

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

March, 1944

Cover by John Giunta

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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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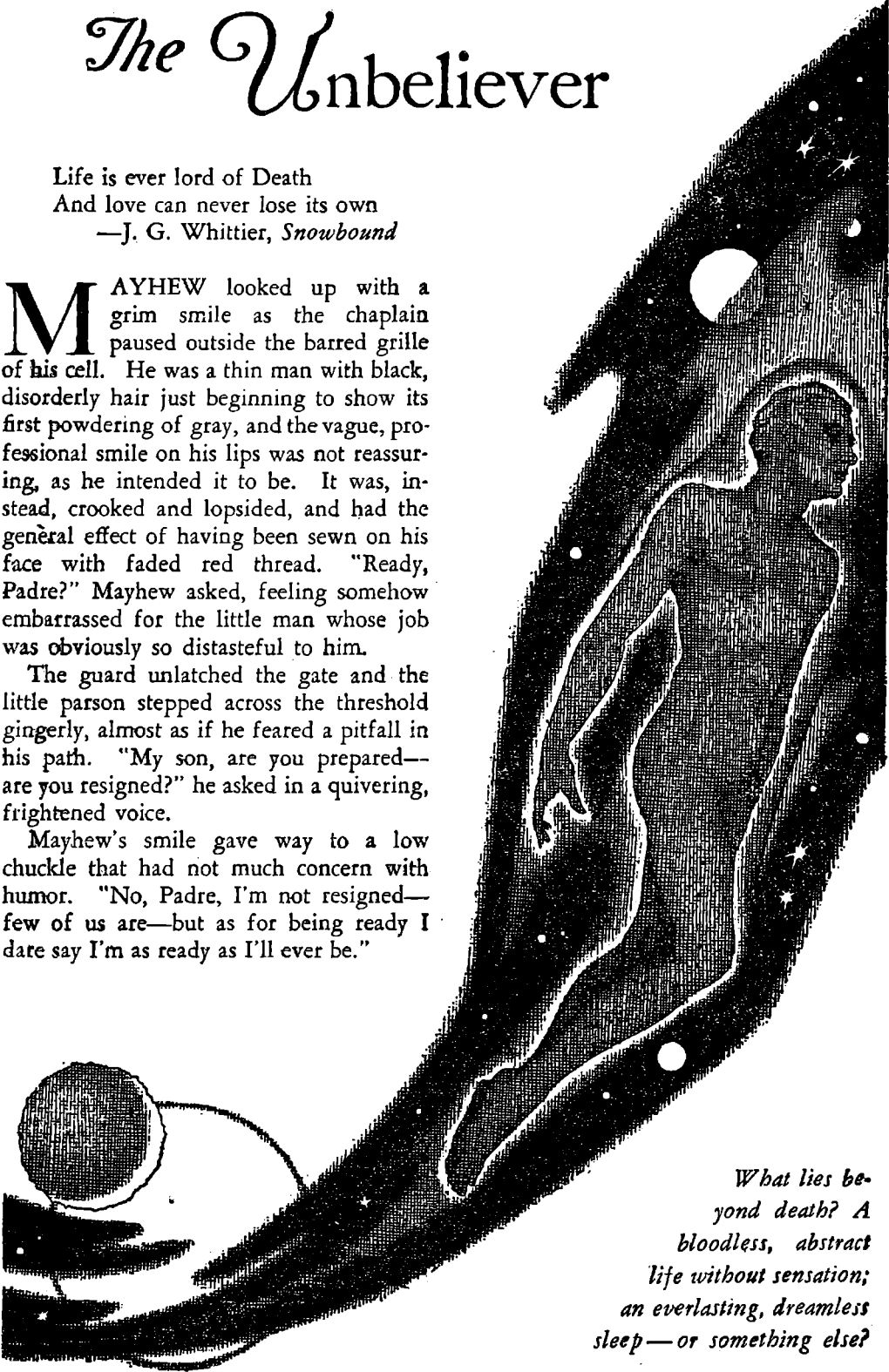
The Unbeliever

Life is ever lord of Death
And love can never lose its own
—J. G. Whittier, *Snowbound*

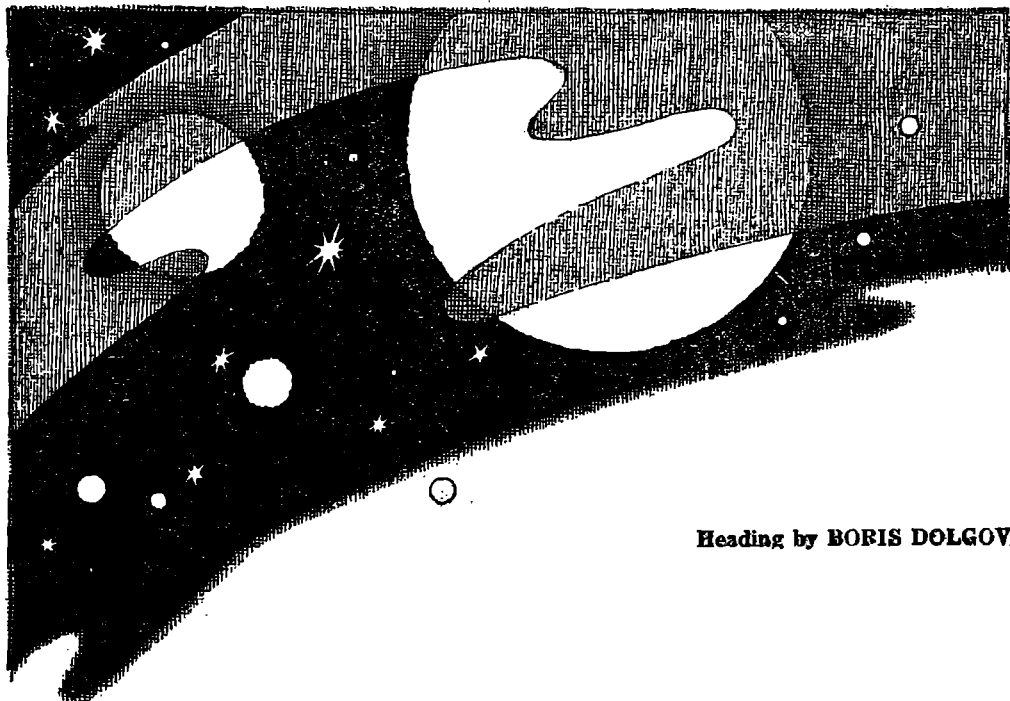
MAYHEW looked up with a grim smile as the chaplain paused outside the barred grille of his cell. He was a thin man with black, disorderly hair just beginning to show its first powdering of gray, and the vague, professional smile on his lips was not reassuring, as he intended it to be. It was, instead, crooked and lopsided, and had the general effect of having been sewn on his face with faded red thread. "Ready, Padre?" Mayhew asked, feeling somehow embarrassed for the little man whose job was obviously so distasteful to him.

The guard unlatched the gate and the little parson stepped across the threshold gingerly, almost as if he feared a pitfall in his path. "My son, are you prepared—are you resigned?" he asked in a quivering, frightened voice.

Mayhew's smile gave way to a low chuckle that had not much concern with humor. "No, Padre, I'm not resigned—few of us are—but as for being ready I dare say I'm as ready as I'll ever be."



What lies beyond death? A bloodless, abstract life without sensation; an everlasting, dreamless sleep—or something else?



Heading by **BORIS DOLGOV.**

"Then"—the chaplain's voice was still more hesitant, almost tremulous—"we'll read a portion of the Scripture together—"

Mayhew ground the fire out of his cigarette and there was only kindness in the look he bent upon the clergyman. He was genuinely sorry for this man, sorry and embarrassed as one might be for a child who forgets the words he has to speak on a platform or an actor who is overcome by stage fright. "Don't bother, Padre. There's nothing in that book of yours that's going to help me over this hump, and as for praying—I never was much of a one to talk to myself, and I hate to hear another person do it. You just run along and come back with the warden when it's time. That won't be long, will it?"

"Only half an hour, my son."

"That's fine. I'll smoke a cigarette and do some thinking—maybe you'd call it searching my soul—and when they're ready

for me, if you want to read or pray"—he made a vague gesture which might have indicated almost anything—"well, I'll be waiting for you. Go on," his voice grew suddenly harsh, "scram out of here. I don't want to be bothered with you this last half hour."

"Unfortunate man"—the cleric's words were sharp with righteous indignation—"do you not realize you stand upon the threshold of eternity? Have you no contrition for your sins?"

"I have a lot of it, Padre, but not the kind you mean. I'm sorry that I didn't take advantage of my opportunities; I'm grieved to think I may have caused sorrow to others, and if I had it in my power I'd blot out certain things I've said, but I've no regret for having killed Bill Stokes. I'd do it again in like circumstances."

As the chaplain left him with a degree of celerity that belied his expressed desire

By **SEABURY QUINN**

to remain Mayhew sank down on his cot and lit another cigarette.

He wanted time to think, he'd said. And that was just another excuse, just another not too clever device to rid himself of the chaplain's presence and save the little minister an unpleasant duty. He had been thinking furiously all day, trying vainly to bring order to the chaos of his thoughts, to make them quit revolving rapidly—and futilely—as squirrels in a cage.

At last he had reduced the tangled skein to some semblance of pattern, and the chaplain's advent had delayed the process of the final sorting. Now he had to think faster than ever if he were to be done before they came. . . .

It was inevitable, of course, that he should have killed Bill Stokes. As mathematically certain as that two and two make four. Fate had dealt the black ace of death from her marked deck the first day they met in kindergarten when, for no apparent cause, they had made for each other and in an instant were locked in furious combat. Teacher and schoolmates separated them and scoldings reinforced by sound slaps kept them in order, but from the moment of their meeting they were like two chemicals waiting for a suitable catalytic to explode them.

In grade school they were rivals, working not so much to make good marks as to outdo each other. Athletics added point and edge to rivalry in high school, and when each fixed his affections on Muriel Johnson the dice of destiny were cast irrevocably.

They were antitheses in every way. Bob Mayhew was hazel-eyed, dark-haired, small-boned and delicate, as sensitive and neurotic as a girl. He played the piano—Grieg, Tschaiowsky, Beethoven and Chopin; he had a talent for composing verse, played excellent chess and was a natural linguist, taking honors in French, Latin and Spanish. Despite his slender

stature he could swim like a merman, ride like a centaur, run the hundred yard dash in champion form and shoot a rifle and revolver with unerring accuracy.

WILLIAM SYLVINUS STOKES 3rd stood six feet without shoes, and tipped the scales at better than a hundred ninety pounds, but there was not an ounce of fat on him. His hair was almost straw-colored, his eyes were gray and far apart, his chin square with a deep dimple in it. He rowed stroke in the school racing shell, leaped over hurdles on the track almost as easily as if they had been shadows on the ground, boxed better than the average professional and took top rank in physics, chemistry and math. Poetry and poets he despised, music, unless it could be danced to, was merely noise to him, and with all the lustiness of a strong nature he detested Bob Mayhew. With an even greater fervor he adored Muriel Johnson.

Nor was it strange that she should appeal to these youths of diverse tastes and character. Indeed, few normal men could have withstood her charm. She was not tall, but seemed so because of her superb carriage. Her skin was very fair, with the white, creamy loveliness that goes with hair of the shade commonly and unjustly called red—really a fine rich sepia brown with strands of ruddy raw gold running through it. Her eyes were not true brown, they were a sort of golden-orange, almost the shade of topaz, and with their gold-tinged brows and lashes they gave the impression of strange barbaric jewels set in the ivory exquisiteness of her face by a master craftsman.

Both boys asked her to the senior prom, but Bob was half an hour before Bill, who swallowed his chagrin with such grace as he could, took Helen Collier in place of his beloved Muriel, drank too much punch—which, since it was the period of Prohibition and hip-flasks, had been surreptitiously

and liberally laced with gin—and during intermission found opportunity to meet Mayhew outside the gymnasium and give him a most scientific, thorough beating.

Of course, Muriel was outraged and vowed she'd never speak to either of the claimants for her favors again. But as everybody knows a woman's no may mean maybe, and in time her maybe become yes, and in addition, no one feminine since Trojan Helen's day has known herself to be the cause of masculine contention without at least an inner glow of secret satisfaction. So before September she was friendly with both boys again, and both were welcomed at her home and went with her to the movies or to dances or on boating trips and picnics, but with consummate diplomacy she contrived to keep them apart. One fight might have romantic implications; a series of them would prove embarrassing.

In the fall the boys went off to college, Bill to study architecture, Bob to prepare for the foreign service, and by an odd coincidence neither could get home for Christmas holiday in his junior year and each sent her a puppy. Bill's was a lovely fringed-legged English setter with a white blaze on its auburn-haired forehead. Bob sent a saucy little Scottish terrier with bright inquisitive eyes, an insatiable appetite for rubbers, party slippers and kid gloves, and an all-pervasive friendliness that was especially manifest when his feet were muddy. Muriel loved them impartially, and when John o' Gaunt the setter met death beneath a drunken motorist's juggernaut she wept inconsolably, and when Tam o' Shanter, grieving too for his dead playmate, thrust a dry, black, sympathetic nose into her hand and licked her fingers with a moist pink tongue she gathered him into her arms and cuddled him as if he were a baby. "You're all I have left now, Tammie," she sobbed. "You'll have to be so good to me—" and the small,

black, whiskered Scottish gentleman bestowed a kiss of fealty on her chin.

She sent them identical gifts at graduation, and since they received their diplomas the same day, maintained impartiality by staying away from both ceremonies.

BILL came back to a position with Alstein, James & Tetlow, where as an architectural engineer he won quick recognition. He could figure load capacities for steel foundation piles sunk through soft soil, water and quicksand to bed rock, and plan a girder superstructure to resist side strains and wind pressures with the nicety of a navigator charting his position, and delighted in the work; but he took no interest in the merely beautiful. The columns round the Parthenon he looked upon as mere surplusage, and the soaring spires of Notre Dame, Milan and Canterbury were in his opinion not beautiful, they merely used unnecessary material and served no useful purpose. He was practical, intensely so, as the warehouses, factories and loft buildings he designed bore testimony. Strong, useful serviceable buildings they were, built to last a generation, to fulfill their functions perfectly, and having no more beauty than a string of freight cars waiting on a railway siding.

Bob passed examinations for the foreign service *cum laude* and was sent from consulate to consulate in the Far East, acquiring intimate knowledge of the peoples who had been no more than names in books to him—Koreans, Japanese, Tibetans, Tartars, Turkomans, White Russian refugees, Persians, Cossacks, Armenians, and highly improbable hybrids of them all.

From these contacts he learned many things, but principally that people were just people, whatever race had spawned them, and that the Seven Deadly Sins were by no means the exclusive heritage of "the heathen." At first he had been puzz-

zled by his chiefs' attitude toward missionaries. One of his earliest recollections was Rally Day at Sunday School when pennies, dimes and nickels were collected for the foreign missions. One of the first tunes that he learned began:

From Greenland's icy mountains
To India's coral strand . . .
The heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone.

But the missionaries, he discovered, worshiped gods as numerous and diverse as those they came to lead into the Light. They all served the same Lord, at least they called Him the same name, but some of them declared the Lord was displeased by the use of wine, others were as certain that He looked with disfavor upon tobacco. Some said the unbeliever might be received in the fold with mere sprinkling of water, while others solemnly declared that only full immersion could wash away sin, and with a few notable exceptions all of them were voluble in warnings and denunciations directed against all the rest. So, since they all claimed to have direct communication from on high, and since their several messages of Grace were radically different, the heathen could not be blamed greatly for refusing to abandon the faith of his fathers in favor of some special brand of Grace provided by some special brand of missionary—and denounced by all the rest. "What those birds need," the secretary of the consulate had said one day in disgust, "is a neatly lettered sign reading: 'Don't Go Next Door and Get Cheated. Come in Here.'"

Accordingly the faith that had never been very strong in him decreased until it was almost entirely atrophied and in its stead he had developed something not quite cynicism, but something not far from it. Fourteen words defined his attitude: Prayer is communing with your inner ego.

Faith is accepting what your reason rejects.

When a much delayed mail brought a heavy envelope enclosing a second one in which was tucked a neatly engraved request for the honor of his presence at the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ashton Johnson's daughter Muriel to Mr. William Sylvinus Stokes III the little remnant of belief that had persisted from his childhood was utterly extinguished as a guttering candle in a blast of wind.

She was the only thing he'd ever longed for with whole heart and soul. The night before he set sail for Kobe he had told her of his love and begged her to wait for him. "The Foreign Service is like the Army, Muriel. A man must win promotion slowly, but there's nothing that can hold me back if you—"

"It wouldn't be fair to you or myself, Bobbie," she had interrupted. "I know I love you and have always loved you. You are so sweet, so kind and gentle. When we are together I feel as if we were the only two people in the world. But—I'm not sure that I love you well enough to put my life into your hands forever. We've known each other almost all our lives, dear. Maybe it's more the love of a sister for an adored brother that I feel for you—"

"You mean there's someone else?"

"No, Bobbie; no! There's no one else. I know what you are thinking, but it isn't so, my dear. I feel almost exactly about Bill as I feel about you. He's like a brother, too. A big, rough brother, not kind and gentle and understanding like you, but very, very dear to me. Please try to understand, Bob"—her hands trembled in his and her lower lip began to quiver like a little girl's about to cry—"I can't make up my mind. I honestly can't do it, dear, but—"

"Yes, but?" he prompted as she fell silent.

Her eyes were wide and soft and her mouth was tender. "I think," she whis-

pered in a voice so small and tremulous that he could hardly hear it, "I'm almost sure, my dear, that it is you." Then she turned her sweet cool lips up for his kiss and he held her in his arms a long, trembling moment.

And afterwards the clicking of steel wheels against steel rails, the thudding throb of steamship engines, the shrill cries of the 'rickshaw boys—but always through the babel of the traffic and the clattering confusion of a dozen gabbling foreign tongues there was the echo of her whispered promise, the feel of her sweet lips on his, the memory of the sweetness of her perfumed body in his arms.

Despite his waning faith he had still prayed, not regularly, but at odd intervals when some trick of memory brought the image of her to his mind: "O Lord, grant that it may be as she said, that I may be the one of her choice. Help her to endure the waiting, and speed the day when I may go to her. Make me worthy of her, Lord. Amen."

And then the tardy invitation to her wedding to Bill Stokes . . . "the honor of your presence is requested. . . ." He sent them a magnificent silver service, the salvaged remnant of some Russian prince's treasures worth twenty times the hundred yuan dollars he paid the Armenian pawnbroker at Harbin for it. But he never prayed again, nor did he ever cross the threshold of a church.

AS FOR Muriel, the echo of the epithalamium had hardly had a chance to fade before she realized her mistake. Bill was a success, a go-getter; hearty, healthy, robust, wholly masculine. He had no patience with nor understanding of a woman's moods—"Of course we'll have steak, French fried potatoes and coffee. Everybody likes that," he'd order in a restaurant, and the fact that she would have preferred a romaine salad with hot rolls

and tea made no difference. His likes and dislikes were intensely personal, husband and wife were one person, and that person principally husband. Didn't the Bible say so? Very well, then. He went to church regularly and insisted that she go with him. Not to St. Luke's where she had worshiped since childhood, but to the big, ugly red-brick First Church at Twenty-fourth Street and the Boulevard, where the minister spoke vaguely of rainbows, stars and similar celestial phenomena, lamented the recession of the XVIIIth Amendment and occasionally lashed out at such contemners of the Word as Roman Catholics, atheists, Christian Scientists and Episcopalians.

After dinner he liked to read the sporting and financial pages of the paper and in the course of his reading he absorbed half a dozen highballs, which instead of making him fatuously good-natured made him just a little cross, a trifle more dogmatically positive in expressions of opinion.

There was a harsh streak in his make-up, not exactly vulgarity, but a sort of brazen self-assertiveness that galled her like a hairshirt. There was nothing shy or loverlike in his advances, he was forthright as a satyr in his demands. After all, why should he sue for the embraces that were his by right? A man would be as great a fool to court his wife as to continue running after having caught his street car.

Then Clotho, Lachesis and Atropes, the three weird sisters, whose office is to spin the thread of human destiny, took up the strands of these three lives and knotted them into a snarl past all untying. The package came marked "Customs Free—Diplomatic," and when Muriel undid the red wax seals that fastened it and laid the layers of rice paper aside there was a Chinese scarf that spilled breath-taking greens and blues and yellows into the room. "Oh,

see, Bill, how lovely!" she exclaimed. "Bob sent it to us for an anniversary gift—"

"He did, eh?" Bill was in a vicious mood that afternoon, for it was Saturday and he had had an engagement to play golf with a prospective client, but the rain that sweated on the windows and made canals of the streets had canceled it. "He's got a nerve, sending those heathen gim-cracks to another man's wife."

"He didn't send it to me, he sent it to us, and heathen or not, it's beautiful, the loveliest thing I've ever—"

"Oh, yeah?" Bill was on his feet now, a little unsteady, knocking against the table and oversetting his half-consumed highball. "What's beautiful about it? Just a lot o' garish color—" He took the shawl in his hands, wrenching at it as if he would tear it into shreds, but the tough fabric held, and with a muttered oath he tossed it into the grate where a fire of cannel coal blazed.

"Bill!" Reproach mingled with outraged amazement was in her voice. "How could you?"

There was no humor in the grin he turned on her. "I could, all right, and I'd do' the same thing to the sissy-pants who sent it if I had him here. The stinkin' little sneak—"

"He's not!" her hot denial interrupted. "He was always sweet and kind and gentle—"

"Maybe you should have married him instead of me. He's more your style than I; you'd like someone to kiss your hand and write verse to you, wouldn't you? Someone who can't make a nickel for himself, but has to take a salary, skulking on the outskirts of the world like a—"

"You're drunk!" she flung at him. "Drunk with whiskey and your own conceit. You think that you're successful because you've made money. All right, if that's your criterion, any gangster, no matter how low or depraved, can make money,

and more of it than you. If making money is your measure of a man, then Al Capone and Hymie Weiss and Frankie Yale are all better men than you—they all made more—"

"Shut up!" It was not like the usually submissive Muriel to show such spirit, and he hardly knew whether to be more annoyed than amazed. "If you think so much of him, why don't you leave me and go to him? Go on, nobody's stopping you!"

He had meant only to give her a half rough, half playful shove, but his hand was unsteady and anger lent force to his thrust, so that instead of subsiding ludicrously on the sofa she staggered back a pace or two unsteadily, fought for her balance futilely, and fell heavily, striking her face on the carved leg of the coffee table.

Tam o' Shanter had crouched on the hearth rug, an interested spectator to the argument. Perhaps he understood their words—dogs have a greater understanding than we give them credit for—perhaps their tones alone told him that anger underlay their bickering, but when he saw his beloved mistress fall he launched himself at Bill like an avenging fury, barking with the strident, hysterical yelp of the infuriated terrier before he fleshed his teeth in Bill's ankle.

"What th'—" Stark amazement and shrill pain wrung the exclamation from the man. "You, too? He gave you to her, didn't he? She let the pup I gave her die, but she saved you. Oh, yes—" His heavy Scotch grain brogan swung with the force of a battering-ram and sent the small black furry body in a low parabola across the floor until it crashed into the wall. There was a sharp staccato of agony, the threshing of short legs as Tammie fought for breath, then the trickle of bright blood on the protruding tongue as broken ribs thrust through the tortured lungs. The screeching yelp subsided to a

groan that ended in a labored, panting gasp, a tremor ran through the tormented little body, and Tammie's gallant head fell sideways and lay still.

"I'm sorry, Mu, I didn't mean to hurt him, but he bit me—" Bill reached awkwardly to pat his wife's shoulder as she cradled the dead terrier in her arms. "Good Lord, I wouldn't have done it intentionally for any—"

The suppurating *fury* in her eyes stopped him. This was not anger that he saw in her gold-orange pupils, it was hatred coiling like a live thing, a smoldering aversion that had burst into a sudden writhing flame to make her topaz eyes glow like garnets. She raked him with a glance of detestation as she spit one word at him with concentrated venom. "Murderer!"

An hour later she had gone and Bill sat by the fire and drew such comfort as he could from a fresh bottle of Scotch and the repeated self-assurance, "She'll be back; she's bound to come back. She can't run out on me this way. Why, we're married!"

But Muriel did not come back and three days later O'Brien & Schwarz served him with a summons in a suit for divorce, alleging drunkenness and cruelty.

The order *nisi* had been signed, but legally they were still man and wife when Bob came home on furlough and almost the first voice to greet him was Muriel's. "I'm getting a divorce from Bill," she told him. "It's not final yet, but—"

"Will you have luncheon with me tomorrow?" he broke in eagerly. "Anywhere you say. The Adlon? Fine! I'll meet you in the Princesse Room at twelve. And Muriel—"

"Yes?" The bird-thrill in her voice proclaimed she knew what he would say before he spoke, but womanlike she waited for his words.

"I—you—there was a question. I asked

you before I went away. Could—would you be willing to hear it again?"

Her answer was more a whisper than a voice. It came across the wire murmurously, like the sighing of a small wind through new-budded trees. "I was a fool not to have listened before, dear. I shan't make the same mistake twice."

TIME flowed backward for them when they met next day. He had left when apple blossoms fluttered like hurt butterflies through the soft April air; now, when he was returning, spring was once more there, clear, windy-bright. The whole city was bathed in sunshine, and crocuses were peeping through the grass.

The face of each was poignantly familiar to the other, but the intervening years had changed them subtly. Seven years in the far places of the world had taken every trace of adolescence from Robert. He was a slim and neatly built man dressed in Scottish tweeds that draped a trifle loosely on him. His sleek brown hair showed a tendency to recede at the temples, his hazel eyes were alert, his face was deeply tanned by sun and wind; there was about him the look of a man familiar with all climates and all types of people.

Muriel had changed, too. She had been a girl when he had left, now she was a woman, mature and lovely. Age had stolen some of her bloom but the calmness and repose that it had given more than compensated for the lost flush of girlhood. Her skin was pale—as it had always been—and there were lavender shadows beneath her eyes and in the eyes themselves there was a hardness born of disillusion. But the hardness vanished as she saw him and came forward, both hands extended, a quince-colored flush in her cheeks and her lips trembling.

"Oh, Bob, my very dearest," she whispered. "You can't know how much I have missed you; how glad I am that you

are back!" She raised her lips for his kiss naturally and unaffectedly.

He followed her to the table the *maitre d'hotel* indicated and thought that in all his wanderings in all the fabled cities of the East, where women whose sole stock in trade and fortune was their beauty, congregated, he had never seen a face so lovely or a body that stood so straight or so proudly. This, he told himself, was the true flowering. Youth was but the bud, the promise. Its sparkle was all on the surface. This beautiful, mature woman was fulfillment of youth's promise, youth's sparkle had become an inward glow in her.

A little smile, half deprecating, half embarrassed, rippled across her lips. "I'm being most unladylike, aren't I?" she asked as she stared into the tawny depths of her Martini with brooding tawny eyes. "You know, I'm practically throwing myself at you, saying, 'Here's a bit of shopworn goods. They wouldn't let you have it when it was all new and shiny-bright, but now it's on the bargain counter. Take it at your own price.'" She raised her glass and the huge topaz on her finger re-echoed the matching jewels in her ears and the topaz eyes which suddenly seemed to have become hard and empty as the stones themselves. "I know I've been a fool, Bob. A silly addle-pated fool that had no better sense than to mistake propinquity for love. But I've paid full price for my folly, dear. If you could know the agony of being linked to someone who lives in a different world from yours and thinks a different set of thoughts—almost speaks a different language—with no common meeting ground, no contacts, except the purely physical—I think his beating was more tolerable—"

"He beat you? The swine!"

"Only once." Her lips moved almost soundlessly as she twirled the stem of her glass between her fingers and looked into it intently. "And I'm not sure I didn't

have it coming to me. I'd gotten fed up with his endless boasting of his success, and held the mirror up to him. Not the mirror in which he saw himself, but the one in which I saw him, and had been seeing him almost from our wedding day. His vanity's colossal, you know. I hit him on his tenderest point."

SHE was silent for a moment, then, "We'll have to be careful, Bob." Urgency lent sharpness to her voice. "I don't know if he really loves me—I rather think he does, as much as he's capable of loving anything or anyone—but I do know that he'll move heaven and earth to keep us apart. He was utterly dumbfounded when I left him, for I really think he thought that he'd done his full duty as a husband when he gave me food and clothes and shelter. But to have me go to you would be adding insult to injury, dear. You know he's always hated you—"

"It's been mutual, I assure you," Mayhew cut in dryly.

"Yes, dear, I understand, but you don't—you can't—know him as I do. He's terribly religious in a bigoted, intolerant way, and feels that I've disgraced him by divorcing him. The quarrel that led to our separation was about you. My final decree will not be signed for two months, and if he hears that I've been seeing you he'll feel as if you'd lured me away from him; as if he were the injured husband and you the guilty wife-stealer. I'm frightened, Robert, terribly frightened. Remember that night at the senior prom—"

"I'm not likely to forget it," he replied grimly. "My nose is still crooked where he broke it. But we're grown up now, Muriel. People don't do things like that in civilized communities. Now, if this were Outer Mongolia—"

"What's civilization? Just an overlie of veneer that can be scratched off by any claw of passion. He's big and very strong,

and arrogant in his strength. If he meets you—or me—he might—”

His laugh reassured her. “I’ll be careful to keep out of his way, darling, at least until your decree has been made final. Meantime here comes the *bouillabaisse Marseille*—” Mentally he made a note to call on William Sylvinus Stokes, 3rd, and have a plain talk with him. Bill might be twice his size and a good boxer, but he had learned a trick or two in the Far East. If Bill should decide to get rough . . .

THE big man in the chromium-and-leather chair looked unbelievably at Mayhew. “I didn’t think you’d have the guts to come here,” he muttered, almost as if he argued with himself. “You were always such a sneaking little stinker, playing the piano, writing poetry—”

Mayhew’s eyes met the other’s with cold steadiness. He was thinking how this splendid virile body and tough ruthless mind had broken under the strain of adversity. Stokes used to brag that he was made of iron. Iron was right. Cast iron. Hard and rigid, with no spring or give to it, no resiliency. He had always been bulky, now he was merely heavy, thick-fingered, beefy-shouldered, a little puffy at the waist, the acquisitive falcon-look gone from his face. His eyes were blood-shot—too much whiskey!—and looked dim and foul, like pools with scum on them.

“We needn’t waste time in personalities, Stokes. We might find one or two things that you lack if we went into it deeply enough, but we won’t. I’ve come to tell you Muriel and I are going to be married just as soon as her decree is made final, and if you try to stop us—”

The other’s face seemed changing, to be remodeled before his eyes. A mask of some inner feeling, of something strange and terrible that raced madly in his brain, dropped over his countenance, wiping off

his look of stolid apathy and replacing it with one of positively feline fury. Something animal, not human.

He heaved himself out of his chair and laughed, not insanelly, but as if at some secret only he knew. “By God, you *are* impudent!” he chuckled. “To come here tellin’ me you’re going to take my wife. You’d make a fine pair, you two—a molly-coddle and a woman with no more life in her than a wet firecracker—if I’d let you have each other. But I won’t. Get this, you lily-livered snake. I’m goin’ to beat the life out of you right here—you won’t steal anybody’s wife when I get through with you—”

“Keep back, Stokes!” Mayhew’s eyes were mercilessly unwavering as the other lurched toward him, and his voice was low and dissonantly gritty. “You’re not going to beat anybody—you’re not going to interfere with Muriel or me again—ever.” The lamplight glinted on the barrel of the little Belgian automatic he had jerked out of his jacket pocket. “You’re a big burly bully, but this’ll make us equal—”

“You never saw the time you were my equal, you dam’ pansy—” Stokes made a sweeping clutch for the weapon, stopped short in mid-step, hiccoughed once and started to draw a breath that stopped before he had it in.

He fell disjointedly, clumsily, as if he had stumbled over his own feet, and his big strong body seemed to collapse in upon itself as if his spirit were no longer sufficiently interested to keep its contours filled out.

It was very quiet in the room; quiet but not noiseless; a hush filled with small sounds that blended together till they could not be noticed—the ominous, slow ticking of a clock, the faint rasp of a wind-stirred tree branch on the window pane, a man’s harsh, rasping breathing, half gasp, half sob. Bill lay on his side looking scarcely more human than a bundle of old clothes

or a scarecrow that had been unceremoniously dropped on the floor. There was no longer anger in his face, nor any trace of passion. There was only blankness. All expression and all life had drained out of his countenance. He was just a relic now, his life a closed and finished book.

HE HADN'T had a chance at the trial. The record in the divorce case was introduced, Muriel had testified on cross-examination that the quarrel that led to her beating and their separation was over him. A dozen people testified that they had been together almost constantly since his return. Every kiss they had exchanged at meeting and parting was duly recorded. "Gentlemen of the jury, not content with carrying on a correspondence with the deceased's wife, with sending her presents and alienating her affections from her husband, this man went brazenly and shamelessly to keep appointments with her, exchanged embraces with her in public while the decree of divorce—a decree that might never have been made final, mark you—was still pending. Not content with all this, I say, he deliberately and with premeditated malice sought the injured husband out, provoked a quarrel and shot him dead!" the state's attorney bellowed. "He says he fired in self-defense. God save the mark! Why did he go to see the man he had so greatly wronged—why did he go to call on William Stokes armed with a deadly weapon if not with murder in his heart and the cold-blooded intention to commit murder in his brain?"

She had called on him that afternoon, "the woman in the case," dogged by reporters and photographers who followed her right to the prison doors and waited avidly as wolves for her to emerge. "Please, please," she begged the guard who sat outside the death cell, "oh, please take the screen away a moment. I—I want so to kiss him good-by!"

The man looked undecided, cast a furtive glance up the corridor, then, sudden resolution forming on his long, immobile face, unlatched the fastenings of the wire net that swung before the barred door of the cell. "Be quick, lady," he admonished in a hoarse whisper. "It's agin th' regulations—"

Although the steel bars intervened they clung and kissed, arms circled round each other, lips and hearts together in a final long farewell. "I love you, Bob," she whispered almost soundlessly. "I love you. Will that help—"

"Help?" A seraphic smile broke on his tired, lined face. "Help? Oh, my darling, when I walk that little way tonight I'll *feel* your love surrounding me; feel the pressure of your hand in mine to give me courage—"

"And you'll wait for me, dearest?"

"Wait?" The question puzzled him.

"Yes, darling, yes! There may—I don't know that there is, nobody does—but there's a chance there may be something after this life. Say that if there is you'll wait for me, stretch out your hand to help me over—"

"To a land of pure and filmy spirits?" he answered ironically. "Where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but only bloodless, abstract life without sensation, with no hands to clasp, no lips to kiss—"

"Perhaps," her hurried words broke in. "Perhaps it is like that. Perhaps it's just an everlasting, dreamless sleep, but if there is a life and consciousness there, promise that you'll wait for me. I'd rather be with you through all eternity as a pale shade than share a full life with another."

"Time's up, lady," the keeper cautioned. "I gotta put th' screen back. If they ketch me—"

"Now," Mayhew gasped as his arms tightened around her shoulders, "one last kiss, dearest, then good-by. I'll close my

eyes and stop my ears so I can't see or hear you leaving, and when I open them again you'll be gone, but I'll have the memory of your lips on mine when—when—"

"My dear, my dear!" she moaned and stopped his words with burning kisses.

Then he had sat with head bowed, elbows on knees, knuckles pressed against his lips, not crying, but staring dry-eyed straight ahead as though he could already glimpse the long vistas of eternity. The prison barber had come to shave a small tonsure on his head and slit his trousers leg with his shears. "Half an hour," the chaplain had said. . . .

"All right, son," the warden stood at the cell door. "This is it." He drew a folded paper from his pocket, began reading: "The Governor . . . to Leslie Simpson, warden, greetings. These are to command you that . . . you cause the sentence of the law to be executed on the body of Robert Mayhew . . . and this shall be your warrant. . . ."

The chaplain, looking as if he were about to be sick, opened his black-bound book: "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .*"

They were walking, not fast, but not slowly, toward the end of the corridor. Terrifying in its very commonplaceness was a solid metal door, wide enough for three people to pass abreast, grained and painted in imitation of golden oak. SILENCE proclaimed the legend on its lintel. To right and left were prison guards who held his elbows lightly. Another guard brought up the rear. ". . . I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me . . ."

They led him to the chair but he did not seem to see it. They had to help him up the one low step—his last step in the world—or he would have stumbled on it.

Hands fumbled over him. Someone seized his leg, turned back the slit trouser

from his calf. A leather belt was latched across his stomach, straps were buckled on his wrists, his ankles. The leather head-piece was drawn down across his eyes and everything went dark. But he could hear and feel. Feel the cold electrode on his leg, feel the moistened sponge against the shaved spot on his head, feel the straps that bound him to the chair. A watch ticked stridently in the silence, cutting through the heavy, panting breathing of the guards, the chaplain muttered almost inarticulately. "*Out of the depths have I called unto Thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice . . .*"

It was as if a dreadful cramp had seized him, not alone in limbs and stomach, but in every nerve and muscle and tendon. His body seemed to swell and bloat and distend till it was ten times too big for his skin. A roaring like the roll of thunder deafened him and a million brightly colored lights were flashing in his eyes. Then suddenly a vast, outrageous crash in his brain—and darkness.

But the darkness lifted slowly. Before his closed eyes glowed a dull violet light, growing brighter by degrees until it seemed shot through with golden spots and flashes. He seemed to grope his way across an endless set of obstacles, creeping painfully back to consciousness. Every muscle in his body ached like an ulcerated tooth. He grasped at consciousness again, heard the watch-tick, now magnified until it sounded like the beating of a frantic hammer on an anvil, caught the mumbling voice of the chaplain—"My soul fleeth unto the Lord, before the morning watch . . ." Then once again the roaring, the dazzling lights, the unendurable torment of cramping. . . . A faint moan pushed past the blued lips beneath the leather mask, a shuddering tremor ran through the form in the chair as it dropped back from straining against the straps. Then it was still.

He seemed to be in a land of gray mists. The air was thick with brume, a

sort of gray, translucent fog that neither moved nor shifted, yet did not quite shut out vision. He could see a little way around him but, except for fleeting glimpses, could see nothing further than ten yards or so. The land was flat and seemed to stretch away to an uncertain misty horizon. There was no sound, no breath of stirring air, just colorless gray fog and desolate, uncolored, flat landscape. Then for just the twinkling of an eye the mist parted and in the far distance, clear cut and minute as something seen through a reversed opera glass, he caught a transient view of what looked like a city, a collection of tall towers and rounded domes that shone with scintillating splendor in a blaze of light that was not quite sunshine nor yet moonlight, but a glorious effulgence such as he had never seen or imagined.

He caught his breath in amazed awe. What was it—where was he?

A dog's sharp, joyous bark sounded, and in an instant something small and black and very full of life, a Scottish terrier, dashed up and leaped upon him as if it had known him always and was welcoming him home. And then another dog came running from the shadows, a splendid English setter with a blaze of white on its red forehead and soft, affectionate brown eyes. It too leaped on him with a joyous yelp of welcome, and he patted the black and red heads fondly. "Good boy—good dog! I don't know who you are or where you came from, but I'm as glad to see you as you seem to see me."

The dogs at last ceased their demonstrative greeting and trotted off before him, stopping now and then to look back as if to ask, "Aren't you coming?"

Why not? They seemed to know their way and he was a stranger . . . could this be hell or heaven, or what? From infancy

he'd been taught that dogs had no souls. Except for the Mohammedans and a few obscure cults every creed denied them immortality. And yet . . .

"Tammie, John o' Gaunt, have you found him?"

The voice was like a strain of music, striking back responsive chords of incredulous joy in his heart. Muriel! In this place—

"Can't you find him, boys?" the hail came again from the fog, and Mayhew called back, his voice jubilant:

"Muriel—beloved!"

"Bobbie, darling—where are you?"

"Coming, dearest," he called back. "The dogs are leading me."

She came to him out of the fog, eyes alight with love and tenderness, both hands outstretched to him. "My dear, my dearest dear, I was afraid I'd missed you!"

He took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. "How—why are you here, beloved?"

"Heart's dearest, did you think I'd stay when you had gone away?" she asked almost reproachfully.

"You—you mean you—"

"Yes," she nodded. "It didn't hurt much. Only, when I realized I was drowning, I fought a little, but the struggle didn't last long, and—" she paused, her face transfigured by her love as by a halo—"we're together, dearest one. Not for time, but for eternity."

Then they were in each other's arms, so naturally, so tenderly that the quiet ecstasy of it was almost appalling.

And as her soft sweet lips found his and clung he knew that all his doubts and fears had been groundless.

There was another life, and there was consciousness and feeling and sensation in it, with hands to clasp and lips to kiss. . . .