Latest Things in Phantoms . . . a Hitch-Hiking Ghost—an Ectoplasmic Hobo!</i>		
THE GHOST OF LANCELOT BIGGS	Nelson S. Bond	61
<i>Featuring the Resurrection of that Crackpot, Crackjack Mechanic of the Spaceways!</i>		
THE PHANTOM SLAYER	Fritz Leiber, Jr.	91
<i>He Slew Wantonly—for the Sheer Hellish Fun of It!</i>		
TABLE FOR TWO	Arthur Leo Zagat	120
<i>"Maybe I'm Nuts—but I Thought I Heard Someone Whisper 'Good-by!'"</i>		

VERSE

THE CURSE	Page Cooper	119
SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS	Irwin J. Weill	102
THE EYRIE		123
WEIRD TALES CLUB		126

*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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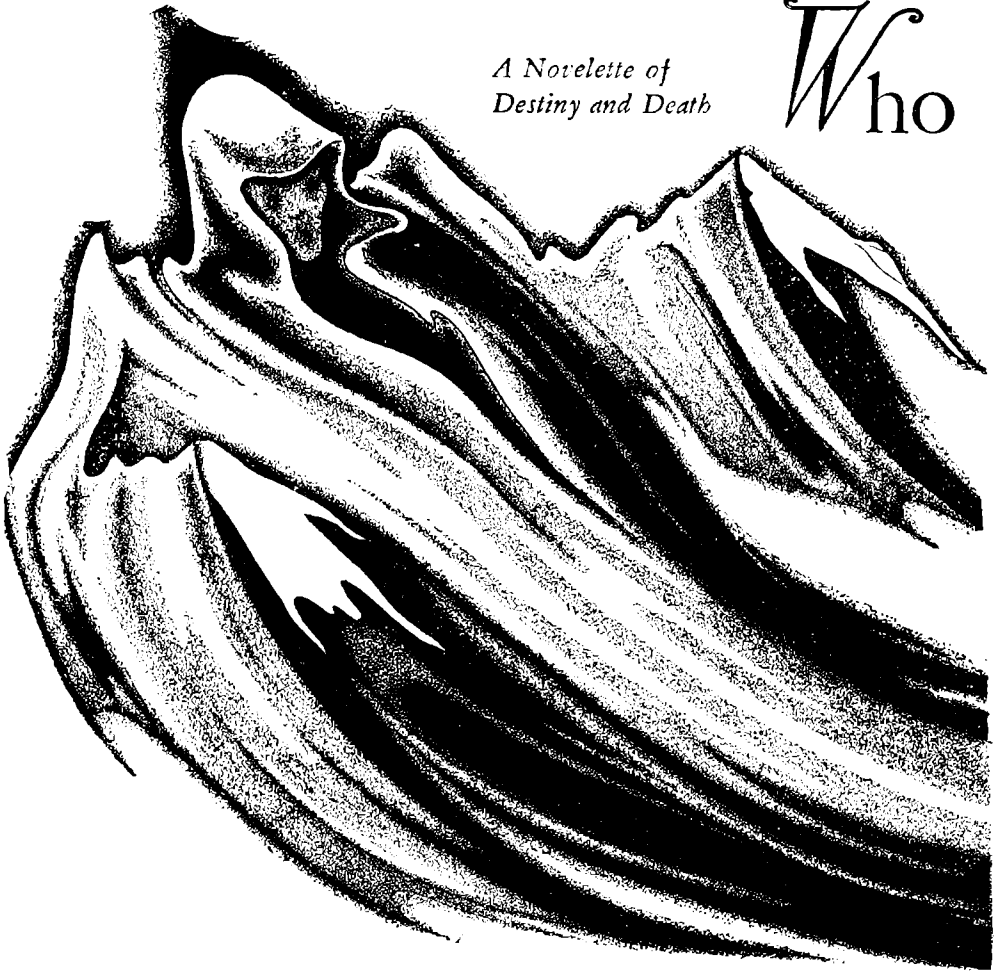
173
Vol. 36, No. 3

D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

*A Novelette of
Destiny and Death*

Who



BY SEABURY QUINN

You can fairly feel the slow unfolding of this tragedy—the relentless closing in of Nemesis—the final springing of the trap!

Certificate of Suicide Issued

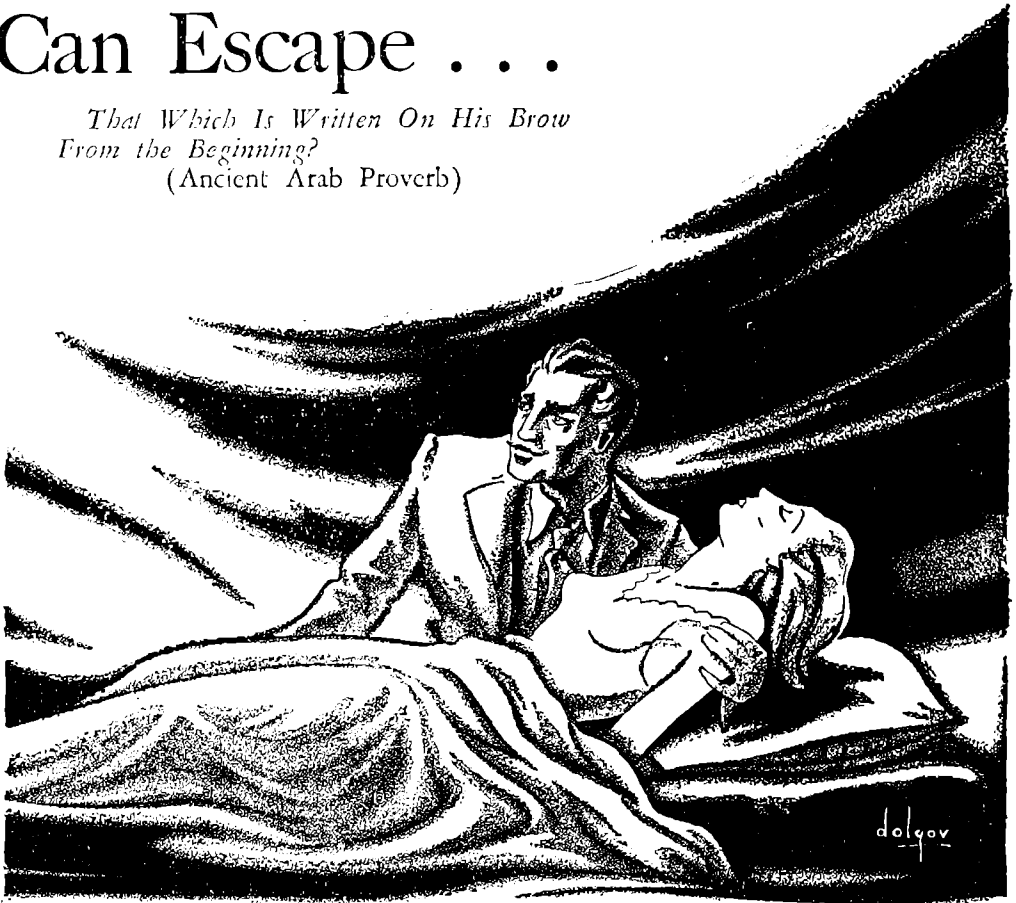
CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER CHARLES G. RODRIGUEZ today issued a certificate of suicide in the case of Judson Talley, 51, who was found dead in his Sutton Place apartment last Thursday, shot through the right temple and with a .25-caliber automatic pistol lying on the floor beside him.

Mr. Talley, widely known for his activities in the sporting world, especially in racing, was found lying face downward on

the floor of his living room by Mahdi Omar, his Syrian houseman, when the latter reported for work early Thursday morning. Although apartments above and below Mr. Talley's were occupied, none of his neighbors recalls hearing the shot which must have ended his life, but as the lethal weapon was of small bore it is believed that traffic noises from the street may have drowned out its report, or the detonation might have been mistaken for a motor car's backfire. Police and the medical examiner's office attribute Mr. Talley's suicide to grief

Can Escape . . .

*That Which Is Written On His Brow
From the Beginning?*
(Ancient Arab Proverb)



over the death of his wife, Mrs. Lavinia Talley, which occurred in Mt. Alto hospital, Fifth Avenue, shortly before midnight Wednesday. She was his second wife, and hospital attendants recall that his first wife, Mrs. Augusta Hall Talley, died at that institution a year ago under strangely similar circumstances, both women having been operated on for appendicitis and both apparently having been well on the way to recovery when fatal relapses occurred.

Mr. Talley had no known relatives in New York and funeral arrangements are being held up pending efforts by the police and public administrator's office to find kin elsewhere. —*New York Daily Sphere.*

Thickly banked snow clouds pushed and

crowded on each other, as if they cowered from the sharp lash of the shrewish January wind, but the snow itself had stopped and the dregs of the storm were slush in the streets as Talley came out of the hospital. The nurse's stereotyped condolences still echoed in his ears, the light from the glass doors flowed past him from the vestibule, striking back small echoes of itself in the sad muddy puddles by the curb, slush spattered from the grinding wheels of the taxi he had automatically raised his hand to halt, splashing a pine-tree pattern on his overcoat. He took no notice as he climbed into the cavern-like interior of the cab.

"Where to?" the driver asked as he slammed the door shut; then, as Talley

made no answer: "Where to, sir?" he repeated.

He'd had the stand by the hospital three months now, and learned that fares that came out of the rambling red-brick building were a funny lot of birds. Young fathers, bubbling to the point of effervescence with the pride of recent parenthood, grinning till it seemed their mouths could stretch no farther, slapping him on the back and forcing cigars on him, older men with weary eyes and sagging mouths, tired from their long vigils at the bedsides of their wives or children; sometimes a woman sobbing softly, with the lipstick on her mouth in sharp contrast to the fresh pallor grief had painted on her cheeks. This guy was hard to classify, though. Taut as a fiddle-string, drawn to the point of snapping, yet oddly lax and flaccid-looking—as if he'd been keyed up until his nerves were at the snapping-point, then sought release in liquor which had not yet had time to act. "Where to?" he repeated for the third time, then: "What's that?"

"*Bism-illah irrahman errahmin!*" his fare had muttered.

"Cut out th' double talk. Where d'ye wanna go?" the cabman snapped.

"Oh? I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking," the passenger apologized. "Six eighty-seven Sutton Place, please."

As they swung east from the Avenue the cabby took a quick look at his fare in the rear-view mirror. Funny-lookin' bird; kind o' gave a guy the creeps. Thin-faced, with a little, almost white mustache and two long lines like saber-scars seared down his cheeks. His hair was gray as lead, and seemed somehow to match the grayness of his face. The black Homburg hat and white-silk scarf tied in an Ascot knot, and the heavy dark-gray melton overcoat were as conservatively fashionable as the address he gave. He ought to be good for a real tip, but. . . . There was something in his eyes that made the cabby feel uncomfort-

able. Where had he seen such eyes? He ransacked memory as the cab sped down the cross street and skidded to a stop as a red light gleamed suddenly at Madison. He had the answer: Dr. Meise! He'd been loitering in the concourse of Grand Central Terminal one morning when they brought a gang of convicts through for Ossining. One of them was the little Maspeth druggist convicted of poisoning his wife. Meise had just such eyes as these: vacant, blind as marbles inlaid in his face, and sick with desperate fear—no, not exactly fear, but rather the ghost of dead hope. Tip or no tip, he would be glad when he had slammed the door behind this bozo.

TALLEY pressed the wall switch and a mellow light bloomed in the little parchment-shaded lamps each side of the sofa drawn up to the fireplace. The big room seemed strangely familiar. Somehow, he had thought to find it changed, altered past his recognition, since Lavinia was gone. It ought to be, he thought with petulant resentment. It should be desolate and ruinous as a haunted house. For it was haunted. Love haunted. Haunted by the specter of dead happiness. It was matched and blended to her personality as was the blended perfume she affected and the gown that Madame Iukle made for her, yet here it was, unaltered and unchanged, while Vinnie was—his thoughts halted abruptly, blocked by the memory of the empty, staring eyes, the opened flaccid mouth with lolling, idiotic tongue—as if she had made a silly face at him!—and the slack laxness of her drooping jaw. God, how death could make a mocking parody of beauty! He'd never realized before how much the dignity of death owed the embalmer's art.

There was his white-leather wing chair, and there, across the hearth from it, was hers, upholstered in bright green and gold

brocade. For the tenth time he tried to find tears, and couldn't. His eyes ached for the relief tears would bring, but, oddly, he seemed to have none to shed. His hands felt cold against his cheeks and in the hollows of his shoulders fine pain seemed to stab until he thought he'd scream with the torment of it. His throat ached, too, and deep inside his chest he felt a numbing, dull misery, but no tears came to wash the bitter, gritty rasping from his throbbing eyelids. "Lavinia!" he murmured desolately as he looked about the softly lighted room. He could see her now—not as he'd seen her half an hour ago when the nurse drew up the sheet to veil her hideously altered face, but as she'd looked that evening, a little luscious wisp of womanhood clad in a misty negligée of Nile-green chiffon that set off the vivid freshness of her pink-and-white face and the soft luster of her glowing yellow hair and made her look like a bright blossom blooming on a stalk of palest green.

How happy he had been with her there just across the hearth from him! Happy? Delirious was a better word for it. "Give me a cigarette, darling," she had asked as she curled her graceful legs under her and raised her tapering arms in a luxurious stretch, sighed with content, and relaxed again, "and light it for me, please."

He jumped to do her bidding. He always leaped to serve her. She was so beautiful, so fragile, so helpless and exquisite, this morsel of femininity whom he worshiped and adored from the topmost of her childish-tight blond curls to the rose-enameled nails of her childish-small toes. "Now put my shoe on for me," she commanded with a pretty pout as he bent and clicked his lighter for her. She extended a tiny coral-tipped white foot to him.

He went down to his knees and retrieved the small gold-kid strapped sandal which had fallen from her foot as she had drawn it up beneath her. It was size two, quad-

ruple A—he had her shoes made specially for her—worked with her monogram in seed pearls where the straps crossed on the instep, and as he set it in place he bent quickly and pressed a kiss on the blue-veined, slim arch of the soft, dimpled foot.

"Old thweetums!" she lisped the baby-talk of endearment as she might have spoken to a pet dog. Her eyes were soft and bright in the firelight as she smiled down at him. "He loves his little Vinnie, doesn't he?"

They made an interesting if not entirely pleasing tableau, the fragile Dresden-china figurine of a woman with her wisp of Nile-green negligée shadowing but not concealing the sweet rondures of her body as she curled up like a kitten in the big chair, and the slim distinguished-looking man of middle age who all but groveled on the hearth rug before her. She regarded him with genuine affection in her violet eyes, but there was something like a look of condescension in her soft glance, too. As if she owned him, body, soul and spirit, and knew the power of her ownership.

On his face was a look of breathless worship such as some ancient priest of Isis might have worn as he knelt all but swooning with the ecstasy of adoration in the temple-place of his goddess.

"Love you?" he echoed hoarsely. Emotion made his voice go hollow. "If you only knew—"

She didn't, of course, but he did; and sometimes the memory of it haunted him like a frail ghost that lacks the strength to make itself more than a vague discomfort to the haunted one; but each time memory troubled him he'd fix his thought on Vinnie, and the little, frail, pale ghost of conscience would go wailing impotently back to its tomb.

JUDSON TALLEY had been brought up to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Especially the pursuit of happiness.

His father was a prosperous butcher in the Bronx, not yet a part of New York City, and because he'd had to slave for everything he had and forego schooling in an orphan's effort to clutch soul and body together he vowed his son should have all that he'd missed. So Judson went to the best schools and had more spending money than the sons of millionaires who were his classmates, and afterwards he went to college with two hundred dollars to squander as he pleased every month. He learned quickly, but because his father took inordinate pride in his scholastic triumphs and social gains the education he acquired was almost useless. At twenty-six he was a Ph.D. and knew an almost numberless amount of things that were information, and very few things that were things. Slender, well-made, dark-haired, gray-eyed, he was an attractive young man, socially eligible and financially desirable—and practically worthless from the standpoint of business, commerce or the professions. When his father hinted diffidently that it might be well for him to think of taking over the responsibilities of the rapidly expanding business, young Judson always had an excellent excuse. He had his social obligations to fulfill, or his duties with the Guard.

The Guard was both his hobby and his passion. He loved the dignity of military discipline, the trim, precise formality of drill. Also he looked extremely well in uniform and the contacts that he made with brother officers helped him socially; helped him to forget his father was a Bronx butcher who had never gone past the third grade in school.

Then came the war, and France, and a measure of the military glory he had dreamed of while in camp for annual maneuvers. His father came to see him off at Hoboken—an alderman's influence had secured a pier pass for him—and to his great embarrassment kissed him on both

cheeks before he went up the gangway.

They assigned him to staff work in Paris, so while his former comrades slogged through mud and fought off cooties and grinned back at death a hundred times a day he slept between clean sheets, washed regularly and went to his desk each morning in a spotless, freshly pressed uniform.

Expansion came at home. The chain of prosperous meat markets his father owned grew to a giant enterprise with half-a-dozen slaughter houses of its own. The price of meat soared higher, but demand was always greater than supply. Mr. Talley borrowed from complacent bankers, put up more abattoirs, worked them to capacity, then borrowed more and built more.

Peace broke the bubble. War contracts were canceled, the soldiers were discharged, the swift recession of the early 1920's set in and the giant Talley Packing Company, over-financed and geared to run at profit-making speed only when at maximum production, fell like an unbalanced stock of plates and smashed into a ruin of irredeemable fragments. Nor was it all that broke. A microscopic arteriole in Mr. Talley's brain gave way beneath the pressure of his shattered fortune like an over-inflated balloon tire on a hot pavement, and one gray December morning they found him face-down on his bedroom floor, quits at last with life—and poorer than he had been forty years before when he had opened his first meat stall in Tremont.

When Captain Judson Talley walked down the gangplank of the *Leviathan* after nearly three years service with the Paris Secretariat he found himself at a loose end. There was no work for him, and he was fitted for no special job, even if there had been. The brief halloa of triumph was long since over, returned soldiers were being quoted at a dime a dozen, and prospective employers were demanding evidence of value before they made room on their payrolls for a new man.

He borrowed where he could, bought an outfit of civilian clothes and went looking for a job with easy hours, negligible duties and substantial pay. Meantime he eked out his fast-melting capital by accepting all such invitations as came his way.

AUGUSTA HALL was no beauty. She could not have been called a true brunette, although she certainly was not a blonde. Mousy was perhaps the best description of her coloring, and she did nothing to relieve the drabness of its monotone. Everything about her, her small shoulders, her small, indeterminately-colored eyes, her narrow profile and her thin, long fingers revealed her as a woman of edges rather than curves.

Also, just as some favored women can wear bargain-basement dresses in a way to make them look like Paris importations, Augusta had the unhappy knack of wearing expensive clothes in a way to make them look as if they had been grabbed up at a third-rate rummage sale. At forty she looked forty-five, typically an old maid, one of those unhappy females foredoomed by fate to go to other women's weddings and exclaim over other women's babies.

But though she had no sense of style and no more beauty than a rag doll, she had two qualities to recommend her. She was a lady, no doubt of that. In the gracious poise of her manner, in the softly modulated voice, in everything she did gentility was manifest. And she had money. Lots of it. Her forbears settled on the western tip of Long Island long before Broekly became Brooklyn or anybody visioned bridges over the East River. They set up mills and bought wharf-rights and leased out tracts of land on unredeemable ground rents. Before the Revolution they were well-to-do; when Lee surrendered they were wealthy; the closing of the World War found them rich and few in numbers, with Augusta owner of a large

share of their wealth and heir to more of it.

Judson hated the idea, but he had to eat, and all his training had accustomed him to eating only finest, most expensive foods. So he and Augusta were married in Old Plymouth Church, and it was not long before he learned that marrying money is the hardest way to work for it.

Augusta had a house, a big ramshackle mansion dating back to Civil War days, in Pineapple Street. This loathsome pile was furnished in black walnut and horse-hair, with gilt-framed portraits of her ancestors upon the walls. And there she made him live, enduring a decrepit heating system, foregoing his daily shower because there was no modern plumbing in the place, enduring cold, dank atmosphere in winter and almost stifling heat in summer.

He had thought that once the marriage ceremony was performed he could embark again upon the life he knew and loved. Instead, he found that he was linked for life to a narrow, strong-willed woman who disapproved of almost everything he liked and held the purse-strings with uncompromising tightness. She did not insist that he go to work—thank God for that!—but she'd scarcely let him from her sight, and when on rare occasions he was able to get out with his old friends he paid for his release with weeks of sitting in the stuffy Brooklyn parlor, entertaining guests who bored him nearly to extinction, or attending lectures and concerts at the Academy. He found the concerts worse than the lectures. He couldn't sleep through them.

For twenty years he trod the dreary treadmill of his servitude. He was housed and clothed and fed, but for this bare existence he paid daily agony of spirit. At fifty he looked his full age and more, a slim man whose face showed utter weariness of life, eyes with a dull, strange, far-off look, almost filmy with ennui, shoulders sloping as though nothing mattered,

hair almost completely gray and a small, trim mustache nearly pure white.

Then, like a vision out of Paradise, he saw Lavinia. He'd begged an evening off to go to a reunion of the Old Regiment, and afterwards some of the boys had taken him to Club 19. They'd had a round of Scotch and soda and were waiting for a refill when he saw her coming toward him with her tray of cigarettes and cigars held before her. Her black-sateen uniform was much like that of Gunga Din, having

*" . . . nothin' much before,
An' rather less than 'arf o' that be'ind."*

and without a doubt she was the loveliest thing his eyes had ever rested on. Small, almost tiny, not childish in her smallness, but a perfect woman in miniature. Her pale-gold hair, worn short and absolutely frothing with tight little curls, was her outstanding attraction, but her luscious cream-and-strawberry complexion, her violet eyes, her small straight nose and the mouth that seemed a little sad, a little mocking, made up an ensemble that fairly took his breath away. One look at her and all the long repression of his heart-starved life exploded with the violence of a chemical reaction. It had come late—too late!—but there it was: love at first sight, instinctive and spontaneous, so overpowering that it seemed to stop his pulses and his breathing.

"Cigarettes, sir?" she had asked as she paused at his table, her voice throaty, almost caressing. He fumbled with the change as if his fingers had been numbed with cold, finally left it all in the small saucer wedged between the packs of cigarettes and cigar boxes on her tray.

"Whazza matter, feller, got hit bad?" hiccoughed Albert Templeton as he saw the look that Talley cast after the girl. "Little Vinnie get your goat? Wanna meet 'er?"

He slapped a jovial hand on Judson's

shoulder and waved the other to her. "Come 'ere, Vinnie," he ordered. "Mr.—I mean Captain—Talley wants a knock-down to you. Be careful of him, gal. He's an old soldier, just like me, an' dangerous, Vinnie—but dangerous!" He hissed the warning through clenched teeth as she came slowly back to the table and gave Talley a brief nod.

"How d'ye do—" she began, then stopped short, a little breathless catch in her voice. She had looked into his eyes, and what she saw there frightened her, yet at the same time struck an echo somewhere deep inside her. She had worked at Club 19 a year and seen desire in men's eyes a thousand time, but this was different. This was worship, adoration, pure idolatry, and it sent a tingle through her like the after-glow of fine old sherry. No woman ever felt the power of her beauty save with exultation, and little Vinnie Dunn the cigarette girl thrilled with jubilation as she saw this mature man—this gentleman—prostrate before the altar of her loveliness.

She laid a tiny hand in his and felt his fingers tremble at her touch. There was nothing wanton in her glance, her look was not voluptuous, yet at the contact with her perfumed palm and at the slow-kindling light in her wide, knowing eyes, he felt himself go weak and helpless with a sort of numbness close akin to pain—the sort of feeling he had not experienced since as a lad in first long trousers he had called on his first sweetheart.

HE SAW her every chance he had, which was not often. Money was hard to obtain, for Augusta demanded full particulars before she wrote a check. Opportunity was even harder. He had to have an excellent excuse to be away from home at dinner, and excuses were difficult to invent with Augusta's calm, slightly ironical eyes fixed on him.

He pawned the wrist-watch she had

given him and put the proceeds on a bet he made through a poolroom. He picked a daily double at Bay Meadows that paid off fifty-five to two, and for a time was flush.

After that he followed race meets clear across the country, Jamaica, Pimlico, Churchill Downs, Santa Anita—he placed bets at all of them. Sometimes he lost, but oftener he won, so lack of money ceased to worry him, but opportunity to see Lavinia was rarer than star rubies, and he hoarded every moment spent with her in memory as a miser hoards his treasure.

Once or twice they motored to the shore for glorious release upon the sands. In sharkskin shirt and slacks she was adorable, slim, straight and supple as a lad, yet with no hint of masculinity about her. In a black lastex swim-suit with the sunlight foaming in her golden, tight-curled hair, she was a vision to make his heart skip a beat, then race until it almost stopped his breath. Her body was as perfect as an alabaster statuette hewn by some master-craftsman of old Greece, and added to her gorgeous coloring it was a sight to set an artist reaching for his pigments and brushes, but most of all he loved her little feet. Shod stylishly in leather, kid or satin their tininess and shapeliness caused heads to turn and necks to crane as she clicked past on high slim heels—but they could drive a man insane when they were naked.

Conceivably he might have had an *affaire* with her. He never knew if that were possible or not. Men do not set up idols in the secret temples of their souls and bow down to them and worship them only to defile them.

AT LAST she let him kiss her. They had been for one of their brief outings to Westchester in a hired car and it was late when he drew up before her house. Their relations had been friendly, nothing more, for he dared not trust himself to

touch her, and while his soul looked from his eyes each time he glanced at her he said no word and made no move to bring them into greater intimacy. The moon was full that night, its light was silver on the dew-drenched grass of the small park across from her apartment. The city had grown quiet, but small noises came to them—the muted belling of a ferry-whistle, the subdued murmur of an elevated train as it snaked up Third Avenue, and from downtown the heavy, mellow gonging of the great clock in the Metropolitan Tower. She leaned back on the cushions of the car and sighed with weariness and content. "How beautiful the night is."

His pulses hurried to a quicker rhythm. He had a frantic, almost smothered feeling in his breast beside his heart. He could scarcely force the words out, but he did—"How utterly and perfectly beautiful you are!"

Her blue eyes met his, flickering for a second, then, "Oh, you are sweet!" she whispered and turned her face up for his kiss like an affectionate child.

Quicker than thought the longing in him raced to meet the challenge of her lightly parted lips. The flame of her raced in his blood and crashed against his brain. He drew her to him hungrily, and she clung to him with a sudden, unexpected vehemence. He could feel the quickening flutter of her heart beats through the light silk of her dress, her hair was fragrant on his cheek, her mouth was soft as rose leaves on his mouth. She was a woman, sweet and young—adorable—and he, for all his age, a man.

He was married. Yes. He was dependent on his wife for everything he had, for food and clothes and shelter. Yes, he knew that, too; but here against his heart was trembling the first woman he had ever really loved. His barren, cheated, empty life cried out for her. His heart, his very blood, were leagued against his reason.

But reason reasserted itself in the morning. How could he ask this gorgeous girl to share a life of poverty with him? Indeed, how could he ask her to share life with him at all? He was old enough to be her father. If he could give her every luxury, indulge her every whim and invent fresh ones to indulge, he might beseech her to accept him as her slave, but as things were—

He stayed away from Club 19 for almost six months, then, the craving for a sight of her grown stronger than the longing of a dope fiend for his drug, went back.

She saw him as he entered and came toward him, both hands lifted, and both his hands reached out for hers. "You've been away?" she asked, and he saw tears start to her lovely eyes and noticed that her lower lips was trembling.

"I've been through hell," he answered almost harshly, and her eyes went wider with surprise and alarm.

"Hell?" she repeated questioningly.

"Yes, my dear, hell. Anywhere away from you is hell to me."

"Oh," her voice tremulous, as if emotion strove to break through it, "you are so sweet—" she stopped and drew her breath in quickly with a sort of half-elated, half-affrighted gasp before concluding in a whisper—"darling!"

AUGUSTA called him to her room as he crept past her door, and one look at her face brought paralyzing fright to him. She was too much the gentlewoman to create a scene, she did not raise her voice, but her words were heavy with contempt and biting as the cut of an oiled whip-lash.

"I've fed and clothed and sheltered you for twenty years," she told him bitterly. "I rescued you from poverty and gave you everything a decent man could ask. The least you could have given in return was faithfulness. Even if you didn't love me—

and, of course, you never did—you might have paid me back with loyalty and decency, not made a scandal with your carryings-on with a low night-club entertainer."

He tried to break in, tried to say a word in defense of Lavinia, but before the icy hatred in the woman's eyes his tongue was paralyzed. "I shan't divorce you," she announced. "You'd like that, wouldn't you—like your freedom, so that you could spend your whole time with that painted hussy?"

"No fear! You married me, and you'll stay married to me, but from now on you'll work for your board and lodging. I'll see my Cousin Elwood in the morning and have him make a place for you in his office where he can watch what you are doing. You're in my debt for more than you can ever pay, but every week I'll take your salary and apply it on account. You may eat and sleep and stay here—during good behavior—but if I hear another breath of scandal about you—"

She broke off sharply, and the silence fairly thundered after her denunciation. Finally: "Why don't you say something?" she demanded.

"What's there to say? It seems you've had me spied on—"

"Spied on!" Her laugh was bitter as a curse. "As if you needed watching! Your mad infatuation with this creature is town gossip. Half a dozen of my friends' husbands have told them about it, and they, of course, came straight to me. As if it weren't enough to have you mooning round a girl who's young enough to be your daughter, you subject me to the pity of my friends!"

Her voice was so flat and unaccented that it seemed mechanical as she finished, "I thought you loved me, needed me; that you cared for something but my money, and so I made you heir to all I have, for I knew you'd never be able to live without

my support. But I'll change all that in the morning. I'll see Alvin Johnson the first thing and have him draw a new will—"

Cold anger stopped her speech. She was suffering the deepest hurt a woman could endure, but bearing it with the courage of a thoroughbred. "Get out!" She waved her hand contemptuously, as if she were dismissing a servant caught stealing.

It was nearly daylight when he heard her call out in agony. It took possibly a minute for her hail of distress to penetrate his sleep, and when he woke he thought he had been dreaming till it came again, weaker now, and broken by short groans of pain.

Her cries were muted to low, panting moans when he reached her. Small drops of perspiration stood out on her brow and upper lip and she held her hands clasped to her stomach, as if trying to force back the press of unendurable distress. "What is it?" he asked fatuously, blinking rapidly to clear sleep from his eyes.

"I—don't—know," she gasped between moans, "but it's dreadful. Call Dr. Elkins, please."

"H'm. Appendicitis, pretty well advanced," Dr. Elkins diagnosed. "I'll ring for an ambulance. We'll have to operate right away."

HER face was livid, almost green with post-operative pallor, her lips were nearly gray as lead, and round her eyes the little network of fine wrinkles seemed to have been etched more deeply by her suffering.

The cords of her neck stood out in long lines that reached from her chin to the high neck of the coarse hospital bedgown, making her throat look scrawny as that of a plucked chicken. She greeted him with fluttering eyelids, nothing more, then watched him almost warily as he sat down beside her.

"How's it go, dear?" he asked as he

reached for her hand. It was not a gesture of affection. She'd been having a foul time of it, and he'd have bestowed a pat of comfort on a suffering dog in similar circumstances.

She moved her hand weakly, avoiding contact with his, but the by-play was lost upon the nurse. "I'll be right outside in the corridor, Mr. Talley," she beamed with professional cheerfulness as she tiptoed toward the door. There were no complications, and Mrs. Talley had come out of anesthesia nicely. Besides, they'd want a little privacy—

"How are you?" he asked as the door closed softly on the nurse. "Not suffering too much, I hope?" She turned a haggard face toward him with an effort. Her strength was nearly spent, but the spirit looking from her sunken eyes was indomitable. There was no compromise in her look, no weakening, no forgiveness. As she flicked her tongue across her lips he noticed it seemed dry, almost rasping.

"Thirsty," she besought.

"Oh, no," he shook his head. "You mustn't; it would—"

He broke his denial half uttered. "Of course, dear, just a moment," he finished and tiptoed to the bureau where a tall pitcher filled with ice water stood beside two tumblers on a tray. "Here" he dropped a bent-glass drinking tube into the brimming goblet and held it till her lips closed on it, then, as she sucked the chilling liquid avidly: "Another?"

She drank the second glassful and he went quickly to the bathroom, drew water from the faucet till the pitcher showed no sign of having been used, then drew his handkerchief and wiped the drinking tube and tumbler carefully. No telltale moisture, no betraying fingerprints.

His eyes were shining with elation and he had to hold himself in check to keep from laughing as he dropped once more into his chair beside the bed. This had

been too utterly, absurdly, easy. Fate had dropped the marked cards in his lap. Ether anesthesia—ice water—make another will, would she? Set him slaving in her cousin's office and collect his wages every week? They'd see about that. It ought not to be long, now.

Nor was it. Shocked by the chill of almost a pint of ice water her stomach and intestinal tract rebelled. A spasm rippled through her face, then a sudden shudder shook her arms, her shoulders, her whole body. Contorting with the force of it she turned her face to him and looked full in his jubilant, elated visage.

Realization came to her too late. The eyes were sick and desperate in her pale, drawn face. She tried to reach the call-bell, but had not the strength, tried to raise her voice, but could force nothing but a raspy, sighing groan between her lips. Then for a moment her eyes locked with his. There was no fright, not even hatred, in her glance. Rather, it was the sort of look she might have cast into a pit of snakes at the zoo's reptile house. Not anger, but disdainful contempt; not fear, but loathing looked from her drawn, masklike face.

Then the full force of convulsion struck her, and after he had waited till there seemed no fear of consciousness returning, Judson Talley pressed the button of the nurse's call-bell.

It was one of those unfortunate cases which medicine cannot explain and so does not attempt an explanation. Mrs. Talley had shown every sign of quick and normal recovery. It had been a simple appendectomy; no complications. The operation had been quite successful. But the patient died.

The broken sod had not had time to heal above Augusta's grave when Judson and Lavinia were married. That she consented to become his wife astonished him, and that she did not tire of him or show resentment at the years that lay between them

left him breathlessly bewildered. Infatuated, as only an aging man could be with a young and lovely woman, he looked on her acceptance of his utter—often servile—devotion as a species of self-sacrifice. It seemed wonderful and kind in her to let him buy her clothes and furs and jewelry at the most expensive shops. When she thanked him with a smile and kiss for a small flask of perfume that had cost almost five hundred dollars he was almost awe-struck at her condescension. His passion for the race course had not dulled with affluence, and he gained a widespread reputation no less for the consistency with which he won than for the size of the bets he placed, but the satisfaction he derived from backing long shots against the field and making fools of all the dopesters paled to insignificance beside the unadulterated joy he felt when she permitted him to latch a necklace round her throat or put her shoes on.

For her part she was reasonably happy and content. All her life she had known poverty, and her work at Club 19 had made her more aware of its sharp gripe. Often she had cried herself to sleep when she came home from work at dawn and thought of the fine furs, the splendid gowns and opulent jewelry of the women she had seen the night before, then compared them with her tawdry imitation ermine coat, her bargain basement dresses and her ten-cent store "pearls." Now she had everything she'd ever longed for and many things of whose existence she had never dreamed, and if at times his fawning adulation palled on her, to let him grovel like a bondsman at her feet and do her the most menial services as though they were high privileges seemed small enough return to make for all he gave. And in a little while she rather grew to like the abject servitude he offered. The realization of her power over him was stimulating to her ego. She had worked since little-girlhood at semi-menial occupa-

tions—shop girl, hat check girl, cigarette vrendress. Now she was mistress and lady in her own establishment, pampered, petted, idolized. He begged her almost tearfully to let him serve her, to let him wash her stockings, comb her hair, take off her shoes and put them on. Her smallest frown could bring him literally to his knees, a single sharp word made him beg forgiveness for imaginary faults with all the fervor of a captive pleading for his life. She found the new existence very pleasant. The throne of his devotion made a comfortable seat, his heart an ideal footstool.

HE HAD been vaguely troubled all that day. One year ago that night he'd bought release from Augusta and made his marriage with Lavinia possible by administering a drink of ice water. He had no remorse for that, nor any fear of retribution. The dead were dead, the past was past. You could no more recall the one than the other. His whole life since Augusta died had been enough to give the lie to all the stuffy maxims about ill-gotten gains being unprofitable, or conscience flogging those who strayed from the straight, narrow path.

But as he walked across town that morning he'd glimpsed a figure that struck echoes in his memory. It was a woman dressed in rusty black, not poor, but frumpish, as if her dress had been spoiled in the making and ruined past redemption in the wearing. Her hat, too, was a nondescript affair, not wholly unbecoming, but without a trace of style. He thought of Vinnie's modish chapeaux—small, inconsequential trifles weighing possibly three ounces each and costing twice their weight in gold—and smiled whimsically as he compared them with the heavy felt headgear this woman wore. Why, such a hat might have been suited to Augusta—

The thread of his thought snapped as if a knife of fear had severed it, and he took

a step back while his lips parted, then shut again abruptly.

The woman had been looking in a shop window at a display of religious books and as he came almost abreast of her she turned her face toward him. There was no doubting it. The long and rather equine face, the prominent, slim chin, the thin-lipped mouth, the small, intelligent dark eyes all belonged to Augusta—Augusta who was dead a year today and almost a year buried in Greenwood.

He drew his breath in so quickly that it seemed like a sob, and stood there staring at her, sick and desperate. A verse from Shelley seemed to come from nowhere and din against his inward ear in rhythm with the blood that throbbed and pounded there:

*There are ghosts that may take revenge
for it.*

The woman looked at him a moment with cool, dispassionate irony in her level gaze, then turned back to the shop window.

"I—I—" he faltered, then stopped, breathless, for the woman had looked at him again, eyebrows slightly raised as he spoke. And she was not Augusta. She bore no semblance to Augusta, save as all thin, dowdy, middle aged women bear some resemblance to each other.

"I beg your pardon," he concluded as she continued to look quizzically at him, then touched his hat and hurried past.

But at Fifty-sixth and Madison, as he waited for a traffic light to change, he caught the level, satirical stare of a pair of small dark eyes as a taxicab went flashing by, and recognized them as Augusta's.

Three or four times he thought he saw her dowdy, ill-dressed figure in the crowds, in passing cars, in the subway, and every time she seemed to look at him with calmly mocking eyes; not hostile, not menacing, but vaguely taunting and triumphant.

His business downtown was finally finished and he hurried home. Home to the security of firelight and drawn curtains, with Lavinia's blond, dainty loveliness as an anodyne for troubled nerves, her soft sweet, scented arms and softer, sweeter lips to drive the memory of Augusta and his life with her back to the limbo of forgotten things.

Mahdi Omar, their Syrian butler and factotum, had served a perfect dinner, with the subdued candlelight falling on cloth and silver and glassware: oysters with sparkling chablis, green turtle soup with Spanish sherry, a rolled roast, crisp and crackling-brown on the outside, pink and succulent within, Maine potatoes steeped and stewed in its juice, with rich full-bodied burgundy; finally an apple tart for him and an orange charlotte russe for her.

Afterwards they sat before the fire of cannel coal in the big living room while she poured coffee from a Georgian Sheffield pot in eggshell porcelain cups and brandy from a cut glass bottle into bubble-thin inhalers, and he sat worshiping her with his eyes. They were not going out, and she had worn a negligée instead of dinner gown, and the gold-kid, pearl-set boudoir sandals he had bought her from the boot-maker's that evening. He could see the gleam of the gay lacquer on her tiny toenails and the ivory-white, pale glowing of her slim, small feet between the braided lacings of the shoes. This was not merely happiness, he thought. It was heaven—

HE HAD lit her cigarette and replaced the tiny sandal she had kicked off capriciously. Now, kneeling on the hearth-rug before her he was looking at her as a hermit might gaze on a vision. "Old thweetums," she had lisped in playful baby-talk, "he loves his little Vinnie, doesn't he?" And:

"Love you?" he had echoed. "If you only knew—"

And then the sudden spasm of shrill pain had raced across her face. Her cheeks went pale with abrupt pallor. The scarlet lipstick on her mouth and the bright rouge on her cheeks stood out sharply as the blood receded from her face; she pressed her little milk-white teeth into her lower lip and laced her little ineffectual rose-tipped hands across her small flat stomach, hugging herself in quick agony.

Raw suffering was stark in her blue eyes. "Oh-oh, Juddie darling, I'm so sick—it hurts so!" she quavered in a little, frightened voice. "I think I'm going to die!"

He could see the tiny beads of perspiration standing like a diadem of little diamonds on her brow beneath the hairline, see the skin of her chin wrinkle suddenly, as if with frostbite, and fear abysmal as the grave struck at his heart as he looked.

"Appendicitis. Pretty well advanced, but nothing to worry about; have to operate at once, though," the doctor said when he'd completed his examination. "I'll call an ambulance."

HE SAT beside her, one of her small flaccid hands in his. She's stood the ordeal well, they told him, probably would not be sick when she came out of the ether. "No complications," Dr. Whitcraft reassured him. "No reason why she shouldn't be out dancing in a couple of weeks. I made a buttonhole incision; there'll be hardly any scar, and a few physiotherapy treatments should erase even that."

"I'll be right outside if you need me, Mr. Talley," the nurse promised. "I don't think she'll wake for several hours, but be sure to call me just as soon as she begins to stir."

A chill of January air came through the partly opened window, and with it came the subdued rumble of the traffic on the Avenue.

She'd need the fresh air, he mustn't close the window, he told himself as he

turned his collar up against the mounting cold.

But it was getting colder every second. It seemed to him the air was fraught with more than natural chill—that it was cold with the utter, stark coldness of interstellar space where spirits of the unquiet dead, the dead who seek revenge for unavenged injuries, float bodiless but vengeful on the vagrant winds of destiny—

This wouldn't do! He pulled himself up sharply. "Nerves!" he muttered. "You've got a case of nerves, feller. You thought you saw Augusta all day long because she died a year ago tonight. Snap out of it, you fathead. The dead are dead. They can't reach through to us. If they could—"

His thought raced off at a tangent. If Augusta only knew! If she could see the way they'd used her money—the money she'd have done him out of if he hadn't given her that drink—to play and frolic with. If she—poor, dowdy frump!—could see the ermine evening wrap and silver fox jaquette and mink dolman he'd bought Vinnie with her money, or that string of matched pearls, the pear-shaped star sapphire ear-studs, or that diamond and ruby marquise dinner ring—she who had never owned a piece of frivolous jewelry in her life, not even an engagement ring, because he couldn't buy her one! If she could see the little pearl-set sandals he'd bought Lavinia that day, or the slim-linked platinum anklet—He gave a low, amused chuckle. It would be worth while to call her back for a moment, if he could, just to show her those things.

It was the dulled echo of an ambulance's siren, of course, but he could have sworn a faint wail whistled down the breeze that seeped into the room. Yet it was not exactly a wail, either; there was a sound of faintly mocking laughter in it; not actually malicious, but not far from it. He shivered, not entirely with the growing cold, and

sunk his chin a little deeper in his upturned collar. "Nerves again!"

Irresistible drowsiness crept over him. What time was it? he wondered, then realized that his left hand was clasped in Lavinia's right. He could not withdraw it without disturbing her, so could not see his wrist-watch. No matter. He could stand it a few hours more. It would be worth it to have her see his face first of all when she awakened.

Despite himself he nodded. He wasn't quite unconscious, but he was not quite awake. He couldn't be, for he was dreaming. Dreaming that a shadow crossed the dimly lighted room and paused beside the bureau where the water pitcher stood beside two tumblers on a tray. It didn't seem to have much shape, it was indefinite and unreal, as ghosts are said to be, or like an object seen through fog. Yet it was tangible enough to hide the water pitcher and the glasses from him.

He sat forward in his chair, eyes narrowed. Was he dreaming, or was he really seeing something? Do you know that you are dreaming when you dream, or—

The gurgling gug-gug-gug of liquid being poured came to him faint. Damn those shaded lights! He couldn't see what went on by the bureau. Of course, it was a shadow thrown by the partly opened bathroom door, but—Cautiously, not to disturb Lavinia, he began to draw his hand away. He had to get across the room, to see if there were something—

"Thwectums—Juddie darling!" Vinnie's shrill cry drove the faintest trace of drowsiness from him. Vinnie's little hand clutched at his fingers with a force he had not thought her whole small body held. "Oh, darling, I'm so sick—I'm dying!"

He jumped up, oversetting his chair, switched on the ceiling light and pushed the button of the nurse's call-bell.

Little Vinnie writhed in a convulsion. Her eyes were open—staring but unseeing

—her red mouth closed and opened in sharp spasmodic gasps, her little white teeth bit her lips and tongue until fresh blood ran down her dimpled chin in two small rivulets, one from each corner of her mouth.

The nurse was there. The house physician came a moment later. "What the hell'd you give her water for?" he demanded. "Don't you know a patient who's been etherized—"

"I? Give her water?" Talley echoed incredulously. "Don't be a fool, man! I'd never have done anything like that. I couldn't have. I've been sitting right here by the bed the whole time, holding her hand, and waiting—"

"Yeah?" the doctor interrupted sarcastically. "If you didn't give it to her, who did? Mickleson's been outside in the corridor the whole time, and no one came in through the door." He pointed an accusing finger to the bedside table. On it stood an empty water goblet with a bent-glass drinking tube in it. "I s'pose you'll try to tell me that a little fairy fluttered through the window and gave her that drink while you were sleeping—or maybe it was a ghost? Now get the hell out of here and stay out till I send for you. I'll do the best I can for her, but—"

He leaned against the wall outside the sickroom. The echo of the angry doctor's words kept dinning in his ears; ". . . maybe it was a ghost!" He put his hands up to his eyes to shut the light out, bit his lips to keep from screaming. She was his life, his breath, his soul. All the love that family men had for their children, all the devotion pious people gave to God, he had lavished on that little fragile wisp of womanhood in there. If she should die—die as Augusta died—The words came clumsily and haltingly, for he hadn't prayed in almost forty years, but somehow he found them: ". . . burn me in hell forever, for I'm a murderer, but let my little Vinnie live . . ."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Talley, really sorry," Miss Mickleson the nurse laid a compassionate hand on his shoulder. "I'm afraid she didn't have much chance. She was so frail—"

"You—you mean—" he looked at her with dull, lack-luster eyes.

She nodded sadly. "Yes, Mr. Talley, she's gone." Then, as a ragged, broken sob pushed past his lips: "Don't blame yourself too much, sir. You didn't know what you were doing. You were overwrought and very tired, and probably dropped off to sleep. She must have waked and asked for water—they often do—and you got it for her without knowing—just as if you'd been sleep-walking. I've known such cases."

HE'D picked up several scraps of Arabic from Mahdi Omar. One of them the houseman used when everything was going wrong, and when he'd asked him what it meant he had translated: "*Bism-'illah irrahman errahmin*—who can escape that written on his brow from the beginning?" The memory of it came to him as he walked numbly from the hospital and climbed into the taxicab.

"Who can escape—"

The room seemed unchanged. He looked about it wonderingly. It should be changed. It should be desolate and dust-strewn, like a haunted house. For it was haunted. Love haunted. Haunted by the wraith of his dead happiness.

The softly shaded lamplight picked out dear, familiar objects, the little unconsidered trifles they had bought on their gay shopping expeditions: silver cigarette boxes, the muted blues and reds and bishop's-purple of old Chinese porcelain, cloisonné ashtrays, their made to order match-books, even Vinnie's little gilt-kid sandal that had fallen from her foot when he had lifted her to bear her to the bedroom.

"*Bism-'illah irrahan arrahim*—who can escape his destiny?"

He picked the little slipper up, fondling it as a mother might yearn over her dead baby's shoe. Had he, as Miss Mickleston suggested, given her that fatal drink in a seizure of somnambulism, or had it, as the doctor asked sarcastically, been a ghost? No matter. Little lovely Vinnie was dead. Either he had killed her, or the dour, uncompromising, unforgiving woman who had died a year ago had come back from the misty land where the unquiet dead are and—

"*Bism-'illah irrahman*—who can escape—" He rummaged in the desk drawer, found the little automatic pistol, slipped

back its safety catch. He raised the tiny gold-kid sandal to his lips with his left hand, pressed the pistol muzzle to his temple with his right. "*Bism-'illah*—can a horse outrun its tail or a man outstrip his shadow?"

The report sounded like a bursting light bulb. He staggered drunkenly a moment, turned halfway round and fell full-length upon his face. The impact of his fall set the fire tongs and shovel tinkling musically in their brass stand.

The little sandal had slipped from his grasp. His hand moved slowly, painfully; crawled toward it till it touched the cross straps where her monogram was worked in seed pearls. And moved no more.