

## PEACOCK FEATHERS

I

Seen by an eagle, Acron is another town, a hive of buildings, a web of roads, clustered by the lakeside in a star shape, its inland pentacles stretching to traces of farmland and woodland still live and green but not for long.

Seen by an earthworm, Acron is humus and silt and the forbidding, man-made stoniness of asphalt, brick and concrete, a blighted terrain with only the occasional broad lawns of some old homes and the tiny garden plots of residential real estate developments to offer any vermicular charm.

Somewhere between worm and eagle, the town ragpicker inspected Acron as he made his way down Main Street. No one knew the town more thoroughly, no one saw less of it. His eye registered and relayed to his brain the precise and irreducible minimum necessary to his magpie calling, shunning temptations to elaborate or explain.

There were more people than usual at the head of the Town Square today and this could only mean and mean only that there might be interesting pickings later. His

eye noted discarded ends of red, green and bright yellow wire near some kind of electrical truck. Possibly interesting pickings indeed, but later. He gave a scarecrow hop and skip down an alleyway and left the square to its crowd.

Here is the Town Hall, here is the steeple, open the doors and here are the people. The doors were revolving doors, etching a spiral sign of Yang and Yin into the granite floor, and the people were divided into those who were part of the celebration and those few the ragpicker had noticed gathered on the street outside, clumped indolently behind trestles supervised by good-natured local policemen, to catch a glimpse of the celebrants.

The Town Hall of Acron was where the luncheon to celebrate the seventieth birthday of the Green Twins was taking place, although for the purposes of our story we may ignore the official reasons and consider the whole occasion designed so that Jerry might catch a glimpse of Mimosa.

Jerry hadn't even noticed Mimosa during the luncheon ritual within the Town Hall. His sense of the ridiculous had been too fully occupied by the speeches of the Mayor, who really didn't know one Green Twin from the other, and by the flowery tributes from elder citizens of Acron. "It's like 'This Is Your Life' come

for true!" Melvina, the colored seamstress like him in residence at Alma Blake's, had murmured in Jerry's right ear as she made an appreciative attack on the jellied consommé. In his left ear was Chris, another unrelated member of the Blake household, always on the verge of some adolescent explosion, busy through the meal with wild comments on Thelma Fahnstock, who strained with dignity to keep her fork from dangerous entanglement in her lorgnette and from the string of pearls that hung and swung almost to her waist.

Jerry sat in the middle of Alma's group, a clear-faced, tousle-haired youth in his early twenties, neat in a dark-blue, summer-weight suit, someone to be passed over as almost too tritely Young America Male until the eye found itself tugged back by an irreverent twist in his lip, an extra firmness to his jaw line, a seeking quality in his stance that all added up to a need for reassessment and more thoughtful study. And this second-showing could reveal a Jerry tautly muscled to belie his boyish slightness, a Jerry wildly buoyant and raffish in sudden enthusiasms yet sometimes stammeringly shy for causes closest to his heart. Little girls with lollipops and old ladies in invalid chairs and most of their sisters in between liked Jerry at First glance. Jerry usually returned their liking cheerfully because he was as unaware of it as sunlight.

Once he had shoved to the back of his mind the guilt at taking the time off from work, Jerry enjoyed every bit of the luncheon, from food to the equally delicious minutiae of overheard conversations. There was enough for his attention without searching out Mimosa, the quiet girl almost hidden between her brother and the maid, far down at the end of the long table.

Alma Blake sat at one end of the table and Thelma Fahnstock at the other, and both of them rose to acknowledge toasts and tributes and both of them accepted bouquets politely and neither looked directly at the other because, although Alma and Thelma were the celebrated Green Twins, linked by illustrious family past to the history of Acron unto the First stirrings of the republic, they had less to do with each other than the Mayor himself and the town ragpicker.

The Mayor at least accepted the ragpicker as a furtive and harmless but integral part of Acron like the weathervane on top of the Congregational Church or the asphalt patching on the sidewalk in front of the post office. Thelma could never accept the fact that a sister of hers, a Green, lived in a real estate subdivision and clerked in a supermarket for a living. Alma could never accept the fact that a sister of hers remained by choice removed from everything in life that was fun, removed from contact with people and

noise and color and excitement.

On their rare chance meetings in public, Alma would usually freeze her round and merry face into a caricature of Thelma's frowning mask, and Thelma, without changing pace in her dowager's waddle, would steady herself with a clasp at the smelling salts in her black velour handbag.

With these two officiating at a joint and public celebration of their birthday, it is not to be wondered that Jerry had little chance to notice Mimosa until the party moved outside.

The Mayor had ducked out First, excusing himself from the table with a coy explanation that "Things have to be checked out and finalized with The Television Boys."

"'This Is Your Life', I told you," Melvina whispered to Jerry.

"Boy, what a phony," Chris contributed.

"I suppose we're to go First," Alma Blake said. Andrew got up to hold out her chair as she rose. She bobbed a round half-curtsey to the table in general and scooped up the bouquet by her place as she led the way to the revolving doors.

Outside, the mayor beamed professional fellowship at the bored television crew and chanted "One, two, three, testing" into the microphone whose cord coiled serpentine and threatening down the stone steps out through the knotted curious on the sidewalk

to the sound truck.

"A great occasion," the Mayor whispered from his notes, and then trailed the cord along toward the door as its swinging winked a glassy signal of action.

Alma interrupted the twinkle of the door, appearing as if ejected from a high altitude jet, bouquet clutched to her breast giving her a floral montage in place of a face.

The Mayor huffed into the microphone in surprise and then borrowed the unctuous tones of a television MC.

"Just a minute, honey. The flowers hide you." He pushed Alma's bouquet lower to show both her features and her own long strand of pearls that matched Thelma's.

"Let's try it just once again."

Alma smiled him the smile she gave to stray dogs and encyclopedia salesmen and spun back through the door.

"Can we cut that out of the tape?" the Mayor asked a moody television expert from the local station.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry."

Alma completed her circuit again.

"Roll it!" cried the Mayor, feeling the snug official fit of invisible puttees. "Roll it!"

Technicians pressed buttons scornfully.

"Folks, this is one of the Green Sisters here, the Green Twins," the Mayor looked hopefully at his notes. "This one should be . . . Mrs.. Blake. Are you the eldest, my dear?"

"I'm several minutes younger than my sister."

It took a few moments of confusion for the rest of Alma's household to collect around her at one side of the steps. Jerry and Melvina and Chris, and Andrew and Joanna and Luke. It took more moments of confusion for the Mayor to be assured by Alma that "Yes, they are all my family. Aren't they grand?" and "No, Chris isn't my real grandson. No, nobody's related to me, but goodness everybody knows my Jo, and my Melvina!" To Alma warmly, freely Mine was everything and everybody that lived under or near her roof. "My Andrew, My Jerry, My Luke."

"And Mr. Blake?" asked the Mayor

"Now you know Mr. Blake is an invalid and couldn't come, Mr. Mayor. This is Mr. Antoine, a very dear friend of the family. We couldn't have a celebration without Mr. Antoine!"

"The Mayor wiped his brow and went back to his script.

"Now this wonderful group is the family, the friends that is of Alma Blake. Are they all here, honey?"

"Yes, we're all here now. Where's Thelma?"

The Mayor made elaborate signals toward the

revolving door and in obedient response it swung and ejected Raoul Fahnstock, Thelma's grandson, a fussy, fat, fidgety youth who could have been anywhere from twenty to thirty, encased in an ancient Norfolk jacket that clung to his vast midriff like a woolen sausage skin. Raoul hurried to the Mayor's side in agitated bounces and whispered in his ear.

Alma and all her household, neatly arranged at their side of the steps, seemed to have been changed from part of the celebration to just another group of spectators. Like the crowd on the pavement, they gazed hopefully from Mayor and Raoul to the now stationary doors. Andrew tickled the ears of the puppy he had insisted on taking with him. "Easy, girl. It'll all be over soon and you'll get back to Momma. "

"That old Mrs. Fahnstock's a-scared to come out, I bet," Chris confided to Jerry.

"She is scared," Alma agreed and turned to Antoine in a moment's flood of sisterly charity. "Why don't you see if you can do something, Antoine. You know how she hates this kind of thing, and she'd never listen to me . . . "

"The whole thing was a mistake," Mr. Antoine muttered. "If people would only follow their stars . . . " But he bobbed a nod at Alma and set off for the revolving door through the glass of which now darkly could be seen an agitated milling of shadowy human shapes.



"Something seems to be holding up Mrs. Fahnstock, our other beloved Twin," the Mayor said to his microphone. "She'll be right along though with her granddaughter and grandson. That was her grandson that just went back in with Mr. Antoine. That was Rool Slade, his name is."

"Raoul!" hissed Alma.

"Raw-ool! Raw-ool!" hissed Chris and Jo, turning the name into a banshee wail, both delighted at having found something to do.

"Some Mayor, can't even pronounce old Raoul!" Chris told Jerry.

Jerry was growing too bored even to laugh. The novelty of the luncheon had worn off. He looked at the door only hoping that all the crazy Fahnstocks would hurry out and get the business over with so he could get back to his work. The job was simple and all laid out -- finishing the First story frame of a new Colonial-type house -- but a fat lot of work would get done without him and Luke.

And then he saw her.

First Raoul came out again, now holding a hatbox, and after him, in a costume borrowed from the illustrations in a tattered copy of The Motor Boys, starched middy blouse and a flat straw boater perched on lavish puffs of hair (Barbara LaMarr? Beverly Bayne?), came a great-eyed girl so beautiful that Jerry's laugh

stopped halfway in his throat.

There was just that flash of Mimosa before she disappeared again, making a full round of the door, but Jerry's gaze was fully focused now.

When she reappeared with Thelma, Jerry didn't even hear Chris's sarcastic asides or the Mayor's recovered commentary with delighted stress on the true pronunciation of Raoul.

"Now here we are. Good afternoon, Mrs. Fahnstock!"

"Good afternoon." Grudgingly.

"And this is your granddaughter, is it not? Good, afternoon, Miss Mimosa."

This is Mimosa. This is the girl nobody ever sees, the girl you only heard about as a kind of family joke -- sad joke, Alma shaking her head disapprovingly -- the granddaughter kept close in the upper floor of some towering Fahnstock castle, daughter of Thelma's actress daughter, faceless and formless hidden away. But she's beautiful! Even in that low-comedy costume, she's beautiful!

And Jerry sssshed Chris impatiently.

"We've already met Raoul. And who is this charming lady?"

"That?" Thelma sniffed. "That's Veronica, my maid."

"How do you do, Veronica.

"How do you do." Veronica, ruffled and grotesque in party finery, returned the Mayor's greeting absently. To her the celebration was an opportunity to peer at Andrew at close Quarters, to savor the football player's shoulders she only glimpsed when he delivered the milk. "What a man!" had been the expression of her hopeful girlhood and it fitted Andrew like a T-shirt to a T.

"Just my maid," Thelma repeated to herself for strength and reassurance. It was terrible, being out here on the sunbright steps with all these people gawking. Bad enough inside at the luncheon, but some illusion of privacy. This was too frightening, too much to ask of sensitive nerves. But they'd soon be home.

"My Veronica, my Mimosa, my Raoul," she whispered to herself. Hotly, privately, hoardedly Mine was everything to do with Thelma, possessions and people, human beads carefully to be counted and recounted to be certain they all remained in their proper pigeon-holes.

The crowd giggled at a moment's interlude when the Mayor tried to interview a tourist couple who had no connection with the Green Twins.

"Man, what a cube!" " Chris said.

The two groups shifted uneasily at either side of the steps. Jerry remained as still as a pointer

staring at Mimosa, even his carpentry forgotten. Andrew soothed his puppy oblivious to Veronica's devotion. Raoul fidgeted. Mr. Antoine divided his nervous attention between the two groups.

Mimosa, of all the participants, was probably the most naturally happy and excited, staring at every face in the crowd, blinking her great eyes cheerfully in the sunlight, breathing in not merely air but every impression about her. So this was The World! It was so much more colorful, so much more full of light and darkness and movement than she could ever have imagined from the scenery Raoul had painted for her rooms. So many more people all with quite different faces! So many new smells and shapes and sensations! Her beatific smile was for The World, but Jerry took it for his own.

Thelma leaned on Veronica for support. It couldn't last much longer and These People wouldn't expect another public appearance from her until she was 80, a good ten years to store up strength and inner resources. She must ask Mr. Antoine if he thought Yoga might be helpful . . .

It is fun, Alma thought, smiling back at the chubby toddler who was making faces at the TV camera, a child she was sure she'd seen with his mother in the supermarket. If anything happened to his parents, Lord forbid, Alma would adore to take him. in. There was the room above the kitchen, or he could go in the garage

with Joanna. No problem there. What fun to have the whole town remember one's birthday! She looked proudly around her at Andrew and Jerry and Jo and Chris and Luke and Melvina. Such a shame that Don's arthritis had to act up this week. Maybe he'd feel better for the 80th birthday. There was something to look forward to! She waved at one of the store delivery boys in the crowd and caught the stiff image of Thelma in the corner of her eye. Poor old stick-in-the-mud.

"Now, before we break up," the Mayor was saying, "we have to get a picture of you two charming ladies together on this happy occasion. Mrs. Blake? Mrs. Fahnstock?"

Thelma began an automatic retreat as Alma bobbed obligingly forward.

"Come now, Mrs. Fahnstock. It will only take a second and the Acron Times wants to record this event for posterity in its files."

Veronica, Raoul and Mimosa clustered around Thelma, and Paul, the Fahnstock chauffeur, joined the conference before she could be persuaded to move next to Alma.

"Look at him in a suit!" Veronica crowed to Paul and pointed at Andrew. "Busting right out of it with muscle."

"You're a spectacle!" Paul said primly, pushing her pointing hand back to her side.

A photographer from the Times crouched for a flash shot of the Twins and Chris ducked down beside him to get some pictures with his Polaroid.

Thelma and Alma stood obediently still as in days when they had posed for cameras less sophisticated. Although they had not discussed the luncheon before, their Edwardian dresses were almost identical, both wore the same long strings of pearls, both had hats that might have been rifled from the wardrobe of England's late Queen Mary. Only their expressions set them apart -- Alma still beaming, Thelma rigid and affronted her eyes closed tight against the threat of the flash.

"That's it, folks!" said the Mayor

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Alma said.

"I thought it was a perfectly terrible ordeal," Thelma said, moving quickly back to the protection of her circle.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Fahnstock," the Mayor cried after her. "You were so nice to let us do this little program. A bit of town history. I hope it hasn't . . ."

Thelma turned and stopped his speech with one indignant glance.

Veronica was waiting for her with the hatbox she had taken from Raoul. Thelma stood still while Veronica removed her hat, placed it in the box and covered her head with a vast veil. Thelma's one girlish gesture

was holding her pearls in her teeth so that the veil could fall properly into position and remove her none too soon from the glare of the world.

The crowd around the steps began to break up.

Mr. Antoine gave Alma an affectionate farewell hand-squeeze before responding to a beckoning from Thelma.

"I hate to admit it," Thelma told him, still speaking through a mouth half-full of pearls, "but I should have listened to you."

"Not to me, Mrs. Fahnstock," Mr. Antoine said sincerely. "To the stars. They said you two should never have come together today. Perhaps inside at opposite ends of the table was all right, but this business on the steps!"

"Well, I admitted you were right, didn't I?" Thelma said. "You said it would be bad and I've suffered and that's all there is to it."

"If that were all . . ." Mr. Antoine almost sighed. "The stars threatened more than this momentary discomfort of yours, Mrs. Fahnstock. Much more, I'm afraid, but I'll have to work it out on the charts."

"Momentary discomfort!" Thelma was indignant again. "If you knew how I suffered. And more! What more could there be? Paul!"

The chauffeur took one arm and Veronica the other, escorting her to the high old Cadillac town car

at the curb. Raoul had to take Mimosa by the elbow. She could have stayed on the steps drinking in sound and color and life forever.

"She's cute, huh?" Chris said to Jerry. "That Mimosa, not Mrs. Fahnstock, hah!"

"More than cute," Jerry said. "Why haven't we ever seen her?"

"Come on, Jerry!" Joanna motioned toward the jeep. "I'll play you gin when we get home." She tugged a little anxiously at Jerry's shoulder as he continued to watch the departure of the Fahnstock entourage.

"You know," Alma told Andrew, "I don't like my hat a bit more than she likes hers." With very deliberate gestures, Alma unpinned her hat and held it for a hostile inspection. "Not one teensy bit more!"

Her whole round face suddenly lightened with the sly smile of a three-year-old discovering mischief. She took the hat in one hand and swung her arm back like an Olympic discus thrower. "There!"

Alma let her arm swing forward and the hat sailed aloft to the delighted squeal of the toddler who was still watching her. Alma gave him an impish wink of fellowship.

Air currents caught the hat and carried it high, up over the Town Hall, past other buildings,



circling and soaring blocks away to come to rest in an alleyway between two office buildings.

The town ragpicker saw it land like an ornate gift from the sky gods. He moved toward it almost unable to believe his luck and stared a full minute before he picked it up.

It wasn't every day you found something like this. He looked up and down the street to make sure there was no one who might interfere, jealous of his own good fortune. This was far beyond the scraps of colored wire he'd looked forward to. This could go with the plastic toys and the wonderful string of paperclips in a place of honor in his present hoard.

People were coming!

The crowd was breaking up from that celebration of whatever it was at the Town Hall.

He bent swiftly and furtively, picked up the hat and folded it as best he could to fit beneath his arm as he walked away hurriedly and a little wobbly with pleasure.

## II

Once, when Paul had been parking the old Cadillac in front of Mr. Antoine's Beauty Salon, a man, a perfect stranger, had come up to Thelma and tried to offer her five thousand dollars for what he said was a Classic Car "in perfect operating condition." Thelma had struck him one sharp blow with her umbrella before he made good his escape. It was merely his rudeness and effrontery that had enraged her, not his label for the limousine.

Of course it was a Classic Car and had been one from the day of its purchase in 1916. Just as the Fahnstock residence, Marchmont, was a Classic Home, re-enforced concrete poured for eternal security into the mold of an Eleventh Century Castle. Just as Veronica was a Classic Maidservant and Paul a Classic Chauffer and Steadman a Classic Butler. Raoul was on his way to being a Classic Grandson and Mimosa, with just a few years more of careful supervision, would be a Classic Granddaughter.

Settled classically herself in the rear seat of the Cadillac, Thelma inhaled her smelling salts and spoke sharply through the tube that connected with the front seat compartment.

"Let's not poke along, Paul. I've got a splitting headache and I want to get home to Marchmont and decency as soon as possible."

"Yes, Ma' am," Paul said into the tube, and to himself, "I'll rev her up to an Indianapolis Speedway thirty!" The Cadillac snorted and shivered and rattled in protest.

Mimosa sat almost squashed out of sight in the middle of the rear seat between her grandmother and Raoul. Thelma returned the smelling salts to Veronica, perched cramped on a jump seat, and fanned herself with a handkerchief.

"Poor Grandmother!" Raoul said. "I can't see what possible interest the public could have in a purely family event like this. Even if Aunt Alma did go along with it all . . . You know, Aunt Alma is funny . . . "

"Your Aunt Alma is a goose!" Thelma said. A silly goose who has forgotten that she comes from a family of swans. I should have listened to Monsieur Antoine."

"He told you not to see her today?"

"Well, seeing her would have been all right, but we shouldn't have come together. That foolish Mayor and his photograph, that's what upset everything."

"But I thought it was fun!" Mimosa wriggled her shoulders forward to let her voice come out from between Thelma and Raoul. "Nothing bad happened."

"Nothing bad?" Thelma groaned. "If you had my headache, child, you wouldn't say that. And besides, we don't know what else may come of it. Monsieur Antoine's going to ask the stars all about it."

"Did you see her throw her hat away?" Raoul asked.

Mimosa's laughter made both Raoul and Thelma shake with her.

"Alma threw her hat?" Thelma asked.

"Yes, she did," Raoul said in the satisfied tones of a small boy telling Teacher on a classmate. "Just as we were leaving, she threw it away right in front of everybody."

"It sailed," Mimosa said. "It sailed high, as high as houses!"

"Disgusting!" Thelma said. "A perfectly good hat, too. And she works, you know. I can't afford to throw hats away. And when people see Alma do things like that, they think I'm eccentric!"

"Oh, look!" Raoul cried. "Paul, stop!"

Look! Look!"

All eyes followed his to the roadside ahead where three cars assumed distorted angles, one half in the ditch, another defying gravity halfway up the bank. A scatter of bodies lay about the cars, wisps of smoke curling among them, a child sprawled like an abandoned rag doll was almost in the road itself.

"Oh, those poor people!" Veronica wailed.

"Drive on, Paul! Drive directly on!" Thelma gasped into the tube. "There's nothing we can do. Let's not get mixed up in this. There'll be police along in a minute. The salts, Veronica!"

"But what is it?" Mimosa asked, trying to look back as Raoul pulled down the rear window curtain.

"The side windows, too, Raoul," Thelma said., "Oh, my head! Oh, to be safe at Marchmont! The way people drive today, every common nobby with a car and all probably smoking that marijuana in the newspapers!"

They made the last five minutes of the drive home safely closed in from the dangerous outside world. It took both Veronica and Paul to help Thelma up the stairs to the vast pillared front porch of Marchmont.

Steadman, a worried Gothic saint in butler's livery, was waiting at the front door. Wei, the Chinese cook, peered out behind him.

"Madame is so pale!" Steadman said, moving to

help Paul and Veronica.

"I've every right to be pale," Thelma said. "A shocking exhibition at the Town Hall, a shocking day altogether, and then all of us almost slaughtered like sheep on the highway. Don't just stand there with your mouth open, Steadman. Help me off with my things."

Steadman and Veronica helped with coats and veils and scarves, as Thelma stood angrily on the front porch of Marchmont, high above the town the house had once dominated, the town that now reached next door and beyond, and left Thelma Fahnstock and Marchmont, defiant bits of the 19th Century, marooned in the callous encroachment of the 20th.

Thelma Fahnstock and Alma Blake might be the Green Twins in genetic fact, but Thelma Fahnstock was The Green Twin in glory and tradition. It was Thelma who kept and lived in the old house built before the fatal turn of the century by their father, the Green of long-defunct Green Smelting. It was Thelma who had held and increased the comfortable fortune Father Green had handed on, and added to it the estate of her husband Mr. Fahnstock when he died, and added to all this the considerable assets of her late daughter, the ever-to-be-remembered May Green of stage and silent screen. It was Thelma who kept the image of Green pride and wealth and importance alive in these parlous shallow

modern times.

The town might trot out Alma Blake from her development house full of rag-bag familiars and a chronically ill and unemployable husband for ceremonial occasions, but in the months and years between, what was Alma but another plump Acron matron in a flowered house-dress, sinking into the morass of squalor that passed for life today? It was Thelma who upheld the ancient banners that stood for something.

All this Thelma felt, between the throbs of her migraine, as she stood there on the porch of Marchmont with Veronica and Steadman peeling off layers of her ornate cocoon, handmaiden and gentleman-of-the-bedchamber, she half thought, until the hideous thing happened.

Raoul and Mimosa were not yet up the porch stairs. Veronica was taking off a coat and Steadman trying to remove a veil when Thelma was aware of danger.

"Watch out for my pearls! They're in the veil, Steadman! Veronica, they're caught!"

There was the tiny snap of the string and then the pitiful rainfall of pearl after priceless pearl droning onto the concrete of the porch, pattering down the stairs and into the grass below.

"Don't step on them!" Thelma cried. "No one move! Be careful! It's worse than Monsieur Antoine

could have known!"

"You, Steadman!" cried Veronica.

"I didn't do it!" Steadman pouted.

"I suppose you'll be blaming Mrs. Fahnstock next," Veronica said.

"Oh, heavens! Poor Grandmother!" Raoul made a wide detour to come up behind Thelma. Mimosa looked down at the grass in front of her and knelt to pick up lustrous jewels one by one.

"There are some inside my lingerie!" Thelma announced. "Why, they're cold!" She shivered. "I don't dare move. Steadman, Veronica, get those screens from the hall and surround me. And then get everyone to search. We must find every last pearl."

Steadman bustled inside and Wei helped him bring out screens which Veronica arranged around a continuously complaining Thelma. Steadman and Wei and Paul were all put to work searching for pearls, directed by Thelma and interrupted by her as more pearls worked loose from her clothes and fell behind the screens to patter down the stairs.

Raoul was detailed to take Mimosa to her rooms.

"She hasn't been out this long in years," Thelma said. "It's not good for her. Give your pearls to Steadman, child."

Mimosa spilled the five or six pearls in



her right hand into the bowl Steadman had brought out and smiled a deeply happy secret smile as she clutched her left hand tight into a fist. It had been the most wonderful day!

It was half an hour later before Thelma was able to make her way inside the house and to telephone Mr. Antoine. She had insisted on standing inside the screens even after Veronica had reclothed her, for she found an entirely new insulation there and was loathe to abandon it. Steadman brought her a pony of brandy to ward off the effects of cold and shock. There was quite a good collection of pearls in the bowl now, but careful searching brought new ones to light in the grass and in the bushes near the porch.

“Keep on hunting, keep on!” Thelma commanded as she left for the telephone.

Mr. Antoine had purposely left his appointment book blank at the Beauty Salon because of the birthday luncheon, and now he was luxuriating in peace and calm in the back room, poring over the star charts of the Green Twins. The minute he got back he had shed his conventional jacket for the Oriental robe he kept hanging in the back room and had put his turban on his head. Alma Blake sometimes teased him about the turban, but he would never give it up. It made him feel more

competent, more truly master of the arcane arts of astrology and divination that had begun as a sort of hobby and now consumed more time than hairdressing.

In the back room here, with the astrological symbols on the wall and the vari-colored light from the lamp with the Tiffany glass shade slanting across the table, Mr. Antoine felt capable of more than the simple cut-and-dried conclusions that any mail order school astrologist might draw from the conjunctions of the planets. This costume, this atmosphere carried him past the mundane and himself, gave him the courage of intuition and insight beyond the mere symbols of the craft.

It was here two weeks ago that the not-quite attraction between Mars and Venus on both sisters' charts had led him to a deeper foreboding than usual, and in his bones as much as in the charts, he felt he had been right. The Twins had met when they should have stayed apart and things were in the heavens already making changes in their lives. If only he could concentrate and recover that feeling of two weeks ago, perhaps he could help them.

To concentrate. To be at One with the One 'til the Carrier danced on the wall with the Bull and the Infinite was a Grain of Sand and the Future as clear as a still pool.

Mr. Antoine was within a hair's breadth of

Revelation when the telephone rang. It always did.

"Hello . . . Mrs. Fahnstock? . . . I'm working on ;your chart right now."

Mr. Antoine drew aimless doodles as Thelma told him the tragedy of the pearls, First on the margin of the chart then, as her lamentation rose to a crescendo, into the paths of the stars themselves, dotting the Houses of destiny with wild asterisks, crescents and exclamation points.

"Of course, of course. It's a frightful disaster. Those lovely pearls, priceless, I'm sure...No. My God, no! It's bad enough as it is without your risking further contact with your sister. I'll call her at once myself and call you back . . . Now rest! Take a sedative by all means. Those wonderful purple ones Dr. Tremaine gave you should be fine . . ."

Thelma ranted on for another three to five minutes before Mr. Antoine could hang up.

Thought and concentration were gone for the day. He took off his turban and hung the Oriental robe on the hook beneath it discouragedly before he dialed Alma's number.

## III

The Blake home was called Homedale and there was a neat little wooden sign with zigzag cuts at either end and H O M E D A L E in plastic reflector letters spelled out to prove it on the lawn. It was a development house, but Alma had managed to buy a double-size lot and at the rate outbuildings and household projects accumulated she needed every inch of the space.

Like Thelma, Alma had gone home directly from the celebration, but with a household the extent of hers it had taken more transportation. Jerry drove the motor-scooter with Luke hanging on behind him and Alma bouncing merrily in the sidecar. Melvina, Jo and Chris had followed in Mr. Antoine's jeep.

"That was some pretty girl!" Luke shouted through the wind into Jerry's ear.

"You bet she is," Jerry shouted back. "I'm going to find out more about her."

"Look! Look!" Alma shouted as they came around a curve in the highway. "A picnic! What fun!"

There on the roadside three cars stood in eccentric angles, one parked half in the ditch, another defying gravity halfway up the bank. A scatter of picnickers lolled about the cars, wisps of smoke from their wienie roast curling among them, a child sated with Coke and candy bars sprawled happily like an abandoned rag doll at the roadside.

"Hi!" Alma shouted and waved. The picnickers waved cheerfully back.

"What fun people have!" Alma cried to Jerry and the wind.

They all got out at Homedale and Mr. Antoine begged off staying to discuss the celebration. Andrew had arrived in his milk truck and was already in the backyard having a reunion with his animals. Don Blake stumped out with his cane to greet the party.

"Oh, I just wish you'd been there, Don," Alma, said. "It was a beautiful party, wasn't it, children?"

Don gave a non-committal grunt and slumped into the tête-à-tête rocker on the kitchen porch.

"Lot of nonsense, I expect."

Alma sat in the other half of the rocker and patted Don's knee affectionately. The tête-à-tête rocker, inspired purchase years ago at a wayside antique trap, was something like a love seat on rockers. In it

Alma and Don could sway back and forth, face to face, never quite sure who was rocking whom, but comfortable and content.

"The Mayor said the nicest things," Alma said. "Everybody asked for you. "

"Bet old Thelma missed me!"

"Oh, Don, you'll make me laugh and I'm all out of breath still."

Life at Homedale took up again without a ripple.

In the dinette off the kitchen, Melvina was already at her sewing machine working on dolls' dresses for Jo. At thirteen Jo had outgrown playing with dolls; now she manufactured them, clothed them and did a respectable mail order business with small novelty shops.

I thought that Mayor made a real nice talk," Melvina told Jo.

"I guess he's better than the last Mayor. Anyway, he's younger. Keep the hem small. There should be hardly any hem at all. Just wastes material anyway."

"Mighty good food, too," Melvina said.

"We have to get another dozen out tonight," Jo said. "Those two new stores in Connecticut."

Outside, Alma, as if picking up a theme from Melvina, recited the menu to Don. He listened, dozing and swaying in his half of the rocker.

Jerry and Luke were both nailing together

window frames on the lawn near Alma and Don.

“Don’t mention all that food, please, Mrs. Blake,” Luke protested. “That American food, two hours after I eat it I can’t even get hungry again.”

“You boys should take the rest of the day off,” Alma said. “They’ll be knocking off at the job before you get back there with those frames. Besides, it’s my birthday.”

“We finish up these frames now, they can go right in in the morning,” Jerry said. “This isn’t work to me, Mrs. Blake. It’s what I like best. Building.”

“I don’t understand why your parents disapprove of you wanting to be an architect,” Alma said. “Seems to me, you’re born to it.”

“They still think it’s terrible,” Jerry said. “Makes me the black sheep of the family. They’ve all been in the wrecking business as far back as anyone can remember.”

“My folks just as bad,” Luke said. “Anybody doesn’t want to run a restaurant, he’s crazy.”

“Well, I like restaurants, although I think you should follow your own bent, Luke,” Alma said, “but I honestly don’t understand the wrecking business. Wrecking!”

“Wrecking! Wrecking! Wrecking! That’s what I’d like,” Chris chimed in from the kitchen window.

Build and wreck! Build 'em up and wreck 'em down!" He took a string with a cluster of measuring spoons on the end and thoughtfully banged it against a tower of lady fingers he had erected on the kitchen table. "There goes the old Empire State Building!"

"Stop making the kitchen a mess!" Jo said sharply. "You're old enough to be constructive. Like Jerry."

"He'll clean it up," Alma said. "He's just a boy, has violence and things to work out of his system."

"But I don't see that, Mrs. Blake," Luke looked up again from his work. "I'm the younger one, but it's my father who thinks about violence, always wants to get into fights with other restaurants, with suppliers, with customers even. And it's Jerry's older family that likes wrecking."

"That's different," Alma said, unmoved. "That's parents and children. I don't know why it is, Luke, but parents can be funny and they're funniest about not understanding that their children may want to branch out into life in new ways. Poor Thelma is terrible that way. When I think how she handles little Mimosa, and Raoul, too. , He ought to have a job. Their mother always worked hard."

"Mimosa's not so little," Jerry said, stopping his hammering to listen.



"What a great actress May was!" Alma, said.

Don grunted himself awake and curious. "Huh? Who?"

"Thelma's daughter, May. You remember. Mimosa's mother. Wasn't she a wonderful actress, Don?"

"Greatest Juliet I ever saw," Don said with something like vitality. Great in modern stuff, too. Pity she ever left the stage."

"More pity she had to die so young and leave those poor children to Thelma. We never did get to know her husband. She went south with him, we heard about the babies and then the auto accident and both May and the poor father dead."

"It was her mother killed her," Don said. "Accident or no accident, it was Thelma killed her, Thelma she ran away from into marriage, accident, everything else." He spoke with grave finality and in two more rocks of the chair was asleep again.

"Was her mother beautiful, too?" Jerry asked.

"Beautiful, too?" Alma thought aloud. "What a funny thing to say, Jerry."

"Well, I got a good look at Mimosa."

"Of course May was beautiful. One of the great beauties of the stage, Alexander Woollcott said," Alma said. "Thelma talks about Mimosa being an actress, too, I hear, but I don't know how or where."

"How old is Mimosa?" Jerry asked.

"She's, let's see, eighteen going on nineteen," Alma said, "but Thelma dresses her so you couldn't tell she was over fourteen. Our Joanna looks older, I declare."

"Jerry doesn't think Mimosa's any thirteen, " Luke said.

Jerry waved his hammer threateningly.

"When did her mother die?" Chris joined in from the kitchen.

"Who, Chris!" Alma turned her head.

"Mimosa's s mother."

"She was an actress," Jo said. "Personally, if I was a man I don't think I'd care for the actress type." She looked out carefully at Jerry as she spoke, but he offered no reaction one way or the other.

"I know she was an actress," Chris said. "I asked when did she die?"

"A long, long time ago," Jo said. "But she was famous. Oh, Andrew, not through the kitchen! We just mopped it."

Andrew followed by three dogs, a rabbit, two cats and a tame fox, stopped at the doorstep with a hurt look.

"Time for their vitamins," he said. "You know that. It's the same time every day."

"Well, I don't see why they can't stay in the yard where they belong. If they belong anywhere," Jo said. "They can't read the labels."

"They like to come with me," Andrew said stiffly. "It's a treat for them."

"Well, it's no treat for the kitchen floor," Jo said.

"Now, Jo, stop it," Alma called from her rocker. "You've been picking on Andrew every time he's moved for the last two weeks. I don't know what's got into you."

"But I just mopped," Jo answered querulously, feeling her eyes moisten. She knew Alma was right and that made her feel even worse. Every time she saw Andrew she wanted to sew on a button or smooth back his hair, and every time she found herself starting a fight with him, especially on days when Jerry had been inattentive or when Luke had called her a "kid."

Something terrible was happening and Jo felt there was no one to help her. Her daydreams about Jerry got all mixed up with movies she had seen and she found herself teasing Luke so he would roughhouse with her and even acting strangely with Chris. Alma was no help at all, and when Jo tried to talk to Melvina, Melvina simply chuckled and rolled her eyes. It was a wicked world to be thirteen in.

"All his animals!" Jo added to assert and underline her independence. All the animals he lavished

so much affection on when all he had for people was a short Hello or Goodbye. And Jerry saved all his emotion for blue prints and two-by-fours, and so did Luke. And Chris was just a kid. It was hopeless.

"Andrew's not hurting you," Alma insisted. "He's just taking the poor things for a bath."

"Not a bath, their vitamins," Andrew said with the patience and near-warmth that touched his voice only when he spoke to the animals themselves or to Alma.

"Don't blame Jo," Don suddenly sat up straight and awake again. "Kitchen's no place for Noah's Ark. Hrmpf!"

"You're down on Andrew, too," Alma sighed. "He's a good boy and he's got no more animals out back there than I've got human beings here in the house, and just as much right to them."

"Here, Chris!" she changed the subject with tactful abruptness. "Where are those flashlight pictures you took? Let me show Don."

"Polaroid," Chris corrected. "It's an entirely different process." He leaned out the window past geraniums and Dutch windmill flower arrangements and the little old man and woman weather indicator to hand Alma several shiny prints. "Picture-in-a-minute!"

"Look at them!" Alma cooed delightedly. "Aren't they terrible? I look so silly in that old hat."

"Look at Thelma!" Even Don chuckled.

"Her eyes all squinched tight, " Luke looked over their shoulders. "She looks more Chinese than me. Some old Mandarin empress.

"Looks like something hit her." Jerry said.

"Well, the poor thing was uncomfortable," Alma said. "The thing is, she's so touchy and odd it makes people think, just because we're twins, that I'm some kind of an eccentric."

Jo's head joined the others as she asked: "Why did you throw the hat away?"

"I don't now, " Alma pondered. "I was sort of mad. I don't like the hat and I won't be wearing one for another ten years! I don't even like this old dress or these silly beads. It's the same kind of get-up we've always worn for the ten-year anniversaries. You can put the snapshots away, Chris. It makes me morbid to look at them too long."

"Here's one you can keep, Melvina," Chris handed a print to the seamstress.

"Thank you, Chris. That's a picture I'll treasure all my days. I only wish you were in it, too."

"I couldn't be, Mel," Chris tried to explain. "I took it."

"Never mind," Melvina said. "You'll take one of yourself someday."

The telephone rang before Chris could launch another explanation, and he darted across the kitchen to pluck it from the golden-haired kewpie doll beneath whose bright chintz skirts Alma insisted on concealing the instrument.

"It's Mr. Antoine," Chris called to Alma.

"Yes . . . She did? Wow, I wish I'd been there...All right, all right, I'll tell her."

Chris poked his head out of the window again, showing a smile of unleavened delight.

"Mrs. Fahnstock broke her necklace and she wants to find out from you how many pearls there ought to be in it. She can't tell how many more to look for. She's going wild, Mr. Antoine says. Has the whole house looking for pearls, even the cook."

"My goodness!" Alma's dismay was genuine. "Hers are real pearls!"

For a moment the rocker, the lawn and Homedale all faded for Alma and she was back to when she and Thelma had really been Twins together, the lovely young Green Sisters waiting to be launched into the adult social whirl on their nineteenth birthday, and Father coming down the long stairway at Marchmont with two oblong cases from Cartier's in his hands, matching pearl necklaces that could have taken care of the whole Acron town budget for a year in those long-ago days.

He had made them a little set speech about beauty and wealth and security before he hung the necklaces about their youthful shoulders. It was one of the rare moments when Alma had felt close to Father, for he had said to Thelma, snapping the clasp to, "Wear it proudly, dear," but to Alma he had said, "And remember, little Alma, if you lose your head at Monte Carlo or your heart at Newport there's money enough in this string to save your shirt and maybe your soul."

Well, she had never lost her head at Monte Carlo and when she had lost her heart it hadn't been at Newport but at the chamber music recital where she had first seen her tall and angry Don sawing away at his bass violin. But she had lost and wasted many other things -- years and her inheritance -- so that when the time came to sell the pearls there was no sadness but only the memory of Father's prescient and tolerant words.

It was those blessed pearls that had brought enough money to pay for Homedale and a small income besides, and she would never forget this and would always keep the inexpensive copied string beside her.

"But I can't for the life of me remember how many pearls there are!" she cried. "Here, help me count. One, two, three . . . "

"One, two, three," Jerry joined her counting from the other end.

"I, erh, san, ssu," Luke returned to Chinese as he tackled another section of the string.

"Oh, this is hopeless!" Alma cried. "Chris, you get on your bicycle and take the string over to her. She can get that butler to count there. But be careful."

Chris took the necklace and stuffed it into a trouser pocket.

"Hey!" Jerry called him.

"I'm rushing," Chris said.

"I know," Jerry said. "But when you're there, just as a favor, try and see if you can see her."

"See who?" Chris asked with a purposely inane grin.

"Mimosa, stupe," Jerry said. "Just where she lives, anything. And, if you tell anybody, I'll build your corpse into a retaining wall."

"Okay, okay! All part of the Christopher Orr Service."

Chris made a cowboy leap at his bike and was pedaling down the road.



## IV

On the lawn before Marchmont looking somewhat like overgrown children on a treasure hunt party, Paul and Steadman and a Chinese in a chef's hat were crawling about, turning over plantain leaves, making false starts at white pebbles, continuing the search for the pearls. The Chinese, a dignified middle-aged man with a vague resemblance to the cook who had helped Steadman with the screens earlier, used chopsticks to probe the terrain. Paul and Steadman raked the sward impatiently with grubby fingers.

"You find pearl, you tell us," Paul spoke painful baby-talk to the Chinese.

"For heaven's sake, he knows," Steadman said. "Wei explained everything before he left. Didn't he, Wei?"

The Chinese nodded agreement.

"But the other one was Wei?" Paul said.

"They're both named Wei," Steadman said. "It's

a family name, like Jones. The last three cooks have all been Weis and for all I know the next three will still be Weis."

"Here's another!" Paul cried triumphantly. "That makes seventy-seven."

Chris ground his bike to a dramatic halt at the staircase to the drive.

"I'll take it up to her," he said. "Christopher Orr Service. Special rates for precious stones."

Steadman eyed the boy suspiciously.

"You're sure you're meant to go into the house?"

"I'm the key man!" Christopher said. "I'm bringing the other necklace. No delay for the Queen's Messenger. One side, sirrah!"

"All right, you can take it," Steadman said and Paul handed Chris the pearl. "She wants us to keep looking. We'll be here for weeks, I shouldn't be surprised. And all the silver still to be polished. Go in and on up the first stairway. You'll find Mrs. Fahnstock at the top of the first landing."

Chris was already taking the porch stairs two at a time.

Inside the front door he paused and pursed his lips in leisurely examination of the dark, high, wood-paneled hall with ornately framed landscapes of melancholy deer in Scots Highland scenery. There was

not enough of interest to detain Chris long and he attacked the stairs to the second floor with his normal double-step speed, so that he hurtled into Thelma's bedroom with no opportunity for the politeness of a knock.

"My God, what's this?" he said.

The scene called for Daumier with an assist from Mary Petty. Veronica, starchy and solemn, sat in one corner stringing pearls and counting them as she strung.

Opposite Veronica, like some unusual form of sea-life cast gasping on an alien beach, Thelma reclined on her bed, garbed in a violet chemise covered by a Japanese kimono, her legs encased in clocked gray stocking, her head bound in another stocking, this one black. Above her head hung a vast expanse of accordion-folded glimmering plastic. She held her head hunched as if fearing the imminent fall of this construction and sipped Rhine wine and seltzer from a tumbler through a curved plastic hospital straw.

"Ssssh!" Veronica cautioned, holding a finger to her lips and then pointing to the figure in the bed. "Seventy-four, seventy-five, seventy-six . . ."

"Seventy-seven!" Chris said in a stage whisper, dropping his pearl on the table before Veronica. "Hi, Mrs. Fahnstock!"

Thelma pulled herself slightly more erect.

"How many are there?" she asked. "How many, young man?"

"What?" Christopher stood baffled.

"How many pearls in my sister's necklace? Your grandmother's."

"She's not my grandmother," Chris said patiently. "She' s my adopted grandmother."

"Alma can't be your adopted grandmother," Thelma your said. "You're her adopted grandson."

"Now that's where you're all wrong, Chris said. "I adopted her. Jo and I adopted her five years ago and you can't prove we didn't."

Thelma glared helplessly.

"Here," Chris pulled out the necklace. "We tried to count them, but everybody kept getting mixed up. Maybe you'll have better luck."

Thelma handed the pearls to Veronica.

"You count them, Veronica."

"Yes, Madame. It will take some time."

"I'll send Paul back with them," Thelma said, giving Chris a look of dismissal. But his eyes had been attracted to the contraption hanging above the bed.

"Hey, what's that, Mrs. Fahnstock?"

"It's an oxygen tent, you silly boy. What did you think it was?" Thelma said.

"Gee, I don't know," Chris said. "Some kind of trap. It would scare me, sleeping with something like that hanging over me."

"Nonsense," Thelma said. "Now I thank you for bringing the necklace, and you might as well get back home. I'll have Raoul show you out. Raoul! Veronica, call Raoul; I can't strain my voice."

"He's in his studio," Veronica said.

"Well, then, go and fetch him," Thelma said, and turned again to Chris. "How is that lazy man my sister married?"

"Don?" Chris said, making an effort to sort out the Homedale household. "He's just fine. He's sick."

"Fine. Sick. He's a loafer," Thelma said. "Does he still play that stupid . . ."

There was no need to finish the sentence. Chris had already struck a pose and begun to strum and bow an imaginary bass violin.

"Zoom, zoom, zoom-zoom, zoom, zoom, zoom-zoom! He sure does. All the time."

"He hasn't changed a bit," Thelma shook her head. "I warned her years ago. You realize he's old enough to be her son?"

"You mean she's old enough to be his mother," Chris said. "You get things all mixed up, don't you, Mrs. Fahnstock?"

"I?" Thelma's sputtering was relieved as Veronica entered with Raoul.

"Did you want me, Grandmother?" Raoul asked. He wore a short painter's smock that covered his rotundity and made him over into an ambulatory tent.

"Yes, dear boy," Thelma said. "I hate to interrupt your work, but someone should show young Christopher out."

"Oh, all right," Raoul said. "I was just changing from a Paris street scene to a simply elegant drawing room anyway. I think you'll love it, Grandmother; it will be perfect for Pinero. "

"I'm sure, dear, Thelma said. "Now, goodbye, Christopher."

Raoul waddled ahead through the door and Chris followed him, imitating his elephantine walk. Veronica stifled a disloyal giggle.

"Just down here, Chris," Raoul said. But Chris had stopped as soon as they were out of the bedroom to turn and gallop up the next flight of stairs.

"Simply follow me," Raoul said encouragingly.

Chris was on the top floor now and pushing through the door at the top of the stairs, behind which he had glimpsed an odd movement.

The whole large room he entered was set as a stage with scenery flats turning it into a 19th Century

Parisian park. Jutting out from a painted fountain Chris could see a strange sort of top, a spool held in mid-air by moving strings, going up and down, up and down. He stepped uncertainly farther into the room and saw that it was Mimosa, her tongue held between her front teeth in concentration, working the toy. She looked up and saw him without pausing except to say: "Hello. You're Christopher, aren't you?"

"Yes," Chris said. "What's that thing?"

"It's a diablo. It means devil. It's a very old game."

"Well, I'll be darned!" Chris said. "So that's what you do up here. You are Mimosa, aren't you?"

She nodded as Raoul came, huffing and puffing from his climb, and wallowed through the door in tremulous agitation.

"Mimosa!" Raoul whispered in agony. "Christopher! If Grandmother catches you, you know what'll happen. . .and I'll get it, too."

"Oh, Raoul!" Mimosa said. Christopher registered the fact that she was wearing a different costume, something a little older and fancier, but no less outlandish than her dress for the celebration, and tried to remember it for Jerry. "She won't hear. She's sick again. And Christopher is a cousin some sort of way, so it can't matter. Just let me show him how to work the diablo."

"Well, do it quickly, then," Raoul said. He held himself back against a wall of scenery. His own worry was genuine.

"I had to learn it all by myself," Mimosa said. "Look, Chris, it's a spool on strings and you use the right hand to guide it. The other hand is only to hold and follow and be where it's needed. Remember that the right hand is the guide. Try it."

Chris took the two sticks holding the string in his hands and managed barely to keep the spool from falling.

"That's good!" Mimosa cried. "That's very good for a beginner!"

"Be quiet!" Raoul hissed from his corner.

Unseen by Raoul or either of the others, the room door swung open a crack and through the crack peered balefully the shocked and angry eyes of Thelma. She stayed by the open door just a second, long enough to fix the criminality of the scene in her mind before tiptoeing back down to her room to prepare her armament.

Chris found he was able to keep the spool moving fairly well.

"The right hand guides," Mimosa repeated. "That's it, Chris! Oh, what fun!"

"You know old Jerry?" Chris asked, keeping the toy in motion.

"No," Mimosa said uncertainly. Why?"



"He knows you," Chris said. "He noticed you at the birthday thing. He's one of our family. Sort of. I mean he lives with us. He thought you were pretty."

"Which one was he?" Mimosa raised her voice. "Careful with the left hand!"

"He was the one in the blue suit, standing next to me outside on the steps."

"He was handsome!"

"I don't know about that," Chris said. "But he is a nice guy. Going to be an architect. Say, where can I buy one of these diablo things?"

Raoul had prowled behind a drop to close a window.

"Grandmother has told you always to keep them shut and the blinds drawn," he scolded Mimosa.

And suddenly Thelma was there. She had come back up the stairs silently, and it was only Raoul's squawk of recognition that brought her to all of their attention at once. Framed in the door in the outlandish costume she had taken time to don, she looked like a wicked witch from a child's book of fairy tales, and with her piercing stare of anger she reduced all three of them to frightened children.

She wore a long, floor-brushing Oriental robe of electric yellow with a pattern of feathers in iridescent blue running down its back. She had

replaced the funereal stocking on her brow with a band of heavy orange velvet and from the front of it, bobbing over her forehead like an antenna of some insect goddess, depended a wide-tipped feather of the same shimmering blue as the robe pattern. She was grotesque enough to be comic, but too intense in her fury to be anything but terrifying.

"Young man! Out!!" she said, and Chris dropped the diablo with a clatter to the floor and fled down the stairs without looking behind him.

From behind her back Thelma drew one hand with a delicate bright peacock feather clasped in its fist.

Mimosa backed away into the scenery with outstretched fingers held to her mouth in silent fear.

"Grandma, I tried to tell them!" Raoul pleaded. "I did . . . I . . . she wouldn't listen. Oh, no! Oh, no!"

Mimosa fell to her knees as Thelma raised the plume and moved relentlessly toward her.

Thelma herself could not tell the power she wielded, but she knew its strength, an accident of conditioning from that first distant day when the two orphaned children had first misbehaved in her home. She had locked them up in a room to wait punishment and while they waited, an hour or more, since Thelma had at first forgotten both crime and atonement, a wild cloudburst had struck with thunder and lightning and the blackness of power failure all through Marchmont's castled gloom.

By the time Thelma remembered the children and the necessity for meting out justice, she was herself ready for bed and in almost a kindly mood. But Raoul and Mimosa were beyond even forgiveness, held close to each other in the cell of shifting lights and sky bursts through the stained glass of the narrow window, they saw much more than the figure of their grandmother robed for bed, come to let them off lightly as a servant held an oil lamp, behind her. Animal whines and hopelessly groping small hands assaulted Thelma's knees and when she bent to touch their heads softly and reassuringly the children keened like lost souls and shuddered back against the floor in frozen fright.

Lights and shadows and the wavering eye of peacock feather from that day forward in Marchmont held black magic all their own, beyond the children's need to explain, far beyond Thelma's own knowledge. All Thelma knew, hoarded in her head between guilt and secret pleasure, was that she had in her hands the worst of all punishments. To do her credit, she reserved it only for household crimes she held to be capital. Minor sins could be paid for by scoldings, privileges withheld, rude diet and even physical chastisement. The peacock feathers were reserved for Sin, and Sin this afternoon had most assuredly seen.

"You, too, Raoul," she said. "Wait!"

As Mimosa fell before her she let the feather descend. Mimosa lay in a heap and tried to close her eyes but could not. They stared wider and watched the feather as it swung so softly down, a caress of evil in the air above her, the great eye in its end widening and glaring as it swooped to touch her head and meet her own two eyes helplessly staring.

Mimosa gave a shriek that wobbled into a shuddering hysterical ululation as she felt the feather's touch with all its hazy burden of memory and co-mingled horror, and at the touch her whole body convulsed and writhed away and then was still in a coma of wicked dreams.

"Now, Raoul," Thelma said.

"Please, Grandma!" With a stricken gesture Raoul picked up the diablo from the floor and held it out before him.

"Now, Raoul!"

He backed toward the window and in a quivering gesture of defiance flung the toy out and away before he, too, fell to his pudgy knees.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Watch where you're going!" Steadman said.

Chris burst down the steps to the drive and raced for his bicycle.

"You'll trample the pearls right into the

ground, " Paul warned.

Chris couldn't care.

"Mang che pu hui, hui che pu mang," Wei advised.\*

From somewhere in the sky, Chris heard a wail of all the fear in the world. He grabbed his handlebars.

Just as he vaulted to the seat, there was a sound on the concrete and he saw the diabolo landing there. He scooped it up and pedaled away as if the powers of darkness were behind him.

"What a day!" he told himself. "Maybe Mr. Antoine has something after all."

He had to swerve on the town road to miss the ragpicker. The ragpicker had found a shopping cart to accommodate his treasures and he wheeled it carefully to the nearest trash basket where he stopped to examine the contents. Alma's hat had the place of honor in the cart. The ragpicker went through the basket conscientiously but the only item worthy of addition to his lot was an old aluminum stocking-drying frame. He tucked it in next to the hat and wheeled away toward new horizons.

\*The busy man is unable, the able man is never busy.

Alma was happy the next day to be back behind the cash register at the check-out counter of the supermarket. The birthday had been a wonderful celebration and a holiday, but she always enjoyed the close yet casual camaraderie of her job, the bright Hellos and the bits and pieces of gossip and opinion that floated across the counter as she totted up the purchases of her fellow citizens of Acron. Here, Alma was in the important center of a whole small universe, able to tell who might be having a party that night, what family was cutting down on the more expensive cuts of Meat (and to make an informed guess as to why), a thousand myriad facts and speculations right at hand! She had found Chris a part-time helper's job at the store and he worked right beside her, bagging and boxing purchases and helping overloaded housewives out to the parking lot.

Late afternoon sun slanted through the plate glass front, and Alma hummed a tuneless accompaniment to the jangle of her register bell.

"Why, hello, Raoul!" she looked up at the moon face above hands that had just shoved a Kandy Korner Special onto the counter belt.

"Hello, Mrs. Blake. "

"My, your Grandmother's eating a lot of taffy lately!"

"It isn't for her," Raoul said confidentially. "She never eats taffy. It sticks to her bridges. It's for me."

"Well, that's nice," Alma said. "Anything else?"

"Hi!" Chris broke in. "You all in one piece?"

"You mean yesterday? " Raoul lowered his voice to a whisper. "Wasn't it awful? It was me threw you the diablolo."

"Thanks. And tell Mimosa I'm getting good at it. Tell her I didn't have a chance yet to talk to Jerry," Chris said.

"I don't want to hear things like that," Raoul said. "It was awful enough yesterday without starting Grandmother all up again."

"Move over here, Raoul," Chris said. "Let the lady through."

"Lady!" Raoul said, but he cleared the aisle. Behind him was a girl, feline in movement, her face quite covered by glossy strands of her black hair. She

was obviously a member of the tribe of gypsies which had been in Acron as long as anyone could remember, first in the fields outside the town, now in ramshackle tenements in the town, the men world working at odd jobs when they did work, the women telling palms in back rooms off Main Street.

The girl put down a single can of chili beans and waved her hair defiantly at Alma.

"Twenty-nine cents, dear," Alma said, ringing up the sale. A pretty girl, Alma thought, if she would only come out from behind all that hair . . .

Chris plucked up the can and put it into a paper bag without stopping the flow of his conversation with Raoul.

"You mean she beats you and Mimosa? At your age? I'd let her have it right in the chops."

"Not beat, Chris. You simply wouldn't understand," Raoul said. "Grandmother is a terribly powerful woman, but I don't mean physically . . ." His voice ran down. He and Chris had both been following the movements of the gypsy girl. It wasn't simply the brightness of her skirt and blouse, but the lithe movement of her body, even though you could see nothing of the features under her hanging hair, had a sensual promise almost impossible to ignore.

Instead of going out with her bag, she had skipped back into the store along the meat counter side.



Now crouching like a hungry cat, she made one swift lunge with her hand and conveyed a Cellophane-wrapped steak from the refrigerated shelf into her paper bag.

"Did you see that?" Raoul said, open-mouthed to Chris.

He hadn't even finished his sentence when the girl was at the door, first battering mistakenly at the ENTRANCE, then finding the EXIT and darting free.

"Somebody stop her!" Raoul shouted, high and squeaky with excitement. "She stole a steak!"

Chris tried to place a restraining hand on Raoul's arm, but Raoul was in full hue and cry.

"Stop thief!" he cried and dashed to the ENTRANCE door with as little luck as the girl.

"That girl pinched a steak," Chris whispered quickly to Alma.

"Oh, dear!" Alma said. "You run after Raoul. I'll do something here. She must have been very hungry or had a wicked father."

Raoul had finally located the proper door, but Chris pushed through ahead of him.

"Hey, don't run!" Chris shouted at the disappearing girl. "It'll be all right!"

Raoul pounding after him was still shouting "Stop thief!" and "Officer, there's been a crime!"

A motorcycle patrolman gunned his cycle to

join the chase. Raoul jumped on the running board of the Fahnstock Cadillac and Paul jerked his head up from his racing form.

"Follow that girl, Paul! " Raoul shrieked. "It's a matter of life and death!"

Paul coaxed the Classic Car into low gear.

The gypsy girl turned her head and saw what seemed to be all of Acron behind her. With a cry she tossed the bag to one side. Chris picked it up still running. The patrolman had moved ahead of the girl and half-blinded by her streaming hair she ran directly into his motorcycle at the corner.

Raoul arrived at the same time on the running board, panting as if he had been propelling the Cadillac himself.

"Officer, arrest that girl!" he huffed. "She's a thief. Take her back to the supermarket."

Exhausted, Raoul draped himself against the motorcycle as the patrolman took the gypsy's arm. Paul drew the Cadillac up against the curb and jumped out, bringing Thelma's emergency vial of smelling salts with him to Raoul' s rescue.

"I don' t see how J. Edgar Hoover stands it!" Raoul sniffed deeply. "This sort of thing day after day after day!"

The policeman was leading-dragging the girl

back up the street toward the store. She had resisted at first, taking a respectable snap at his wrist, but now she stumbled along in sullen defeat. Outside the store there was a humming knot of Acron matrons and passers-by with Alma at the center.

"You really gave her the steak?" a woman asked.

"Of course I did," Alma said stoutly. "Rang it up and put the money in the till and have the tape right here to prove it." She waved a strip of cash register paper. "Why, her folks have been trading here for years. One of the oldest gypsy families on the eastern seaboard." The way to make people believe a statement, Alma knew, was to say it clearly and roundly and without allowing the possibility of a doubt.

Chris loped along beside the girl and the officer, trying to soothe the girl. He had still to catch a real look at her face, but he didn't need to. There was something more exciting about her than about any girl he had ever seen, even in Playboy.

"It'll be all right," he said. "You'll see. My grandmother'll take care of everything."

"Go 'way, " the girl almost spat. "I don't t know your people."

"Here she is, Ma'am!" the officer said proudly in front of the store. "She's a wild one, I tell you. Bit me on the arm, but I brought her in!"

"Officer, I know you meant well," Alma said,

"but you can just take your hands off that girl. Poor thing, chased like a wild animal! She's no thief."

"She didn't steal the steak?" the patrolman asked. "Wait'll I get my mitts on that fat boy!"

"Of course she didn't steal anything," Alma said. "It was a present for her family. July 19th is a big gypsy holiday. Everybody knows that."

Paul and Raoul were back at the store in the Cadillac.

"Oh, heavens!" Raoul said. "It's all wrong! Home to Marchmont, Paul! Full speed."

"Chris!" Alma, ordered. "You take this girl home to Melvina and then take an afternoon snack to Jerry and his crew. I'll mind the bagging while you're gone." She walked back into the store and the crowd began to break up.

"Not one of my days," the patrolman said. "You tell your fat friend to lay off false alarms for a while. It's a lucky thing I'm a patient man."

"Can you ride on the back of a bike?" Chris asked the girl.

"Sure. Why not?" she said. "Where are you taking me?" She didn't seem to require any answer.

"You'll see," Chris said. "Maybe you'll stay with us. How would you like that?"

"I don't know who you are," she said, "so how

can I know?" But she straddled the bike behind Chris and they set out for Homedale.

The girl managed to keep her face still hidden even through introductions to Melvina and Jo. She took a chair in the corner of the kitchen and sat there silently while Melvina piled a basket full of milk and cookies for Chris to take to Jerry and his construction crew.

"I'll go, too," Jo said, climbing in back of Chris. "It's dead here and your friend doesn't seem to be about to add much to the gaiety."

"You just want to hang around Jerry," Chris said. "I know. Or Andrew. everybody around this joint is love-sick."

"I'll swat you," Jo said. "Tell me about the girl while you're worrying about everybody else being love-sick." And Chris did on the short ride to the construction site.

Jerry and a crew of four men including Luke here working on a new frame house in the very shadow of Marchmont.

"Hey, you're late!" Jerry said. "What happened yesterday with the pearls? You see Mimosa?"

"What's to eat?" asked Luke.

"We have a gypsy now," Jo cried. "A real one. Wait till you see her, only you can't see her because she has hair all over her face."

"One of them bearded ladies, I bet," a crew man offered. "I seen them in the sideshow, but I always thought they were a fake."

"No, silly," Jo said. "It's just long, long hair that hangs all over her."

"What's the food?" Luke asked again. "I told Melvina to get me subgum sometime. Good Chinese food."

"What, may I ask, is subgum?" Jo asked.

"Gum picked up in subways," Jerry said.

"Iaaagh!" Jo cried.

"Don't laugh," Luke said. "Wait till you eat some real Chinese food. My father's restaurant is great. We may not get along on careers, but I gotta admit he can cook. He cooks even better now that he's so mad."

"What's he mad at?" Jo asked.

Chris had taken Jerry to one side to give a report on his sighting of Mimosa.

"He's the feuding type," Luke said. "Now there's another Chinese family in town and opening a restaurant right across the street. Going to be a big fight, I shouldn't be surprised. All it needs is somebody to mark up the war sign."

"War sign?" Chris was distracted from his conversation with Jerry. "What war sign? What is it?"

"Two characters like this," Luke explained. He took a carpenter's pencil and drew two ideographs on a napkin. "It means 'The Dragon Spring Overflows' and it can

start a Tong War just like that.”

“What's a Tong War?” Chris was really interested.

“Tong is like a family clan,” Luke said. “Also, something like a gang. When they fight, believe me, it's sort of a small civil war. Everybody piles in because everybody is related to somebody else. Oh, boy, you should see Chinese fight sometimes!”

“Just if somebody writes those two characters?” Chris said. He took the pencil and tried to copy them.

“Not like that,” Luke said. “One line down, line at the top, and then another line down and one across. The bottom one you did okay.”

“Boy, some fun!” Chris said..

“Knock it off, Luke,” Jerry said. “We got work.” And then, contradicting himself, he pulled Chris aside again.

“You mean the old lady beats that girl?” he asked.

“Raoul says she doesn't beat them, but whatever she does, it scares them silly,” Chris said.

“I can't let that go on,” Jerry said. “Let me try that diabolito, will you? I'll bring it back tonight. Thanks for the food.”

Chris tossed the diabolito to Jerry and took off for the supermarket on his bike. Jo stayed, as she usually did, to kid with Jerry and the men and to watch the progress of the building. Every time Jerry had a spare minute, he

pulled the diablo from his pocket and practiced. By the time the working day was through he had it well under control.

Jerry and Jo and Luke arrived home at the same time that Mr. Antoine in his jeep was delivering Alma and Chris.

"Now where's our new friend" Alma addressed the kitchen window briskly.

"She's still in here," Melvina reported.

Melvina had had an uncertain two hours with the gypsy girl. After an unsuccessful trial or two at conversation, Melvina settled to her sewing machine. The girl watched her intently and after a few dolls' dresses had been hemmed she let curiosity win over her shyness and stood by Melvina's shoulder to watch.

"This is Miss Jo's business, honey," Melvina explained. "Dolls and dresses for the dolls, whole big wardrobes. It's a prosperous business, all right. If you stayed here, I expect you could help out making the dolls, nothing but bending the wire right and painting li'l faces on them. Miss Jo could afford to pay you a salary and I expect you'd fit right in."

"Where could I . . . sleep?" the girl asked. Her diffidence was wearing away ever so slightly.

"Why, there's lots of room in Miss Jo's quarters. She's got the whole garage to herself. She works there, but there's plenty extra space. What's your



name, honey?"

"Amaryllis," the girl said.

"That's some fine gypsy name all right," Melvina said.

"I don't know," Amaryllis said. "It's my name anyway." She actually brushed back her hair and smiled.

"You pretty, too," Melvina said delightedly. "You are pretty. Well, that's nice. Why don't I fix you something to eat?"

"Oh, no," Amaryllis shied away again. But she made no protest when Melvina heated up a can of soup on the stove.

She drank it directly from the bowl, in great hungry gulps and stopped the bowl in mid-air when she heard the sounds of Andrew and his animals in the yard.

"Feeding time for them, too, honey," Melvina said from the stove. "That's Mr. Andrew. He's the milkman lives out back there with his dogs and cats and rabbit and fox and goat. Whole menagerie, like Miss Jo says."

Amaryllis stared fascinated through the window at Andrew and his animals. The goat chomped at a bunch of carrots as lustily as Amaryllis had been drinking her soup. The rabbit had its own carrots in a small dish. Each dog had a dish of its own, as did the cats and the fox. Andrew talked to them, a soothing friendly patter reaching the kitchen window only as wordless monotone.

"He lives here, too?" Amaryllis asked.

"Who doesn't live here?" Melvina laughed. "Here, honey, your steak's ready."

She put down the dish on the table.

Amaryllis wheeled and in the same motion covered her face once again with her curtain of hair.

"No!" she said. "No! I never want to see that steak again. Please!"

"Good food going to waste," Melvina reproved.

"I don't care," Amaryllis said. "Give it to him. The animal man."

Melvina shrugged and took the steak out to Andrew. Amaryllis drew back her hair again just enough to see through and curved her mouth in a smile as she watched Andrew accept the steak, apportion it among dogs and cats and fox, and nod as Melvina's gesture described her presence in the kitchen. It was a strange, wonderful house and perhaps she would stay.

Her hair was still back and her smile still with her when Melvina came back into the kitchen. Melvina returned her attention to the sewing machine, content to let well enough alone.

Amaryllis perched at the window and continued to watch Andrew. Now the animals had all been fed and he stretched himself full length in front of the kennel and reached for a pearwood recorder which he put to his lips.

Its plaintive strains hardly reached the window, but the gypsy girl's lips twitched as she saw the animals move uneasily away.

Amaryllis held her head high with her face open to the world. She turned thoughtfully to Melvina.

"Is there someplace I could wash my face and hands?" she asked.

There was a heavy thump from the inside kitchen door and Amaryllis swirled her hair around her face in a quick protective motion.

"Where's my goat's milk?" came the gruff and hurt tones of Don Blake. "Melvina, you've forgotten my goat's milk again and it's five o'clock." He strode into the kitchen, thumping his cane ahead of him.

"What's that?" He pointed his cane at Amaryllis who cowered against the sink.

"It's a friend of Mrs. Blake's, Mr. Blake, and you've gone and scared her right back behind the curtain again," Melvina said. "Here's the goat's milk. I thought Miss Jo gave it to you before she left."

"No consideration," Don said, taking the glass of milk and thumping out again.

It was five minutes before Amaryllis asked: "Who was that?"

"That was just Mr. Don Blake," Melvina explained gently. "He's Mrs. Blake's husband. Mrs. Blake is the lady saved you from being arrested. Don't be so jumpy, girl."

But Amaryllis had moved back into a corner and would not stir.

"Our new friend," Alma was saying firmly from the back yard. "Just wait 'til you all see her. You can talk to her about Romany lore, Mr. Antoine."

"I just don't know about that," Melvina said. "I wouldn't be too sure . . ."

Cowering in the kitchen, all Amaryllis heard was the sound of a great convocation of people, behind closed eyes she envisioned a mixture of the crowd pursuing her down the street and half-a-dozen Don Blakes all waving lethal canes in her direction. In a defensive reflex, she roused herself from her corner and made a rush for the screen door. Just as Jo came up on the back porch, Amaryllis had the door open and raced across the lawn and into the wooded area beyond.

Andrew rose from his nap in front of the kennel in time to avoid being trampled and, after a pause of perplexity, began to run after her. But Amaryllis had a good start and was up the wooded hill and over it before Andrew reached the beginning of the rise. He gave one long look after her, then shrugged and rejoined the group in the yard.

"How very strange!" Mr. Antoine said.

"Now why would she want to do that?" Jo asked.

"Looked for a while like it might work out, too," Melvina said. "Just too jumpy a girl for this house, I'm afraid."

"I did hope she'd stay with us." Alma said.

"Said how her name was Amaryllis," Melvina said.

"What a pretty name," Alma said.

"Did you ever see what she looked like?" Chris asked.

"Well, I don't mind saying she was beautiful," Melvina said. "Once she let you get a sight of her."

"Hrrmmmpff!" Don Blake said, reaching the group. "She looked like a mop!"

It had been a busy day at Marchmont, too, but the pattern there followed the more leisurely pace suitable to a surviving castle. Breakfast went up to Mimosa and Raoul before nine and on each breakfast tray were Mrs. Fahnstock's instructions for the day. She rose much later herself, but did not like to think that anyone else's time might be wasted as she lay dreaming foggy with barbiturates of the wondrous past.

"Miss Mimosa:" And then, under the black-lettered heading of the clipboard on the tray, the day's devotions. "Read Racine's Andromaque in English and French. Re-read The Second Mrs. Tanqueray and study the parts marked in green pencil. Be prepared for lessons at two. If you have any extra time, you may practice make-up, copying roles from your Mother's scrap-book."

"Master Raoul: Touch up the Gothic scenery and take care that it is not once again confused in storage with the French 18th Century. Last Tuesday's debacle was inexcusable! Do practice the exercise Monsieur Antoine

recommended for weight control. Do not eat sweets. If you have finished your painting in time, you may accompany Paul into town for shopping." Both notes were signed "T. Fahnstock" in a large, firm hand.

Alone in her stage-set quarters upstairs, Mimosa skimmed angrily through Racine. She ignored directions concerning The Second Mrs. Tanqueray since she knew every role in the play by heart and had since she was thirteen. Then she took off her shoes to pace the floor restlessly without disturbing Thelma. Against all discipline, she opened her window a full two inches and raised the shade a foot. There was nothing to see outside except for Paul and Steadman and still a new Wei, taking turns searching the lawn, but she could hear busy, cheerful, alien noises from the near house a-building beyond the high border of trees and bushes that insulated Marchmont from the world.

Yesterday had been awful. It was the first time Thelma had taken the feather to her in a year. But this morning Mimosa could laugh and always before it had taken her days, sometimes a full week to recover from such an encounter. She must act the role of a maiden properly downcast, however; it would never do to let Thelma know that her feathery power might be waning.

For Mimosa felt sure it was waning and almost sure she knew the reason why. It was a misty reason wrapped up in a lot of different things, in the excitement

of the birthday celebration, in the sight of the town and all the strange free people, but most of all in two things: she, Mimosa, at last knew things that Thelma didn't -- she knew that there was a handsome young man named Jerry who thought she was pretty and probably wanted to do something about it, and she knew where the missing pearl was.

She smiled a wide yet secret smile watching the latest Wei combing the lawn with his chop-sticks. Veronica had counted Alma Blake's necklace four times over and each time it had come out to 189 pearls. There were only 188 pearls thus far recovered to restring for Thelma, and Marchmont would remain in a state of search and tension until the 189th was found.

Mimosa opened the bottom right-hand drawer of her dressing table, exactly the same table her mother had used as a star, and fished beneath jars of cream and tubes of make-up for the little cloisonné pill-box. She took it to the light of the window before opening it for even a peek. She wanted to see the pearl right off in the natural light of day.

There it lay, round and perfect, reflecting the sun with the lustrous blush born in China seas. Mimosa took it from the pill-box and held it for a second against the third finger of her left hand, pirouetting like a heroine in any one of the hundred plays she had acted out in that still room.



"Somebody named Jerry wants me!" she sang softly.

But what does a man want, really want, when he wants me? she asked herself. None of the plays, for all their rapes and seductions, adulteries, closeted liaisons and romantic deaths had an adequate answer for her. Thelma encouraged, even forced her to consult the big dictionary on its mahogany stand over every word that bothered her in the least, but the big dictionary had no answers either. "LOVE: that state of feeling with regard to a person which arises from recognition of attractive qualities, from sympathy or from natural ties, and manifests itself in warm affection and attachment." Mimosa slammed the book shut.

It had to be more and greater! She knew there was something much different outside in that world she had only glimpsed, something with the satin sensuality of the 189th pearl, with its mystery and uniqueness.

She put the pearl back in its box and away under the make-up. She stood by the window and let the sun warm her and let her hands move along her sides, against her thighs and past her waist, closing her great brown eyes to make them different hands as they moved up and forward to touch her round young breasts. She felt her body tense and her breasts harden and her hands squeezed them in anger. She cried quite soundlessly, eyes open now and looking out the window into the high, free-riding sun.

Raoul read his morning instructions more placidly. He had long ago adjusted to life as a vassal of the Lady Thelma and found it not too bad. Raoul liked painting and food and listening to music and news on the small radio that had been granted to him as a special boon on the understanding that he keep the volume low enough never to penetrate his grandmother's quarters, and all these pleasures were his in comfortable profusion. Thelma's hectoring was not too high a price to pay. Raoul read more about the real world than Mimosa whose fare was almost exclusively drama and not much modern drama at that; he knew that the world outside was not all sweet delight and he had begun, very much like Thelma herself, to treasure the insulation of Marchmont.

"You tell Paul I'll be going in with him this afternoon, Veronica," he said. "And when you serve Grandmother and Mimosa their tea, be sure to use the Sevres. The porcelain is English and Miss Mimosa is to be French today. You know how upset Grandmother is when periods clash!"

"Yes, Mr. Raoul," Veronica said. "Will that be all?" Sometimes she could just pinch the big, fat booby, keeping her here upstairs when the milkman might be arriving any minute!

"That's all, Veronica," Raoul said.

He settled comfortably to attack his two soft-boiled eggs, his four slices of toast with the imported

lime marmalade, his bacon, his sweet roll, his warm milk with a stick of cinnamon in it, his big mug of decaffeinated coffee with three full spoons of sugar.

Touching up the Gothic would take no time at all. There would be leisure to finish the candy he still had stored away in the brush cupboard, to finish rereading Dracula, and to look at that new Civil Defense booklet with the latest information on fall-out. And then he could go into town with Paul and while Paul shopped at the Epicure Boutique, he could run into the supermarket and get a whole new supply of taffy with the change he had saved by never letting Thelma know the special sale price of the last batch of Windsor-Newton brushes.

It was going to be a great day. Thelma had hardly touched him with the peacock feather yesterday and he understood now that even that was directed more at disciplining Mimosa than at blaming him. The poor, silly girl didn't know how well off she was.

Down in the kitchen, Steadman had been excused from the pearl hunt to catch up on his silver polishing. Veronica pattered about him in the kitchen, darting back and forth to the window so as not to miss Andrew with the milk.

"Disgusting!" Steadman said. If Veronica got any giddier he would either have to give notice or marry her himself. You would think that after thousands of years

of medical science doctors would have done something about the embarrassing behavior of women's glands.

Of course Steadman could never give notice anymore than Veronica could. They were as much a part of Marchmont as Thelma herself or Raoul or Mimosa and the extravagant salaries Mrs. Fahnstock paid were the least of their ties to the castle and to her. They were held by an indefinable loyalty and devotion that made virtues of Thelma's wildest outrages ("Wait 'til I tell you what she did today, Steadman!" "What now, Veronica?") and also by a vital combination of inertia and curiosity. Neither of them could imagine working or living anywhere save Marchmont, and neither could think of leaving Marchmont for much the same reason that a child would be indignant at having to go away from the middle of a movie. Steadman, and Veronica had sat through so much of the show already, they could hardly leave before knowing how it was going to come out.

"I've got to see what becomes of Miss Mimosa, if anything does," Veronica, would confess.

"What's she going to do next?" Steadman would nod after Thelma's retreating back, after Naturopathy, after mineral baths, after Dianetics, but still before polyunsaturated fats. And his interest was as sincere as life.

"There he is!" Veronica cried, twittering to the head of the back stairs. "Here he comes! Isn't he

divine, Steadman?"

"You could be his grandmother," Steadman said, giving a vicious swipe to a candlestick. "Easily!" God knows, he didn't want to marry Veronica, or anybody, but it might be the simplest thing all around.

Veronica watched down the stairwell as Andrew, whistling off-key, picked up the empty milk bottles with one hand and substituted the full new ration with the other, muscular shoulders rippling unconsciously under his T-shirt.

"Oh, I can't stand it!" Veronica cried, stifling a high-pitched titter. She ran back into the kitchen to lean out the window and watch Andrew get into his truck. It was a standard milk-truck, but he had partitioned half of it off for his animals, so that most of them could ride with him on his route and not sulk lonely back at Homedale. From behind his driver's seat, like mounted trophies, poked the heads of three of the dogs.

"My Nature Boy!" Veronica sighed as the truck moved down the drive.

"My foot!" Steadman said.

Mrs. Fahnstock awoke a little before eleven and devoted her first few waking blinks to re-arranging her thoughts before ringing for Veronica.

"Order! Order! Discipline!" she reminded

herself in the tones of her father. "Make a list!"

She groped for pencil and pad on the bedside table and quickly scrawled:  
"Intolerable building noise! Take care of."

Triumphant at this effort, she lay back against the pillow and tugged on the bell-pull.

"Coming, Ma'am," Veronica's voice floated through the communication tube to the kitchen.

After a Spartan breakfast of rusks and Postum and a careful sampling of her various medications (all in proper order -- "The blue pills first, Veronica!"), Thelma girded herself for the day. Corset, a Nile green slip, a heavily brocaded robe, a head-band of beige velvet. Only then, lorgnette held before her like a periscope, did she ascend the stairs to Mimosa's quarters.

Mimosa was seated before her dressing table mirror, experimenting with her eyes.

"Hello, Grandmother," she said, playing her role of deference and submission.  
"How do you think this looks?"

Thelma examined her thoughtfully through the lorgnette.

"Just a little more dark under the eyes, dear," she said. "Andromaque was a very sad woman, what with Hector being dead and all that. Your mother played her

in the original French in Paris, you know, and poor as my French was at the time, I cried."

Mimosa referred to the fading newspaper photograph in the scrapbook propped on the table and drew a heavier line under each eye.

"Much better, dear," Thelma said. "But longer eyes, almond-shaped, almost. Study the picture." She pointed a finger down to the scrapbook page.

"She was beautiful, wasn't she?" Mimosa said.

"Do you remember her at all?" Thelma asked.

"Only like a sort of dream."

"You look a little like her, you know," Thelma said. "The resemblance is growing. Although she was taller..."

"Why did they call her Green, Grandmother, when her last name was really Fahnstock?"

"She took my maiden name -- May Green, she was -- and made it a by-word for dramatic artistry on two continents," Thelma said. "She loved me and let me guide her, until..."

There was no way to explain it and no reason to explain it to this mercifully sheltered child. The years of watching May grow from infancy to childhood to graceful girlhood. The death of ineffectual Mr. Fahnstock taking place practically unnoticed in the busy-ness of enrolling May with a drama coach in New York, of moving

to an apartment on Gammercy Square to be near her and take care of her. The thrill of seeing May -- with her name -- answering a dozen curtain calls in her first appearance. The newspaper reviews with "Last night a new star was born" and Thelma standing like a dragon at May's side to protect her from all the threats that came pouring in from that day on.

And how long she had been able to protect her! A full ten years of staring down the dreadful seedy agents, the shoddy-important producers, none of whom could be trusted with the future of Thelma Fahnstock's daughter. Trying to laugh and hiding from May the snide jokes in the newspaper columns -- "A certain backstage mother dragged her glamorous daughter out of Delmonico's last night..."

To that brand-new Mecca Hollywood and back with May, and that was the worst of all. Broadway had been bad enough for a lady, but Out There they had even fewer morals and scruples!

But Thelma had been a match for them, falling exhausted every night, fighting the men and the women, too, who would try to take her May away from her. Thelma had been a match for everybody until that day May had come to her and told her -- simply told her coldly and without apology -- that she had married a Virginia lawyer named Jason Slade and was off to live her own life



on a country estate near Richmond.

"Why, your grandfather fought them!" is the first thing Thelma could think to say.

And then: "What about the new Philip Barry? And I've been corresponding with London about your doing Juliet there, only with a much better cast."

It was here in these same rooms at Marchmont that May had stood before her and said as clearly as if the universe were not falling apart: "I love Jason and I'm going to work at being his wife. I waited, Mother, until I found someone I did love, but there have been many times in the past years when I thought of marrying anyone just to win freedom from you, just to find a chance to live my own life, something different from the stage life everybody else wants me to live and the other child life you've forced on me. Good-bye."

And this was the last Thelma had seen of May alive.

Now she had May's daughter and she looked upon Mimosa as a trust and as a second chance. Poor May, despite all Thelma's care, had been corrupted and won away by the world, but her fate had taught Thelma a lesson. It would never happen to Mimosa. Mimosa would be molded into as great an actress as May had ever been, but the crouching, threatening world would never be allowed to guess her secret. Hers would be an audience of one: Thelma.

"She loved me and let me guide her," Thelma told Mimosa, "and the world was at her feet. But it all ended when that good-far-nothing Slade fellow came along and persuaded her that she'd be serving the cause of Art better by having a raft of children and living on the ole plantation." Thelma slurred her voice to a crude caricature of Southern accent to end her speech.

"But let's not dwell on what's past and gone, Mimosa," she came back to crispness and direction. "In this scene you must reject Phyrus and berate him for the cruelty of the war. You are sad, very lonely and unhappy."

"Yes, Grandmother," Mimosa said.

"I want you to know, dear, that your sister has been making remarkable progress lately," Thelma told Raoul at the dinner table that evening. Raoul was still shaken with indignation over the events at the supermarket, which he had recited -- leaving out the taffy -- to Thelma over the first course, a green turtle soup laced with sherry.

The two of them dined alone -- Mimosa still had her meals served in her own rooms -- in the huge old dining room. Raoul dressed for dinner in a velvet jacket and wore a flowing tie of satiny lavender. Thelma had changed her brocaded robe for a formal evening dress and replaced the tortoise-shell lorgnette with a silver one. Through this she inspected each dish as Steadman and Veronica served, taking tiny helpings for herself as against the

shameless shovelings with which Raoul filled his plate.

"Very remarkable progress." Thelma repeated.

"Yes, Grandmother. How?" Raoul said.

"You wouldn't understand, Raoul, but I think she is going to be a great actress. Just now is a crucial moment in her development, and I warn you to be very careful of her. That extravaganza yesterday was a terrible mistake. Mimosa must not leave her rooms again for some time. I count on you, dear boy, to help me."

"Yes, Grandma," Raoul said between engorgements of veal and mashed potatoes.

"I told Monsieur Antoine we wouldn't be expecting him for dinner itself, but to drop in for something after. I believe he had to stop by at that foolish sister of mine's in any case. He can have coffee with us. Or maybe champagne. Are we having champagne tonight, Steadman?"

Steadman was in the kitchen and so was Veronica and Thelma rang her bell furiously. People should be where one expected them!

"Steadman!"

"Yes, Mrs. Fahnstock?"

"Why are there no champagne glasses, Steadman?"

"Mr. Raoul says Madam's champagne isn't old enough for him to drink,"

Steadman reported.

"Is this true, Raoul?" Thelma asked.

Raoul tried to gulp down his mouthful of wine and

answer at the same time, but failed and simply nodded a swollen face.

"But Raoul, you do know something about wines," Thelma said. "You realize that after 15 years champagne no longer improves, but actually deteriorates, and the champagne we have now in the cellar is all of respectable vintage years."

"It isn't that, Grandmother," Raoul was finally able to speak. "It isn't anything like that at all. Steadman doesn't understand. It's just that champagnes since 1945..." He lowered his voice awesomely. "They may be full of that awful stuff."

"What awful stuff?" Thelma asked.

"Fallout!" Raoul hissed. "Strontium 90!"

"I've never heard of such nonsense!" Thelma said, but she was rattled. "There isn't any truth in it, is there? Oh, my goodness! What is this wine we're drinking, Steadman?"

Steadman patiently unwrapped the napkin from the bottle and studied the label.

"Medoc, '40, Madame."

"Strontium 90, Medoc '40, are they the same?" Raoul spluttered back into the glass the wine he had just begun to gulp.

"It means a wine from the region of Medoc in France of the year nineteen hundred and forty, Mr. Raoul,"

Steadman said.

"Well," Raoul said, and finished off his glass. "That's all right. But it doesn't hurt to be careful. That stuff is every where now."

"Just a drop more Medoc for me, Steadman," Thelma said.

"Me, too," Raoul said.

"It's delicious," Thelma said. "And in moderation it aids the digestion. In moderation, Raoul. Remember."

"Yes, Grandmother," Raoul said, draining his glass.

"Monsieur Antoine, Madame," Steadman announced from the doorway.

"Good evening, Mrs. Fahnstock," Mr. Antoine came into the dining room. "Good evening, Raoul, Veronica. Nothing to eat, thank you. Just a little coffee."

"Coffee for all of us, Veronica," Thelma ordered. "What on earth is Steadman doing back there?"

In the passage between kitchen and dining room Steadman was remonstrating with an insistent Wei whose loud Chinese protests penetrated to the table.

"It's the cook, Ma' am," Steadman called. "Wei. He is most upset that you aren't eating more. He says it's an insult."

"Tell him it's because I'm an invalid," Thelma said. "He's an excellent cook, but I must follow a strict regimen."

"I have endeavored to explain, Madam," Steadman called back, "but he will not accept my explanation. He insists on speaking to you personally."

"But he's not even down on my list for this evening!" Thelma consulted the pad beside her demitasse. "This is most irregular, but I suppose I have to give in. Please excuse us, Monsieur Antoine."

Steadman showed Wei into the dining room and Thelma examined him from head to foot through her lorgnette.

"But this isn't Wei!" she said.

The cook launched an eloquent speech in Cantonese.

"This is one of the Weis, Ma' am," Steadman explained. "In the past few days, Ma' am, we have had a series of different but related Weis in the kitchen. If Madame will remember, the first Wei resigned several days ago for much the same reason as this Wei's present complaint, Madame's diet

"This one is the first Wei's brother," Veronica said. "And the cousin of the second Wei. He says all the Weis are great cooks, and he is humiliated that you don't eat."

The latest Wei stood beside Thelma and spoke earnestly and loud in his own tongue.

"How bothersome!" Thelma said. "The first one spoke English quite well, and so did yesterday's. Listen,

Wei! You Wei, me Missy Fahnstock. Missy Fahnstock likee your food very much. You cookee yum-yum food Wei, but me Missy Fahnstock no can eatum good because me Missy Fahnstock very delicate tum-tum, doctor's orders."

"Yes, Wei," Mr. Antoine broke in to stem the tide of Thelma's home-brewed pidgin. "Mrs. Fahnstock is on a diet, but she appreciates your cooking very much. And look how Mr. Raoul eats!"

Raoul was just stuffing half a slice of pie into his mouth and at the sight Wei allowed himself to be restored to good humor. He launched another, flood of better-natured dialog at Thelma before he left.

"I think he was trying to explain, Ma'am," Veronica said, "that his family, all the Weis, are opening a new restaurant in town and he would be flattered if you would visit it."

"Never heard of such a thing," Thelma said. "Now, let's get things back in order." She pecked at her pad with an efficient forefinger.

"First, did you see this, Monsieur Antoine?" She picked up a copy of the Acron Times from the chair beside her and waved it at the beautician. "This picture." On the front page was a reproduction very similar to Chris's Polaroid snapshot, the Green Twins at the celebration with Thelma facing the camera sour and closed-eyed.

"I know," Mr. Antoine said. "I deplore the use of such a poor photograph, but we can't change the ways of the press, dear lady. I did warn you against going, although I hate to say I told you so."

"Well, nothing worse can happen than's happened already," Thelma said. "Now, what have I got down next?"

"The stars may have more to tell us," Mr. Antoine said gravely. "Which reminds me that I shan't be able to give you your regular hour day after tomorrow."

"Oh, no," Thelma started from perusal of her notes. "How annoying!"

"I'm sorry," Mr. Antoine said, "but it's necessary. I must consult my own teacher, my guru so to speak."

"Well, I can't stand in the way of that," Thelma said. "Here we are!" Her finger settled on an item on her pad. "This house going up next door, isn't there any way I can stop it? It's almost in the yard, Monsieur Antoine. And the noise! What kind of a district is Marchmont turning into?"

"I'm afraid that's a problem more for your attorney than for me and the stars," Mrs. Fahnstock," Mr. Antoine said.

"Well, you might ask your guru anyway," Thelma prodded. "He might have an idea."

"He is, well, he is a she," Mr. Antoine said. "I should perhaps have used the term sibyl rather than guru."



"Well, if you won't help, you won't," Thelma said, crossing the house off her list. "But do try to find out about the missing pearl. I have all of them but the 189th and I can't have the necklace properly restrung until I find it. And not having the necklace upsets everything. Why, I've had it since I was nineteen and I feel all at sixes and sevens seeing it unstrung there in a box."

"I'll find out what I can," Mr. Antoine said. "But it is little use trying to find out the secrets of the Universe and the Occult when my advice is flouted."

Seeing Thelma frown, he sighed and tried to lighten the conversation.

"How is Miss Mimosa?"

"I was just telling Raoul, who doesn't understand at all, that she is doing very well. She went through part of Racine's Andromaque for me this afternoon and I almost wept. I could see and hear her mother there on the stage in Paris!"

"It must have been very moving," Mr. Antoine said. "When do you think Miss Mimosa will be ready for her debut with a theater audience?"

"You don't understand either," Thelma said. She said it without her ordinary spark of anger, and in the seat at the table she was shrunken and small. "I'm her audience. Mimosa is to be my work of art. My mistake with

her mother was...But nobody understands..."

"Steadman, bring us some more Strontium 90," Raoul directed.

"Medoc, you silly boy," Thelma corrected him with something of her old vigor, but the evening never returned to a truly comfortable level.

Mr. Antoine was glad to leave as early as possible.

The next day was a day off from the supermarket for Chris and he went along with Jerry to the construction site.

"Lemme have my diabolos back," he asked Jerry as they got off the motor scooter at the job.

"Your diabolos?"

"She gave it to me, didn't she?"

"Okay then," Jerry said, handing over the toy. "As long as you let me keep in practice."

"You don't even need practice," Chris said. "Heck, you can already do it better than me."

"Chinese say," Luke joined in, "that good pupils always surpass their masters. Otherwise, why should anybody teach? Just so people will do the same things over and over?"

"You're right," Jerry was thoughtful. "That's the way it should be with building and architecture. And everything, I suppose."

On the job, Jerry was all business for the first hours. It was the first house the company had allowed him to follow through on his own design and he and Luke had put in endless evenings over the kitchen table at Homedale, drawing up the plans and double-checking their facts and figures. Technically, and on the payroll they were still carpenters, but their dreams raced much farther.

"We may never get a degree, Luke," Jerry said "but if this thing works, we're on our way to where we can hire some bloody architect to sign on our projects."

It was eleven before Jerry was willing to call a break and then only because Jo had arrived with coffee as well as lunch supplies which she stowed in their thermos packs under the frame for the fireplace.

"It's going great guns, Jerry," she said. "I bet it's going to be the best house the old company ever put up. Why, you're smarter than any of their office architects!"

"Put it in writing, honey," Jerry said dryly. "Hey, Chris! Let me have the diablo again."

"You're getting good enough to audition for Mimosa," Chris said, watching Jerry twirl the spool. "You don't do it the way she told me, exactly, but you make it work."

"Why don't you just arrange that?" Jerry said, throwing the spool high into the air and catching it on the string as it came down.

"What do you mean?"

"Get me an audition," Jerry said. "Tell her I'll give a show for her whenever she wants. Even go to her place to do it."

"Go to her place?" Chris said, breaking into a grin. "Why you don't even know where you are, Jerry. You're at her place right now. Been there all along."

It was Jerry's turn to ask: "What do you mean?"

"Marchmont is right here," Chris said. "Right next door, on the other side of all those trees and bushes. Boy, are you some dum-dum!"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Jerry cried. "Show me. Where's her room?"

"Calm down," Chris said. "You can't see anything from here. The trees are too high. All you can see is the tippy-top of the tower unless you want to climb a tree."

"That's an idea," Jerry said, "but I got a better one. Hey, Jim!" He shouted to the operator of the power shovel that had been digging a sewerage ditch. "Can you give us a lift in that bucket?"

"Against every safety regulation in the book," Jim said. "Sure. Where you want to go? Into orbit?"

"Just straight up a ways. So we can look into the top floor of the old house past those trees."

"Hop in," Jim said, putting down his coffee container.

"You get in beside me, so you can point where," Jerry told Chris. The two of them climbed into the bucket and Jim started the motor, threw a lever and they were hoisted slowly up to the level of the tree tops.

"This is okay," Chris said. Jerry made a hand signal to Jim to hold the bucket steady.

"Right there," Chris pointed. "That window there."

"The shades are down," Jerry said regretfully.

"I know. I told you they always are, but I bet she looks out sometimes," Chris said.

As if in answer, they saw the faintest flicker at the side of the shade.

"It could just be the wind," Chris cautioned.

"Nope, it's her!" Jerry said. "See! See! See!"

"Watch it, you're going to wreck us," Chris cried. Jerry was leaning halfway out of the bucket waving at the window where, unmistakably, was half a smiling face. A hand emerged beside it and gave a timid answering wave and the window was shaded and lifeless once more.

"That'll be all," Chris said. "She won't dare try it again with old Thelma sneaking around."

Jerry insisted on keeping the bucket aloft a little longer before he had to agree with Chris and signal Jim to let them down.

"Some boss," Jo sniffed at him as he got out of the bucket. "Joyriding on the heavy equipment like...like some ignorant little child." She turned away to help Luke sort out blueprints.

Jerry worked on the job at a furious pace, abstracted to the rest of the crew up 'til lunch hour.

"Right across there all the time, " he mused aloud to himself over his sandwich. "Hey, Jo, maybe you could go over and like ask to borrow some sugar or something in the kitchen and then, if you see Mimosa, you could ask her if she'd like to come over and watch the job here?"

Jo stopped mid-bite in her own American-on-whole wheat.

"Are you going out of your mind, Jerry?" she asked. "You know they don't let her out of her rooms, much less out of the house. Besides..." Jo frowned to herself.

"Besides, I'm not for running errands. It isn't something you ask a girl to do."

"Okay," Jerry said, morosely. "Forget it." He lay can his back and spun the diabolo, trying new tricks and patterns. One soaring flight saw the spool fly away out of control and into the tree border.

"Hey!" Jerry scrambled to his feet and followed the spool. He was almost through the bushes before he found it. Looking up, he could see the porch and lower battlements of Marchmont clearly on the other side. He felt excited and anxious to go ahead, yet suddenly shy and lonely facing an enemy world.

"Hey!" he called back to Luke and Chris. "Come on." He waved his hand above his head, signaling toward the castle.

"I'm game," Chris said, getting to his feet.

"Me too," Luke said. "Chinese very romantic people."

They joined Jerry in the bushes and moved forward as a trio. Jo looked after them solemnly.

Jerry looked a little like Stanley going to meet Livingstone, she thought, something like that, but nothing like anyone going to meet Jo. She began to pick up sandwich wrappings, clucking angrily at masculine sloppiness in general.

Jerry, Chris and Luke pushed through the last barrier of pine and yew jungle to come upon Steadman, Paul and the current Wei, all still engaged in suspecting every blade of Marchmont grass of harboring the 189th pearl.

"You look like a bunch of lost chickens," Chris jeered.

"Very well," Steadman said. "If you're so smart,



tell us how you'd look for a pearl."

"Okay," Jerry said. "What the heck. We still have most of lunch hour to kill. We'll help you look."

Luke had dropped to his knees before Jerry made his offer, and was poking into the bushes. Chris!" he hissed. "Hey! Come over here."

Chris crawled across to him.

"See that Chinese man," Luke asked.

"Yeah, he's the cook."

"Well, he's also one of that family I told you about. It's his family that's starting the new restaurant trying to do my family out of business. He probably wouldn't recognize me, but I don't let him see me anyway."

"You mean he'd start a Tong War, if he saw those letters you showed me?" Chris said.

"Tong War," Luke said. "You bet he would."

"Boy!" Chris said more thoughtfully. "Hey, what's the matter with Jerry. He can work the diablo better than that."

Jerry was standing on the lawn awkwardly manipulating the spinning toy. He seemed able to get it started, but then it would roll off its axis as Jerry teetered and waved his arms and staggered drunkenly to keep it from falling off the string altogether.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" Chris called. "Do like you were doing. Guide it."

"Sssh!" Jerry cautioned, and then in a louder voice: "What am I doing wrong? "Help! Help!" And, as Chris opened his mouth again, Jerry made a savage silencing gesture and bobbed his head toward the top floor window in the tower above them.

"Man, that coony Jerry!" Chris whispered to himself.

"Help! Help!" Jerry went on.

And, sure enough, out came Mimosa's head from beneath the window shade.

"Right hand guides," she said in a low clear voice. "Guiding hand forward, Jerry. All the way."

Jerry looked up and nodded his head in thanks.

"That's it!" Mimosa said. "Now you're doing it right. Right hand always guides, and the other follows. Good!"

"Thank you Miss Mimosa," Jerry said, matching her softness of tone. "Now watch this!"

He let the diabolo twirl normally and then raised his left arm and spun it as the toy sailed into the air above his head and landed again perfectly on the string, the raised left hand controlling the whole action, the spool rolling obediently on the string as he moved the arm down.

"But that was the left hand!" Mimosa called from her window.

"That's right, Miss Mimosa," Jerry said. "Sure, there has to be a guide, but you can pick the guide you want. It doesn't have to be the right, just because you started that way."

He raised his left hand again and went through the whole complicated operation, Mimosa leaning far from her window now and watching every spin.

"Bravo!" she cried when he finished. "Bravo!" and clapped her hands gently.

"Why don't you come down and we'll play together?" Jerry called up. "Come on!"

Mimosa made a face.

"I can't," she said. "Ask Chris; he knows. But someday."

She drew her head back and the shade fluttered to stillness.

Jerry let the diabolo drop and banged a fist into his palm.

"Okay, gang. Let's get back to work."

It was clear that Jerry was trying to get back to work himself with the same devoted intensity that usually marked his application to the job, but it was just as clear that he was not succeeding. Bursts of energy with plane or hammer or saw would be followed by slow motion periods of blank reflection in which Jerry's gaze seemed to

trying to pierce the barrier of trees between the job and Marchmont .

Luke looked up toward Jerry from his own work, to offer a smile of sympathy and friendship, only to catch Chris, blue marking crayon in hand, inscribing the side of the power shovel with the symbols for The Dragon Spring Overflows.

"That's not funny! " Luke cried, leaping down from his trestle and rubbing out the characters.

"Okay, I was just kidding," Chris said. "Hey, here's old Andrew!"

The milk truck drove up and Andrew stopped it to give his animals a run and to look at the job.

"How you like it, Andrew?" Luke asked. "Coming along good, huh?"

"It's all right for a house," Andrew admitted, surveying the structure. "The trouble is, there are too many houses already."

"What do you want?" Jo said, defending Jerry and the job. "Everybody to live in caves with animals?"

"Just everybody to mind their own business," Andrew said. "Hey, Chris, I saw that gypsy girl in town this morning. At least I think it was her."

Chris looked up from the fresh cement sidewalk.

"Pretty, but with all that hair?"

"Yep. I waved at her and even hollered, but she just ran down an alley. I don't guess she'll ever come back."

"That's minding your own business all right," Jo said.

"I wish she would come back," Chris said. "We need another girl at Homedale. Jo's so evil tempered."

"You!" Jo said, and threw a clod of dirt at Chris. "What's that you're drawing, Chris?"

"You draw again, Chris?" Luke was up again. Chris had used a stick to scratch the Tong War symbols in the wet cement. Luke grabbed him by the waist and wrestled him down the slope of the lawn. He caught Chris's hand and twisted it behind his back.

"Honestly, Chris, I tell you that can start terrible things, " Luke panted earnestly. "You promise never to draw it again."

"Ouch!" Chris said. "Okay, I promise."

Luke didn't relax his grip and used his other hand to uncross Chris's fingers. "Now you promise straight, Chris, and I'll show you something."

"I promise straight," Chris said, accepting defeat.

"Now I show you what I can do, " Luke said, picking up the stick Chris had used to make the inscription. "Old Chinese man would see these signs and wring his hands and think Tong War must come, woe is me! Young man like me sees the same signs, but what do I do? This!" Luke scored the cement to form another line in the first character. "Then fix the second character like this." He drew another correction. "Now it means: The Wise One Survives The Clever One. You

remember that, Chris. You can write that anywhere.

"But remember more: Things look all bad, smart boy can change them."

"Some things even a smart boy can't change," Jerry said. It was one of his moments for staring at the trees that blocked out Marchmont.

"How about a smart girl?" Jo said. Impatience at Jerry's moping had got the better of her jealousy. "It's not so hard to change, if you really want to, Jerry."

"Yeah?" Jerry said skeptically. "How, Miss Smarty?"

"Well," Jo said, pulling one of the blueprints out of its folder. "You're going to have stairway here eventually. Why not now? And from the top of the stairway you could..."

Jerry had already taken the blueprint from her.

"By golly, you're right Jo," he said. "Look, Luke. The stairwell is going to go straight up here in the middle anyway. All we have to do is change the schedule a little bit and put the stairs in right now. The beams are in place to support them anyway."

"I don't get it," Chris said.

"He'll be on the top of the stairs right across from Mimosa's window, stupid," Jo said. "Everything his heart and little pointed head desire," she added sadly.

"I'll never forget it was your idea, Jo," Jerry said.

"Thanks," Jo said.

"It's a good idea for the building, too," Luke said. "Build stairs first, it's easier than ladders for bringing up material for other floor. And when we build stairs to top, Jerry, I'll make you a little platform at the very end."

"I can stand right up there and look at her and she can look at me," Jerry was carried away. "I'll wave at her and do a little Fred Astaire...a-two, a-three, a-four, hey!"

He clicked his heels together and began to rattle out a tap step on the unfinished flooring. Chris and Luke and Jim clapped in time to the beat.

"Bunch of nuts," Andrew said, whistling for his animals. "Jo, you want a lift back to Homedale?"

"No. I don't want to go with anybody," Jo said. "I'll take Chris's bike. Just leave me alone."

"Okay," Andrew said. "Suit yourself." He shooed the last dog into the truck and chugged away.

"That was great!" Luke said when Jerry reeled in a mock swoon and ended his dance.

"No reason we can't start those stairs right now," Jerry said. "Chris, start bringing up those two-by-sixes. We'll just follow the print for the stairs and get

to the rest of the house tomorrow or whenever we get to the top of the stairs. Okay, gang?"

In Marchmont, beyond the wooded palisade, Thelma rang for Veronica to bring her ear-plugs against the new spurt of carpentry activity from across the way.

"One might as well be living in the slums of Calcutta," she said.

To the rear of Marchmont the town ragpicker wheeled his shopping cart in search of booty. Marchmont had yielded some glorious treasures in the past. There had been a full-size dressmaker's dummy he had never forgotten and many smaller joys.

He fished through the trash basket, but there was hardly anything worth a serious man's consideration. He settled for an atomizer still in working condition and a copy of the Acron Times. He had been looking all of two days for something suitable in which to wrap the wonderful hat that had descended from the skies, and the Times would do very nicely.

He pushed his cart away and down the hill, humming beneath his breath "Whistle While You Work."



## VIII

Sunday was always a family day at Homedale and family meant the whole shebang, from Alma and Don themselves, down through all the adopted and semi-adopted members of the household to the last four-footed denizen of Andrew's sub-section of the group.

"Why do they call them saw-horses?" Alma asked Jerry, the whole human family grouped around a trestle table for brunch-lunch-picnic-Sunday-dinner in the back yard.

"Why not saw-foxes or saw-rabbits, I wonder."

"Darned if I know," Jerry confessed.

"They did call them saw-bucks," Don grunted over his goat's milk, "but it didn't have anything to do with buck, the deer. It was a Dutch word, boc, for a wooden frame."

"Wouldn't you know Don would have the answer!" Alma said admiringly. There was always some new and bright trinket he could dredge up from his grab-bag of pedantry

and aimless endless reading to delight her after twenty years of wedded bliss.

"A game!" Chris cried. "Word game. I start because I thought of it. An author beginning with E. You, Luke" He pointed a celery stalk at Luke. "One, two, three, four, five..."

"Emerson!" Luke said. "That was easy."

"Good, Luke," Alma said. "I'd never know a Chinese author with an E."

"A motor!" Chris began again, pointing at Andrew, busy breaking up food for two dog dishes. "One, two, three..."

"Evinrude," Andrew said without even looking up.

"Doesn't it have to be people?" Jerry asked.

"There was a Mr. Evinrude, all right," Andrew said. "I went to school with one of the kids."

"Imagine!" Alma said, fanning herself with a paper plate. Every now and then Andrew would drop something of his background, and it was a treat to note it, but not to follow it up. Alma let her lively curiosity free rein in town gossip at the supermarket, but she seldom intruded into the lives of those about her. It was fun to speculate about Andrew who had obviously known a comfortable country club and private school childhood and could tell you things about yachts and debentures, but the important thing was that he was a good person and he was here; to pry

could drive him away or at the very least hurt his feelings and nobody's feelings were to be hurt at Homedale. Not intentionally, anyway.

"A famous woman!" Chris cried, aiming now a hot-dog at Jo who was serving the salad. "One, two, three, four..."

"Elizabeth!" Jo said. "You almost made me spill the salad."

"First names don't count," Chris said. "Do they?"

"With Queens, they do," Jo insisted.

"Right," Don grumbled to her defense. "You never heard anybody refer to her as Miss Tudor, did you?"

"Okay," Chris said. "A composer. You." He aimed his half-demolished hot-dog at Don. "One, two, three..."

"Sir Edward Elgar," Don said, between munches on his slice of gluten bread.

"Oh, he gets double credit for that," Alma said. "'Two Es. Good for you, Don!"

"Never heard of him," Chris said.

"Perfectly good composer," Don said glutenously. "Wrote Pomp and Circumstance."

It was a typical Sunday at Homedale. Even Andrew's goat had been allowed off her lead and was munching solemnly near the table.

"Andrew, does she have to?" Jo complained.

"She's minding her own business, and that's more

then you," Andrew said. He prepared new dishes for the cats and the rabbit and the baby fox. Andrew was part of the family group as always, as always a little remote from it.

"Well, a goat at the table!" Jo prepared a tirade in more specific detail. "I don't believe..."

"Sssh!" Andrew halted her with authority. He had caught the slightest movement at the corner of the house, a dark, tousled head peeking suspiciously at the assembled party.

"Wha'?" Jo said.

"Sssh! There," Andrew motioned. "Don't let on to the others."

He raised his own head then and smiled as the gypsy girl's head appeared again. Jo watched fascinated as Andrew motioned to the girl, keeping his hands low and out of sight of the gamesters at the table.

A whole figure emerged on all fours. It was most definitely Amaryllis. She swept back her hair with one hand to take a longer look at the Homedale group.

Andrew found another dish on the table and was filling it with a selection of hot dogs, salad and bread. He motioned again, and Amaryllis, still wary but with a tentative smile on her unveiled face, crept toward the table on hands and knees. She moved as softly and gracefully as a cat herself, Jo thought, seeing her curl at Andrew's

knees and take the plate he offered her.

Looking up, Amaryllis gave Jo a slow smile that slowed the nameless indignation Jo had begun to feel. Jo leaned over to the table and found a fork which she passed down with an answering smile of secret friendship.

Among the others, Jerry was "It" and the letter was L.

"One, two, three, four..."

"Louisiana!" Melvina crowed. "Couldn't miss the state where I was born!"

"Okay. Alma, you. Something red and slimy! One, two, three, four..."

Alma made nervous knitting motions with invisible needles before she rose half out of her seat to cry: "Liver!"

"Oh, Grandma, that was wonderful!" Jo cried. "I'd never have thought of liver."

"Of course it isn't red and slimy when you eat it" Alma said. "Why, look who's here! Amaryllis for heaven's sake! I never even saw you slip in,"

"I knew you'd be back, honey," Melvina called across the table. "You just as sly as Andrew's bitty old fox. Welcome back."

Amaryllis kept her expression of fear and uncertainty as she looked from face to face, but she did not try to flee.

"I thought you'd come back, too, dear," Alma said. "This time I hope it's to stay. We really would like you here."

"Well, my old police-fighting buddy," Chris said. "How's things?"

Amaryllis curled a little closer to Andrew who handed her down a glass of milk without speaking. Luke stood on his chair at the far end of the table, to get a better view.

"She is beautiful girl!" he said. "What you mean, mop?" he added to Don.

Don grunted a general disclaimer of any opinion, but Amaryllis had heard and burst into laughter.

"Mop! Mop!" she said, at last relaxed, and pulled and pushed her rich hoard of black hair over and from her face.

Everybody laughed with her in relief and acceptance.

"Where's my goat's milk?" Amaryllis mimicked gruffly from behind her hair, and everybody laughed again.

"Oh, please stay, Amaryllis," Jo found herself saying. "You can share my room and help with the dolls. I know you'll be wonderful at it."

Alma was pounding on the table with an empty pitcher.

"Silence, everyone. This is a very special occasion so Don is going to give us a concert on his bass fiddle in honor of Amaryllis's return. It will be a real treat, Amaryllis; my Don knows the bass parts of all the Verdi operas by heart. From the years he played in the pit at the Chicago Opera, dear. You do love music, don't you?"

Luke was already on his feet.

"I promised my father. At the restaurant," he said apologetically and with a reluctant glance at Amaryllis.

"Oh, Luke!" Alma reproached without elaborating. "I'm so sorry!"

Chris was rising, too. "I just remembered, Grandma. I've got to go and..."

"No, Christopher!" The steel of Thelma rang through Alma's voice. "You sit right down there on the ground and listen."

"Aw!" But Christopher sat. There were traditions at Homedale as well as at Marchmont and foremost among them was the fiction that a bull fiddle concert by Don should be considered a cultural treat for young and old, man and animal. Luke alone had made good his escape by the time Don had come back from the house clutching his bass violin like an Arab chieftain with a favored odalisque, his moustache drooping but his eyes alight with fervor. He navigated the space from kitchen

to picnic table in scooping strides, a brace at the back the fiddle clutching one leg and letting the instrument serve as a surreal crutch.

"Aida," he announced with deep solemnity and scraped his bow cruelly across the strings.

"Ah!" Alma said, patting Amaryllis on the head. Then she folded her hands in her lap and leaned back with closed eyes to enjoy the treat.

Don bowed and plucked and the instrument gave forth growling wails not unlike its master's speaking voice. Between the wails there were irregular spaces of dead silence when presumably the remainder of the Chicago Opera Orchestra would have been blowing or tweeting.

Alma's face was a mask of beatific trance. Chris stole a look at her and then crawled silently across the grass to disappear safely around the house. Jerry followed him, and then Jo escaped quietly to her garage workshop.

Don bowed and scraped and plucked and, as the vast orchestra in his head stirred him deeply, made groaning sounds of near ecstasy, seeing Rhadames trapped by Amneris and true love doomed to dusty death.

Melvina stifled a giggle and tiptoed to the sanctuary of the kitchen.

Don played on to Alma, Amaryllis, Andrew and Andrew's zoo.



The three of them clapped heartily when Don brought his concert to a close, and Don and Alma ignored the familiar diminution of the audience.

Andrew's animals dispersed to the area around the kennel and, like shy animals scenting the end of peril, the human complement of Homedale began to reconvene.

"I can show you your room, Amaryllis," Jo offered.

"You mean I can stay?" Amaryllis asked.

"Of course you can, child, we want you," Alma said. You'll fit right in.

"Good to have one more girl," Luke beamed.

"Fit right in," Andrew interrupted incoherently. "Like one more goat, one more rabbit."

Amaryllis pulled her hand away from him.

"You dare say I'm like some animal."

"Now, Andrew," Alma soothed automatically. "I'm sure Andrew didn't mean anything like that, dear. Did you?"

But Andrew knew he couldn't explain whatever he had meant. It was one thing for Alma Blake to collect all the people she had already, or for him to collect his four-legged menagerie, but he felt something different about this girl and had felt it since the first moment he had seen her racing past him in panic the other day. It was unfair to feel all this and not to be able to let anyone, any human, know what he felt, so he turned

abruptly and went off toward his cages and his pens.

"I don't know what gets into Andrew," Alma fluttered on, "but, you mustn't pay him any attention, dear. He has these moods, but actually we're the happiest of families. Let Jo show you your room."

"You show her that Chinese robe I gave you for Christmas," Luke smiled his face into a map of delight. "Maybe she'd like one, too."

"Oh, clothes!" Amaryllis brought stricken hand to her face. "I must find a way to bring my things here, Mrs. Blake. Without my mother stopping me. She would want me to stay with her forever, doing dukker, reading tea leaves for foolish people."

"Well, I think we all have a right to lead our own lives," Alma said, crusading fervor brightening her eyes. "We'll find some way to help you get your clothes."

"You just tell me when," Luke filled the breach. "I can run you to your house in the scooter while you get whatever you want You ever ride a scooter, hey?"

Amaryllis turned and gave Luke the full force of her widest smile.

"I'd like to ride your scooter," she said. And then with a long pause: "Luke?"

"That's me, Luke!"

It was much later in the day that Mr. Antoine was walking

in a haze of serious metaphysical thoughts down the main street of Acron. It was the hour of his appointment with his guru and his mind was a tracery of arabesque astrology symbols, the trump faces of the Tarot deck and varied numerical computations based on the maiden and married names of Alma and Thelma. "If she had only married somebody named Zbrask!" he muttered to himself. "It could have worked out perfectly." He shook his head in gloom and turned into a doorway.

A grave Chinese greeted him. "So sorry, sir. Un-opening until next week. Please accept our advertising card."

"Excuse me. Wrong house," Mr. Antoine said, taking in his hand the pasteboard slip reading: "NEW IMPERIAL CATHAY, Traditional Chinese Cooking the Wei Way."

Mr. Antoine read the card impatiently and continued down the street. From the doorway of a seemingly empty store a sibilant Tsssst! assailed his ears. He turned and saw the sign in the soap-streaked window: "PALM READING WHILE YOU WAIT. TEA LEAVES, CARDS. Why Not Know The FUTURE Today?!!"

"Ah, there you are!" Mr. Antoine said to the statuesque figure in the doorway. "Isn't this a new place? I was sure you were down the street."

"You will follow me," said the gypsy woman without explanation. She was a good three inches taller

than Mr. Antoine and carried her sibyl's face on a frame that could have done credit to a circus strong woman painted by a Reubens in Rembrandt browns.

"I'm taking you to my new holy of holies," she said, as Mr. Antoine followed her inside the dingy store. "Only there may we learn the Great Unknown."

She swept aside a flowered chintz curtain and two steps later a second curtain of embossed Woolworth plastic.

They were now in a curtained square about the size of a gasoline station Rest Room in the far corner of which another gypsy woman was hard at work picking through the scalp of a seven-year-old gypsy boy.

"Clara Boyton, this is not your room," the sibyl said sharply. "How dare you!"

"Aw, it's too hot for the kid back there," the other gypsy woman said, unawed.

"New York trash!" the sibyl said grandly, sweeping aside another curtain and leading Mr. Antoine hastily into still another subdivision.

She posed for a moment before unveiling the next partition. Its curtain revealed the bottom of a cast-iron bedstead, two sets of entwined bare feet and a portion of legs to go with them, a series of excited and emotive squeals before the sibyl let the curtain drop again.

"Wrong, damn' room," she said curtly, and swept away the curtain at right angles to the false revelation.

Another cubicle, and in this one a guiltily surprised Amaryllis kneeling before an open bureau drawer.

The sibyl leaped at Amaryllis and stung her face with slaps to either cheek.

"I'll be back!" the sibyl said. "You mind, I'll be back!"

She ducked again to Mr. Antoine's side and raised her arms for the remaining curtain.

"That poor girl?" Mr. Antoine could not help asking.

"Ungrateful daughter," the sibyl said. "She has some crazy idea about leaving home. Says she has too much liberty here. She wants to be tied down. Well, I'll tie her down, all right!"

She shook her head in silent motherly indignation before remembering her mission of the moment.

"Here is the end of our Quest!" she said, and pushed the last curtain aside. Sunset light streamed through the cracked glass top of a wooden door. The sibyl stepped forward and threw the door open with a gesture sounding mysterious trumpets in the far distance. There was a raddled concrete flooring to a back porch area flanked by a fire escape and several overflowing trash cans. From one of the trash cans a life-

size doll, mother-naked, stared candidly at Mr. Antoine, unblinking China-blue eyes leveled from under a stiff blonde marcel.

"To plumb the secrets of the Universe, it is Nature we must be near," the sibyl said.

Hiking up her skirts matter-of-factly, she squatted down on the cement and scooped up a pack of cards lying there in disarray.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said to Mr. Antoine, and pointed to the cement in front of him.

Mr. Antoine plucked his trouser creases gingerly and lowered himself into a sitting position. The sibyl was shuffling the cards and muttering under her breath.

She dealt four piles of four cards each and then looked up at Mr. Antoine with a child's wide, mischievous smile.

"The first pile," she said. "Here is what is in the House. One Jack, this tricky fellow..."

"Madame Esmeralda, you are superb!" Mr. Antoine said in honest awe. Nothing in his books, neither in Eliphas Levi nor Montague Summers was one half so real and tingling as this confident crone crouched before him, the doll's mad face peering over her shoulder, juggling destiny in a handful of soiled playing car cards.

Madame Esmeralda's instruction detained Mr. Antoine

for another half hour. She beguiled him with hints that his suspicions about the 189th pearl were correct; there was some connection between its whereabouts and the future of Mimosa, but it was all so vague!

He left the dingy storefront as bemused as when he had entered, nodding a Hello in reflex to Luke whose scooter idled at the curb, not noticing the girl who ran out behind him with a package bound in a bandana, concentrating carefully on what he had learned.

"First pile, House. Second pile, Mind. Third pile, Heart. Fourth pile, Soul. H, M, H, S. 'Now, here is what is in the House!'"

## IX

"Now, that was what was in the House," Mr. Antoine said gravely. "In this pile we will find out what is..." He held his cards and studied them for a moment. "...in the Mind!"

"Monsieur Antoine, you are superb!" Thelma said, leaning back in her chair opposite him at the table in the dim and cluttered sanctum in back of his beauty salon.

"Your great gifts!" She twinkled a jeweled hand in helpless tribute.

Mr. Antoine smiled thanks. He had put in long and dedicated hours since his visit with the gypsy sibyl and it was gratifying to see them rewarded. He felt that this divination was going as well as any he could remember. The Tiffany lampshade filtered its rainbow hues over the table end touched the pattern of his robe and the coiled splendor of his turban. It was not simply that the fall of the cards meant something; it was that today he was able to see beyond their simple meaning, to embroider and project



and entwine them with the other arcane meanings of stars and numbers. It was as if the dumb doll smiling over Madame Esmeralda's shoulder on the back porch had communicated some vast universal secret.

"I've actually just learned this method from my teacher," Mr. Antoine confessed. "It seems to fall into place beautifully."

"He must be a wonder," Thelma said.

"He is a she, as I explained to you," Mr. Antoine said, beginning to be nettled. When the Infinite was so close, the slightest distraction could make it fade and recede, and who could know when It might come again?

"Now," he said firmly, "let us see what is in the Mind."

A shaft of bright fluorescent light from the beauty salon sank the lampshade hues into diluted white and Raoul's head popped through the door behind Mr. Antoine.

"Don't hurry, Grandmother," Raoul bleated. "I'll wait for you outside here. Paul brought me in the car. I have a book to read." His head popped back and the room darkened again, but Mr. Antoine knew the moment of truth had passed. Thelma was stroking the glass of the lampshade as if magic had never been. The cards in the pile were cards with surface meanings but little more.

"Hate interruptions!" Mr. Antoine said, now as much in sorrow as in anger. If he forced himself, he could

still push back the first or second veil of fate. "A King of Diamonds," he said. "That's good. A terrible ten of clubs."

Thelma wasn't even listening. "You know, Monsieur Antoine," she said, "I've always loved this lamp." She held her cheek against its translucent warmth. "It's the design. Peacock feathers! They've always been special for me, always stood me in good stead."

Mr. Antoine let his cards fall. A really good necromancer had to learn to adapt, to go along with situations and salvage what he could from a world of mechanics and materialists.

"They are a very powerful symbol, Mrs. Fahnstock," he agreed, looking at the lampshade more closely. "Very powerful. In some cultures for the good, and in some for the bad."

"But in ours, surely for the bad!" Thelma said smugly.

"Don't be too sure," Antoine regained the upper hand. "All symbols can be both good and bad. They are very changeable, and one must be careful in interpretation. The cards, the stack of what is in the Mind, are symbols, too. The King is a face card, the ten of clubs a harbinger of woe. Danger, juxtaposed to a face card. Harm to the face..." He was speaking to himself now, seeing a new gleam to follow.

Outside in the beauty shop, Raoul had made himself comfortable on a padded barber chair, one of the reasons he always enjoyed waiting for his Grandmother at Mr. Antoine's. The high, hugging seat was a perfect throne for serious reading. He held his tongue between his teeth, intent in concentration on the Effects of Fallout bulletin he held in his hands. He read oblivious to the world around him like some enormous young Buddha enshrined above the throng.

Peter Willets was a member of the throng walking downtown in Acron and past Mr. Antoine's display window. Peter was, in person, the entire art colony of Acron. Every few months he finished canvases enough to tote to a borrowed station wagon and to take into the city to try to find a gallery, and this was one such day. Acron appreciated Peter Willets without doing him the indignity of trying to understand him, so when he put his stack of paintings down to rest on the pavement in front of Mr. Antoine's passers-by peered unashamedly.

Peter was more rewarding than usual this trip for he had abandoned Post-Impressionism for a nude period and although he was experimenting with a style borrowed from Roault and Jack Levine, the nudes were very nude, especially the one displayed lying sideways on Peter's exposed outer canvas.

Paul, standing by the old Cadillac, looked at the painting casually and then pursed his lips in a whistle and cocked his head sidewise for a less distorted view. Other pedestrians followed Paul's example, leaning over as they strolled past to see the boldly outlined pin-up for the world of Far Out.

Raoul, mummified behind the window, read on. "Spinal column can be effected in early stages of fallout. One's walk, will, little by little, be warped out of line and into the typical Strontium-90 curvature."

This was the moment that Raoul chose to peer out over the top of the page.

All of Acron, he could see at a glance, had been effected. There must be a dozen people passing before his eyes, unknowing of their ravaged cells, but already listing dangerously to port or starboard. How had he been able to escape thus far? He must rush back to the safety of the Cadillac where he could seal himself in until he got back to Marchmont. Perhaps Grandmother would permit him to move his living quarters to the cellar. Poor Mimosa on the top floor must be saturated with the stuff!

"Oh, my God!" Raoul cried, seeing more people approaching the window and turning their heads into the fatal stance. "Oh, my God!" He shot out of the chair and bolted for the door.

"Hello, Raoul," Alma said pleasantly, coming

into the salon for a hair-set. "What's the hurry?"

But he had no reply for her as he dashed for the Cadillac.

Alma settled herself in the chair Raoul had vacated and picked up a years-old copy of Harper's Bazaar. Why, there was a photograph of a lady just as nude as one of Peter Willets's paintings! What was fashion coming to? She did hope Jo wouldn't start going around like that.

There was a sound from the back room and Alma recognized Thelma's voice. Hastily, she pulled the drier down over her head. It had been a nice day so far, no sense letting her sister spoil it.

"Remember now," Mr. Antoine was saying to Thelma. "Sunday week."

"I wrote it on my list," Thelma said regally. "I still don't understand about the missing pearl. I thought you'd find it for me."

"It's all tied together," Mr. Antoine said. "Only give me time to work it out. The important thing is to remember what I told you. Watch out for Sunday next!"

"I will," Thelma said through the closing door.

Mr. Antoine turned to Alma who was lifting the drier cautiously to see if the coast was truly clear.

"This goes for you, too, Mrs. Blake," he said.

"What goes for me, too, for heaven's sake?" Alma asked, allowing herself to come into full view. "I don't come to you for fortunes, Antoine; just for beauty!"

"Never mind," Mr. Antoine said. "You and Mrs. Fahnstock are under the same sign, identical twins, and the stars and cards and numbers all agree that you two Green Sisters will suffer some harm to your faces on next Sunday."

"Oh, Antoine!" Alma laughed. "Take off that ridiculous turban and talk sense while you fix my hair."

"Very well," Mr. Antoine said with a hurt chilliness. He retired to the back room to trade his turban and robe for a conventional white jacket. "She can't say I didn't give her fair warning, poor thing," he told himself.

This same morning saw the completion of Jerry's stairway tower at the construction site next to Marchmont.

As Jo had discovered from the blueprints, construction of the stairwell caused no real confusion in the overall building program. It had to be done anyway; all that her inspiration meant was that it was done now.

Jerry's romantic enthusiasm had driven the work crew to a new pitch and, even discounting the tower, the job was so far ahead of schedule that everyone could take off the rest of the day after the gala lunch hour.

"But not 'til after I finish my dance," Jerry requested. "A fellow needs some moral support."

"You're sure the old lady isn't going to be watching you, too?" the shovel operator inquired. "With a double-barrel shotgun?"

"Checked that out with Antoine," Jerry said. "She's got an appointment with him right now, and she always does a couple of hours shopping in town afterwards."

"I got the platform all set, Jerry," Luke called from the stair top. "Plenty room for you, man." Luke did a dance of his own down the stairway and at the foot discarded the dungarees he had put on over his best suit trousers. Amaryllis handed him his jacket.

"You look very nice, Luke," she said.

"Not bad for a poor Chinese boy," Luke admitted, brushing a straw curl of wood-shaving from his shoulder. "This is a preview of the Great Architect, honey."

"Well, go on up, Jerry," Jo prodded. She had had the idea in the first place, now she might as well see that it was carried off in style. "Mimosa may be willing to wait for Prince Charming, but I've got a hot lunch here that isn't."

Jerry started up the bare framework of the towering stair. At the first landing he leaned down, suddenly struck with something like stage-fright.

He had been building toward this moment for over

a week now, a fantasy in his waking as well as dreaming hours. Now that the moment was here, he felt shy and clumsy and foolish. It had been so easy in dreams, dancing high in the air and an enchanted window opening in the castle tower across from him, and from the window a Princess smiling at him, applauding and somehow flying into his arms and they lived happily ever after. But this was reality and he was a young man feeling hopelessly awkward half-way up a framework of two-by-sixes, dressed in overalls that weren't as white as they could have been, gawky and ridiculous as a teenager at his first prom.

"Do you really think I should?" he asked the world below.

"You get up there or I'll chase you up." Chris cried.

"You don't do it, I'll dance," the shovel man said. "Maybe this Mimosa doll would go for like a more mature man, hey?"

"Like an elephant," Jo jeered to keep her own spirits up.

There could be no turning back, so Jerry gripped the makeshift handrail and mounted to the top. Luke's platform was a good six-by-eight feet and Luke had even added a shallow safety balcony in case Jerry's dancing mood carried him away. Jerry took a long deep breath and pulled the transistor radio out of his apron pocket. He



turned the dial hopefully past commercials and found a strong solid rhythm. He placed the radio at a corner of the platform and twisted the volume high.

With a rasping sigh, he tapped one foot, then the other. And it began to melt into what it had been in all the dreams...

He was dancing! Up, up above the trees, he was bouncing with sheer happiness and letting his feet spell out a dream and a love story and a proposal that nobody could ever decipher except himself...and Mimosa?

Inside the castle were the Fairy Princess and the Toad. The Fairy Princess was rehearsing a Paris street scene while the Toad watched her from a perch near the ceiling. An antique phonograph wheezed a French music hall tune of the faded past.

"It's supposed to be winter," Mimosa chided Raoul. "Let me have more snow."

"Well, there's only one more box of Corn Flakes after this one," Raoul argued, squatting above the street scene flats. "I can't throw it all down at once." He nibbled greedily at some Corn Flakes in his hand.

Mimosa wore a long tight skirt and a furred jacket with tiny muff to match. She stamped her foot in vexation.

"I'll tell Grandma you didn't give me snow," she threatened.

"All right," Raoul said and released a shower of flakes.

Mimosa pirouetted into a stately gavotte in time to the music. But answering her own steps she heard a faint rhythm from outside. Raoul was munching more Corn Flakes. Mimosa danced to the window and let the shade up a foot or more and then stopped stark still to gaze out.

There was a man dancing outside her window! And he was dancing at her! Nothing like this had ever happened before in history or fable. And the man was, yes, he was, Jerry!

She leaned on her hands on the window sill and tapped her feet trying to match the new rhythms from outside. Jerry's feet were talking to her, telling her something about a dream and a love story and -- she blushed pleasantly as her own feet tapped on -- some kind of question about what a boy and a girl might really do...

"Mimosa, what are you doing?" Raoul asked pettishly from his height. "That's not the right dance."

"Oh, it's so right," Mimosa said. "Only you'll never know."

"Well, stop it and dance in the right place," Raoul said.

"I'll dance in the right place," Mimosa said. "Oh, will !! But not today. Not just today, but someday."

"What is going on?" Raoul said. "I'll tell Grandmother." He heaved his bulk with painful effort from its seat on the platform.

Mimosa pulled the window up all the way and leaned out. She clapped her hands together in their long brown gloves and then drew them to her lips to throw an avalanche of kisses.

By the time Raoul had got all the way down, she had closed the window again and, pirouetting chastely, was back in key with the tinkle from the old phonograph. Her dance was the same demure gavotte she had been rehearsing, but she did it now with a sly lilt, an inflection to every movement that made its stylized and old-fashioned innocence a naughty mockery.

"I don't like this at all, not at all," Raoul grumbled, looking out the window. There was nothing there but the silly derrick those people had been working on next door. People building up into the dangerous sky, when they should be burrowing down for safety. Raoul sniffed disconsolately.

Jerry came down from the tower touching only every third step.

"You were great, Jerry," Luke said.

"Almost like flamenco," Amaryllis gave her best compliment.

"It was wonderful!" Jerry puff puffed through out-of-breath gasps.

"Boy, some modesty!" Chris said. "It was wonderful!" he says!"

"I don't mean me," Jerry panted. "I mean I saw her. She waved and clapped.

That and just being there dancing for her. Oh, hell, you can't know."

"I think I do. A little, I think," Jo said and looked away. "Hi, Andrew!" She waved as if to change the subject.

Andrew had parked the milk truck and joined the spectators while the dance was going on. His animals, let loose for their outing, wandered about the construction site.

"Hi, Andrew," Jerry said.

"That was a good dance," Andrew said slowly. "It was a very old dance."

"But I just made it up," Jerry said.

"It was a very old dance you just made up," Andrew said.

"Have some hot lunch?" Jo offered.

"No, I have to get back to town," Andrew said.

"Hey! Grommet, Devil, Groobly, Bartholemew, into the truck! Whup!" The dogs, the cats, the young fox and the rabbit all

came obediently to his side and he shoed them into to the milk truck. "Amaryllis, you want a ride through town?"

Standing beside Luke, Amaryllis gave Andrew a puzzled stare. He shut the door on his zoo and made a motion toward her arm, awkwardly grazing her sleeve.

"Come on!" he said.

"Don't touch me, Andrew. I'm going to town with Luke," Amaryllis said. "You think you can treat me like an animal!"

Andrew stared back at her wearily.

"I do not treat you like an animal," he said, trying to make a child understand a simple fact. "I do treat animals like people."

Amaryllis shrugged and Luke led her up to the unfinished house where Chris was already handing out soup and sandwiches for lunch.

"Oh, hell!" Andrew said to nobody and the World and got into the milk truck.

Luke hurried Amaryllis through lunch the sooner to get her to town. He had been planning to take her to show off to his family ever since the day she had returned to Homedale and now, two movies, several long walks and motor scooter rides, and a half-dozen interesting but tentative kisses later, she had agreed to go with him.

"This is the restaurant," Luke said, parking the scooter.

"No, this one," as Amaryllis looked at the wrong side of the street. "That one is the new restaurant, the one I told you with the family of the cook at Marchmont that wants to steal my family's business. Come with me."

Amaryllis couldn't see what the fuss was about. Why shouldn't there be two restaurants? But she followed Luke dutifully to the entrance of the Old Imperial Canton.

A whole array of relatives crowded the doorway. At first Amaryllis assumed they were there to greet her and Luke, but a phrase or two of English amid the Chinese babble made her realize they had been observing the rival restaurant.

"Sunday, they open," said a patriarchal Chinese, "and with good luck they close. Monday."

"This is my father," Luke tried to make an introduction, but he was swimming against a strong current of commercial indignation.

"If you were any kind of son," the patriarch said to Luke, "you would have blown up that cheap joint by now."

"This is America, dad," Luke said. "You can't do things like that. Dad, this is Amaryllis."

"We have Mei Ling here," his father said, still ignoring the gypsy girl, "a cousin you don't know. Nobody knows she is our cousin so she has got a job as cashier with those bandits across the street. She will put

chewing gum on her abacus and hold it up to the window so with my spy-glasses I can count every penny they steal from us. How do you like that, peaceful son?"

"But that'll only make you feel worse," Luke said.

"All I need is one sign for war," his father said. "We can crush the Weis like spiders."

Luke gave up trying to make progress in English and began to shout a torrent of Chinese at his father and the others.

They looked at Amaryllis with interest.

"He says you live with him. True?" Mei Ling asked.

"I mean she lives in the same house is all," Luke tried to explain. "With Mrs. Blake." In his excitement, Alma became Mrs. Brake. "She is my fiancée."

"Well, not really fiancée," Amaryllis said. "Not yet, I mean. I haven't known Luke long enough to make up my mind or anything." Honestly they were as bad as a bunch of gypsies!

"You live with him, why not be his fiancée?" Mei Ling still wanted to know.

"Mrs. Brake is his fiancée," another Chinese girl suggested.

"Occidentals live like rabbits," a teenage boy suggested. "Everybody fiancée, all orgies."

Luke and his father between them managed to bring about some semblance of order and coherence and the group broke up into separate pursuits. Luke's father showed Amaryllis to a table in the restaurant.

"Okay, you have some good Chinese food," he invited her graciously. "You have some here and then you and Luke can spy over there when they open and see how bad they cook. Luke's not a bad boy, just impossible to stay around here and argue with me all day long."

"But we just had lunch," Amaryllis said.

"We'll have tea," Luke compromised.

They drank golden tea and Amaryllis got a fortune cookie which read: "Consistency is the hobgoblin of petty minds" and cheerfully substituted Confucius for Emerson.

"What does it mean?" she asked Luke.

"I don't know," Luke said. "What does mine mean: 'A woman is running water.'?"

"This batch has been cuckoo," his father said. "We're going to switch back to the place in Passaic that has the funny ones like: 'Man may go to moon, but he can't keep grapefruit from squirting in his eye at breakfast.' That's more what people like today."

There were family farewells mixed with more mutterings against the restaurant across the street and near confusions: "Why don't he ask Mrs. Brake to let him live with this girl if he wants her for fiancée?", before Luke and Amaryllis got away and into the scooter again. Jouncing



down Main Street they overtook Alma, on her way home from a rinse at Mr. Antoine's.

"Hop in!" Luke pulled over and Alma got into the sidecar while Amaryllis mounted pillion behind Luke.

"This is perfect," Alma shouted as they headed for the development. "It gives my hair that wind-blown look Mr. Antoine is so crazy about."

They all dismounted from the scooter in the usual Babel of Homedale greetings. Don was rocking silently on the tête-à-tête chair, on the back porch.

"How do you like it, Don?" Alma asked, shaking her head in front of his face. "Antoine says it's the Italian Look. It's supposed to be sticking all out like this. I saw that naked woman again in his place. In the magazine, I mean."

Don did not raise his head, but went on rocking wearily.

"Now, Don," Alma chided. "Is there something wrong?" Why don't you get your bull fiddle and play something?"

Don still refused to answer. He scrabbled with one hand into a trouser pocket and withdrew a crumpled sheet of note paper which he passed on to Alma.

"Honestly, Don, it doesn't help to be sullen, even if you're in pain," Alma said, and then her voice ran down as she read the letter.

"Dear Mr. Blake,

This is to inform you that you and your music are the laughing-stock of our family. If you had to be a musician, why didn't you learn to play a proper instrument? Or, better, go get yourself a job instead of being a burden.

Handicapped people have no difficulty getting jobs nowadays.

Yours sincerely,

A Well-Wisher"

Alma was shaking with fury by the time she had finished.

"I bet I know who's at the bottom of this," she said.

"Andrew, Chrissie, Jo, Luke...Where is anybody?" she called. Don went on rocking monotonously.

"I'll settle somebody's hash," Alma promised, showing the letter. "I'd settle it right now, if it wasn't more important to get my Don out of this bad old mood."

"But who could be so wicked?" Amaryllis wondered.

"Old Mrs. Fahnstock could, that's who," Melvina said, shaking her head.

"My sister. That's right," Alma said. "And she'll be sorry. I have to work tomorrow morning, but as soon as I'm through..."

The letter passed from hand to indignant, shamed hand.

"It's not fair," Jo said. "Don worked when he could, and that's more than she ever did."

"He isn't any laughing-stock," Jerry said. "Not in this house where we all laugh at each other anyway. Isn't that right Don?"

Don lurched up from his chair still silent and, supported painfully by his cane, went off to his room in the house.

"He gets really upset, he'll just stay there for days," Chris said. He felt a guilt he couldn't admit, recalling his bull fiddle imitation at Marchmont the week before.

Andrew had been tapping his foot angrily at the edge of the group ever since he had read the letter. Now, Amaryllis had moved to his side and was talking to him with intense concentration. At first he shook his head, but Amaryllis went right on with her argument and at last Andrew turned and trotted down to his shack by the kennel.

"He'll be just drinking his goat's milk and not talking to anybody," Melvina said. "Miserable!"

"Even the music is better than that," Jo said.

"Wait. You all wait," Amaryllis said.

Andrew had come out of his shack and was walking toward the house carrying his recorder. When he got to Don's door he raised it to his lips and began to emit the

uncertain off-key sounds that drove his animals away as from the plague. There were the usual jarring skirls and flats, but Amaryllis was nodding encouragement and Alma dared show the trace of a smile.

"It was a wonderful idea," she whispered to Amaryllis. "Thank you and Andrew. It may even work."

They all stood near the kitchen door listening and wincing a little as the recorder shrilled its horrid way. And then, from inside Don's door, came the unmistakable scrape of bow on bull fiddle. Then a plucked string or two and the subterranean bass sounds began to force a trellis of form on Andrew's tootling.

"It is working!" Alma whispered and hugged Amaryllis.

Tiddle-tiddle-tiddle, Voom-voom, voom, the sounds met and matched. Don's door edged open and he hobbled into the kitchen with the bass violin strapped to his game leg without stopping playing. Amaryllis led the way as the whole family crowded in through the kitchen door to sit on chairs, tables, floor, sink and listen with undivided attention to the latest concert, the first duet between individually unbearable artistes. It wasn't simply guilt and anger at the letter that held them there; something combined in Andrew and Don to make a new music of awkward but very real charm.

They were all of them too entranced even to notice the town ragpicker coming furtively up the road.

His shopping cart now carried a superstructure of aimless, airy sculpture, the accidental combination of almost two weeks' careful gleanings. Alma's hat in its newspaper wrapping, the stocking-frame, odd bits of wire and paper, the graceful dangle of several broken toys.

The ragpicker's ears caught the strange sounds from the rear of Homedale and absorbed them with boundless delight. Never had he heard such music! It was as if dump angels were singing to him and him alone from rubbish piles of truly celestial magnificence.

Tiddle-tiddle-tiddle, zoom-zoom, zoom.

The ragpicker moved almost in time to the queer melody, pushing his cart in excited and exalted jerks and bursts. He came abreast of the house on the front drive. From his unshaven face his eyes brightened at the HOMEDALE sign with its glitter letters catching the evening sun.

Two long, suspicious looks at the house satisfied him that there was no danger. In a hop, skip and a jump he was on the lawn, the sign picked up and tucked under his arm and back to his teetering cart, wheeling it away down hill with the music following him into the shadows as if he had snatched the Holy Grail.

The concert broke up with prolonged applause.

Don's face cracked into a near-smile. "Where's my goat's milk anyway," he growled to keep in character, but Alma was hugging him happily.

"I'll settle the other matter tomorrow," she said softly and still in solemn anger to herself.

"He did it very beautifully," Amaryllis said to herself aloud.

"What's that, honey?" Luke asked.

"Nothing."

X

Before Thelma had left Marchmont that morning, she had been persuaded to give her final imprimatur to Raoul's project.

He had brought it up many times in the past months, but the shock he had suffered peering out of the beauty parlor window Sunday overrode his normal awe of his Grandmother. She would have to listen to him whether he had been penciled in on the list for the morning or not. Survival was more important than protocol.

He strode up and down the front porch with an energy never before displayed, perspiration painting huge circles on his lavender shirt, as he quoted government statistics, Rand Corporation estimates and came back again and again to the blueprint of the Everyman's Survival Shelter he had spread on the wicker table.

"Your great-great-grandfather poured this house out of solid concrete," Thelma iterated.

"I know all that, Grandmother," Raoul said.

"It's stood firm and steadfast for a century," Thelma said. "It could outlast the Pyramids."

"I'm worried about us lasting," Raoul said. It was the first time he had deliberately argued with Thelma and squirts of tingling adrenalin found their unaccustomed way through his vast and blubbery frame like children exploring Macy's in the dead of night. "At Hiroshima..." He quoted an impressive list of morbid statistics. "In the desert tests...At Bikini, the whole island...and the bombs now are even bigger."

"But the expense!" Thelma made one last try.

"Can ashes spend money?" Raoul asked dramatically. "And besides, it comes ready-to-assemble, so Steadman and Paul can dig the area out and put it all together under my direction."

"All right, Raoul," Thelma said. "I'll admit there are some few aspects of this modern world which I do not comprehend, nor do I care to, so I shall act on your advice. You may get Paul and Steadman to begin, but be sure Mimosa's sets are ready for rehearsal when I come back from Monsieur Antoine's."

"Oh, Grandma, I knew you'd understand!" Raoul cried. "Paul, take this list to the Village Hardware and stop off at Taylor's and tell them to deliver the pre-fab as soon as they can. Steadman! Steadman!"



"Yes, Mr. Raoul," Steadman sighed.

"You get right down in the cellar and bring up some shovels. You can start while Paul's taking Grandma to town," Raoul said.

It was a busy morning.

Steadman began turning over sod meticulously, still clothed in his full butler's regalia and looking a little like the Gravedigger in a not-quite-modern-dress Hamlet.

"Dig, Steadman! You're just scratching," Raoul said. He had brought down a chair from the porch in order to superintend more effectively. "All that part inside the strings has to be dug out forty feet. You can't do it that way. Put on work clothes."

"These, Mr. Raoul," Steadman explained, "happen to be my work clothes."

"You know what I mean. Some old pants and a T-shirt," Raoul insisted.

"Trousers, not pants," Steadman said icily. "I hope."

He came back from the house in a pair of neatly pressed Army sun-tans and a BVD top.

"Does this meet with your approval, Mr. Raoul?"

"Well, it's better," Raoul said. Veronica tittered from the pantry window.

Steadman did look funny, but actually he had a better build than she would have guessed. Nothing like the milkman, but still surprisingly

manly and substantial.

"Yoo-hoo, Steadman!" she waved from the pantry.

"Demoralizing!" Steadman said under his breath and bent to scooping up bits of loose earth with the garden spade.

"I just don't think you understand," Raoul pouted. "I can't show you, but I know you're supposed to get up more dirt than that. You're scratching, Steadman, not digging at all."

"I am a butler, Mr. Raoul, doing the best I can," Steadman said, and continued to scratch and scoop until Raoul left to take care of Mimosa's sets.

Veronica darted out with a pitcher of lemonade and a new sparkle in her eyes.

"I never knew you had such muscles, Steadman," she said.

"I have always endeavored to keep myself fit," Steadman said kindly. There had been no signs of abatement in this foolish girl's infatuation with the milkman, Andrew, and Steadman felt he owed it, somehow to himself, vaguely somehow to the standards of Marchmont, to distract her if he could; even at the risk of his own sacrifice on her romantic, addled altar.

"Could I just touch a muscle, Steadman?"

"Well, Veronica, very lightly."

Upstairs Raoul rushed through his backstage chores,

begrudging any time lost from the shelter project. Mimosa in lace and tiara tapped-danced roguishly around him as he pushed new backdrops into place.

"Where did you learn that silly dance?" Raoul asked. "It's new, isn't it?"

"Brand new," Mimosa hummed in time to her steps. "Brand new and it came in through the air, Raoul!"

"Well, wherever it came from, Grandma doesn't like it," Raoul said. "She told me, so you'd better stop!"

"Pooh!" Mimosa said. "I like it, and I'll dance it. She doesn't scare me anymore. You know, she tried that old peacock feather thing yesterday and it didn't even bother me. It was just feathers and they tickled so I almost laughed, but I didn't want her to find out so I pretended to cry,"

"That's as may be," Raoul said, "but there's something else you better not let her find out."

"What do you mean?" Mimosa halted in mid-rhythm.

"The missing pearl. If she ever knew that, it'd be something even worse than peacock feathers when they worked, I bet," Raoul said.

"How did you know?"

"I saw you playing with it," Raoul said. "But I didn't tell. And I won't, Mimosa, if you'll just try to treat me a little nicer. You know nobody does, and I never used to mind, but now I do! Just getting Grandma to

let me build that shelter, talking up to her, it's started me thinking all kinds of things."

"You can pick your own guide," Mimosa repeated. "It doesn't have to be the one you started out with.' You, can pick your own."

"What?" Raoul asked.

"Nothing," Mimosa said. "I mean, it seems like we started at the same time, Raoul. Starting to learn things and to grow up years after everybody else. Does it hurt you a little, too?"

"Oh, I know," Raoul said, flopping onto a prop chaise-lounge and puffing from his speeded up work. "It does hurt a little. It's funny it should be happening to both of us. And Her never knowing."

"We just won't let her know, Raoul," Mimosa said. "It can be the first real secret we ever had."

"And one she can't scare out of us," Raoul said.

"Good for you, Raoul!," Mimosa tapped across the floor and kissed her brother on his forehead.

"Golly, thanks, Mimosa," Raoul panted back to his feet. "I know I'm fat and funny-looking, but I'm a fat, funny-looking person, and you're a person, too. But let's not ever let Her know." Just a shadow of the old dread crossed his face as he finished up his work in the room and sped, for Raoul, back down to chilly Steadman.

When Paul came back from town, work speeded up.

Thelma ran Mimosa through her rehearsals quickly and took to her darkened room with one of the headaches which inevitably followed her excursions into the 20th Century world of downtown Acron. The headaches had been even worse since the loss of the pearl.

Paul knew how to shovel, and Steadman was shifted to a pick. The pick was heavy enough to break earth effectively from its own weight as long as Steadman could raise it and let it drop, while Paul lifted the loose dirt into an embankment along the sides of the pit as fast as Steadman broke it. By nightfall, when Raoul was willing to call a halt, they had quite a decent depression of several feet across the whole staked-out area.

"If Grandma would only let us rent a steam-shovel!" Raoul was wistful. "Could you drive one, Paul?"

"I could drive anything that got me out of hand shoveling," Paul said.

"We'll see," Raoul said. "I can't ask her right away, but I will. Yes, I will soon."

"I sincerely hope so," Steadman said.

But Thelma's bad nerves continued into the next day and Raoul was afraid to press his luck. He worked Steadman and Paul through the morning and even bent down himself once or twice to help with the rocks that cropped up as they delved a foot or so deeper. He felt put upon when, Steadman insisted on an hour for his and Paul's lunch.

"It isn't going nearly as fast today," Raoul said, "and it's time we're working against."

"It'll go slower before it goes faster," Paul said. "The deeper we go, the harder it is to throw the dirt out. You'll see."

"Well, we must do what we can," Raoul said. "My! It does give one an appetite!" He finished off a whole day's supply of taffy for his dessert.

They were all three back at the excavation and much too busy to notice Mr. Antoine's jeep arrive with Alma, her usually smiling mouth pressed in a grim line, his sole passenger.

When Alma had called him at his shop, just as soon as he had opened for the day, Mr. Antoine had reacted according to long habit in dealing with the Green Twins and had attempted to soothe Alma's anger, but as he read out the text of the letter he felt himself joining her indignation.

"A shocking thing," he said. "I have to admit I don't blame you for feeling that way, dear, not at all. It's only that I hate precipitate action. We don't know what the stars have in reserve and we may upset the whole apple-cart."

"Stars, my eye," Alma had shouted irreverently into the receiver of the pay phone at the supermarket. "Thelma is going to get her lumps for this and all the

stars in the Milky Way aren't going to save her. Can you drive me up there as soon as I'm through work? At two. If you can't, I'll just get Luke or even a taxi." From a woman of Alma's financial caution, the taxi was the crowning evidence of total war.

"I'll be right in front of the store," Mr. Antoine said.

He had spent what time the rest of the morning spared him from sets and rinses poring over the two sisters' charts. Like any astrologer, Mr. Antoine delighted in having at hand a pair of identical twins to study. Here was the most convincing proof not only of the significance of the heavenly pattern at birth, but of the miniscule differences in human personality caused by a time lapse of mere minutes that made two persons respond consistently to the same astral influences, yet act out their responses in quite individual fashions. For a vague and general picture Mr. Antoine could use either sister's horoscope to outline the future for both, but it was their differences that interested the astrologer-beautician more than the similarities of their fates. Especially now.

There was a cusp in Thelma's pattern that did not quite match Alma's. Perhaps this could be justification, Mr. Antoine thought, for him to stretch the ethics of his science just a trifle, the excuse he needed to lend Alma his active aid.

Nonetheless, he was still nervous as he sat in the jeep before the manorial Marchmont steps and awaited her return.

Alma did not knock when she entered. She spurned a Steadman who was not there and tramped heavily up the stairway to her twin's quarters. Such a dim, funny old house now! Who could think of it as a place where two little girls had grown up together, played with dolls, cried over tumbles and dried each other's tears...

Alma swung open Thelma's door and strode into the room holding the offending letter in her outstretched hand.

Veronica, knitting in a rocker and listening to Thelma's complaints about food, service and the World, hardly recognized the angry apparition before her.

"I'll bet you wrote this letter!" Alma cried, brandishing the typescript. "Didn't you? Didn't you?"

"Alma!" Thelma cried out in real alarm. "Close that door! There's a draft and I'm a sick woman!"

"Answer me," Alma said firmly, ignoring the door. "Did you or did you not perpetrate this...this dastardly deed?"

Thelma took refuge behind the opacity of her oxygen tent.

"I can't see you," she said. "Don't know what



you're taking about. This teacup has steamed my tent. You mean me, I write, uh..."

"I won't let you get away with this, Thelma," Alma said. She picked up the lower edge of the tent and revealed Thelma cowering into her pillow. "You don't need to hide under any old tent. You're as healthy as I am. Now answer me. Did you write this?" She poked the wilted letter through the tent's opening.

Veronica had risen to her feet still partly numb with shock.

"Mrs. Blake! Mrs. Blake! Mrs. Blake!" she moaned. "Oh, don't chill her. Poor Mrs. Fahnstock!"

"Poor Mrs. Fahnstock my eye," Alma said. "She's a ravening monster."

"She didn't write it," Veronica said, striking a Joan at the Stake pose. "Mrs. Fahnstock can't type. So there. I wrote it on that machine on the table."

"Hah!" Alma hah-ed.

"She did dictate it," Veronica quailed as Alma turned toward her. "But she isn't well. She'll catch cold. Pneumonia! Mrs. Blake!" Veronica's wails rose to an operatic high as Alma nipped a hand in under the tent and removed the creamer from Thelma's tea tray. Striding across the room to the typewriter, she emptied the thick cream onto the platen and down among the keys of the old machine.

"Don't you Mrs. Blake me," she cautioned Veronica.

"Oh, the poor typewriter!" Veronica keened. "It didn't do anything."

Alma continued to prowl the room. Thelma mewed and moaned from her violated tent, protests that never became fully articulate as Alma went into the bathroom and turned on all the taps full blast, flushed the toilet with a rude loud twist, crossed back to throw a window open wide, slapped rocking chairs as she swept past setting the whole room into crazy motion behind her. Veronica wallowed in her wake, trying to turn off taps, sssshing the roiling toilet bowl, closing windows, stilling rockers, shutting off an electric fan.

Alma paused majestically at the doorway. At that moment she looked every inch as formidable as ever Thelma had in her most outrageous moods.

"And now, good day!" she said. Just before leaving she snatched at a cord dangling next to her hand and with a triumphant tug pulled down several dozen hat boxes in a chain reaction that brought tumbling after them dresses, robes, coats, fur pieces, the whole magpie's nest of the master closet.

"Steadman, help!" Veronica choked out through authentic tears.

"She did it," Alma said, still grim, rejoining Mr. Antoine at the jeep. "Veronica admitted she dictated the letter. I threw a scare into her, Antoine, but she has

more coming to her and you are going to help me."

"Oh, dear," Mr. Antoine said, turning the jeep down the drive. "I suppose she does. I suppose I am. I just hope the stars..."

## XI

Next day was Sunday and Alma was knocking at Mr. Antoine's door by eleven in the morning. All expectations of a normal Sunday at Homedale, sleeping late and picnic dinners, had evaporated in her continuing anger.

Mr. Antoine surprised her by answering her first knock, fully dressed for whatever rigors the day might bring.

"Somebody's even stolen our little sign off the lawn," Alma said before she had even come in the door. "Deliberately stolen it, and you know who I suspect. She's probably burning it and sticking pins into images, or whatever They do."

"I'm sure things are quite bad enough without bringing voodoo into it," Mr. Antoine said. "Now, dear, let me tell you that I have already had a visitor this morning and I think I begin to see a way of settling your score while righting a grave wrong at the same time."

"She was here?" Alma asked, furious,

"Not Mrs. Fahnstock," Antoine said. "Your own Jerry stopped in to ask my help and advice. It seems he is in love with Mimosa."

"Of course," Alma said. "Everybody knows that. Except maybe Thelma."

"But don't you see, my dear," Mr. Antoine explained gently, "this could open the way to a victory over your sister that would be based on something more than spite and hate?"

"I'm still too mad to see straight," Alma admitted with a rueful trace of her normal good humor.

"The stars that you laugh at so," Mr. Antoine went on, "seldom lend themselves to negative actions, but prefer the constructive. In other words, they frown on hate and cooperate with love. At least part of your sister's unhappiness and her unfortunate actions comes from beyond her control; it is enforced on her by the thoughtless barbarity she inflicts on her children, on Mimosa most of all, I'm afraid.

"Now you and I, Mrs. Blake, are in a favorable position, knowing the house and its habits. We may have to bide our time, but here is the solution I propose, a fighting of hate with love..."

Mr. Antoine did not wear either his turban or his robe, but, bending over the table in the back room talking earnestly with Alma, he was more convincing as a philosopher

of the unseen currents of life than in any of his occult poses.

Alma was almost her old self by the time their conference broke up.

"It's sweet, Antoine," she said, "and it will make her just as rabid as any of the wicked ideas I had."

"That's the nice thing about virtue," Mr. Antoine said, "when it's properly applied. May I run you back to Homedale?"

"No, I feel like a spree," Alma said. "I really do. Let me take you to the new Chinese restaurant, Antoine. Half the family's going there today. My treat."

"Impossible," Mr. Antoine said firmly. "I shall take you."

The New Imperial Cathay was, in fact, a gala scene. The opening had been well advertised and curious townspeople gawked outside as new customers arrived. Alma and Mr. Antoine crossed the street just as the Marchmont Cadillac was depositing Veronica and Steadman. Thelma had permitted them both to leave only after prolonged discussion. It seemed to her that the whole morning had been occupied with people wheedling her.

First there had been Raoul nattering about his shelter.

"It's all here, Grandma, waiting to go into the ground, but we'll never get the hole dug with just Paul

and Steadman. If I could have a power shovel for just one morning, and the crew from Taylor's to assemble the parts, it would be ready for occupancy in a day. It says so right here in the folder."

"Haven't you done enough, boy, paralyzing my whole household for days on end?" Thelma fixed him with a basilisk eye that had always proved irresistible.

"You paralyzed the household for a tiny pearl," Raoul said rudely. "You still have people looking for it."

"Tiny pearl!" Thelma was too shocked to fight. "It's an enormous pearl! All right, all right, go ahead and call Taylor's."

She looked down at her pad and, sure enough, against all her hopes that it might have disappeared, there was Monsieur Antoine's warning about this being a dangerous day. She dabbed an unguent from one jar on her face and then dipped a cotton puff in another for extra insurance.

It was then that Veronica announced that she and Steadman planned to go traipsing off to lunch at some Chinese restaurant.

It had taken half an hour of boring explanations about the various Weis who had cooked at Marchmont and what it all meant to them and Madame would not be alone since Miss Mimosa and Mr. Raoul were here after all and Paul would only be away for the moments it would take to deliver them and pick them up, and if Madame had any hope of keeping this

Wei on as cook, and if Madame...and didn't Madame...and...

"All right, go," Thelma said. She sank back under the oxygen tent. She had covered her face with everything from Royal Jelly to plebian mud, and the whole with a Pore-Us Breathe-E-Z gauze mask. All she desired in the world was to be allowed to hide in peace under her mask, under her greases, under her tent to doze until this threatening day had passed without disaster. "Go!" She took two of the yellow pills and one of the purple ones and closed her eyes to fitful dreams before Steadman and Veronica were out of the house.

At the entrance to the New Imperial Cathay, Veronica and Steadman made an impressive couple. One of the Weis bowed them in with recognition of their and Marchmont's importance. Looking past them, the Wei leaped with excitement and bore down on Alma.

"Missy Fahnstock, so flattered," he said.

"Not Mrs. Fahnstock, Mrs. Blake!" Alma protested.

"A twin sister," Mr. Antoine explained, but the Wei shook his head in perplexity. A Mrs. Fahnstock who was not a Mrs. Fahnstock was not a good omen on a day as critical as this.

From across the street, the binoculars of Luke's father in the Old Imperial Canton were trained on the doorway.

"Are light flo Ruke to spy," a crone cackled, "but



we don't terr him bling the whore damn famiry."

Chris, Melvina, Jerry and Jo, Luke and Amaryllis had gone into the New Imperial Cathay earlier. All the dining room lacked was Don and his bull fiddle and Andrew and his zoo.

"I think things will work out fine," Alma told Mr. Antoine over their noodles. "If I can just keep my patience."

"She does look like Mrs. Fahnstock, but Mrs. Fahnstock has more style, don't you think?" Veronica asked Steadman. They were dissipating happily with a chocolate ice cream soda for Steadman and a parfait for Veronica.

"It's going too work, Jo," Jerry told Jo across their table. "It's got to work. Mr. Antoine's promised to help me. I don' t know how, but he will."

"It's terribly exciting," Jo said.

"I got to admit it's not bad food," Luke told Amaryllis. "And I don't think there's going to be any trouble after all."

"What trouble?" Amaryllis asked, struggling with her chop sticks.

"My family, this family, fighting," Luke said. "But nobody's going to be fool enough to make the Tong War sign. That's all olden days. Here, hold them like this." He guided her hands with the sticks and she smiled a dutiful pupil's smile.

"I want some more fortune cookies," Chris demanded.

"I declare, you don't eat that huge pile you have already," Melvina said.

"Opening day," the waitress said cheerfully. "Give you all the cookies you want."

She brought a whole new platter full.

"I don't care about the cookies," Chris told Melvina, "but for a dollar seventy-five I ought to get some kind of good fortune."

Miss Mei Ling, the fifth column cashier, stabbed gum on her abacus and held it to the window. Business was good, but it was not sensational and she could see that the Old Imperial Canton was absorbing a decent number of its own customers. Perhaps there was enough business for both families. If all the people in the street were potential customers... but most of them just loitered long enough to see what was going on and the rest were the gypsies who lived up the street and never ate in restaurants anyway...

One of the Weis signaled Mei Ling to lend a hand at clearing tables. Steadman and Veronica had risen and Steadman was counting money from a change purse. Mei Ling took his payment and moved on to Mr. Antoine's and Alma's table.

"No dessert," Alma said, playing aimlessly with the scattering of fried noodles on the cloth before her. "Just a little more tea before we go." She pushed the noodles

into two different groups.

Mei Ling leaned over the table fascinated. The design of the two noodle groups stood out clear and distinct. It could be no accident. The noodles stared at Mei Ling as if etched in fire for they were no longer merely fried noodles, they spelled out the two characters of The Dragon Spring Overflows!

The Dragon Spring Overflows, and right there on the table of the woman who had been greeted with such suspicious cordiality by Wei the elder!

Mei Ling stopped on her way to the door only long enough to throw a tray at Wei the younger.

From the door of the New Imperial Cathay her voice rang across the street to the Old Imperial Canton in shrill, high Chinese: "It is War! They have made the sign: The Dragon Spring Overflows!" A Wei kicked her rudely from behind and she went down in the door doorway as Luke's father, various brothers, cousins, aunts, all swarmed over her and into the fray.

For the next ten minutes the dining quarters of the New Imperial Cathay were a battleground. The Old Imperial Canton forces had brought strings of firecrackers with them which they threw cavalierly amid the diners. Steadman and Veronica cowered against one wall. Mr. Antoine tried to shield Alma with his body as, shaking with laughter, she kept peeking out to watch the fun. Melvina, Jo and Jerry simply tried to stay out of the way of the main action.

Chris seized the opportunity to throw dishes ad lib at all and anyone. Luke loyally joined the combat on his family's side.

It was at the height of the confusion that Amaryllis screamed. Under cover of the miniature Tong War, Madam Esmeralda and her cohorts had moved into the restaurant and made a bee-line for the renegade gypsy daughter. Amaryllis took refuge under a table, but her mother found her and with the help of villainous-looking relatives dragged her from under, and across the restaurant and into the street.

"Luke, help! Mrs. Blake!" Amaryllis shouted her loudest. But nobody inside the restaurant could hear and Luke on the sidewalk was much too busy dumping chow mein over an angry Wei.

"Fine daughter." Madame Esmeralda cried. "Giving up a good gypsy home to live like a vagabond. I'll teach you!" She raised a hand to deliver a smack in the middle of the street and was amazed to find that her hand could not descend.

"That's enough of that, lady," Andrew said. "Come along, Amaryllis."

He took Amaryllis by one arm and led her to the milk truck which stood with its motor running at the curb. Madame Esmeralda was too startled to do anything but let the other arm go.

"Let's get back to Homedale. I want to talk to

you," Andrew said.

"Yes, Andrew," said Amaryllis.

The battle in the restaurant quieted down. Two Acron officers and a state patrolman had arrived to restore order, and once their uniforms were on the scene Weis and Old Imperial Cantonese were willing to admit that honor had been satisfied on both sides.

"I haven't had so much excitement in years," Alma said, emerging from Mr. Antoine's protection.

"I should never have let you come here," Mr. Antoine scolded himself. "This was the day, you know, when you were to be especially careful lest something happen to your face."

"Oh, your stars!" Alma's laughter pealed.

"Hey, there!" an Acron policeman cried. One unquelled Wei at the serving counter was throwing a last dish of wet noodles after Luke's father. "Hey!"

The dish fell far short of its goal, hitting the wall above Alma, its contents moist and oozing to settle smack on Alma's forehead.

"Oh, my face!" Alma cried, still laughing. Those old stars were right." She seemed Medusa wearing a mask of comedy.

"Thank heaven it's no worse," Mr. Antoine said, dabbing at her with his napkin. "Here, Melvina, help Mrs. Blake. I must find a telephone and inquire about Mrs.

Fahnstock."

"But there can't be noodles there," Alma said.

"I know," Mr. Antoine said, "but there might be something worse.

The noise and excitement of the restaurant feud both attracted and repelled the town ragpicker. He stayed close to the edge of the tumult, fearful lest someone might upset his carefully balanced shopping cart, and only darted into the street for one moment when a Chinese paper lantern impossible to resist was thrown out of the New Imperial Cathay.

He added it to his pile and wheeled to safety down the nearest alley. The color of the lantern was grand and its flimsy roundness gave a finished unity to the material he had been collecting.

It was time for something to happen.

## XII

Steadman and Veronica, flushed with their adventure, got back to Marchmont just as the telephone started ringing.

Veronica answered it.

"Yes, Mr. Antoine. But we just left you," she said.

"No, I haven't even seen Mrs. Fahnstock. She's resting. Well, you know she doesn't like to be disturbed, but if you say it's important..."

"It is of the utmost importance," Mr. Antoine said from the phone booth in the New Imperial Cathay.

"All right," Veronica said. "You hold the line."

"Sometimes I think Mr. Antoine gets just a little beyond himself," she confided to Steadman.

She went up the stairs to Thelma's room and called softly to her mistress. No answer, save Thelma's sleeping snuffling, an old Pekinese dreaming of lost palaces.

Veronica shrugged unhappily and lifted the oxygen tent to shake. Thelma came to life with the

third jostle.

"What is it, Veronica? What has happened?"

And then: "Oh, my face!" Thelma cried, struggling to a sitting position. "It feels on fire. Call Mr. Antoine at once and then come back and help me."

Awed, Veronica rushed back to the telephone.

"...and you're to come right over," she finished, but Mr. Antoine had hung up before she completed her message.

"Jerry, Alma, come here," he was saying. "We must move now. The plan we talked about. There will never be another time as good as this one. You borrow Luke's scooter, Jerry, and follow us. We'll take the jeep and park in back."

"Melvina, you and Chris and Jo take a cab home," Alma was rustling in her purse. "Yes, a taxi. Get everything ready, clothes for Mimosa and Chris can pack a bag for Jerry. They'll have to get the boat to the islands. They can be married there before Thelma has a chance to do anything about it. Why, maybe Luke and Amaryllis can go along with them. I'm so excited I don't know whether to cry or sing."

"Pull yourself together dear, " Mr. Antoine said.

"Everything depends on you, you know."



Andrew and Amaryllis were almost to Homedale in the milk truck when Amaryllis moved closer to Andrew.

"We could talk not at Homedale?" she said. "I mean, it is always so full of people."

"But where?" Andrew asked.

"Stop near here," Amaryllis said. "I know a place I found that time I ran away. A beautiful place to talk."

Andrew braked the truck where she told him and they walked down the road with the animals following them.

"Down here," Amaryllis said. She parted some bushes and revealed a slow-flowing creek with cleared grassland along its banks. "Do you think it's beautiful, too, Andrew?"

"Too beautiful to talk," Andrew said. "Hey!" He jumped with pure delight. "Hey!" He threw a stick into the calm water and watched its ripples spread. Amaryllis came up behind him and put her hands over his eyes.

"Who?" she said.

"Everything," Andrew said and twisted until he held her in his arms.

"Yes, Andrew. Oh, yes," Amaryllis said as they sank into the soft turf. Her hands were running up and down his sides as he rolled onto his back. Amaryllis leaned over him and their mouths met in a long kiss.

It would have been longer, but Groobly and Bartholemew thought it was a game and came barking and licking to join them.

"Oh, Andrew," Amaryllis mourned. "When we finally both know what we want, what can we do?"

"You'll see," Andrew said. He drew out the pieces of his recorder from a hip pocket and put them together. With his first wailing note, the dogs scurried back from him. He played on long enough at something almost Greensleeves for all the animals to disappear.

"Now?" he asked.

"Now, and Now, and Now and Ever After," Amaryllis said, moving into his arms.

Steadman and Veronica were waiting at the door for Mr. Antoine. He had told them on no account to disturb the children, so Raoul and Mimosa were in their own quarters oblivious to family crisis. Alma had dismounted from the jeep around the bend in the road and was making her way into the familiar house through the side porch entrance.

"She's burned and blistered from forehead to chin," Veronica said. "She put six different kinds of cream on this morning and they must have all reacted together something awful."

"The sad thing is, she thought she was being

careful," Mr. Antoine said. "Take me to her and then you and Steadman prepare some tea. Don't come 'til I call you."

Poor Thelma was a mess, but Mr. Antoine's call had probably saved her from more serious damage.

"It's going to be all right, Mrs. Fahnstock," he said, "but through no fault of yours. You tried to outwit the stars, and they took their vengeance. There's a vast difference between reasonable precaution caution and overdoing things."

"I know, I know," Thelma said. "It feels much better since you put the emulsion on."

"Bad blisters, but just blisters," Mr. Antoine said.

"They'll be gone in a day or two, but you might have been marked for life if we hadn't caught you in time."

"Don't think I'm not grateful, Monsieur Antoine," Thelma forced herself to say.

"Don't think of that, dear lady," Mr. Antoine calmed her. "What you must have, and at once, is a deep, secure rest. Now, I'll give you two more of these pills, and I want you to sleep. To sleep, Mrs. Fahnstock, deep and calm sleep."

The almost hypnotic repetition of Mr. Antoine's voice, the new sedation added to her original dosage, and sheer relief combined to carry Thelma off to her beloved dreamland in a minutes. Mr. Antoine waved his hand at the closet and Alma emerged from the back-passage

she had not used since sisterly childhood games of hide-and-seek.

"You're sure she's asleep?" she asked.

"She was half asleep from her first pills," Mr. Antoine said. "Perfectly safe, but she's out like a light. Quickly, get in the bed while I move this chaise behind the screen.

"How she ever puts up with this tent," Alma wondered, getting into position on Thelma's bed. Mr. Antoine had shoved the chaise lounge and Thelma on it, into total concealment while Alma arranged herself.

"Very good," he said, inspecting Alma. "Except for the glasses. Let me have them. You use the lorgnette."

"Even behind the tent?" Alma asked.

"She always does, and Veronica might notice," Mr. Antoine said. "Try your lines."

"Children, Mr. Antoine has just told me a most amazing thing," Alma chirped from the tent.

"Not at all, not at all!" Mr. Antoine protested. "You sound like yourself. Make it severe and preachy like your sister talks."

"But I'm not severe, Antoine."

"For just five minutes you have to be," Mr. Antoine said. "Remember the letter."

Alma steeled herself. "Children," she said in a voice of Thelmatized grimness, "Mr. Antoine has just told me..."

"Fine!" Mr. Antoine said. He grasped the speaking tube to the kitchen.

"Veronica!"

"Yes," came muffled from belowstairs.

"Mrs. Fahnstock has changed her mind. She does not want tea, but she wants you and Steadman to bring both the children here and to come to yourselves. She has an important announcement."

"Well, I never," Veronica said. "Steadman, you fetch Mr. Raoul. I'll get Miss Mimosa."

They made a stylized picture, all four grouped at the foot of the bed as the shrouded figure in the oxygen tent surveyed them through a dimly discernible lorgnette.

"Not too close," the hoarse voice intoned. "Monsieur Antoine says it's not contagious, but I don't want to take any chances. The way I'm broken out, you might infect me."

"Now, Mr. Antoine has just told me a most amazing thing" the oxygen-tented presence sounded like an oracle. "The stars this day have great meaning for Raoul and Mimosa. Raoul is to go on with his important work on the shelter with whatever help he needs to do it quickly and efficiently. But Mimosa's whole life is to change. In fact, Mimosa must leave this house at once, without waiting a moment, and leave in the first vehicle she finds in the driveway and with whoever is driving it, not stopping even for clothes or belongings. This is her fate and her fate will take

care of all the petty details. Now, child, go!"

Raoul's round face puckered from the pressure of a hundred unaskable questions. Mimosa gave one radiant smile.

"Goodbye, Raoul," she said, pressing his hand, and sped from the room.

There was silence after she left, only the wheezing from behind the oxygen tent. It remained silent until Alma could hear the sound of the motor scooter, going down the drive.

"That will be all. Everyone," she rasped, and sank back against the pillows, lorgnette falling to her side.

"She needs sleep," Mr. Antoine said. "I shouldn't disturb her on any account until tomorrow morning."

Steadman, Veronica and Raoul filed out. Alma popped from the bed and she and Mr. Antoine peered out the window to wave at the vision of Mimosa, seated gracefully behind Jerry, a white feather boa streaming behind her, wheeling away forever from Marchmont. Only then did they push the slumbering Thelma back into view.

"Poor old thing" Alma said, "I'll tuck a blanket around her for the night. What I wouldn't give to be here when she wake up!"

Scooting to Homedale, Mimosa crowed with elation, hugging Jerry as she rode pillion, disdaining the sidecar. She was still dressed for Lady Windemere's Fan and she shed her boa and her long gloves along the road as they drove and her ornate cape and high-heeled shoes.

"I want to start as fresh as a baby," she called against the wind into Jerry's ear.

"Everything's set up," he said. "They've got clothes ready at Homedale and we'll catch the boat this afternoon and have our honeymoon on the islands."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Mimosa exulted.

"What?" Jerry asked.

"Nothing. I love you," Mimosa shouted.

Coming into the development a crowd of hiking Brownie Scouts cheered them up the road toward Homedale.

Homedale was in a state of more than usual chaos. Andrew and Amaryllis had returned not long before and Andrew was packing not only his own belongings but telephoning wildly to make provision for the animals. Jo and Amaryllis and Melvina were putting together a wardrobe for Mimosa and packing for Amaryllis.

"I want her to have it," Jo insisted, putting a pale blue shorty nightgown into Mimosa's suitcase. "It's something blue that a bride should have that I just happened to have around."

"You are sweet!" Amaryllis said. "Hey, here they are!"

Jerry and Mimosa were swept into the excitement.

From the house came the rasping strains of Mendelsohn's Wedding March as rendered on the bull fiddle by Don. Mimosa was swept into a corner of the garage by Jo and Amaryllis and stripped of her last vestige of Marchmont and re clothed, giggling and gasping, as a girl of 1963.

"Oh, one thing!" Mimosa remembered, moving swayingly in her new clothes back to the crowd. "Chris, you do it tomorrow, please. Give this to Grandma." She took a tiny pillbox from her purse and handed it to Chris. "Be sure it gets there." She kissed him roundly.

"Boy, I'll stick it right under the tent, if you want," Chris said.

"We're going to miss the boat!" Alma worried.

"Still plenty of time," Mr. Antoine said.

"Can't go to the boat, so I'll say Goodbye now" Don grumbled. "Your mother was a great actress, Mimosa, but I think you've got a better life ahead. Life, that's what people lack today!" He stumped back through the kitchen.

"You all go on," Andrew said. "Only place I can dump the animals is with the gypsies and I can't take Amaryllis near there. If they knew I was the one she was



going off with, they'd try to grab her and wouldn't give the beasts a home."

He chugged the milk truck away with its zoo cargo. The rest of the household crammed into Mr. Antoine's jeep and Luke's scooter.

"I thought it was Luke and Amaryllis," Alma said as they loaded up.

"So did I," said Luke. "Oh, well. 'Woman is like running water;' now I know what it means. "

The whole family, less Don, stood on the dock and waved Jerry and Mimosa and Amaryllis aboard. Jerry kept an arm tightly around Mimosa who still looked at every everyday sight as if it were a revelation of wonder.

"Hey," Jerry shouted from the deck. "Chris, I forgot something." He reached into a back pocket and produced the diablo which he threw in a twirling arc to the dock.

"I'll keep it," Chris called back. "I'll always keep it, Mimosa. Thanks, Jerry."

"Remember," Mimosa called. "Either hand can guide!"

"Where is Andrew?" Melvina asked.

"Don't worry," Chris said. "Old Andrew'll make it."

The boat whistle shrilled and the gangplank shuddered.

Amaryllis was leaning over the boat rail. "I want off," she said. "I don't want to go alone."

Just then the milk truck careened crazily up to the dock. Andrew leaped out and ran across the planking. He ignored the gangway and made a jump to catch the boat rail and pull himself up next to Amaryllis.

"It's all okay, honey," he said. "We can get the animals back as soon as the honeymoon is over."

"Oh, you Andrew!" Amaryllis said and pulled his head to hers.

The boat showed water between its side and the dock.

"What are you crying for, child?" Melvina asked Jo.

"I'm not a child," Jo said fiercely. "That's why I'm crying. I helped him go off with another girl. I even gave him the tower idea to court her. That's what I'm crying for. And because I like it."

Melvina nodded and had the wisdom to keep silent as Jo moved into her outstretched arms and sobbed against her.

Everybody waved 'til the boat was down past the jetty.

"Well, I suppose we ought to load up ourselves," Mr. Antoine said.

"Such a day," Alma said. "Wait! Do you see that girl?"

The dock crowd had thinned out now, but at the far end a small blonde girl sat alone on a suitcase, her

head lowered unhappily, not even waving Goodbye to anyone.

"I do believe she's missed somebody," Alma said. "Now Luke, you be a good boy and go over and speak to her. Tell her we've got an extra place at the table for dinner tonight and, if she doesn't have anywhere to stay, well..."

Luke took another look at the girl and brightened. She was a pretty little thing and as blonde as Amaryllis had been raven. Maybe that meant something.

Alma and Mr. Antoine watched Luke approach her, the first indignation when she thought she was being picked up, Luke's wave at the reassuring family group, her dab at her eyes and forced smile...

"Chris, go help with her suitcase," Alma directed. "You know, Jo, she might be able to lend some kind of a hand with the dolls..."

## XIII

Chris drove his bicycle up the Marchmont drive early the next afternoon. Homedale had heard, at least partially, from Mr. Antoine the reactions that had taken place earlier in the day.

Thelma had awakened early, pleased to find her face relatively unscathed and had summoned Veronica to listen to her list for the day. When she had come to "Miss Mimosa: Study Shaw," Veronica had reminded her that Miss Mimosa had been sent off into the World with her blessing.

"But such a thing never happened!" Thelma had cried, actually getting off the chaise without a helping hand. "You say you saw me? I must have been drugged. Get me Monsieur Antoine, at once."

Mr. Antoine had been firm about transacting all business on the telephone.

"I honestly couldn't face her," he said. "I

simply told her that she seemed in full possession of her faculties when she gave the children their instructions, and since the instructions were in accordance with their horoscopes I could only applaud her action."

"And then what did she say?" Alma asked eagerly.

"She said: 'There's been hanky-panky and you know it as well as I do, sir!' She never called me Sir before. And she said she didn't care to have any dealings with me in the future, but I suspect that will wear off. I'm afraid that my stars are so closely entwined with both of yours that we'll all be together for a long time..."

"Why, Antoine, you make us sound like a burden," Alma objected.

"Not at all, my dear," Mr. Antoine said hastily. "I just have moments of weakness when a quieter life seems...Ah, well, ignore it."

So Chris had been dispatched with the pillbox.

His knock on the door interrupted a conversation between Steadman and Veronica. The events of the last days had grown so trying to Steadman that he felt he could no longer face the risk of Veronica's possible defection to a milkman. Also, ever since the first day of the digging, she had shown a more flattering interest in him. Perhaps...he thought.

He held a candlestick to the pantry window as he moistened his cloth in polish.

"Veronica," he began. "I have a rather serious

question to ask you..."

"What, Steadman? Wait, I think there's somebody at the door," Veronica said.

"Pshaw!" Steadman said, but he went dutifully to admit Chris.

"Well, what brings you?" he asked.

"Mimosa told me to deliver this to Mrs. Fahnstock in person," Chris said. "Last thing she said before she went off to get married with Jerry and Amaryllis and Andrew."

"And who?" Steadman asked.

"Andrew, the milkman lives with us," Chris said. "He's marrying Amaryllis and Jerry's marrying Mimosa. Really busy weekend, huh?"

"Go right on up," Steadman said absently.

"Who was it?" Veronica asked.

"That young Christopher," Steadman said, polishing.

"What was it you wanted to ask me?" Veronica said, simpering slightly.

"Oh," Steadman said. "Well, I wondered if you though this pink polish was as good as the old kind," he said.

"Hmpf!" Veronica said. "Six of one and half a dozen of the other. Milkman's late today."

Upstairs, Chris burst as usual into Thelma's room.

"Yes, young man," Thelma said. "I can't imagine what business you have here today."

"This," said Chris, holding out the pillbox. "Mimosa said to be sure you got it."

"The girl is a common thief and if she wasn't my

flesh and blood she'd be prosecuted," Thelma said, reaching for the box. She opened it and stared transfixed. The 189<sup>th</sup> pearl!" she said. "Raoul said she stole it, and even if she sent it back, she is still a thief to wait this long."

Veronica came in, worried by Thelma's raised voice.

"So Miss Mimosa returned it," she said. "I knew she was an honest girl."

"No honest girl would have hoarded it in the first place," Thelma said. "Although Monsieur Antoine, from the very beginning, said the stars connected the pearl with her..."

"Goodbye all," Chris said, and left unnoticed.

"Madame must learn to forgive and forget," Veronica dared to counsel.

"Forgive, never," Thelma said. They might steal her best dream away from her but they could not touch her Marchmont pride. "Never! But I shall forget her at once, forget even that she blotted for me the sacred memory of her mother!"

"Madame still has Mr. Raoul."

"Of course," Thelma said. "The boy has good stuff in him. Where is he?"

"If Madame would come to the window," Veronica said. "They have the shelter all in place now."

Thelma let Veronica help her to the window. From it she could see the ravaged lawn of Marchmont now piled with dirt and scarred by the tracks of the power shovel. Raw earth covered the top of the shelter save for the hatchway entrance down which Raoul was handing supplies.

"My boy!" Thelma said, swelling with pride for all she had left.

Veronica waved to catch Raoul's attention and finally did. He straightened and waved to his Grandmother. He was in riding breeches, tight over his bulk, and had a sola topi on his head, yet even in his incongruous garb of a Victorian explorer, this afternoon he had a certain loutish dignity as he stood on top of his own created dream. He pointed dramatically to the hatchway and walked toward it. With a last wave at the window he went slowly down, sun helmet disappearing with a white blink, into the bowels of the earth.

"Mr. Future!" Thelma whispered proudly to herself and choked back a little sob at the wonder of it all.

Back of the development, back beyond the Acron Town Dump proper, the ragpicker had a small personal dump of his own. There, this afternoon, he had a ritual of his own, a movable feast held only when he knew he had sufficient treasure to consign to the smoldering heap.

Now he stood facing the sun and balanced the overloaded shopping cart in front of him. Carefully he removed Alma's hat from its newspaper wrapping and placed it in properly regal position on the pile. He checked everything, unconsciously but thoroughly. The hat, the fine white feather boa he had picked up Sunday, the stocking frame, the Chinese lantern, the mangled toys, the Homedale sign still glinting nicely, some artificial flowers. Still holding the newspaper in his hands, he, pushed the teetering cart up to the top of his ramp, as solemnly and devoutly as if officiating at a Viking funeral.

It was slow progress up the ramp, but he kept the cart from overturning. When he reached the very top, he gave



a sharp wrench to one side and the cart and contents with it tumbled to join the collections of past months and years, a riddle for such archeologists as might one day clamber out of shelters like Raoul's to inspect the world that had been.

The ragpicker found he still had the newspaper in his hand. He smoothed it out before him and looked at the front-page photograph of the Green Twins celebrating their 70th birthday. His lips moved to read the caption and his askew eyes tried to focus on the picture. The two heads swam before him in the sunlight and swam together to make one wavering face, half smiling, half frowning, half meeting the world, half disdaining it with tight shut eyes.

"Happy Birthday to you,

Happy Birthday to you,

Happy Birthday, dear ladies,

Happy Birthday to you," the ragpicker sang tunelessly to the dust and smoke of the dump.

He crumpled up the paper and let it fall with the rest of the detritus of life and love and longing and mystery.

Would there be better junk tomorrow?

#####



# Minnesota Historical Society

Copyright in this digital version belongs to the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, link to, or email content, however, for individual use.

To request permission for commercial or educational use, please contact the Minnesota Historical Society.



[www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org)