

Death-Dance of the Broken Dolls

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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Chapter I

Older Than Sin.

IT was good Scotch and it was on the house, but I wouldn't be drinking it if I wasn't sure Paul Locker knew he couldn't buy me a drink—or a hundred cases. „Okay, Paul,“ I said, low-toned. „You know what I want.“ It was still early for the Silver Sandal. A tall girl sitting down at the other end of the bar was the only customer in the lounge and the attendant was mopping the counter in front of her. Neither was near enough to hear me. „What's happened to Stanley Forbes?“

Locker's fat-drowned little eyes went blank. „I don't know. So help me, Jim, I ain't—haven't got a notion.“

„You lie,“ I murmured and took another sip. Someone, I thought, has taught him that the owner of a swank supper club doesn't say *ain't*. Someone's dressed him up in a two hundred dollar tux instead of the barkeep's apron that he used to wrap around his paunch. Someone's got him to scrape the stubble off his jowls till they're so pink they look peeled. But he's still a wrong finger, just like I'm still a dumb plainclothes dick in spite of the first-grade detective tag they've hung on me. „You lie,“ I repeated. „If you want a sucker who'll believe that the heir to the Third National Bank can disappear from your dive without your knowing how and why, try telling it to the little she-imp in the wall behind you.“

„The—!“ His head jerked around to that wall, jerked back to me. Pale blue ice filmed his eyes again but it had shattered for an instant to let terror peer through. „Why from here, Jim? Who says it was from here?“

„I do.“ Why, I wondered, had my casual mention of the carnival gadget framed in the silk-draped wall hit him so hard? „Stan Forbes was here, alone, night before last. Wednesday.“ Granted that thumb-size houri strutting around behind picture-frame glass is a little eerie the first time you see her. Locker must know that she's only a trick done with mirrors. „He was still sitting at this bar when you started to close up at five Thursday morning. He wasn't seen leaving here.“ Not at least by the doorman, who's a police stool. The Silver Sandal's one of the night spots we find it convenient to keep a close watch on. „He hasn't been seen since, here or anywhere else.“

I leaned forward a little. „His old man's keeping that quiet, Paul, but it got whispered around and the whispers got to me. You knew it already. Are you going to be smart and tell you know or do I have to get tough?“

The old Locker would have crumbled at that, or got nasty. The new one just said, tonelessly, „You won't get tough, Jim Corey. You can't play that way with me no—any more.“

He'd called my bluff. When this joint was just another rowdy roadhouse we could toss him around all we cared to and the worst flareback would be a whine from some local ward-boss. That was before I'd swapped a badge for chevrons and put in a little time knocking around a different kind of crook. Today, if we so much as scratched the furniture here, we'd have a half-dozen columnists ripping our

hides off in the papers and that would be only the beginning. How he'd done it was a puzzle, but you weren't a big shot in Parling City if you didn't rate a Silver Sandal ringside table and it was Paul Locker who decided that. He was aces with the top brass, from the mayor on down—unless we got him with something putrid.

What he didn't know, I hoped, was what Commissioner Gershon had said a half hour ago, „No, Corey. Harlow Forbes swings too much weight for me to order an investigation of his son's disappearance when he denies that young Stanley has disappeared. All I can do is give you twenty-four hours leave for personal business. It's not my responsibility what that business is, so long as it doesn't involve me or the department.”

That meant I was strictly on my own. It meant that if this thing went sour, Gershon would chop off my head to save his own. „Okay,” I yielded Locker's point. „So you're dug in solid. What's got you scared white-livered?”

„Me scared?” His eyes rounded with a look of innocence but he couldn't stop the pulse-flutter in his left temple. „That's funny, Jim. It's a scream. Know any more jokes?”

„Only that you think you're kidding me,” I came back but I knew I wasn't getting anywhere. I put my glass to my mouth and drank slowly.

It was empty when I set it down and so was my head of any new ideas. „Look, Paul,” I said. „I'd be lying in a cave on Okinawa, very dead, if it wasn't for Stan Forbes. I owe him for that and I pay my debts.” That was why I'd told the commissioner he could have my badge if he banned me from hunting Stan. „Stan's no playboy. When he got out of the army he went right to work in his father's bank, and I mean work. He's done no more stepping out than any other decent kid of twenty-three with a career to build. He came here a week ago last Saturday with a party. He came back the following Monday night and every night since, alone. That doesn't fit, so there's got to be a reason. You wouldn't be Paul Locker if you didn't know what that reason is.”

I pulled in breath. „Or who. Is it a female?”

He took so long answering I didn't think he was going to, but he finally squeezed it out. „Yes.”

„Okay. Which one of the floosies in your floor show is it?” I was feeling sickish. You get to know a kid pretty well when you've spent four years in the same outfit with him. I'd been sure Stan wouldn't let that wind of gal sink her claws in him. I'd been wrong and his father had been right, keeping the lid on the thing till the inevitable payoff. „Come on, Paul. Give me the name.”

„Let me get you another drink,” he stalled, snapping his fingers for the barkeep. The latter came to us fast, started making with glasses, bottles, ice right there. I could only keep a look on his boss's face, trying to hold him where I had him till I was free to talk again.

And trying to puzzle what was behind the fear under his skin. The layout didn't figure. Locker was no lily and he was smart. To risk the gold mine he'd built up here against a two or three way split of a breach-of-promise settlement, he'd have to be a dope or a gambler against crazy odds. I didn't think he was either.

Pondering that, I turned and reached for the new filled glass—It smashed to smithereens before I could grasp it!

The ash tray that had skidded down the counter and done that caromed off the back of the bar. Liquid splashed over the front edge, was cold on my thigh. The little scream I'd heard became a rueful exclamation, „I'm so sorry,” and the girl who'd been sitting down there was coming toward me. „I tried to hit that pretzel bowl and I missed. I'm a rotten shot.” I was conscious of sun-bronzed shoulders rising out of black froth, of dusky-red lips exclaiming, „Oh dear! It's spilled all over your leg,” and then I was looking down at a honey-hued, sleek face as slender fingers dabbed the wetness on my thigh with a white wisp of lace.

„Okay,” I said. „It's okay. Here, let me do that.” I'd dug out my own handkerchief, bent to use it but she kept on dabbing and so my cheek touched the satin warmth of hers.

„Listen, he put something in your drink,” and a cute little giggle covered that as she straightened up.

„I—It's perfectly terrible of me to laugh,” she apologized, „but I can't help it. You looked so comical reaching for the little glass that wasn't there.“

„I sure must have,” I growled, wiping the last drops from my suit. „I must have looked like a dope.” Under the smell of Scotch I caught another, faintly pungent trace of odor. Chloral. So Locker was desperate enough to have me slipped a Mickey.

I was burned up at myself for missing his signal to the barman. And I was frightened. I was afraid for Stan Forbes.

„Look, Jim,” Paul Locker was saying, „the crowd'll be showing up in about ten minutes now. Stick around and take in the floor show. Order what you want, there won't be no check.“

He was slipping off my hook and I let him go. I needed time. I watched him plod down the wide steps to the dining room, stop a moment and then turn along the bottom step to the continuation of the wall that backed the bar, and pull aside a fold of drape. There was a door behind it. Locker reached for its knob, hesitated, then came around to a tall, cadaverous individual who'd appeared from nowhere. I could see the club owner's gesture, apologetic, pleading.

„Don't you recognize me, Jim Corey?” the girl asked. „I'm Leila Humboldt.“

„Oh sure. Sure.“ I'd never seen her before. „What gave you the idea I didn't know you?”

„You didn't even nod,” she said. Everything about her looked good, the way her hair framed her elfin face, the lurking lights in her frank eyes, the slim body her black evening dress enclosed. Even with what I had on my mind, I was aware I was looking at someone too young and sweet to be hanging around a place like this unescorted. „I'll bet you've forgotten meeting me at the Fosdick dance with Stan Forbes. Have you seen him lately?”

The skin tightened over my cheekbones. She was telling me she was a friend of Stan's and that she knew I was. She was telling me she knew I was looking for him. „Why bring him up?” I grinned, warning her to skip the subject within hearing of the bartender. „Now that we meet again, how about a drink?”

„Hold that,” I checked the barman who already had fresh glasses out and was reaching for the pinch-bottle from which he'd poured my last one. „I see you've Irish there.” I pointed to an unopened fifth on the back-bar. „We'll have that. And a new bottle of soda, that last was flat.”

His big shoulders shrugged but he was wooden-faced. I watched him closely, as he scooped ice cubes from the bin, and was certain nothing went into the glasses except what should. I picked mine up as soon as it was filled and Leila did the same, and said, „Isn't this the most fascinating place in Parling City? Don't you just love it?“

I grunted.

„And isn't that girl in the wall weird? She haunts me. I want to go look at her again, Jim.“ Her left hand seized mine, tugging me off my stool. It was as cold as the tumbler in my other hand. „Come on.“

Neat, I thought. She's shifted us away from the barkeep's ear.

The customers had started to flock through the lounge and our progress was slow and halting. We kept our voices low. „You were wrong,“ Leila murmured. „Stan's not chasing a floozy in the chorus. Not my Stan.“

I hoped no one noticed the startled glance I couldn't help shooting at her. „I read your lips,“ she answered the question it asked. „I learned how during the war, as a nurse's aid in the deaf ward.“

It was pat. It was too pat. Was I being taken? „*Your* Stan, Leila? We were buddies for a damn long time but I don't recall his ever mentioning you.“

„He wouldn't. I was fourteen when he went into service.“ That would make her about nineteen now. „I was the neighbor's brat with knobby legs and braces on my teeth. He didn't know I existed. I'd changed by the time he came home.“ A smile touched her lips and there was pain in it. „He hadn't changed, he was just the same. I'd loved him always, Jim. Now he found out he loved me too and I was very happy until—until the Saturday night the Fosdicks brought us here.“

A knot of backs, black-clothed, or bare and draped with furs, barred us off from the thing she'd pretended to want to show me. „Since that night,“ Leila went on as we paused in the comparatively clear space behind them, „I haven't seen him, have had only a couple of hurried phone calls. He was tied up, he said, by something important. I believed him, too, until I had tea with Jennie Fosdick this afternoon and she told me she'd heard Stan was coming here night after night, that he was fascinated by that woman and—“

„What woman?“ I broke in. „I thought you said he wasn't chasing a showgirl.“

„He's not. If it was that, I wouldn't have come here to find him. I would have been hurt, not—frightened.“ In the blue-shadowed hollow beneath her throat her heart pumped. „Is there such a thing as magic, Jim? Black magic?“

It was ridiculous. But I didn't have the heart to laugh.

„She gives me the jitters,“ one of the barebacked women exclaimed and pulling back from the crowd almost knocked the glass from my hand. „You can stay here gaping at her, but I refuse to.“ Her escort mumbled a protest as he turned and Leila surprised me by slipping into the space they'd left.

I shoved in beside her, and felt her fingers close on my arm. „Isn't she adorable, Jim?“ She was back in her teen-age role. „Isn't she the cutest thing you ever saw?“

„Just ducky,“ I chuckled, as I wondered why she'd gotten us into this jam. A plush-covered rail kept us from crowding too close to the wall in which at eye level a glass-fronted box was sunk. A foot wide and some ten inches high, it contained, perfectly proportioned in the scale of an inch to the foot, a tiny rose garden. Just within the left-hand edge a high, vine-clad parapet ran straight back, then right-

angled and merged with the corner of the structure that closed in the rear. Only a portion of this was visible—a curiously narrow window which tapered upward, and half of a door whose stone frame had the same odd slant.

Over the garden wall one looked into an empty and somehow foreboding sky. „You’re mean,“ Leila pouted. „I think you’re awfully mean to poke fun at me,“ but crushed against her I could feel that she was trembling.

The garden could be explained as a sterling example of miniature model maker’s art, not so the woman who strolled among the flowers. In precise proportion to the rest, she was hardly more than five inches tall and she was alive. She was no mechanical doll. She was flesh and blood, an incredible tiny living creature. „See what I mean,“ Leila prattled. „Wouldn’t she bring out the wolf in anyone?“

She was double-talking again. She was saying that this was who’d taken Stan away from her. „Yeah,“ I grunted. „I see what you mean.“

And I did. Human size, the woman in the garden would get into any normal man’s blood. As she stooped to clip with her pruning shears a dead rosebush spray, her silvery, loose robe slitted to reveal a perfectly formed leg that tapered into a microscopic silver sandal. Her arms were uncovered and moved with exquisite grace. A silver girdle caught up the robe under its deeply cut neckline.

Etched cameo-like against the deep hue of the bush, her face was as young as this morning’s sunrise and as old as sin. There was mystery in the droop of the long, dark lashes that hid vaguely slanted eyes and in the flare of the nostrils, the insidious curve of the lips, there was a promise of forbidden delight.

She was beautiful—and evil. The garden was an appropriate setting for her, with the profusion of its flowers and the grim loom of the building whose oddly tapered window was caged over with heavy bronze bars. The door, too, was bronze—It was moving inward!

The woman twisted to it. For an instant she stood tensed, lips snarling back from pointed, feral teeth, then she had darted to the widening aperture and had vanished within. „Damn!“ growled the man beside me, then slid a sheepish grin to his girl and said, „Let’s get a dance in before the floor jams up.“

They were gone. The cluster against the rail had disintegrated. „Queer time for her to cut her act,“ I remarked, „just when the customers are getting here.“

An odd sound came from Leila, a barely audible word, „Look! Look, Jim. The window.“

I looked. At the sill tiny hands clutched the base of a vertical bar and deep within the embrasure was a thumbnail-size face. The hands jerked loose, the face jerked down out of sight, and chill prickles puckered my neck. That impossibly small face, mouth open with what seemed a yell for help, had been Stan Forbes’. Braceletting the wrists of his hands that clenched the bar had been manacles from which a gossamer chain had trailed back through the black slot.

The pain in my arm was Leila’s fingers, digging in. „Easy, honey,“ I muttered. „Take it easy. It’s bad enough, but it isn’t what you think. Stan hasn’t been shrunk to the size of a five and dime-store doll. It’s not black magic, Leila, it’s only a stunt.“

„A stunt,“ she repeated, hysteria jittering in her breathless voice. „How do you mean?“

„Take a slug of that whiskey and I’ll explain.” I had to get that glassy stare out of her eyes, before Locker or one of his gang saw how she looked and guessed why. There was a menace here and I didn’t want it aimed at her as well as me.

She did it. She emptied her glass and as soon as she let go my arm, I did the same.

„Tell me, Jim. Tell me quick.“

„Just a minute while I make sure no one spotted you wilt.” I looked around the lounge. There was a jam around the check window out in the lobby. Three attendants were behind the bar now and all too rushed to have been watching us. The plush rope was up across the gap in the railing at the head of the steps down to the dining floor but it wasn’t Paul Locker who presided there. It was the lank, lugubrious character I’d seen intercept him.

Tall as the latter was, his long-nosed visage and bald headpiece were topped by the white mane of an important looking personage whose booming tones came clearly to me through the gabble of the lounge. „I haven’t a reservation, Henri, and I don’t want one. I want to talk to—“ A crash of cymbals drowned the rest. I twisted back to Leila. „Harlow Forbes is here. Stan’s father. He must have decided to do some poking around on his own. If he sees me here, my name’s mud.“

„Mine too, Jim. I’m supposed to be at a Brierley College hop. He’d be sure to tell Dad and—But what’s behind that glass?”

„There’s nothing behind it. Not right behind it. That’s just a clever optical illusion worked by means of a series of lenses.” I’d seen the stunt for the first time at the New York World Fair in ’41. Assigned there as one of the detectives, I’d been allowed behind the scenes to see how it worked. „It’s like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. The house and garden and the woman are all actually full size. They’re in a big room somewhere back of this wall and so’s Stan. Now we know he’s there, we can—What’s wrong?” I broke off, seeing the girl’s pupils go large again. „Isn’t it clear?”

„Yes,” she whispered. „Yes, it’s quite clear. Only it doesn’t explain what we’ve seen, because—“ A muscle twitched in her cheek. „Because, Jim, there can’t be any big room back of this wall. It’s the outside wall of the building and the parking lot is beyond it.”

Chapter II

Out of Space—Out of Time.

I WENT cold all through, ice cold, for not remembering that. „Hold this.” I thrust my empty glass into Leila’s hand. „Hold it and stay right here,” and then I was stumping through the milling lounge towards the steps.

By the time I’d reached there, however, I’d got back enough control not to shoulder aside the sucker who was giving his name to Henri. Waiting while the maitre found that name on his list, unbuckled the rope and signaled a captain, I searched the floor for Locker but could see him nowhere. Rope-end in hand, Henri

laid colorless, fishy eyes on my face. „I want to talk to your boss,“ I told him. „But fast.“

„My boss, sir?“

„Locker.“

„Sorry, sir,“ he said. „Mr. Locker is occupied at the moment. If there is any complaint, I—“

„I said I want Paul Locker. Where is he?“

„I have no idea. If you will—“ But his look had flickered to the far sidewall and before he'd finished his lie I'd shoved him down the steps and was striding toward the drape-hidden door where I'd last seen the man I wanted. A little surprised at reaching it without interference, I plucked aside the silken fold, jerked open the door and pulled it shut behind me.

It blanked out sound and light. Peering into darkness I heard only the rasp of my own breathing, and smelled the rancid stench of the old juke-joint that had Cinderellaed into the swank Silver Sandal. Then my eyes accommodated themselves and I was in a narrow space between two vague walls, with stairs that climbed steeply between them.

As far as I knew the building had only the single, main floor but wherever these stairs went, they would lead me to Locker. The ladder-steep wooden treads creaked under my feet. My right hand trailed brick, my left hand rough boards gritty with dust. As I reached the upper landing I heard, somewhere ahead, a retreating, tiny scutter.

My cigarette lighter was in my hand, its flame lit. The glow could not reach to the end of the space but its frayed edge caught—

I shook my head. My eyes must have played a trick on me. What the light's edge had caught and lost had *not* been a thumb-size human figure. It was a mouse, I assured myself. Only a mouse.

Nevertheless, for a moment my scalp was prickling.

In the board wall beside me was a closed door. I pulled it open, stepped through into a small room that had only a skylight in its low, slanted ceiling. Grimy light seeped down through the dirt-encrusted glass, and spread over the battered files, a rust-spotted safe, and a scarred roll top desk out of whose pigeonholes a clutter of papers spilled. Paul Locker wasn't sitting at the desk. He lay huddled on the floorboards between it and its swivel chair. I went down to my knees beside him, felt no pulse in his flaccid wrist, saw no flutter of the hairs in his wide nostrils.

He was dead. He'd not been dead very long. The little splatter of blood on the white edge of his collar was still scarlet. There was a splotch on the close-shaved neck just above the collar's edge. It had squeezed out of a quarter-inch slit at the base of his skull.

It seemed grotesque that so small a puncture should have let out the life of this lumbering hulk. It would have been incredible to someone who did not know, as it was my business to know, that right there was a space between vertebrae and skull-case into which a nail file or a narrow penknife blade could be slipped, almost without effort, and sever the spinal cord.

A file or a knife blade or one blade of the miniature shears with which I'd seen a tiny woman prune a tiny rosebush.

I pulled the back of my hand across my brow, and wiped away the cold sweat that had sprung there. This was murder. I not only could, but must call in the Homicide Squad. Columnists, big shots, Harlow Forbes, no one could kick now if we tore the Silver Sandal to pieces looking for clues to the killer—and found Stan.

There was a telephone on the desk. I pushed erect, heard a clink at my feet and realized that I'd been kneeling on something, that it had stuck to the still damp cloth and had dropped off. It wasn't the death instrument. It was a flat door key, one of those silly solid gold gadgets no one ever buys for himself. The first time I'd ever heard of them was when I'd gone with Stan to a jeweler in Phoenix, while we were on desert maneuvers, and he'd ordered one to send to his father as a birthday gift. I recalled that he had ordered the wide finger hold initialed. I bent to see if this one had been monogrammed.

It was. The letters were *H.F.*, for Harlow Forbes.

I stared down at it, my brain racing. I'd overheard Stan's father saying that he didn't want a table, that he'd come here to talk to someone. Locker of course. Henri wouldn't have tried to give him the same brush-off he'd given me, and would have directed him up here. That wasn't more than fifteen minutes before I myself had started for the door below and I hadn't met Forbes coming out. That left ten minutes for him to have climbed to his room, had his talk, descended again, and for someone else to have killed Paul Locker and gotten out before I entered. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

But it seemed inconceivable that Harlow Forbes should have—Something stung the base of my skull. I slapped—tried to slap at it, but darkness invaded my brain too swiftly. I plunged dizzily down into oblivion.

My skull throbbed with pain. I was back to some kind of consciousness but I couldn't lift my hand to my head, couldn't move my feet. Strong light lay against my eyelids, pried them open to a green dazzle splotched with red, pink, and white.

The dazzle cleared. The green was the leaves of a lush bush through which I peered. The colored spots were roses. Huddled on my side, my wrists and ankles manacled, I looked slantwise across a sun-flooded rose garden to a towering, ivy-streamered wall.

The garden and its wall were at once familiar and strange, like some scene out of a recurrent dream. With dreamlike illogic they ended abruptly in a glittering murk. I stared into this. Something seemed to move within it—Suddenly the dream became a nightmare. Squinting against the too-bright sunlight I made out a monstrous and appalling face; purplish, writhing lips as long as my arm, vast nostrils out of whose cavernous nares protruded black hairs thick as hawsers, eyes the size of footballs staring in through what I now knew was glass.

I knew terribly that the tremendous sheet was the twelve by ten inch glass framed in the wall of the Silver Sandal's lounge—knew that the gargantuan face was no larger than my own had been when I'd gazed in here at the silvery-robed woman who now wandered into my field of view and was no longer tiny but as large as I.

Wrong! I was as small as she.

She paused, clipped a rose, lifted a graceful arm to tuck it into her dark wealth of hair. From behind my concealing bush I could not make out if the pruning shears with which she'd clipped that blood-red rose were stained with Paul

Locker's blood, but in that moment I wished she had used them on me rather than that I should be reduced to the size of „a five and dime-store doll.”

„Is there such a thing as magic?” Leila had asked me, „black magic?” and I'd laughed at her. I wasn't laughing now. I was fighting for sanity, and was clinging to the thought of the gray-eyed girl as my last link with the reasonable world. Was she still out there where I'd told her to stay? Was hers the gigantic, distorted face that peered in here? If I wriggled out from behind this screening bush, would she see me, smash the glass and—?

And what? I would live on a circus freak, a homunculus—*Jim*.

The whisper had seemed very near. „Jim Corey.” Now it was a low murmur right behind me and it had the very timbre of Leila Humboldt's voice. „Wake up, Jim.” Now I was hearing things as well as seeing them. “Please wake up, Jim.”

I wasn't asleep. I was insane. Leila was in the Silver Sandal's lounge. She wasn't in here. It wasn't her sob I heard, close behind me. I'd prove to myself that it wasn't. I rolled over, saw looming above me the building facade that backgrounded the garden; saw towering above me the door, only half of which had been visible through the glass. It was a quarter open and there was movement within the dark slit. Leila's voice: „Oh, thank God! I thought—I was afraid you were—“ A sob choked it, and then it gasped, „Quick, Jim. She isn't looking this way. Now's your chance to get back.”

Why didn't Leila reach out, pluck me up between thumb and forefinger and— „Oh, hurry.” I arched my back, did a belly-crawl across the threshold and into darkness.

Relieved breath whispered above me. I shoved cuffed hands hard against the floor, shoved up to my knees. I stared at Leila on her knees in front of me, her wrists handcuffed, her eyes black pits in a color-drained face that was on a level with mine.

She was my size. She also had shrunk to inches. „How—?” I gasped.

„A bus-boy told me you wanted me in Mr. Locker's office. He took me as far as the stairs, let me go on up alone. Just as I got to the top something stung me on the back of the neck and—and the next thing I knew, I was lying here beside you.”

„Beside you? But I was out there.”

„You came sort of half awake, wriggled out and seemed to go blank again.” She swallowed. „What's happened to us, Jim? Where are we?”

I tried desperately to think of something to say which would keep her from toppling over the brink of madness. Beyond her I could see only darkness but I had a sense of space immensely away, of space, even allowing for my distorted perception, too vast to be contained within the wall of any building.

Yet all this must be within the Silver Sandal's outer wall. Or was it? „I—I remember reading a book once, Leila, about the fourth dimension and stuff like that. This writer said, that two different worlds might overlap one another without the people of either knowing anything about the existence of the other. He said time might be different in the two worlds. It might for instance be night in one and day in the other. He said distances might be in different proportions, so I suppose that would mean size too. And he said there might be intersections of the two worlds—*mutual planes*—through which the people of one could pass into the other. The time I read that, I thought he was completely goofy but maybe I was

wrong.“ I grinned at her, pretending to believe what I was saying. „Maybe that’s what this is all about. What do you think? Does it make any sense to you?“

„It does, Jim, sort of. Prof. Manley at Brierley told us something about that theory in one of his lectures on Einsteinian Relativity, only I don’t remember—did your book say anything about the people of a one dimensional world being able to look into the other through a mutual plane? I mean, when we looked in here and saw Stan.“

„Stan!“ How could I have forgotten about him? „He’s here too, of course. Wonder where.“

„He’s right behind you.“

I swung around in the direction of her nod. A beam of light slanted down through the high, tapered window, and laid a brilliant trapezoid on the gray floor. Just within the wallward edge of this was the freckled, boyish face of Stanley Forbes. Not so boyish now. There were bluish pouches under the closed lids and the one cheek I could see was sunken and haggard. The other was pillowed on up-flung hands and from their handcuffed wrists a heavy chain trailed upward to a ring bolted to the wall.

„Chained like a dog,” I said, „to keep him from getting out where he could be seen. She didn’t have time to do the same for us,” and then another thought sent me squirming to Stan’s motionless form.

He wasn’t dead. His nostrils stirred with slow breathing and a pulse beat in the collarless V of his dress shirt. He was asleep, or—„I couldn’t wake him, Jim.” Leila had crawled to me. „I tried but I couldn’t. I think he’s been drugged.“

„Drugged’s right,” I agreed, settling back on my haunches. „That she-devil in the garden must have done it when she dragged him down from the window.” I was still in the dark shadow of the wall but the sunbeam lay across the girl’s face so that I could see how ghost-pale it was. „Well,” I grinned, trying to ease her. „We—We’ve found him.“

„And now we’ve got to find some way to get him out of here and back to our own world. But how, Jim?—We’ve got to think how.“

You had to hand it to that girl. Even if she didn’t know about that slit in the back of Paul Locker’s neck, what she did know was enough to give anyone the heebies. But she was trying to figure out how to save the guy she loved.

„We’re cuffed hand and foot and that dame’s out there.” With those damned shears of hers, I thought, but did not say. „She’d slap us down.“

„She wouldn’t dare, Jim. Not out there where people would see.“

„Why not? Anything that happens in this little box, the yokels would figure was part of the act. Wouldn’t you?“

„Yes,” Leila admitted. „That’s the terrible part of this, that we’re so near help, so near our own kind and yet we might as well be a million miles away.” That was getting me too. „They wouldn’t even hear us if we yelled to them. We didn’t hear Stan, remem—” She checked, as we heard a scrape of wood on wood, somewhere distant.

Far back, the blackness was slit by a gray streak, that widened slowly. As it widened, light spread across the floor and a shadow grew out into the patch of luminance, the gigantic shadow of a man.

The shadow protruded the huge outline of an arm and from the shadow-arm's fist jutted the shape of a gun the size of a 105 mm howitzer. Abruptly the shape dwindled to human size, to our less-than-human size. A door-slam cut off the light but there were groping footfalls in the blackness and a shape moved slowly toward us.

„It's Mr. Forbes," Leila whispered excitedly. „He got little as he came through but I saw him just as the door closed. It's Stan's father. He's found us and he knows the way back."

„Yes," I agreed dully. „He knows the way in and he knows the way back." But he would not be taking us back from this other-world. Was there any better place for a murderer to hide the evidence of his crime than in this space that was out of space and time? To hide the corpse of his victim and the body of the detective who knew him for a killer?

And that of the girl who was about to be witness to his second slaying.

Chapter III

To Hell and Back!

THE vague form neared, slowly but inexorably. A light-ray glinted from his gun. I dropped down, silencing my fall on spread palms, and instantly was in motion.

I'd not lost the skill acquired through months of training, and used through more months when it had meant the difference between life and death. Hobbled as I was, I slithered swiftly on my belly, without sound, heard Leila's gasp behind me. „Too bad," I thought, „that I can't take her along but she's in the light and if I'd tried to, neither of us would have a chance."

Forbes couldn't see me, I hoped, but my eyes were more accustomed to this darkness than his and I could make him out, cautiously advancing. I remembered to be careful not to silhouette myself against the light. That sent me straight out to meet him and he almost stepped on me as we passed.

I rolled hard against his legs, swept them out from under him.

His gun skittered away as he thudded down. I swarmed atop him, sledgehammered my chained fists down on his head. He heaved and I struck again. The threshing subsided, and he was very still.

The split-second furious action had taken more out of me than I'd expected. I lay panting, wondering if this was because of my tiny size. Harlow Forbes was out of the picture for a while and I knew there was an exit from this damnable space, knew that passing through it I should regain normal size, and be able to get help for the others. It was nearer than where Leila stood over Stan's huddled form, but I didn't dare leave them alone as long as that woman was in the garden.

Nor could I call. The woman would hear. I must go back.

She was rigid, watching me return. Her manacled hands were at her breast and her eyes were wide. Just as I came to her she went down to her knees between me and Stan. „Keep away!" Her voice was husky in her throat, her fingers clawed. „I won't let you touch him."

„You won't—oh, I get it.” I almost laughed out loud. „You think that because I sloughed his old man I—Look, the reason I did that is because Harlow Forbes has murdered one man already and was here to do the same to me. And to you, unless I miss my guess by a mile.” I told her the story, just the high spots. I didn't like to but I had to, and I knew she could take it. „I still don't know what's behind this business but I do know your boy-friend's father is part of it. That's proven by the fact that he knew the way in here, and I'll lay ten to one he's the number one devil. It's a cinch Paul Locker wasn't. Not only didn't he have the brains to take advantage of this but he was scared to death of it.

„To death is right,” I added grimly. „He was so scared he was ready to spill his guts to me, and so Forbes killed him.”

„Oh no-o-o,” Leila moaned. „I can't believe it.”

„Believe it or not,” I shrugged, „what you do now is walk, not run, to the nearest exit where we saw Harlow Forbes come through. You'll be back to your right size then and you can go get help. Get going.”

„No, Jim.” Her little chin thrust out a little, stubbornly. „You go. I'm staying here with Stan.”

„Like hell you—” I caught myself. No use arguing with her. She still wasn't sure she trusted me and she wasn't going to leave me alone with the boy friend. What she thought she could do against me if I went for him was a puzzle, but she'd do what she could. „All right,” I yielded. „We stick together then.” What the dame in the garden could do to her would be plenty. „So we're back to what I was talking about. We get to that glass out there and smash out through it.”

This she liked better. „But how? That woman—”

„We'll take care of her. Listen.” I explained the scheme. „It's taking a chance, but it might work.”

„It will, Jim. It must. Come on.”

We struggled erect, and shuffled to the wall beneath the window. Leila faced it. Behind her, I stooped till my hands touched the floor and she could hop backwards.

Her pumps' spiked heels dug agonizingly into my wrists. It didn't do any good for me to tell myself that she weighs only a pound. That might be true but I was only ounces heavier and my strength was in proportion. My back muscles tried to tear loose from their anchorage as I slowly straightened up. Inch by tortured inch I slid her up along the wall till at last I could push her toes into the ring that held Stan's chain.

She thrust her arms across the window's sill, clenched her fingers on a bar. Her neck was corded with strain as she looked down but her eyes shone in the sunlight. „Luck,” I read on her ashen lips and then I was hopping along the walls to the door's opening.

I got myself set, nodded. Leila let go a shrill yell. „Help! You people out there! Help!”

„Cut that,” a husky voice outside commanded. „Cut that and get down out of there.”

„I won't,” Leila flung back, defiantly. „You can't make me.” And let go another yell, „Help!”

Bushes thrashed outside, sandals pattered on the threshold. A swish of silvery fabric, a furious face, came past the door edge. My blow caught the gal behind the ear and she went down.

I snatched up the shears, hopped out the door and into the garden. I went across it like a scared kangaroo, in great, two-legged bounds that crashed through rosebushes, and flower beds. My eyes were on the glass ahead, but the enormous eyes staring in through it reminded me how tiny I was. To their owners I was merely a new puppet acting a miniature drama for their edification.

They'd know differently in a moment. Two more leaps and I'd be near enough to hurl the shears through the glass. I made the first and my arms flung up to fling them. As I started the final bound—Leila screamed, behind me.

The shrill terror jerked my head to it. The window was blank but I was in midleap, could not turn. I landed—

Did not land! *Kept on going down!* Because of that backward glance I'd not noticed that the garden ended feet from the glass. I dropped now into the dark abyss that yawned between ground-edge and wall.

Even in that ghastly moment, training, repeated till it was instinct, prevailed. I fell relaxed, limbs and head tucked in, so that when I thudded to the bottom of the chasm I was shaken, but had broken no bones.

Leila's scream had cut short as I fell. Why? Why had she screamed just as I started that last, disastrous leap?

On my side against one wall of a deep and narrow gulch, I stared up at the gar—Not up! I looked *down*, slantingly down into the eerie scene out of which I had leaped. I hung in midair above it somehow, and somehow too in my fall I'd grown larger. The bushes, the ivy-clothed wall, seemed smaller, not as tiny as I knew them to be, but almost half normal size.

I shook my head, looked again, and was even more confused. Below the garden—or above it—was another, no, the same garden, larger and upside down. The opposite to the other, at any rate. It was as though I looked at reiterated images in edge-to-edge mirrors—That was it! That was precisely what I was doing.

Just like that, the whole weird mystery clicked into relation with reality and was a mystery no longer.

Neither Stan nor Leila nor I had ever shrunk to living dolls. We'd never entered any other-worldly space. The whole thing was, as I'd said at first, a trick done with mirrors. With the mirrors up into which I stared from where I lay on the Silver Sandal's floor behind the silk-draped false wall of its lounge.

It was very simple. The garden was a permanent stage-setting erected not behind but directly above the lounge, in the building's slant-roofed attic. A huge mirror was hung to face this, tilted downward at a forty-five degree angle so that it sent the garden's reflection down into a second mirror at the level of the lower floor. This in turn had an *upward* slope of forty-five degrees and so faced the back of the lounge's wall and the twelve-by-ten glazed aperture framed in it.

To this extent the construction was that of a gigantic periscope with the exception that in the conventional periscope the lower mirror would have faced in the opposite direction. Because of this reversal, the image pictured in it was upside down.

The principal trick, however, was this; both mirrors were convex, their silvered surfaces curved outward, and so the reflection in the upper was a reduced image of the actual scene. That in the lower, a not only inverted but again reduced repetition of what the one above it showed. And the eyepiece, the framed glass in the lounge wall, was a powerful lens that not only once more reduced the pictured scene but turned it right side up again.

When we had looked through it from the lounge, the railing had kept us far enough from this lens so that it had appeared to be a flat piece of glass and the thrice reduced reflection of a scene actually above our heads had seemed to be close behind it. From the stage set, we had been looking into the „right end of the telescope” and seen the spectators’ faces enormously magnified. This, together with the dazing effect of whatever drug had been injected at the napes of our necks made us imagine ourselves shrunk to miniature size. Once implanted, that weird notion had clung to me till now.

Long as it takes to describe this, it took only seconds to realize with the construction right there in front of me. As my eyes found above me the brass collar that held the lens, Leila’s scream seemed still to pierce my ears. To shaken to extricate myself, I stared up into the topmost mirror to see what had happened to the girl.

The garden was empty but there was a shadow of movement within the doorway. I peered into darkness, my heart pounding. Someone had switched off the spotlights. It could not be Leila. She knew no more than I the location of the switch.

Who then?

A dim light came in through the lens from the lounge outside, so that now I could make out that it was a man who’d emerged from the door at the rear.

He was moving cautiously out as I discerned him. He hesitated now, and peered about. I could tell that he was tall and heavily built, that his hair was a white mane. I hadn’t hit Harlow Forbes hard enough. He had recovered, done in Leila and now hunted me to finish me off.

„Corey.” The low call came from behind me. „Where are you, Corey?” It came from Forbes, I’d forgotten that what I looked at was his reflection. „Speak up, man. We must hurry.”

You must hurry, I thought, hurry to silence me. I rolled over, got hands and knees under me and watched his up-side-down image in the lower mirror. I was going to smash out the lens with my handcuffs. I’d have to do it quickly because when I rose I’d be directly in front of this mirror and he’d seen me in the upper one.

I’d be a sitting duck for a bullet from his gun. He’d found it or had another. There’d been no shot so he must have used the butt on Leila, but he’d have to shoot me from up there. Could he bring me down before I smashed the thick glass? No matter. If I crashed through the glass his shot would be heard and that was all I could hope for.

„Stop hiding, Corey. You’re somewhere in here.”

My muscles became taut. Maybe he’d turn his head and I’d have that more time to pull this thing off. Hello! Someone else had slipped out of the door behind the

banker, and moved silently towards his unknowing back. Not quite as tall, and slat-thin. It was the maitre d'hotel.

Henri was dealing himself a hand. That made things different. „Okay,“ I yelled, distracting his attention. „You win, Forbes.“

He looked startled. „Where are you, Corey?“

„Here.“ Henri had almost reached him. „Down under you.“ The thin man's arm lifted and a splinter-thin stiletto gleamed in his hand. It started down but a white hand snatched at it! Not quite quickly enough. Forbes dropped and Henri twisted, fighting to wrench his knife-wrist free from the fingers that had clamped on it. His free hand battered at a white face. At Leila's face!

I had to get up there. I clawed the floor to shove up and my hands caught on something round and wooden. A ladder rung. A ladder lay here. Of course. Those mirrors must be kept immaculate, must be polished daily and the upper one could be reached only by a ladder.

I couldn't see as I struggled with the contraption, and fought to raise it, but I could hear Leila's whimpers and muttered curses. The thing was coming up, slowly. Its other end rested against the floor edge above me and I was hopping up the ladder, dragging myself frantically up from rung to rung.

I was up, staring across the garden to where Leila sank under Henri's merciless blows, but her hands were still clutching the wrist whose fingers clenched the murderous stiletto. And as I half-jumped, I saw Henri wrench his wrist free.

I was hopping frantically toward them but the dagger sliced up, hesitated for surer aim, and I knew I could not reach there in time. The knife started its descent—A black arm flung out from the huddle behind the maitre, struck the blow aside. And then I was there, was pounding furious manacles down on a bald head, and saw Henri slump to the grass that wasn't grass but green-dyed rags.

I sank down and gaped at Harlow Forbes. „You—You're supposed to be dead,“ I mumbled. „I saw his steel sink into you.“

„No.“ He put fingers to the back of his head, brought them away reddened. „The hilt hit me, that's all, thanks to a very brave girl.“ His look went past me. „But you, my dear. Are you badly hurt?“

Her nose was bleeding and bruises darkened her cheeks. Her dress was all but torn from her but she still could smile twistedly and say, „I'm a bit battered but that doesn't matter as long as Stan's all right. I—I was working on his handcuffs with the key you gave me when the lights blacked out and then I saw this—this man steal past and out of the door after you. And you—You were wrong, Jim“ I must have made some sound. „You were all wrong about Mr. Forbes. Stan's awake now and he's told me some of the story. I'm sure now that his father didn't kill Mr. Locker.“

„No, Corey,“ Forbes sighed.

„Okay,“ I said, dully. „After what just happened I'm willing to believe anything. Why did you try to cover up when you found Paul dead in his office?“

„Why did I—?“ He looked puzzled.

„I saw the key on the floor there. The gold key that dropped out of your pocket.“

„The gold—“ Forbes checked. „Oh yes, I recall noticing it also, beside the corpse. But it is not my key, Mr. Corey.“

„It has your initials on it. H. F.“

„Not mine.” His brooding look went to the man I’d knocked out. „That fellow’s full name is Henri Ferroniere.”

Henri Ferroniere. H.F. I recalled that I’d only helped Stan order a gold key for his father, had never actually seen it. „Okay,” I sighed. „Henri’s the killer.”

„And a blackmailer,” Leila added softly, „and a kidnapper.”

„Quite a guy, I’d say. I seem to be the only one who doesn’t know what this is all about. Would it bother you too much to tell me?”

Forbes did. A little then, and more downstairs in the Silver Sandal’s lounge when the Squad had taken over. By that time Ferroniere had confessed to killing Locker and, incidentally, to having me slipped the Mickey Finn. He was the real owner of the Sandal. He’d built it up from a tawdry roadhouse, using Paul Locker as a front, and a cover for blackmail.

A cover and a source. Men—and women—are often indiscreet in night clubs. Even a man like Harlow Forbes. What Ferroniere had on Forbes I never learned and never wanted to learn, but he had been bleeding the banker since a year after the war started. Stan somehow had got wind of it, not the whole tale but enough to send him to the Silver Sandal night after night trying to ferret out more. He’d gotten the notion that he could dig some information out of the woman in the garden, had worked out the secret of the illusion and just before closing time Thursday morning had managed to slip upstairs to get hold of her.

That had been a mistake. The partners had trapped him there, chained him up and drugged him, then sent his father a ransom demand naming Locker as the go-between. Harlow Forbes had come here tonight ready to pay. In the meantime, however, my intervention had brought Ferroniere to a decision he’d long been contemplating. It was time to make a last haul and pull out. And so he’d slain Paul, hurried down again to take over the rope, persuaded Forbes to take a table and wait for his interview with a man already dead.

My insistence on talking with the corpse had played right into his hands. He’d let me go on up, slipped up behind me and knocked me out with a hypo injection, dumped me behind the stage set. And that had made it necessary for him to get Leila out of the way too before she started asking questions about what had happened to me.

When things quieted down in the Sandal, Ferroniere had gone to Forbes, told him Locker had deputed him to collect the ransom money, had taken it and given the banker the key to Stan’s chains, sent him upstairs to release his son. He’d had no intention of permitting Forbes ever to come down again, alive, but an accident—a brawl between a customer and two of his captains—had delayed him for awhile.

The rest is pretty obvious, except perhaps that the woman in the garden was Henri Ferroniere’s wife. His widow, when the State exacts the penalty for Paul Locker’s death. „She’s quite a gal,” Stan Forbes remarked when we’d gotten the tangled skein all unraveled. „She’d go to hell and back for him.”

„I know somebody else like that,” I told him. „I know somebody else who’s quite a gal and would go to hell and back for the man she loves.” I gestured with my glass. „Here’s to Leila Humboldt.”



