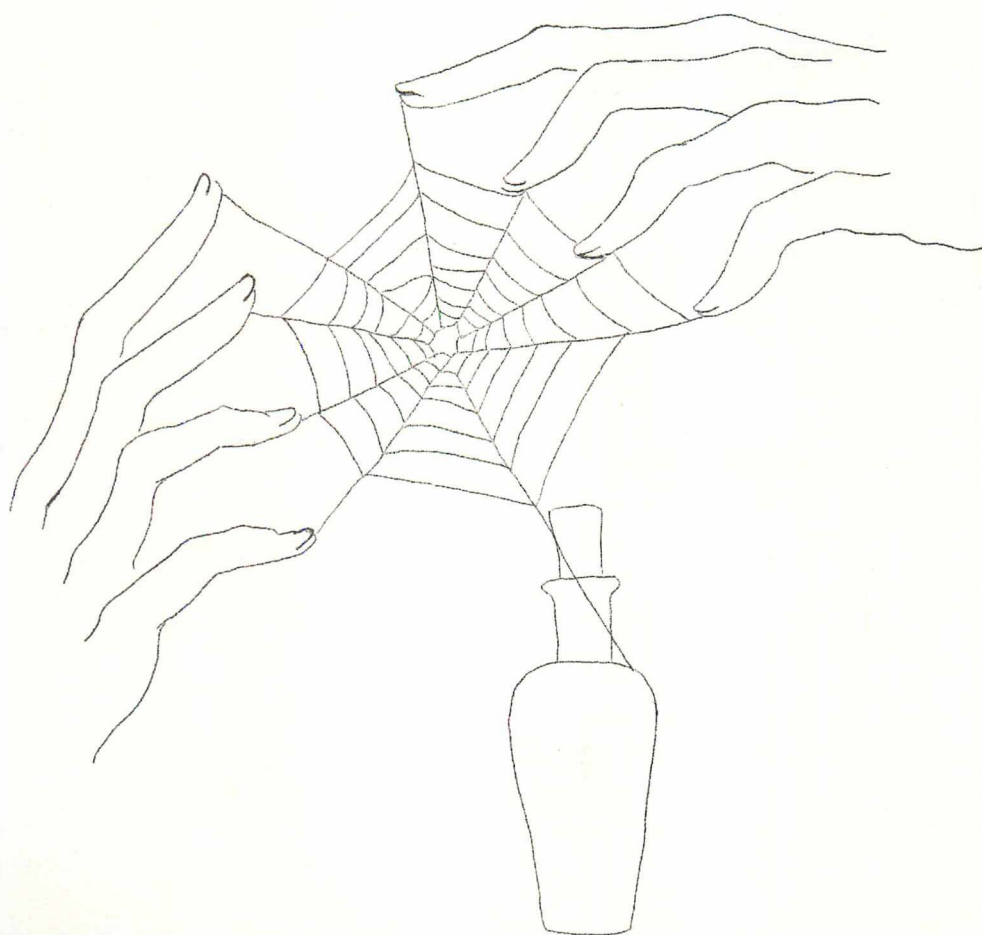


National Fantasy Fan Federation

STORY CONTEST

WINNERS 1961



STORY OF THE
MERS



INTRODUCTION

The National Fantasy Fan Federation was proud to award prizes totalling seventy-five dollars in its first short story contest, which was conceived and helped to completion by Clayton Hamlin. The contestants came from all of science-fiction fandom, not only the membership of the N3F, and the judges were selected from the professional s-f world: it was a fine start for the first contest to be judged by August Derleth, Forrest Ackerman, and Miss Cele Goldsmith, after initial screening by the N3F's board of judges, consisting of Hamlin, Ed Ludwig, and the late Ralph Holland.

Five of fandom's best-known artists have done illustrations specifically for the present volume: George Barr, Isabel Caseres, Juanita Coulson, Karen Anderson and Jerry Burge answered requests for artwork promptly despite, in some cases, tight personal schedules which ordinarily would preclude extra fanac.

Ed Ludwig, Art Rapp, Al Lewis and I are happy to have played a part in bringing these winners to publication, with technical assistance from Bob Lichtman and Steve Tolliver.

--Ron Ellik,
N3F Publications Bureau

NATIONAL FANTASY FAN FEDERATION

STORY CONTEST WINNERS 1961

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The N3F Publications Bureau regrets that Art Rapp's story, CHROMATICA, which won First Prize in Short Fantasy, was lost in the mails. Except for that loss, this collection presents all the first prize winners from the N3F's first story contest; the winners of the second contest will be published in similar form in the near future.

Stencilling by Ron Ellick, Al Lewis, Bob Lichtman, Steve Tolliver and Juanita Coulson. Mimeography by Al Lewis on the LASFSrex, February, 1963. First distribution free to members of the N3F, additional copies available at 25¢ each from 1825 Greenfield Avenue, Los Angeles 25, California.

A BOTTLE OF MUSIC

by Gerald W. Page

The shop was small and dingy. It huddled, as if ashamed, between two other, more respectable shops. There was a dull scum of dust on the windows, that almost obliterated the faded writing on them that read "Spells". Inside, the shop was lighted by bare lightbulbs that were randomly suspended from the ceiling on plaited cords. There were high shelves, cluttering the floor space of the shop, that were filled with an extraordinary assortment of boxes, jars, canisters and small, ornate caskets. Dust coated everything, and cobwebs hung in profusion. The walls were cracked, and in a few patches, plaster had fallen away and lay in small piles on the floor. There was the appropriately musty odor about the place and the floor creaked when you moved upon it.

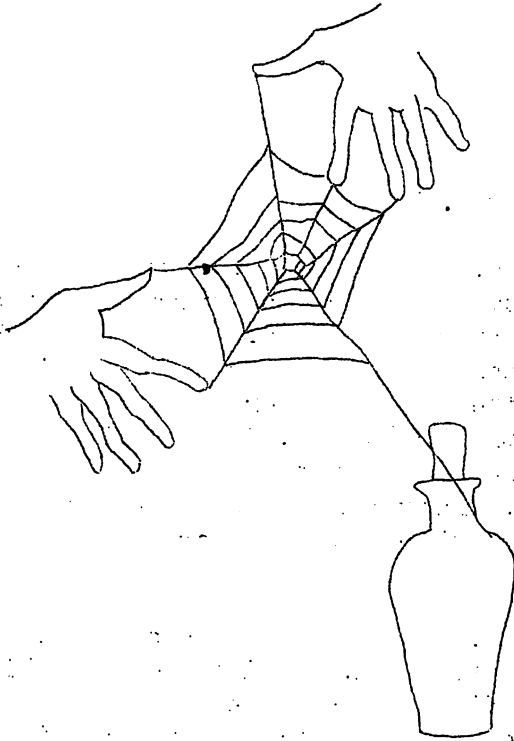
The customer was another matter, entirely. He was small, to be sure, but he was far more immaculate than the shop he patronized, despite the vague hint of yesterday that clung to his clothing. He did not look like the sort of person who patronizes such establishments, and indeed, he was not; although he did have a penchant for small, out of the way shops which looked as if they might contain small and curious bric-a-brac. This was such a shop and he had noticed it one or two times before in passing by here on his way to catch his bus home in the evening. His name was Mr. James Breckenridge and he found himself a shade ill at ease, almost the moment he entered the shop. He glanced around, looking not only out of place, but highly uncomfortable. But it would have been rude, according to his way of looking at things, to go home, and he was much too self-conscious to be rude.

The shop keeper was a Negro who sat behind a make-shift counter next to the door and smiled whimsically as Mr. Breckenridge came in; smiled in much the same way one might smile if he had been let in on some cosmic joke by the gods. He wore light brown trousers and a somewhat worn and rather drab white shirt, with the sleeves carelessly rolled up almost to his elbows. Mr. Breckenridge found himself unable to decide upon the Negro's age. He strode forward, trying to smile amicably and the Negro (whom Mr. Breckenridge had decided must be Mr. Spells) greeted him with a friendly, "How are you?" There was something in his voice that removed a portion of Mr. Breckenridge's discomfort.

"I've noticed your shop," said Mr. Breckenridge, perhaps a little more hoarsely than he would have liked. "And I must confess that I've become curious as to just what might be found here. I wonder if I might browse around?"

"Certainly. Perhaps I can show you something."

Mr. Breckenridge was slightly embarrassed. "No, really, I have nothing in mind in particular. . ." He let his sentence dangle in mid-air, because he could not think of any other way to leave it. Besides, the Negro was laughing in a curious, soundless way that caused small, abrupt, mirthful explosions inside him somewhere, with little or no effect outside, at all. Mr. Breckenridge was not quite sure he knew how to take this.



"Almost no one comes in here these days knowing just what he wants," Mr. Spells said. "That's what I'm here for."

He was suddenly and to Mr. Breckenridge's mild surprise, leading the way to the back of the shop and a row of shelves that contained a number of dull-coated bottles. "You look to me like a music lover," he said. "Is that so?"

"Why, yes, I am. But--"

"Oh, it shows, it shows. After a few decades in this business you can tell a lot about people at a glance. I think I have just the thing for you." He selected a bottle and blew dust from it. He wiped it off with his handkerchief and handed the bottle to Mr. Breckenridge.

"Uncork it," he said.

Somewhat dubious, Mr. Breckenridge held the bottle up and saw that it was stoppered in the old fashioned way with a cork. He tugged at the cork, until it came out with a pop and he stood amazed at what happened next.

"Why, that's Beethoven," he exclaimed. "The Eroica!"

And it was. It came from the unstoppered bottle and in the very best of tones, much more like a real orchestra than a recording. The performance was flawless and inspired. Mr. Breckenridge stood entranced at the artistry of it.

When it was over, he recorked the bottle and stared incredulously at Mr. Spells. Mr. Spells was smiling.

"Now, then, isn't that what you want?"

Mr. Breckenridge, whose salary did not permit him such luxuries as a phonograph or even occasional concert tickets, was very pleased with the bottle. But he said, "I'm afraid that I could never afford such a wonderful bottle."

"Look around you," Mr. Spells said, suppressing laughter. "Does it look to you as if I charge over anyone's head?"

Mr. Breckenridge did not have to look around. "Well, no," he admitted. "But even so, this is a bottle that plays music. And such music and so well! It is, after all, a very wonderful bottle indeed. You can't let it go for next to nothing. I should imagine there are collectors of such things."

"I'm afraid you don't understand how I work," Spells said. "I am not in the sort of business where one supports himself with monetary profits."

"Are you telling me that this is a charitable organization?"

"No, not in the least. Not in the way that we give to the underprivileged for the sake of giving to the underprivileged. We merely distribute as best we can to those who can probably use what we have to distribute. And we don't personally care whether they are healthy or unhealthy, wealthy or poor, good or bad or what have you. Such considerations are artificial, anyway. We merely distribute and our needs are taken care of. It isn't based on the kind of economy you are used to, either moral or artificial."

"Then what must I do for this bottle?" Mr. Breckenridge was suspiciously recalling stories he had heard in his childhood which dealt invariably with the youngest of three brothers, and the winning of the hand of some young, but nonetheless fabled beauty who was invariably a princess. But he did not feel up to the rigors of dragon slaying or giant wrestling or snatching golden apples from under the noses of lightly sleeping monsters.

"I'll let you have it for a dollar," Spells said.

"A dollar?" Incredible.

"That's all. And no strings. We guarantee that as long as the bottle isn't smashed it will play music. We aren't in business to make you unhappy. We don't interfere. In our job, you can, but you wouldn't interfere. The bottle is magic, but it isn't cursed. It can even bring you happiness, I suppose."

"This doesn't seem real, but I'll buy it," said Mr. Breckenridge, fishing in his wallet for a dollar.

-oOo-

Mr. Breckenridge and his equally unmarried sister, Regina, lived in a small house that had been left to them by their father, years ago. He and Regina lived alone in the house, for they could not afford such frills as servants. It was a nice house, though small; it was well built, for in the day they had built it, they had known how to build a house to stand up to years of much more rigorous service than the two of them called upon it to give. It wasn't very modern, but it was adequate, and it was comfortable. Regina kept it clean and did the cooking; in fact she would have stood for things no other way. She preferred the small, quiet neighborhood they had been raised in.

And Regina was perhaps a little intolerant of any interference. It was, she pointed out often enough, perfectly all right for her brother to earn his meagre salary and take care of a few bills, but it was preposterous of him to try to run a household, or, which was just as bad, offer any suggestions on the matter. He lacked, she assured him, the talent. Regina held sway of the affairs of keeping the household in order, and that was the best way to do it. She told him so.

When he came in the door, she frowned a slight, sour frown. "You're late," she informed him. Then she spied the package. "What have you done now? You've wasted more of your salary, I see."

"Oh, no, this cost next to nothing," he said. "It's something to help me with my work." For in the evenings, he was compiling a bibliography, and each night after supper he would go into his study and work from seven to ten-thirty.

"How much did it cost?"

"It cost a dollar."

She made a noise that was a sort of sarcastic snort and stood for a half minute as if she were waiting for a full confession of his diabolical activities. Rather guiltily, Mr. Breckenridge realized that his package was shaped like a bottle. His sister no doubt would be difficult to talk with, these next few days, but he felt that ignoring the subject would be easier than explaining to her about a bottle that made music.

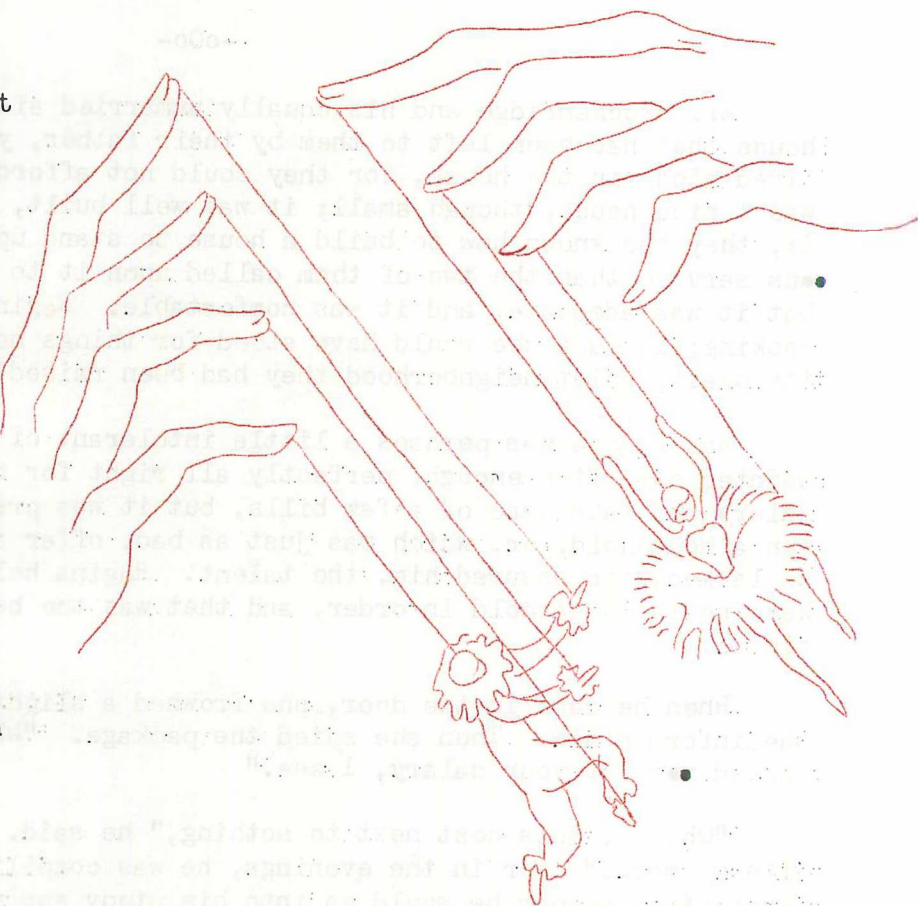
They ate supper in silence. Once or twice, Mr. Breckenridge glanced up at his sister and saw her look at him with piercing, smoldering eyes, and he would then decide to concentrate on his supper--which was, of course, cold. Neither of them spoke other than to request that something or other be passed, and Mr. James Breckenridge found even that hard.

At last he finished, dabbed his mouth with his napkin and excused himself. He went to his study which was a medium-sized room, lined with books, most of them his father's. There was a small desk and a filing cabinet. Small china bric-a-brac lined the tops of the bookshelves. Mr. Breckenridge was busy compiling a bibliography of 18th century pamphlets dealing with the politics of Spain, England and America, as well as certain odd pamphlets he felt would be of interest to researchers. He had gotten the idea while cataloguing the 18th century collection bequeathed by John Thorndike Clever to the library where Mr. Breckenridge was a librarian. Mr. Breckenridge had been working on his bibliography for a year now, and it was moving steadily toward completion. He rather regretted that, for he enjoyed working on it.

He got out his material and set the papers up neatly in stacks on the desk so that he might more easily find what he wanted. He took the bottle and held it a moment as he decided what he wanted to hear. He decided on Petrouchka. He uncorked the bottle and the music began. He listened a second, savoring it, and then placed the bottle carefully on the corner of the desk where it would not fall off. Then he turned to his work.

He had barely picked up his pen when there was a knock on his door. He got up and opened the door and his sister stuck her head in the room.

"I hear music," she said.



"Come in," said Breckenridge. Regina came in, suspiciously, the way she might enter a dark alleyway at midnight. "It's this bottle. I got it for only a dollar. It plays music."

Regina stared at the bottle and then at her brother. Icily, she said, "It disturbs me. I'm trying to wash the evening dishes. This noise distracts me and I might break a plate. You know that I don't like loud noises."

"Well, if you don't care for Stravinsky, perhaps--"

"Perhaps nothing! Turn that--that bottle off! I've got sewing to do as soon as I finish the dishes. I can't very well be expected to-- to-- "

"But Regina, this is only music. It's very beautiful. I thought you would like it as much as I do!" This was, it must be admitted, something of a lie.

"Well, then! Very well! But if you want me breaking dishes and glasses and pricking my fingers with needles until they're bloody pulps, then go right on ahead with your racket. After all, you bring in the money. I'm only a work horse!"

"All right, sister, all right!" Mr. Breckenridge said quietly. "I'll replace the cork." He hurriedly recorked the bottle and the music stopped. He gave a small, plaintive sigh.

"Honestly, James," Regina went on, "you have not the slightest consideration for anyone. Tracking up the floors, getting cigarette ashes on the carpets. It's bad enough to insist on bringing home those musty old books-- "

"But I need them for my bibliography."

"All well and good. I'm not complaining. I never complain, though Lord knows I should have a right to."

Mr. James Breckenridge did not get much work done on his bibliography that night.

-oOo-

The next morning he carefully wrapped his bottle up and took it with him to work. That evening, on his way home, he stopped in at the small, dingy shop. The tall, smiling Negro stood up as he entered.

"I'm afraid I've come to return this," said Mr. Breckenridge, unwrapping his package. The Negro's smile almost faded. "I'm afraid that the music upsets my sister. She doesn't like noises, Mr. -- I beg your pardon, I had assumed your name was 'Spells,' but it occurs to me that the name on the window might not be the name of a person at all."

"Spells is a good name for me. But I'm sorry, all sales are final."

"I see. Well, getting my dollar back isn't important. I would like to leave this here, though. Perhaps you could resell it for me, or just get rid of it. I could never break it myself, and I'd just as soon not have it around the house."

Spells laughed. Mr. Breckenridge, who did not see the joke, felt somehow embarrassed. He was uncertain what he should say or do, so he just stood there.

"Now you don't have to get rid of the bottle," Spells said. "What you need is another bottle." He went into the back of the shop and came back a second later, wiping dust from a bottle with his frayed, large handkerchief.

He placed the bottle on the counter and uncorked it. He smiled at Mr. Breckenridge and then recorked the bottle.

"Well, what did you hear?" he asked.

Mr. Breckenridge was puzzled. "Nothing," he answered.

"Exactly!" Spells emphasized his point with an upraised finger and a disturbing glint in his eyes.

"But I don't understand."

"This bottle," Spells said, almost conspiratorially, "contains silence." He let his words sink in. "It costs five dollars."

"Silence? A bottle of silence for five dollars?"

"The more valuable bottles, such as the one containing music, cost less."

"But silence?"

"Simply put this bottle on a table next to your sister and uncork it. Then go into another room and listen to your bottle. No noise will disturb her."

"Really?" asked Mr. Breckenridge, and Spells assured him. So Mr. Breckenridge paid him five dollars and took the bottle home.

When his sister saw it she was upset.

"Is that all you have to do with your money? Spend it on foolish bottles that do nothing but make noise? Father would be sickened by your waste of money, James." Mr. Breckenridge did not remember that his father was a notably frugal person, but he decided not to contradict Regina. Instead he uncorked the bottle.

Now she grew furious. The silence that flooded the room from the bottle cut her off in the middle of one of her better sentences and Mr. Breckenridge knew at once that he had chosen an inopportune moment to show her how the bottle worked. Hastily he recorked it.

"James!" Regina cried, as sound flowed back into the room. "What is that bottle?"

"It's a bottle of silence, Regina. You objected to being bothered by my music. I thought that perhaps with this nearby to silence the sounds drifting in from my study, both of us could enjoy ourselves. I could have my music and you would not be bothered by it."

Regina took the bottle and stared at it. "So now you want to shut me up, do you?"

"Nothing of the sort."

"You. . . You-- Well, that to you," and she hurled the bottle across the room, smashing it against the wall. Instantly silence flooded the room and infuriated her more, but in a few seconds sound slowly returned.

Mr. Breckenridge regretted that.

-oOo-

The next evening, he again stopped by the dingy shop on his way home.

After he had told Spells what had happened the night before, the Negro considered the problem a few minutes.

"Well," he said in a slow, questioning tone, "there's always poison."

"Oh, good heavens! I could never poison Regina. That would be barbaric."

"Then I guess you wouldn't care for psychiatrists, either. Well, let me see."

For a second he rubbed his chin meditatively. Then he said, "All right, follow me," and headed for the back of the shop. He opened a door and led the way down the stairs into the basement.

"We have some old items down here that aren't as popular as they used to be," he said, turning on the light. They came to a pile, two or three feet deep, of old bottles. Spells brushed away part of the heavy covering of cobwebs with his hand and started rummaging among the pile.

"A lot of things grow out of style," he said, still rummaging. "And we have to lay them aside. You know how it is. You can't sell last year's dresses. You can't sell last year's magic, either." He picked up a bottle, shook it, examined it a moment and then laid it aside. "There's one of these around here and I think it might be just -- Ah!" His hand closed on the neck of a bottle and he held the prize up for Mr. Breckenridge to see. "This is just what you want, Mr. Breckenridge." He got to his feet and pulled out his handkerchief to wipe the dust from the bottle.

Mr. Breckenridge started to ask how he knew his name, but he decided that when one sells magic spells, one can find out people's names easily enough. Instead he asked, "How much is it?"

"This is one of our more valuable spells, for all that it's out of style. There's no cost."

"No cost? But you said it's valuable."

"And another time I explained to you that our system of profits is neither financial nor moral. Fact, it's growing out of style. But we still like it. So this is yours. It will solve all your problems if you'll just uncork it near your sister. It's more personal magic than the music or silence, so you won't be affected." Then he told Mr. Breckenridge what it was.

-oOo-

When Mr. Breckenridge returned home, he found himself met with another icy stare. "So you not only didn't get rid of that first one, you had to buy another?"

"But it cost nothing, Regina. And I think you'll like this one." She said nothing. Neither did he, so she turned and went into the dining room where his supper was cold on the table.

After supper, he went into the living room, where Regina was sewing. She really didn't like to sew, so he felt no pangs about disturbing her sewing for the night. He had the bottle with him. Regina did not look up from her work. He felt uncomfortable but he uncorked the bottle. He put it on the end table, next to the chair she was in.



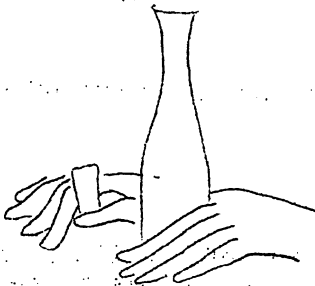
He went to his study and uncorked the music bottle. His work went well that night.

At ten thirty, Finlandia ended. Mr. Breckenridge, smiling, stoppered the bottle and carefully put up his papers. He had not enjoyed a night such as he had enjoyed this one in quite some time.

He went into the living room. His sister was still seated in the chair, but she had neglected her sewing, as he had suspected she would. Regina's eyes were closed and there was a soft smile on her face. He had not seen her looking so peaceful and happy in years. He replaced the cork in the bottle. Slowly, her eyes opened.

She looked up at him, smiling.

"I was dreaming," she said, and there was just a hint of astonishment to her voice. She laughed at herself. "It has been so long, since I dreamed."



Carefully, her brother put the bottle away. He felt rather good himself, and he rather suspected that things would somehow be better, and simpler, and more enjoyable for all concerned, from now on.

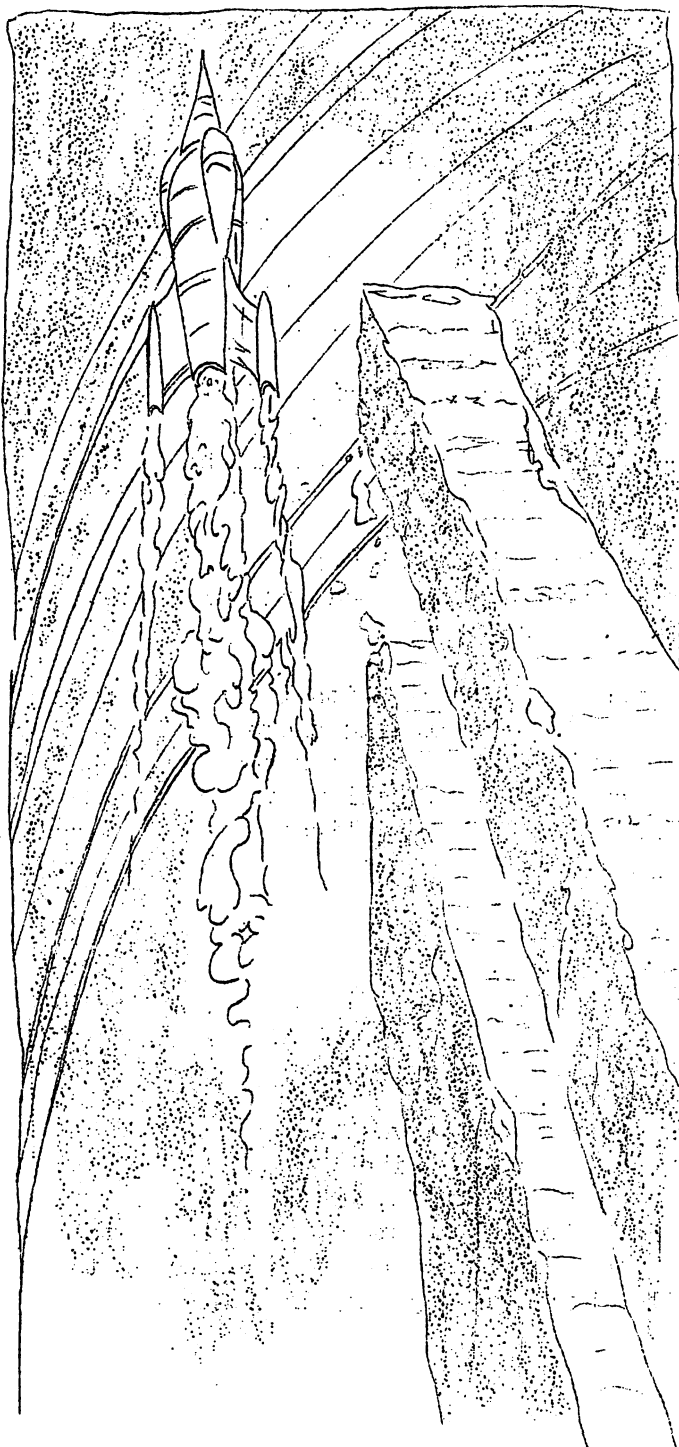
It was a wonderful bottle, and just the thing to cure Regina's disposition. Soon, she would learn how to dream again, and the bottle could be put away. It was wonderful.

He found it hard to believe that it was out of style.

"...MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD."

by B. TERRY JEEVES

The yellowish sun beat down on the endless expanse of sand, from a sky that was almost pure black. Nothing stirred on the endless rolling dunes, and only the ancient city, slowly crumbling away under the onslaught of time, relieved the monotony of the desert.



High overhead, a tiny speck of light winked into view; and was followed almost immediately by a whisper of thunder. Together, the speck and the whisper grew in intensity, until the speck became a roaring jet of flame bright enough to equal the sun, and the whisper had grown to a howling, tearing, holocaust of sound that surged in and around the city, and brought jagged lumps of masonry crashing from the walls.

The space ship touched down a scant hundred yards from the city wall, rocked a trifle and then settled more firmly into the sands. For one more agonising instant, the thunder crashed about the city, and then ceased with an abruptness that was as shocking to the nerves as the original tumult. The last dying rumble of the underjets had barely ceased to echo among the silent buildings, when with a harsh grating of unlubricated bearings, the airlock door ground slowly open.

Two oxygen-masked men appeared. Framed in the opening, they looked out over the expanse of the city. Nothing stirred to disturb the silence, their eyes swept over the towers and pinnacles and revealed nothing but the slow processes of decay. From behind the ship the weak rays of the setting sun cast a long needle of shadow across the rapidly chilling sands; a tiny fragment of stone cracked away from the wall's parapet and fell to the dust beneath, with only a slight tingling to disturb the thin air. The silence washed back, and

around the city and the spaceship, enveloping them against the coming of night. The taller man shivered, and then almost defiantly began to descend the metal rungs let into the black hull of the ship. The other hesitated for a moment, then followed him down the ladder and across the sands; to where a crumbling section of the wall had spread a wide fan of rubble around the base. Here, the taller man paused for an instant to assure himself that the other was following, then, with a grunted, "Get a move on, Cliff," began to scramble and curse his way up the slope.

Within the city, the silence seemed almost tangible. The ever present sand deadened even the slight sound of their movements, and as the shadows deepened, the two men drew imperceptibly closer together. This time it was Cliff who broke the silence, and even so, his voice was very soft, as if in sympathy with the surrounding decay. "Don't you think we'd better leave all this until morning, Carl?" The other's voice came back harsh and grating, even after freeing itself from his oxygen mask. "Not likely. Now we're here, we may as well look around and see what the place has to offer."

Switching on his powerful hand torch, he began to move forward again. Copying his example, Cliff Farrar switched on his own torch, and gaining confidence from the lights, they began to follow a wide road which led towards the centre of the city. Occasionally, they paused to examine the buildings which lined both sides of the thoroughfare. The tall graceful structures reared high into the darkening sky, but their bases all wore skirts of debris, cracked away from the towers by the tiny but remorseless expansion and contraction of cool days and frigid nights. Cliff could see no windows visible in any of the buildings, but Carl Machin, slightly in the lead, suddenly spotted a door. With an eager cry, he lumbered up to the entrance, but even before Cliff had started to follow, he let loose a string of curses. The door had been sealed off. They moved along the front searching for a way around, or another entrance, but where the building ended, and a side road should have left a space before the next, they found nothing but a high wall. The surface was decorated by a series of carvings, which though obscure in meaning, seemed to be almost on the verge of becoming comprehensible. Shelving this problem for a moment, Machin and Farrar moved on along the road. It soon became apparent that the bricked-up door and closed-off side roads were not unique. Far from it.

Taking opposite sides of the road, the two men traversed its length and found that every door and side road had been closed off. The closing showed signs of being of more recent origin than the original building, but it was none the less effective for all that. The only path lay straight ahead. Silently, the two men followed it, skirting piles of rubble and drifted sand by the light of their torches. They came at last to where the road ended, blocked by the foot of a mighty tower.

Taller than all the rest, the tower reared black against the night sky, a dark giant silhouetted against the stars. Gazing up at it, Cliff felt an almost uncontrollable urge to run. The thing was falling on him. Carl must have felt the same way, for before the shorter man had fully overcome the sensation, he called raggedly, "There's a door," and stepped jerkily forward. Forgetting his fear of the tower, Cliff followed him. There was a doorway all right, but even though it hadn't been walled up with the usual large stones, it was still sealed very effectively by a seamless sheet of some opaque material. It looked rather like a plastic, but was nevertheless firm enough to turn the blade of Machin's knife, and showed not even a scratch after the impact of a revolver bullet. Carl re-holstered his gun as the rattling echoes of the shot died away. Both the sheet and the silence seemed to mock them. Cliff looked at the door, and then back the way they had come.

"Whoever sealed off those side roads must have done it so that any explorer would be led straight to this tower. It's probable that there is a walled-off road leading up to each face, from the four points of the compass, that's if they know what a compass is. Anyway, it's my guess that we'll find quite a few answers inside the tower, and maybe the wall carvings will tell us how to get inside."

"I know how to get inside," Carl blustered. "Just wait until morning, and I'll cart some gear from the ship, and be through that stuff in a couple of minutes. Come on, let's get back, get some sleep, and bust the thing wide open in the morning." Turning abruptly, he led the way back to the ship.

The city waited, and with the morning came the men. Cliff, who felt sure that the key to the tower lay in the carvings, stopped at the first wall. Carl gave him a contemptuous look, muttered something about "Blooming professor" and, Christmas-treed with equipment, carried on to the tower. Under the weak light of the distant sun, its height seemed no longer formidable.

Carl dumped his gear beside a load of rubbish, and, selecting a diamond-edged cutter from the pile, advanced confidently to the doorway. Seconds later, a lot of the confidence evaporated rather suddenly when the cutter skated across the gleaming surface with no more effect than a pencil on a windowpane. Disgruntled, Machin's next attack on the plastic was made with a bottle of acid. This ran serenely down the sheet, and bubbled fussily on the stones. No other result was apparent. With a muttered, "Blasted stuff," Carl hurled the bottle from him. He rummaged through his pile of gear, and began to run a length of cable from the doorway, where it terminated in a little canister of explosive.

Cliff had progressed to the third wall of carvings when he heard the rumble of explosion. Shaking his head, he bent again to read the story written in the walls. The first one had been simple, a diagram of the solar system, with this planet marked and named, followed by a map of the planet, with this city treated in a similar fashion. Next had come a plan of the city, which had confirmed his ideas about the absence of side roads. Already he knew that the only key to the black tower lay in following the carvings right to the end. Simple mathematical laws and relationships had come after the plan, and gradually the message was becoming more a matter of grasping ideas, than of establishing facts.

He ignored another, louder rumble of explosives, and moved slowly along the walls. Then, sensing the tall man's approach, he straightened and turned to face him. Carl grimaced, made a thumbs-down motion, and with an annoyed, "I'll fix the damned stuff this time," continued on his way to the ship. Cliff had progressed more than half the length of the road when he felt Carl returning, staggering slightly under the weight of an atomic cutting torch and its associated equipment. This time, Cliff didn't bother to look up from the carvings, but pressed on steadily as he felt wash over him the mixed waves of anger at the plastic and resentment at his own apparent indifference. The increased sensitivity didn't bother him, in fact, he accepted it as normal. He was busy learning from the walls, and anything else was a mere side issue. A little later, he realized that his companion was activating the torch. At first, merely for a short period, followed by a test for results, and then for longer and longer spells, as no effect became apparent.

Concentrating on the carved message, Cliff felt a sense of awe, as he thought of the city builders. Many long centuries ago, they had used spaceships and voyaged among the planets of this system, their command of the physical sciences but a prelude to a further advance along the paths of mental science.

Telepathy and other ESP faculties gradually began to replace the more clumsy tools of the machine era, until finally, their own bodies and brains had been able to handle any of the tasks formerly carried out by ingenious but cumbersome scientific gadgetry. It was at this time that the problem of their thinning atmosphere, and slowly cooling sun, began to assume a more serious aspect. Their solution had been simple; scorning space ships and other mechanical devices, they had relied upon the sheer force of mental power to carry them to a new home. On wings of thought, they had left their dying planet, and travelled in search of a new home. They had found one, more beautiful than their own planet had ever been, but during their search they had found no other trace of life.

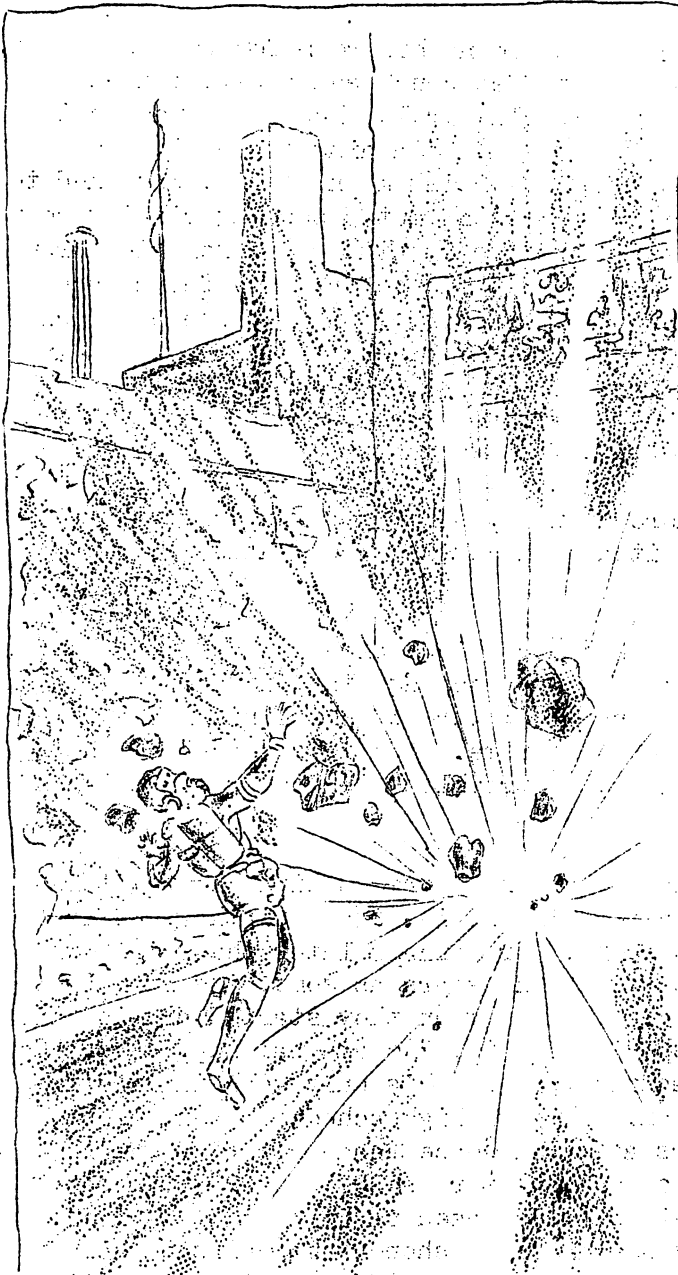
The builders had returned to their dying planet for a brief spell, long enough to wall in their city, so that all roads led to the tower, and long enough to carve the message into the walls. To anyone who could read the message, the builders offered a way to reach their new home. They had known that if any other intelligent beings existed, the city would attract them once they matured enough to reach the planet, but since intelligent creatures can also be destructive, they had also left the door. The forceful would waste their energies on the portal; the thoughtful would find the message hidden in the walls.

Cliff straightened from his cramped position. He now knew why the tower was there, all that remained was for him to decypher the last part of the message, find the way to enter, and then he could call to the builders. His sharpened senses signalled that Carl was going to try more explosives, and temporarily shutting off all auditory sensation in preparation for the blast, he moved to the last stretch of wall, the one holding the key to the tower.

Carl, however, thought he had another key, and when it didn't seem to fit, he was trying to force it. Even as the thought passed through his mind, Cliff felt the ground tremble as Carl set off another charge. Its only result was to bring a few shards of stone rattling down from some of the buildings. Ignoring the interruption, Cliff absorbed the teaching of the walls. Now he was actually learning how the builders intended the door to be opened. Mind control was the secret, and the method was here. First came simple exercises in concentration, then more and more difficult processes. With each success, Cliff felt greater admiration for the builders. Problem followed problem, and then -- it was done.

He realised with something of a shock that he could open the door whenever he wanted. Rising stiffly to his feet, he trudged along to where Carl was searching the plastic surface for any sign of weakness. Hardly noticing the other, Cliff faced the gateway; he gazed at it a moment in intense concentration, and then, to Carl's amazement, the plastic surface seemed to flicker. His ears caught an amazed shout of "Cliff!" and then he was through. Behind him, the plastic resumed its former state; before him, a ramp spiralled gracefully up into the tower, its walls bearing finer and more intricate carvings. Sweeping forward without a pause, he began the secondary stage of his learning.

Outside the tower, the tall man swore and beat frantically on the door. When both curses and bruised knuckles alike proved useless, he stormed back to his equipment. Babbling angrily to himself, he heaped all the remaining explosive against the door. In his angry, half-crazed condition, he failed to withdraw to a safe distance. A flying fragment of explosive casing flew true to its mark. . . The echoes of the explosion hunted fruitlessly among the buildings and finally died away.



Cliff never heard the noise. Somehow, his control of the door had marked a turning point. To his surprise he found he could read the symbols as easily as if they had been in his own language. Walking slowly, reading as he went, he began to ascend the ramp.

Hours later, Cliff stepped out on the top of the tower. Thoughtfully, almost unseeingly, his eyes swept over the city, past crumbling walls, over the gleaming needle just beyond them, and out across the rolling sands. They briefly considered the swiftly sinking sun, and rose higher to fasten on the first tiny stars to appear. Somewhere, on a planet circling one of those stars, the city builders were waiting. Waiting, not just for him, but for any intelligent being who could solve the riddle of their cities.

They had realised that sooner or later other intelligent races would arise, and had left a similar city on each planet they had visited. Cliff wondered just how many different races had risen during the ages—how many of them had decyphered the message and gone to join the builders? Now it was his turn to decide. The decision was soon made, Cliff settled down comfortably on the top of the tower, and concentrated all his new-found powers into one particular channel.

The weak rays of the setting sun cast a long needle of shadow across the drifting sands. Had there been anyone there to follow it, it would have led them to a body sprawled at the foot of

a huge black tower. Looking up they would have seen it silhouetted against the stars. In imagination, they might even have seen another, tiny star, detach itself from the tower and vanish into the void. The student had gone to join the teachers.

Within the city, a tiny fragment of stone loosened by the explosions tinkled to the sand. The slight noise was soon lost in the thin air, and hand in hand, silence and night returned to the city.

—B. Terry Jeeves.

I swept my eyes around his room for the last time, taking in the overstuffed couch and a battered oak desk, with his first slide rule plopped on top beside the old dented telescope. Standing there with the faint trace of oil permeating my nostrils, I seemed to hear echoes of laughter and muted sobbing ringing down the corridors of yesteryear, dislodging memories from the dusty corners of my mind before they faded once more into obscurity. Finally I sighed, stepped back through the narrow doorway, and slowly slid the heavy metal panel closed behind me. Since then that panel has never been opened. Jack's room has been shut from the day he left, ten years ago.

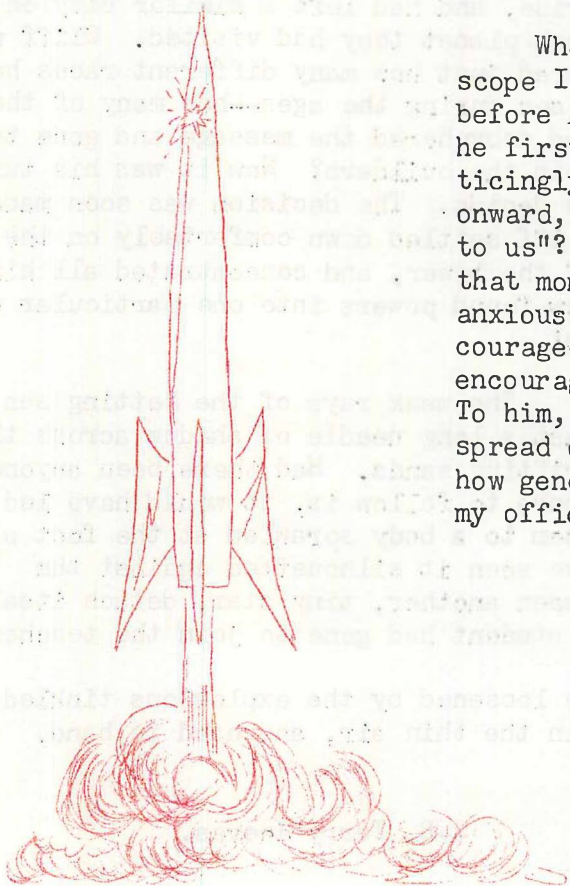
"Five more minutes, Dad," he said, carrying the regulation suitcase through the hall and out into the front yard.

"O.K., Jack," I replied, already lost in thought. "Jack." It wasn't too long ago that it had been "Jack" "Jackie," and Ann and I were watching him leave for school for the first time. Now it's "Jack" and he's leaving for good. I trembled with the realization of my words.

Where had it begun? Perhaps with the toy telescope I presented him on his eighth birthday--four years before Ann's death. Or perhaps later that night when he first discovered the stars as something real and enticingly near. Is that when they started drawing him onward, whispering to him, "We are waiting, Jack. Come to us"? Reaching them was his only goal in life from that moment on. Through high school and nine long, anxious years at World Space Academy, if he became discouraged, the patient stars shared their strength and encouraged him when he gazed up at them each night. To him, they sparkled and shone like polished gems spread on black velvet. No offer of mine, no matter how generous, could persuade him to change the sign on my office door to "Hanson and Son".

HOME

CHARLES
WAUGH



KAG2

Only a few minutes left, I recalled with a start, hastily walking out onto the lawn toward him. I did not glance skyward, for I was afraid that the brightness of the newly-risen sun had not yet obscured my son's kidnappers. My hands were shaking, there was an emptiness where my stomach should have been, and both legs seemed to have lost all feeling. If only Ann could have been with me. Sweet, kind, and gentle Ann. . . But she wasn't. And in just a little while I would have no one left. There would never be any grandchildren, for marriage would have disqualified Jack. I can still hear his logical explanation for that.

"Dad, faster-than-light star drive hasn't been invented yet; maybe it will be some day, but in the meantime the World Government is attempting to reach other stars by using a modified model of the ships we have today. The name of the first star ship is the S. S. Conqueror, and I've been chosen a member of the first crew. The Conqueror will take at least twenty years at three-fourths the speed of light to complete the round trip, but the corresponding time on Earth will be over five thousand years. If I married, my wife would be dead at least fifty centuries before I returned. To expect her to bring up a child that would never see me. . . And if I did accept a berth on the Conqueror, I would have a guilt complex and be more of a hindrance than a help to the rest of the crew. That's why the World Government says that only single men are eligible to go."

"Five thousand years." That's when I first realized how lonely I would be.

I don't know who first said, "Parting is such sweet sorrow," but whoever did was wrong. When Jack glanced at his watch and called to me gently, "Dad, it's time for me to go," what I felt wasn't sweet. It was sharp and bitter.

I managed to stammer stupidly, "Goodbye, Son," before my emotions overwhelmed me. He gave me a half salute and got into the car. The last I saw of him was a cloud of dust, kicked up by the rear wheels of the car, rising from the weather-beaten road.

Today I'm going to open Jack's room. It no longer reminds me of my loneliness. I realize now as I should have then that this was never really his home. A man's home is where his heart is. This house was my home and my father's before me, but it was never Jack's. It was a place for him to grow in strength and knowledge, a way-station to rest in before he started on the long pilgrimage to his real home.

Now when I feel the pangs of loneliness beginning to gnaw at me, I go out on the porch, look at the stars, and wave at my son--on his way home.

SIREN'S SONG

by Gerald W. Page

It began as a tune caught in his mind, the way a small tune will sometimes catch to be played over and over again, running through a man's thoughts until it becomes tiresome.

But such tunes vanish from the mind. This one did not vanish; it grew. It took on a certain intricacy. It became vast, like a symphony. And it took on an alien quality.

The first few days he fought it without much real trouble. It bothered him, but he did not see any real problem in the annoyance. He tried to keep his mind too occupied to wander off. But with each day the tune took on new strength in his mind; it became an effort to fight it down. His realization of his own inadequacy in overcoming a small tune in his mind gave birth to fear. Fear, that he was losing his mind.

His name was Fred Corley. He worked in the accounting department of a large store, auditing payments, and he was going over a large number of invoices, checking cost against selling. He knew the job well; he had been doing it for fifteen years. The invoices were, for the most part, unlike, but the selling information was on a standard form. He had handled hundreds of invoices from most of these companies, in his fifteen years, and he could pretty easily spot a slight discrepancy if one existed. He was intent on his work. His mind functioned automatically, like a machine, with little conscious awareness of the job. Each month he had to check a selected cross-section and make out a report on his findings. He was familiar with his work in the way a man becomes after many years as he had devoted to doing the same job. He was good at it.

But the mistakes began, small. He checked an invoice against the wrong selling record, and almost did not catch it. He wrote a number down wrong and had to erase it, three times, before he got it right. Small things that he did not take seriously, at first—just as he had not taken the music. But they grew. He found himself making more mistakes, committing more serious errors, fouling up his arithmetic. Clumsily, he picked up some papers and let them slip from his hands, spilling to the floor. Agitated, he bent over to pick them up. In the back of his mind, he heard the music, softly growing louder. He realized that the music had been there for several minutes, interfering with his work. He was strangely afraid of it. He shut his eyes tightly, but the music would not go away. He tried to sort the papers out and put them back in order. His hands fumbled. He tried to get his mind back on his job, but the music softly intruded into his thoughts, making it hard for him to tear his mind from its sensuous tones. He found, closing his eyes again, and trying to think of something else, anything else. The music grew louder, and his fear produced hatred of it, but at the same time he was caught up in the narcotic tune. He found it numbing his sense, capturing his mind, binding up his will in a way that kindled his fear. But he was powerless to do more than weakly struggle.

"Corley—? You all right, Corley?"

Strangland's voice jarred through the music. For a split second, Corley was a little stunned. Then he became aware of Strangland's hand on his shoulder, shaking him firmly but gently. He became aware of the sweat streaming down his face and of the low moaning sounds he had been making. He felt his face grow hot with embarrassment and he pulled his handkerchief out to mop the wetness from his face and neck.

"I'm sorry," he said, stuttering slightly, with confusion. "I don't know what came over me -- "

Strangland's face looked worried. "Look, Corley, don't you feel well? You looked like you were having some kind of stroke there." Strangland was a tall, lanky man with straight grey hair that was thinning out. His face was pale and serious, and when he tried to sound friendly, his voice was condescending. Corley feared him.

"No, no, Mr. Strangland. Nothing like that, just. . . It's just that I've been a little under the weather of late -- "

"So we've noticed. Yes. Look, suppose you come back to my office and we can talk this over. . ."

Corley felt uneasy. He looked around and saw that people had stopped their work to stare at him. Hastily, when he looked up, they turned back to their jobs in exaggerated concentration. Corley felt his face grow warm again.

"Honestly, Mr. Strangland, I'm fine -- "

"Certainly, Corley."

"I'll be all right in a few minutes. . ."

"Well, I'd still like to have a little chat with you. It's been a while since we talked."

Corley didn't want to have a little chat, but he saw nothing he could do. "All right," he said, a little weakly, and got up to follow Strangland back to his small office. Strangland closed the door behind them, motioned Corley into a chair and sat down in the chair behind his desk. He leaned forward on his elbows and removed his glasses. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, massaging it with his fingertips.

In the minute before Strangland spoke, Corley grew uneasy and shifted his weight in the chair.

"How's your wife, these days?" Strangland asked, suddenly, startling Corley.

"Same as always," he said. He was flustered, and added quickly, "Her health is delicate, you know."

"That's what's bothering you, isn't it?"

"Bothering. . . No. I mean, no more than usual. She has a good doctor. He can't find out exactly what it is that's wrong with her, but he gives her pills and medicine that help her some. . . I don't think it's bothering me more than usual."

When Strangland spoke, he spoke with a drawl that gave him the appearance of carefully weighing each word before it was spoken. And there was something meditative about his tone, too. It made Corley feel uncomfortable. "Look," he said, "I know how it is; you have a wife sick and the medical bills have eaten into your salary checks for a long time. It's hard to keep up, I know. The medical bills, your home, car. . . I know how it can be. I don't blame you; it isn't your fault. But these past couple of weeks you've been falling down on the job a little. Your mistakes have been small and haven't added up to much, in themselves, but they've been building. You've made more mistakes than is normal. Especially from you. I don't mind saying that usually you're the most careful worker in the department."

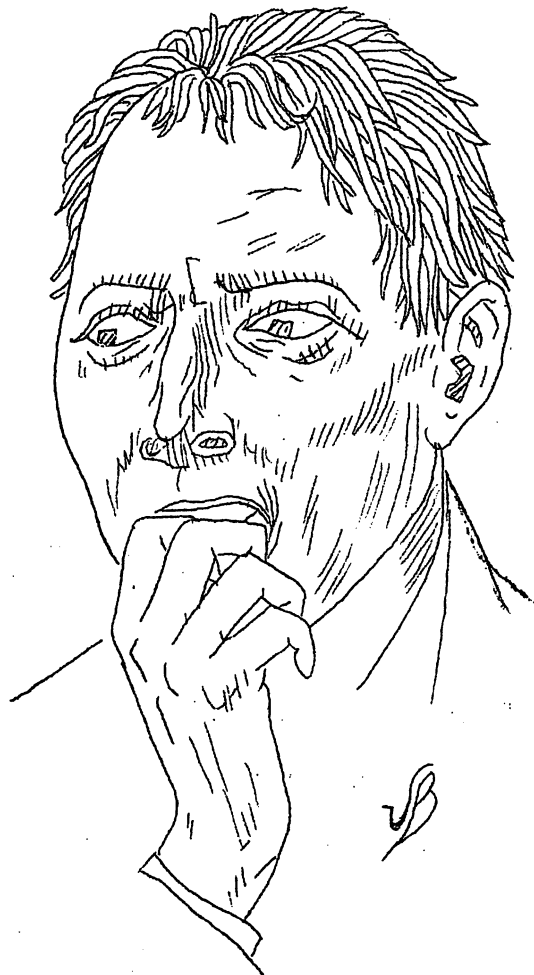
Corley said, "I don't mean to make these mistakes, Mr. Strangland -- "

"I know, I know!" I'm not trying to warn you about them. Far from it. You've been damned loyal to the company and we've a policy of being loyal to those who're loyal to us. We wouldn't fire you for a few mistakes, even if they were serious--as long as we can find a way around it." For a few seconds that seemed interminable to Corley, Strangland stared at him and nibbled on the tip of the ear-piece of his glasses. Then he continued, "Oh, look, Corley. What I'm trying to say is that we've noticed the way you've been working. You haven't taken your vacation yet and it's late in the year. You could use a rest."

Corley felt a chill touch him. "What -- I don't understand."

"A rest. You're overworked. You need to get your mind at ease, get it off the job. Take a couple of weeks and run up to the mountains and do a little fishing, maybe."

Strangland went on, but Corley didn't hear his words. Just the sound of him talking. Corley felt helpless. He didn't want to get away from the job; he didn't think he would be safe. Without something to do, he would fall victim to the music in his mind. And the fear that was not wholly a rational fear for his sanity gripped him. And another voice, nudging him from his subconscious mind, told him that there would be his wife, too. He couldn't believe that, of course, but it was there, just below the level where he admitted things to himself.



"No, no, I don't want a vacation."

Strangland glanced quickly around his small office and gestured with the hand in which he held his glasses. He spoke softly. "Corley, no, it isn't that! I know how you feel--after fifteen years of well nigh perfect attendance and doing such a good job at your work. But we aren't tossing you out or grooming you for an early retirement. We just want you to get a much needed rest so you can take on your job like your old self again."

Corley cursed himself and fought down his panic. But fear remained. He felt foolish and awkward. "I'm sorry," he said, groping. "But I mean that -- that we don't have any plans. I'd like some time -- I mean, I don't think this is very serious. . . ."

"You mean you don't want to take a vacation?" There was a faint note of disbelief in Strangland's voice.

"No, I mean that -- Well, could I have a little time to think about it? I mean, I'd have to talk with Edna."

"See? That's what I mean. You take things too seriously. Your nerves are frayed."

"Nothing is wrong with my nerves!"

Strangland stared incredulously as Corley fearfully realized that he had raised his voice. "Corley," he said, quietly, "I merely think that a rest would get you settled. I think you need one. Now you talk it over with your wife and we'll discuss this again, tomorrow say."

"Tomor -- Very well, Mr. Strangland, tomorrow, then."

For the rest of the day, Corley sat at his desk, hearing the music over and over in his mind. He had to fight against the music and against himself. There was an urge in him to run. An urge to run, and another to scream for help. But when he would look up from his desk, he would see someone's eyes, darting guiltily away, and he was unable to ask anyone for help. His fear was almost a tangible lump of molten steel in his breast. His handkerchief became soaking wet from wiping sweat from his face. He couldn't concentrate. He made mistakes.

He did not complete his report that day.

He went home. He entered his house quietly and closed the door behind him, holding it firmly so that it would not creak or slam and startle Edna, who did not like loud noises. In his mind the music was a narcotic melody that moved undulantly like the waves of the sea. It hinted of a deep emotional well that Corley had never consciously suspected; one that gushed forth like a geyser to put an end to loneliness and longing, and to fill a man's desires. The music was soft like the whisper of wind among tall, graceful trees, full with spring foliage. It tore at his soul.

"Fred?"

For a brief moment his mind was jerked away from thoughts of the music. He stood rigid, just inside the door, his hat in his hand. He was back in the real world now, for a time at least. He had been almost drawn away from it by an unearthly beautiful music; but he had been drawn back by a self-indulgent whining voice.

"Yes, Edna, I'm home." He crossed tiredly to the hall closet, and put his hat and coat up.

He went into the living room, where Edna was on the couch. There was a sickly pallor to her skin.

"I'm glad you're back," she said. "My back has been hurting me so, today. I haven't been able to move around." There was a slight pause. "That doctor was here again."

"Hirnloss?"

"Yes. He can't find anything wrong with my back. And he was smart about it, as if he didn't believe anything was wrong! Fred, he doesn't believe me. I want Dr. Lawlor again."

"He's out of town on his vacation. You know that."

"But Fred, I'm sick. And I need a doctor who cares about his patients, not some inhuman machine." She stared at her husband dolefully, waiting for his reply. He was thinking that Lawlor was a very expensive doctor who catered to matrons, most of them as indulgent as Edna--though that wasn't the way he put it--and most of them wealthier. But Fred Corley didn't want to mention doctor's bills to his wife; she would say nothing, but her iciness, and her small, skillful ways would plainly put him in his place. Her small ways were more painful than trying to make ends meet could ever be. "Well, Fred?"

"What--? Oh, I'll see about Dr. Lawlor. Tomorrow morning, first thing. I'll call his office and ask about him."

"Thank you, Fred." But she looked at him in a way that said she was certain he would forget. She closed her eyes, as if with unbearable pain. "Fred, fix my pillow for me, will you?"

Obediently, he straightened her pillow behind her back.

-oOo-

At nine he obediently helped her to bed. She always went to bed at nine, because she wanted to conserve her strength. And he went, too, to another twin bed, next to hers. If he stayed up, she would nervously call out to him every fifteen minutes, to ask when he was coming; and she would complain about being unable to sleep because of his reading light, or small noises she claimed he made. It simplified his life to go to bed at nine.

But tonight he could not sleep.

For a while he lay there in bed, his body aching with fatigue, his nerves begging for the relaxation of a night's sleep. But slowly he became aware of the music insinuating itself into his mind. It was a lullabye now, soothing, restful, coaxing him to sleep. Oh, how he needed the soft ministrations of a quiet sleep. But terror, like the prick of a small pin, lightly jabbed his consciousness. And it grew from pin-prick to sabre-thrust. He stayed, eyes wide, into the yawning blackness of night. The music was like the distant, longing plea of a violin.

But it was not the music of a violin, but of the mind and nerves. It spoke to him of the night and of the longing that is in the souls of men and can only be answered by release from that which binds their souls; it was soothing--and lulling. But also it was somehow lonely in a way that Fred could never be for all his self pity. It was like something made by a creature lost in a void vaster than time or space or the black, oppressive night Fred Corley was staring at.

He found himself shivering, as if he were standing naked on a wind-swept plain.

He swung his feet from under the covers and sat up, gripping the edge of his bed with his hands. He was struggling with himself to keep from crying out like a lost child. He was wet with the perspiration that streamed over him like warm rain. The floor was cold against his bare feet. He fought to control his heavy breathing, but it still came in gasps. He groped with one hand to find the bedside table and his cigarettes. They were the only vice he allowed himself, and the only symbol of that rebellion he had secretly wanted to bring himself to for so many years. He found them and a book of matches. Fumblingly, he extricated a cigarette from the pack. He tore a match loose and struck it against the grain on the match book. On the third try it flared, briefly coloring the room with orange light. He heard the expected rustle of sheets in the other bed, and the low, complaining groan.

"Fred, are you smoking?"

"Yes," he said, taking the cigarette from his mouth.

"You just don't care," she said. "You know how cigarette smoke makes me sick. I get nauseated, Fred. You know it isn't good for me." Sometimes when he came home she would complain of smelling the smoke from his day's cigarettes on his clothes.

He looked at the glowing cigarette tip and wanted to stand up and turn on her; to speak in a snarling, unremorseful tone and tell her, Go on and die--it would do us both good! But he just sat there, holding it within himself, like the music. And like the music it did something to him which was not good. He could never admit to himself that she was not really ill. That failure was what kept him where he was. Instead of telling her how he felt, he rose slowly and said, "I'll go for a walk."

"And what will I do if some prowler comes around to kill me in my bed?"

"No prowler will come."

"You wouldn't care if one did. You're just waiting for one to come and kill me!"

He picked up his clothes and left the room, closing the door on her words.

He dressed in the hallway and went outside. It was a night in late summer, warm but not hot. There was a soft willowy breeze that felt good on his perspiring face. He liked nights like this. The wind felt to him like a woman's hand, caressing his face and shoulders. The stars were sharp points of light in a clear sky. The moon was full and just rising above the trees that bordered the street. He went on walks like this only when the need to do something was strong with him. He would return home from these walks refreshed and no longer feeling caged.

He should walk more often, and he resolved to himself to do so in the future. He felt relaxed as he walked slowly along the sidewalks. He had almost forgotten the music.

But it was there.

Like the wind it was soft and caressed his senses like the touch of a woman's hand. It had been so long since he had felt a hand this soft. The music undulated and grew, but not greatly in volume. It was more tangible than a melody should be in a man's thoughts. It was restive, passionate, and underneath it was a harmonic lonely melody that filled his soul and numbed his senses.



A voice in him somewhere cried out in warning, but he didn't care. The music was in tune with his senses, with his physical being, and with something deeper. He would not let fear drive him back to Edna when there was this.

This! Something promised him by the music; something deep and secret and undying, like the cold flame of an imperishable gem. He breathed deeply and it seemed to him that he was running, although he had lost contact with his surroundings. He gave himself over to the music that only he could hear. And with a sudden rush, it possessed him and for a moment he was lifted to a height he had never known before. And something filled him he had never known before, and the ecstasy of it welled inside him. For a moment he was one with the universe, and it was good --

His eyes opened.

The music had receded, like the sea pulling back from a beach after a wave. He was not standing on the beach where he had been. He was standing on the edge of a field, just outside the city. He was dizzy but not with nausea. Rather, he was dizzy with ecstasy. He was shaking with it.

The music was in the distance, now. He was watching something in the middle of the field. A light -- a whirlwind of softly bright, yellow light, filled with flickering points of white brightness like the stars he had seen in the sky. There was something else, too. Something he could not really make out through the bright whirling veil. He realized that he could never have resisted the music, despite his fear. For its source was that lithe, feline form inside the light. He stared at it--at her--and he was a supplicant before some ancient goddess. Doubt fled, for doubt would be sacrilege. This was something vast and limitless, something that towered above the limits of man's philosophies. He had only to go to it and he would be rid of all that had made his life misery. That was what the music had been --the call of this goddess, to him. The call to an ecstatic consummation that he could only find in that light.

A movement on the other side of the field caught his eye. Another man was walking toward the light. His steps were halting, uncertain, like those of a cripple, struggling his way to a magic source of healing. Corley watched the man move his way toward the thing that stood in the center of the field, saw the man approach the light with outstretched arms and stop. Then, with a sudden leap, the man hurled himself into it.

Excitement fired Corley's blood and he took a step forward. He heard the music rising in a new crescendo and he stopped. He stared at the light and heard a new mad sound blending with the music. Not believing his senses, he saw the man being rent apart by the thing in the light and heard the agonized screaming that blended in with the shrill, mad singing in his mind.

The thing was devouring the man. Madly, Corley realized that that was what the thing was after all along--food.

He started screaming himself.

He turned and ran wildly. He fell and picked himself up and ran again like a man pursued by demons. He ran babbling with fear, his reason temporarily fled. He ran and ran until at last he could run no farther. He fell to the sidewalk and sobbed with agonized terror.

When his senses returned he found himself in front of his own house. He was still trembling. He got to his feet and stumblingly walked up to the door and let himself in. He closed the door and locked it. He leaned against it. From the bedroom he heard Edna's whining voice call out to him; "Fred, are you back? Fred--is that you?"

His heart sank and he answered, "Yes."

"You sound out of breath," There was a pause. Then he heard, "Fred, go to the bathroom and get my medicine. I feel like I'm going to be sick."

He clinched his teeth, bitterly. "Fred, did you hear me?"

"Yes," he answered, dully. He started to the bathroom where the medicine was. As he passed the door to their room, he heard her low moan, just as she had intended him to. He hated her now more than before. He knew that he would have to find a way free or go mad. But he quickly forced the thought from his mind.

He was almost to the bathroom when he stopped. He almost cried out. Something cold began forming in his stomach. The music was starting again.

It was the most seductive sound he had ever heard. . .

SURPRISE

PARTY

by

R. Dennis Miller

All among them were hushed and tense. Their low whispers sounded over the murmur of the autumn breeze.

"It is nearly time," said the First One.

"Yes," replied the Second.

A vague, indistinguishable unease gripped the surroundings. One of Them made a shuffling sound. The tall, brown clumps of crab grass hissed as they swayed monotonously in the crisp wind.

"When will he arrive?" queried the First.

"No one knows," replied the Second.

Beyond the iron picketed fence, the old willow tree was silhouetted eerily against the large orange hunter's moon. From far off in the night a lone dog bayed mournfully at the sky and twinkling stars.

"Tonight is Jedediah's birthday," said one.

"Harken, He stirs!" said another.

"Quiet all," whispered the First.

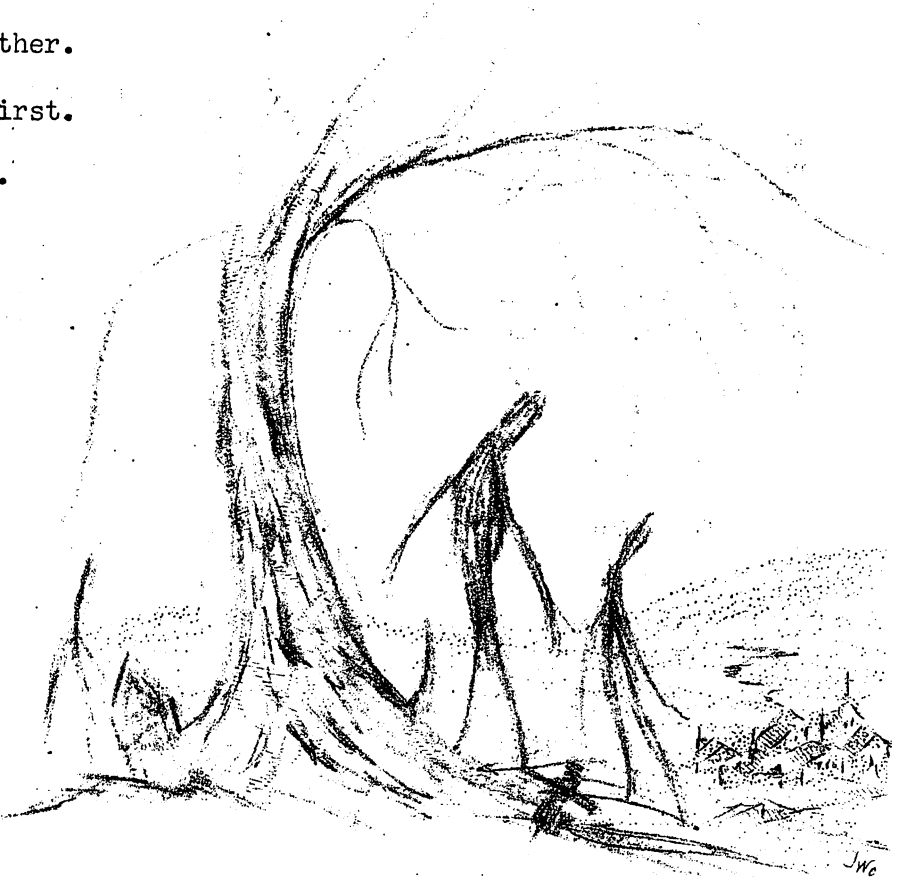
"It is a great night for him.
Jedediah is the oldest among us."

"Silence, ye fools!"

A lone wagon hurried by, creaking discordantly beneath the weight of some massive burden. The horse whinnied and its driver, cursing, urged it onward.

"He shall be here in a short while for I hear him clearly now. He is fully awake."

"Everyone take his place!"



The wind, increasing audibly, darted like a great invisible spectre through the nooks and crannies of the great stone church. A loosened shutter swung to and fro on hinges long unoiled, squeaking out some ageless rhythm. A lone bat flapped from the great belfry above. Cattails, in a nearby pond, thumped together, mimicking the pulsing beat of a heart.

The wind rose to a muffled shriek, then dropped to an unstable murmur.

"I hear him stirring about."

One of Them giggled. "Won't he be surprised?"

"Birthdays are exciting!"

Dry leaves pattered along the rough dirt road outside. Crickets chirped from the underbrush, adding a shrill note to the night sounds. A bullfrog croaked hoarsely from a lily pad in the pond near the willow tree. The odd cacophonous melody grew strangely and added to the tension.

"Hark, He comes!"

"Everyone be silent!"

"Tonight Jedediah is 250 years old," said one of the overly excited group.

"He is close! Sh-h-h-h."

The wind held its breath. The crickets stopped abruptly. The bullfrog splashed back into the murky water of the pond, splintering the reflected moon into a thousand tiny, saffron crystals.

"All together everyone!"

"Surprise!" They all cried in unison.

Above, the wind resumed its game, as the voices faded away into stillness. The breeze ran and hid and ran again among the crumbling headstones. The ancient graveyard was silent. Below the hill a light was extinguished in a house and the sleepy village became as silent as the night.

THE NATIONAL FANTASY FAN FEDERATION is sponsor and endorser of many projects similar to the Story Contests in that they encourage science-fiction fans everywhere to engage in activities which the individual could not perform. Round-robin correspondence, tape-recording correspondence and exchanging, fanzine publishing and hospitality rooms at the annual convention are only examples of many available forms of fan activity. For more information, write to Janie Lamb, Route 1, Box 364, Heiskell, Tennessee. Dues are \$2. initially, \$1.75 annually thereafter.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped out of the car was the heat. It was a sticky, oppressive heat that seemed to wrap around me. I had heard that the weather in the South was terrible, but I didn't realize it would be so intense. The sun was beating down on me, and I could feel my skin starting to sweat. I took a deep breath and tried to ignore the heat. I was here to do a job, and I had to get used to the conditions. I looked around and saw that the landscape was flat and open. There were no trees or hills in sight. Just a vast, empty plain stretching out to the horizon. I felt a little lost, but I knew I had to keep going. I walked a few steps and then stopped. I was thirsty, and I needed to find some water. I looked around and saw a small stream in the distance. I walked towards it and found some water. I took a drink and felt a little better. I continued on my way, trying to ignore the heat and the dryness of the air. I was determined to do this job, no matter what.

I was a little out of breath when I reached the stream. I had never been so hot before. I took a drink and felt a little better. I continued on my way, trying to ignore the heat and the dryness of the air. I was determined to do this job, no matter what.

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