

Devils from Darkonia

by Jerry Shelton, ...

Published: 1945
in »Thrilling Wonder Stories«



Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Chapter I ... | Agent for a Soul. |
| Chapter II ... | Matrix Specialist. |
| Chapter III ... | The Bargain Completed. |
| Chapter IV ... | Twinkle's Melting Point. |
| Chapter V ... | Up in Bradley's Room. |
| Chapter VI ... | One Body Too Many. |
| Chapter VII ... | Girl Problem. |
| Chapter VIII ... | Demon Collector. |
| Chapter IX ... | Psychic Twister. |



When strange demons drive him haywire Professor Bradley learns that if you advertise for the Devil that worthy—or a reasonable facsimile of same—is sure to appear!

Chapter I

Agent for a Soul.

WITH a gesture of disdain, the little fat man rejected the excuse. "Whether you were drunk or sober when you inserted this classified advertisement has no bearing on the matter." As he spoke he pointed an emphatic finger at the folded newspaper Professor Huxley J. Bradley was holding at arm's length and then sat down, Buddha-like, on the foot of the low studio bed. "We take it for granted our prospective clients will keep good faith. You did insert the ad, you know."

Professor Huxley J. Bradley focused bleary eyes on the small print and read:

WANTED

Business association with the devil or kindred demons. Interested party willing to trade one slightly used soul for favor granted. References required.

—Hux Bradley, 814 Sunnyside.

"Now, young man, as to this matter of references," the fat man continued pompously, "I'm sure—"

"Get out of here!" exploded Professor Bradley and snapped his eyes shut. He pulled the bed covers up under his angular chin. His stomach tickled, and it felt queer. Full of duck feathers. Good heavens, what had happened to him since yesterday afternoon? His blurred thoughts were spinning like a drunken gyroscope, all lopsided. The bitter memory of the draft board rejecting his application was definite enough. But what about that sympathetic bartender? Hadn't he realized he was concocting those things for an amateur? Ugh!

Bradley wedged open one eye.

The little fat man was still there. Bald-headed, he was. Gold snakes twisted their tiny bodies into a watch chain that drooped like a yellow suspension bridge across his bulging middle.

A swift breeze stirred the feathers in Bradley's stomach. He swallowed.

"How did you get in here?" he managed to ask "The door's locked."

The fat man shrugged. "A mere detail. Allow me to introduce myself—Horace Twembly." He removed some indexed cards from an inner pocket and went on. "When we saw your ad we looked up your record and were rather surprised. Don't often get professors for clients. Let's see—hm-m-m." As he sorted through the cards, a curiously shaped ring on his middle finger glittered strangely.

HIS flabby lips made themselves into an orifice like the mouth of a goldfish. "You're Professor Huxley J. Bradley, teaching musical theory and musical history at the University. Author of the book *Origin Of Jazz Music*. You spend much of your time giving free music lessons to students who can't afford to pay for them. Hm-mm-m." His soft fingers extricated a thin watch, "I'm authorized to grant you a favor—for a price, of course. It's getting late and I haven't all day to waste, you know. It's almost four in the afternoon."

"Four?" Bradley jack-knifed his lanky figure out of bed and tried to jerk the wrinkled nightshirt down over his bony knees. "What day is it? My classes—" He reeled and flopped down weakly on the bed. "My head—" His tongue slithered over his fur-coated teeth. Great Scott, what a flavor! What in the name of Bacchus had he done in that bar—swept the place out with his tongue?

"Today's Sunday—no classes today," Twembly said smoothly and glanced around the room. He gestured in an odd way at a half-empty whisky bottle on the floor near some rumpled clothing, and the deep blue ring seemed to glow with an inner fire.

"You need a drink," he continued as the bottle lifted, and, bobbing gently, floated into Twembly's outstretched hand just as an empty water glass swooped unerringly out from the bathroom.

Desperate, Professor Bradley clapped his eyes shut again. Good heavens, could this be what his students so lightly referred to as a hangover? Or was it, hangover? If the faculty or Dean Fritterton heard of such doings his position would be impossible. He must pull himself together. Bradley heard the wet gurgle of a liquid being poured and felt a large glass placed in his lax fingers. Cautiously, he opened his eyes.

The fat man was staring at him. The pupils of his eyes were enormous. Little flecks of yellow swirled in bewildering patterns in the depths of the dark green iris.

"Drink it," the visitor commanded. "You'll feel better."

Wrinkles ploughed across Bradley's forehead. "More whisky?"

"Of course," said Twembly. His strange eyes flickered. "The hair of the dog, you know."

Bradley shifted the glass. The glass was large, and half full. Yesterday had been the first time Bradley had partaken of alcohol. But—perhaps this was the correct procedure.

He drained the glass. Bradley blinked once before the exploding fire in the whisky blasted his stomach-feathers into activity like a whirling, burning snowstorm.

"Such ideas," he wheezed as his lungs tried to resume their air-conditioning. "Who the devil are you?"

Twembly frowned. "Please. I wish you would be more careful of your language. I'm not really the Devil as your ad requested. But I represent a firm that can give practically the same service." He started to pour himself a drink. "We can offer a more scientific service than any old superstitious agency ever dreamed of."

A sudden memory played peek-a-boo around the corner of Bradley's consciousness—something about a Martini-inspired idea of phoning the classified ad department of a certain newspaper.

"Representative?" Professor Bradley sprang to his feet, jarring the whisky bottle and glass from Twembly's hand. "What do you mean?"

He choked and sat down abruptly as he saw the falling objects halt in mid-air, and then bob serenely over to the desk as the scattered amber droplets of whisky coalesced to float upward as a single globe toward Twembly.

"Shouldn't waste whisky like that, young man." Twembly's fat face was serious. "Whisky's a decided asset in Our business and should be conserved."

As the rising globe of whisky halted, he leaned forward and opened his mouth. There was a wet sucking noise and the drink was gone. He wiped his mouth on a pocket handkerchief.

"Not bad. Not bad at all. Now as to business."

Professor Bradley passed a shaking hand over his eyes. "Do that again," he said hoarsely.

"What—the drink?" Horace Twembly's pink cheeks darkened and his chins wobbled. "Young man, I'll have you know that I don't have all day to stand around doing tricks to amuse you. Yesterday, you inserted an ad. You should have the courtesy to listen to Our proposition."

BRADLEY hiccupped. Somehow, he was feeling better. He rubbed his stomach. He felt warm—and expansive. He straightened.

"I think I'll have some more of the hair of the dog you mentioned." With a slight stagger he walked over to the desk and splashed himself a drink.

The little flecks of yellow in Twembly's eyes swirled. "That nightshirt is a trifle too short for you, isn't it?"

"I'm too long for the nightshirt," corrected Bradley somberly and strangled down his drink. "That's why the Army wouldn't take me—said I was underweight Not enough protoplasm for my height." He flung his arms to a wide gesture. "So I became inebriated yesterday. First time, too."

"Is that why you put the ad in the paper?"

Bradley picked up a piece of music manuscript from the desk and fanned himself. He was warm.

"What ad?" he replied hazily.

Twembly sighed. "Yesterday you inserted an ad asking for a favor. I can grant you any favor you wish. I represent the firm of Life Psyche, Incorporated." He extracted a card and offered it to Bradley. "Our business front and laboratories for

this Quadrant of Space is situated downtown under the name of Tramble, Trumble and Twembly, Attorneys at Law. All the agents in Our local office have names starting with T—it makes the bookkeeping much easier. Tell me the favor you, wish, please?"

Professor Huxley J. Bradley waved the card away.

"How'd you do that trick—whisky floating through the air?"

Twembly's lips made a little sound. "Really, I couldn't reveal a third order power to you if you had the most desirable life essence in this universe, it's strictly against regulations."

"What regulations?"

"The regulations they make," Twembly oozed forward. "You'll have to pick something else. Money, fame, good looks—you know, the usual thing."

Bradley shook his head so vigorously that his curly dark hair wiggled into a tangle and fell down across his flushed broad forehead.

"No, I don't want any of those things." He was feeling expansive and it was nice. "I want to get in the Army and slap the Japs." He pointed his fingers and sighted over his extended thumbs, sweeping the room to a prolonged burst while his tongue made *br-r-r-ring* noises. He jumped up and ran his long slim fingers through his hair. He waved a generous hand around the bedroom.

"You see all these books? Books all about music. I teach it day in and night out at the University. Music—music. When Dean Fritterton told me not to write that book on *Origin of Jazz Music*—I wrote it anyhow. Now the faculty won't even speak to me. You know something?" He closed one eye and looked at Twembly. "I've almost finished a book that when it's published—they'll throw me out of the University. It's a book about Voodoo music, witch-doctor melodies that drive evil spirits out of the sick. It's supposed to work. I just got a real authentic witch-doctor horn."

He stumbled over to a queer-shaped instrument hanging on the wall.

"It blows just like a trumpet."

Bradley put the horn to his lips. His cheeks tightened. He began to blow a spine-chilling melody.

"Stop it!" screeched Twembly as his finger-ring burst into flaming blue-white brilliance. He jumped up and snatched away the instrument. He trembled as he put the thing down and controlled his voice with effort.

"Now must be more careful," he said, pulled out his pocket handkerchief and sneezed repeatedly. Twembly's eyes were running wet.

"Voodoo music," said Bradley solemnly. "Got lots of books on that stuff. I like Moodoo vusic—" He paused with a surprised look on his lean face. He corrected, "I mean Voodoo music—I got my tang all tongled up."

Twembly pulled himself together. "You mean you got your tongue all tangled up. What about this favor you desire?"

Professor Bradley produced a resonant hiccough.

"What's the price for this favor?"

"Your life essence—the sub-electronic force in you called life."

"In the condition it's in?"

"In the condition it's in!"

"What do you want to do with? I wouldn't want to die for a favor."

"You won't die—yet! We have a use for vital life forces and are agreeable to bargain well with you. But it is necessary that you are willing."

SLOWLY Bradley accepted the fact with a solemn nod and let it digest.

"Prove it," he said. "Do something-different."

The fat man grunted to his feet. "Certainly. That's more like it and is the usual method of procedure. How about a few minor physical changes as a start?" He smiled, and did something to the ring. He snapped his fingers and vanished.

Bradley sat there. He squinted at Twembly's empty clothes on the floor and then looked behind him. No Twembly!

Illustration:

Bradley ducked a formation of winged tanks and things

"Hey!" said Bradley and snapped his own fingers. Nothing happened.

The professor was about to get up and look under the discarded clothing when he jumped—startled! A flock of small pigeons, no larger than bumble-bees, whirred past his nose like a covey of flushed quail! Bradley sneezed and twisted his neck to follow their looping flight around the room.

The miniature pigeons melted into little white horses with green wings and swooped to a skilful landing on his desk.

"Really!" said Bradley. Tiny hoofs made clattering noises as the winged horses cantered around among his papers. "Really!"

Unexpectedly, the winged horses buzzed into the air and hummed through a bewildering evolution of everything that walked, flew or swam while Bradley's nervous system wound itself around his spine.

Finally, after he had ducked a precise formation of winged tanks, complete with propellers and other whirring gadgets, that zoomed at his dodging head, there was a brittle pop—and Mr. Twembly landed gracefully in the center of the room. His pink body glistened with trickling beads of perspiration. The ring flashed as he made a peculiar gesture and his clothes scrambled in an eager fashion around his tubby figure.

"How did you like it?" inquired Twembly. "That demonstration is my specialty. Quite a work out, but it's a pleasure really—and I do think it has a nice impressive finish with a build up. I picked that last bit up from another agent in Xenon an eon or so ago."

Chapter II

Matrix Specialist.

FOR the space of three heart-thumps Bradley's feathers tickled his innards. Perspiration was running down his chest.

"Now look here!" His voice shook as he put the bottle down carefully. Somehow, this all seemed highly irregular. "Is this really on the level?"

"Fiddle-faddle!" exclaimed Twembly in irritation. "This is no time to diddle-daddle. Don't tell me I have to offer more proof?"

"All right," said Bradley abruptly. "The Army turned me down, and I did want a new body so I could fight."

"A new body?" Twembly groaned. "Really, Professor Bradley, I wish you would choose something else. I've just joined this branch of Life Psyche, Incorporated and bodies are a trifle out of my line. We'd have to go down to headquarters for a thing like that and Mr. Tramble is a very hard representative to deal with. We'd have to go to the trouble of making up a matrix and all that."

Twembly fingered his watch chain.

"Won't you be satisfied with money or the usual stuff? I could fix that in a minute. Maybe there's a girl you want, or you might be interested in trying our Special Inducement."

"Could you really give me a new body?" said Bradley eagerly, and did a lot of leaning forward. Air, alone, is an exceedingly poor support for excessive leaning but he didn't hurt himself much. He only fell out of his chair.

Twembly pursed his lips. "Oh, I suppose it could be arranged. But I told you we'd have to go down to headquarters. Why don't you take something less complicated?"

Bradley pulled himself up the leg of the bed. He shook his head.

"Body or nothing." His tongue felt thick.

Twembly's facial muscles tugged until they produced a deep frown.

"We'd have to have Dr. Trumble make up the matrix," he said.

"Who's Dr. Trumble?"

"He used to be a witch-doctor before we gave him the proper scientific training. He assembles and files the matrixes to make it legal and binding. A form of contract."

A spark flared in Bradley's eyes. He directed an unsteady finger at Twembly.

"He used to be a real—authentic—witch-doctor?"

The fat man snorted. "That witch-doctor stuff is now mostly superstition. But in the old days, due to the fact that some of the first witch-doctors stumbled onto some facts that hindered and interfered with Our business here—we invited the best ones into Our firm. Their natural talent with training makes things just dandy."

Bradley chuckled softly at first. Then a rich laugh rumbled around in his chest before it exploded into a hiccough.

"Beg pardon," he said and ambled over to the window. He opened it and gorged his lungs on the fresh air. He cleared his throat.

"Seemed to be getting close in here. I mentioned witch- doctors."

His tongue, he thought, seemed capable of performing in a well-behaved manner again.

"I have always wanted to meet a bona-fide witch doctor," Bradley told Twembly. "I wanted to consult him about the chapters in my new book on—" he said it carefully, "—Voodoo music. The book is finished except for a few minor details and it has been difficult for me to get the exact intonation, tonal qualities, vibratos and

such, merely from ancient manuscripts. I can actually play some of the melodies now, but I'm not satisfied. Do you suppose Dr. Trumble would help me?"

"Well?"

The fat man deliberated. He studied Bradley as he whisked the bottle to him with a clever gesture. His throat made gurgling noises as he swallowed and his yellow eye-flecks danced.

"You couldn't expect him to give you free advice," he said at last.

"If I make this bargain with you will I get to meet him personally?" interrupted Bradley.

"You certainly will," said Twembly. "Pour yourself another drink."

Bradley splattered a drink into the yawning glass.

"Could I turn the body back in to your firm after the war? When I'm through with it?"

"Perhaps—perhaps."

Bradley drained his whisky and thumped the glass down, "Then I'll do it. What happens next?"

TWEMBLY'S soggy little body contracted in a long sigh. "Do you have a phone? Thank you." He dialed. "Hello. This is Twembly—Horace Twembly. You don't have to look it up. I just joined this branch from Xenon. Just give me the Pick-up Department." He rolled his eyes toward Bradley. "I don't know what section of space they're getting Our office help from these days. The help situation is becoming— hello— hello— Pick-up? I'm about to make a pick-up from Eight-fourteen Sunnyside, That's right, look up the specifications for this locality please... Eh? ... Wait a minute."

Bradley watched Twembly fumble in his pocket for a pencil and then scribble something carefully on the apartment wall.

"Check," he said into the phone. "I've got it. Notify Mr. Tramble I'm bringing in a new account and Dr. Trumble will have to make up a matrix. That's right. Thank you and gryyph!" He cradled the phone and wagged his head at Bradley. "You see? This makes it a lot of bother, Professor Bradley. Now I'll have to cut them in on a larger percentage."

"Larger percentage? On what?"

"Your life-psyche," sighed Twembly and then grunted himself to his flat feet "There'll hardly be enough to go around on this basis. Fifteen per-cent here, fifteen percent there," he grumbled, "it's certainly not like the old days with all these new-fangled regulations and red-tape."

He waddled to the bedroom door leading into the living room.

"This door faces west doesn't it?"

Bradley swallowed. "Look, I'd like to know a little more about it What about this business of my paying off? Is it unpleasant?"

"Well, I never saw a human being yet who liked it." Twembly removed a small metal box from his pocket and fastened it to the door knob. He unreeled a long black wire which had bulbs like Christmas tree lights at regular intervals and draped it around the doorway. "But you do get your compensations. We aren't entirely unethical. You receive the favor you desire, and you have a chance of escaping payment. It's only a small chance, of course. That's all in the regulations

They make and Mr. Tramble will take that up with you in a few moments. But as I said, it's not like the old days. There's too much wild competition and red-tape."

"What do you mean—a small chance of escaping?" asked Professor Bradley. He jumped as the phone burped and gathered the fuzzy nightshirt about him as he picked up the receiver.

"Hello, yes. This is Huxley Bradley... Who? ... Well—"

He looked at Twembly who had just finished fastening the peculiar wire around the doorway.

"I'm busy right now. How about tomorrow? That will be fine. Good-by." Bradley frowned in puzzlement "An individual I never heard of. He said it was most important for him to see me. A Mr. Blossom."

"Blossom?" Twembly's pink cheeks blanched. "Professor Bradley, get dressed. There's no time to diddle-daddle!"

"What's the hurry?" asked Bradley in a solemn baritone as he poured himself another drink and downed it. "I'm feeling very, very much better."

He snatched up his pants and tried to put his right foot in the proper leg. He floundered, then finally sat down on the floor to complete the process.

"I feel pretty, pretty good," he said owlshly to Twembly. "Who's Blossom?"

"A cheap competitor," snapped Twembly in irritation and pulled Bradley to his feet manhandling him into a brown tweed coat. "Let's get out of here."

He padded over to the waiting doorway. His lips puckered up like a pink rosebud and a whistle, baffling in its cadence, trilled an exotic melody. Up and down it went, over and over. The Christmas-tree-like lights began to glow softly.

"That's a pretty tune." Bradley tried to imitate it. His own whistle, in unison with Twembly, skidded occasionally, but it was close.

The doorway flickered. Twisting threads of blackness darted snake-like from the bulbs into a tangled mesh. Inky tendrils writhed among the threaded blackness to melt into a solid pulsing curtain of dark nothingness. The doorway was a yawning hole of blackness, and jet black.

BRADLEY'S whistle peeped into startled silence. He drew back a step. "Get going," ordered Twembly, seizing him by the arm and pushing him toward the waiting blackness.

"Now wait a minute—not so fast." Bradley tried to jerk his arm free. "I'll just walk into my own living room."

Twembly pushed him headlong into the blackness.

"Get going!" he insisted. The darkness was sticky and gooey and smelled like sour cream. Also it had a motion of its own, as if Bradley were swimming in warm molasses. He grunted in protest as he felt Twembly give him another firm push, a personal push.

The gooey darkness snapped away like rubber, and Bradley jerked his head around. He wasn't in his living room. He was in the waiting room of a mahogany-walled business office.

Directly before him he saw a heavy door labeled:

**TRAMBLE, TRUMBLE AND TWEMBLY
ATTORNEYS AT LAW**

Bradley felt Twembly propel him through the door and a blonde secretary sitting behind a neat desk hurriedly put down a much-folded magazine.

She dimpled. "Yes?"

"It's all right, Miss Twinkle," said Twembly. "We want to see Mr. Tramble."

Miss Twinkle's cherry-red lips parted, and a tiny pink tongue flicked out for an instant.

"Is this a collection or a new account?" she inquired.

Her nostrils quivered ever so slightly. "He's cute." The blue ring on her finger shot out sudden sparks of fire.

Twembly stiffened. "He's a new account and none of your snallfness. You get your regular payment. Commission accounts are not your concern."

The secretary tossed her blonde head

"The company does declare dividends occasionally. How am I to know?"

Her inquisitive blue eyes never left Bradley.

Professor Bradley staggered. "What's this snallfness?"

"First door to your right," said Twembly soothingly. "Pay no attention to her. She'll get her share."

He pushed Bradley through a door marked: APPLICATIONS. He closed it behind them with a definite snap.

The brittle-faced man poised behind the low desk jerked up his head to look. He was sharp-nosed, with a narrow head twisted erect like an eagle. The pupils of his eyes were huge, surrounded by a deep sea-green iris wherein swirled dancing flecks of yellow.

"Twembly?" The word was snapped like a rifle-shot. "Excellent work. Congratulations." He bit the words off. "I consulted Professor Bradley's file. He'll make an excellent client!" Buttoning his egg-yellow sport jacket he turned to Bradley, lips smiling. But his eyes remained cold.

"My name's Tramble. I'm in charge of things here in general. What sort of an account did you wish to open?" Each word was pointed and evenly spaced as machine-gun bullets. The professor noticed he, too, had a blue ring.

Foggy, Bradley took another look at him and shivered.

"Now see here—let's don't rush things."

Swi-i-ish!

A side door slammed open and a wizened, dark-skinned man, wearing various heathenish gadgets, bounced in with a small black bag. He had striped trousers, a single-button coat, and an ascot tie. His morning clothes were impeccable. He threw a brief nod at Twembly and pushed Bradley into a chair.

"Well—well." He eyed Bradley with the air of authority and began to set up a machine on the low desk. "Shouldn't be difficult at all. Have it ready in a moment." He sounded slightly Irish—or Oxfordish, mixed, like an omelette of accents.

With the speed of an expert, Dr. Trumble clamped a bracelet to Bradley's left wrist and plugged in a wire from the machine on the desk.

"So you're the Professor Bradley who wrote *Origin of Jazz*. Very interesting book, that. Very."

HE adjusted wavering dials and a low hum filled the room. "What's he going to do?" asked Professor Bradley in a weak voice.

"This is Dr. Trumble," Twembly answered soothingly. "He's making up your matrix according to the contract." Twembly made sounds which were evidently intended to be a hearty laugh. "You just need a drink," he added, turning to a cabinet behind him. He sloshed a glass to overflowing. "This is a bit strong, but it'll pick you up, I think."

Bradley accepted the glass and glanced at Twembly doubtfully.

"Feel dizzy," he mumbled. Then as Twembly continued to smile and nod, he closed his eyes and drained the glass. He strangled thoroughly.

Twembly thumped him on the back and turned to Tramble. "Had to bring him here because it's a little out of my line." He threw some papers on Tramble's desk "Wants a new body and I wasn't familiar with your procedure here."

Tramble jerked his head in a quick nod and picked an invisible speck from his egg-yellow sport coat.

"It's almost closing time. Make it fast. Not much business on Sundays." He twisted to Bradley. "You want a new body. Any specifications?"

Bradley roused himself with effort "Don't know about all this—feel woozy." He raised a hand to his head "Think I'll go home."

"Nonsense. Our bargain is entirely legitimate. You want a favor. We can grant it."

Bradley had difficulty in focusing his eyes on Tramble. "Want a new body—Army didn't like this one. Can I get a good one?"

"Well, of course, like everyone else, we're having Our troubles these days getting material." Tramble's fingers drummed the polished surface of his desk. "But I assure you that We don't use any of these new synthetic force-field substitutes that some of our cut-throat competitors try."

"Like Blossom?" said Bradley drowsily. "Blossom?" Tramble's fingers stopped "What do you know about him?"

"Better get his life vibration exact," Twembly muttered to Dr. Trumble, who was absorbed in jotting down information from the calibrated dials. "Blossom telephoned him just before we took the Pick-up here."

Dr. Trumble's black face frowned. "I'll get them immediately." He lifted Bradley's head. "Just a few hairs, Professor Bradley."

"Oh, no you don't!" Bradley ducked. He threw his arms over his head. "Not until I know more about this."

Dr. Trumble's thick lips writhed back to expose sharp yellowed teeth. He looked at Tramble. "Wouldn't be legal without his consent. Have to get the blood sad finger-nails anyhow."

Irritably, Tramble shrugged. "Professor Bradley, We are Life Psyche, Incorporated, and we deal with the vital life forces of human beings. It's all strictly business. What planet we come from doesn't concern you. The legal end of it is important. All you should be concerned with is getting your favor. After a certain period of time and certain conditions have been complied with, I am sure your life-essence will be of far more use to Us that it will to you. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

Bradley managed a foggy look around the room. His mind was too drowsy to follow the conversation, but something kept telling him that he should be more alert. He made an attempt to rally.

"It doesn't make sense. Why shouldn't the rest of the world know about this?" His tongue failed him.

"If you tried to tell the rest of humanity, they wouldn't believe you. Of course if they did believe you, they'd want to do business with Us."

Tramble's fingers drummed on the desk top again. "We Darkonians like the situation the way we have it now," he went on. "We have just about as much business on this planet as we can handle with the present help situation. I assure you we are a reputable Universe-wide concern. Our interests control some of the biggest Earthian newspapers, secretly of course, and We control the problems of supply and demand as We see fit."

Bradley let the idea swim around.

"Demons supposed to live under the ground, not on top, in lawyer's offices," he remarked.

"Come now, Professor Bradley. I would expect more logic from you. We are not demons. We are Darkonians and couldn't live underground. That's not logical and besides it would be exceedingly uncomfortable. Humans have a powerful life force. Therefore, someone must handle things. Matters would get terribly confused otherwise."

Cli-i-ink!

It was Twembly with another drink. He brought a double-shot He gave it to Bradley, who coughed loudly from the effects, then weakly leaned his head back against the chair.

"If you say so," said the Professor. "If you say so."

"It's remarkable," said Twembly in hushed tones. "For a man who doesn't drink he's a sponge. Will the concentration of alcohol affect has matrix, Dr. Trumble?"

The black specialist shook his head. Bone bangles hanging from his earlobes rattled. "I've got his vibration exact. But I'll need some physical samples from his body to complete the matrix."

Tramble pitched forward.

"Get those basics, now," he whispered. He reared back. "Professor Bradley, what sort of a body have you in mind?"

Bradley watched Dr. Trumble clip his fingernail with an expert flourish.

"What's he doing?" asked the Professor.

"Just the requirements. We need to finish the matrix. You want things legal, don't you?"

Listless, Bradley pawed the air. "What about the payment?"

Tramble picked up a heavy leather-bound dictionary. He moved over.

"All you have to do is chose three words at random from this dictionary. As long as you don't say the three words you will choose aloud—in the same sentence—you may use the body without interference from Us." He shot a look at Twembly. "Or from other companies, once the matrix is legally filed and recorded. What sort of body, please?"

"Something different," said Bradley carelessly. "Hey! What's the idea?"

Dr. Trumble had pricked his ear with a bone needle. Professor Bradley sprang to his feet and staggered against the desk, white with fear.

Chapter III

The Bargain Completed.

MR. TRUMBLE slammed Bradley down in the chair and squeezed the drop of blood oozing from the wound into a tiny test tube.

Trumble's thin lips cracked into a smile. He rubbed his bony hands.

"That will do it. File that matrix immediately in Our private file. This will make Blossom furious," He cleared his throat. "Everything has been attended to quite legally, Professor Bradley. The body will be deposited in your apartment as soon as the Make-up Department assembles it. You may now choose the words," He extended the heavy dictionary.

Bradley's lean face was twisting and he arched his back.

"Something hurts—inside." He struggled to his feet. "What'd you do to me?" He tried to yank off the bracelet and failed.

"The pain?" inquired Dr. Trumble in a professional tone. "That's a psychic-psychic hook. You'll get used to it. If the pain doesn't subside to a lower level in a few days, come back and I'll see if I can give you a better adjustment."

He bounced toward the door, then stopped.

His yellowish teeth glistened against dark purple gums. "You will find it impossible to remove that bracelet and if you feel a tug on that psychic hook every hour—on the hour—don't get worried. That hook by means of the bracelet is attached to Our Bookkeeping Department and it enables Our girls to look in on you wherever you are and see what you're up to. It helps to keep Our records straight."

"You mean they can look in and see whatever I'm doing?" Bradley flushed. "No privacy?"

"Don't worry. Our girls in that department get very broadminded. Good day." Dr. Trumble went out.

"Wait a minute," exploded Bradley, "I wanted to ask you about some Voodoo music!" But Dr. Trumble was gone.

"Choose your words." Trumble was firm. "That psychic hook won't bother you—providing you don't try to stray too far out of this district. Choose!" He pushed the book forward.

Bradley shook himself. "As long as I don't say the three words aloud in the same sentence, I'm safe?"

"With certain provisions I won't bother you with now. You'll learn them soon enough."

"Don't suppose it makes much difference," mumbled Bradley, and flipped through the pages rapidly, pointing as he went.

Trumble snapped the book shut with a bang.

"You chose *able, hat and ink*. Thank you." He scribbled a memo on his desk and handed Bradley a card. "You may call me if your psychic hook brings on any abnormal complications other than its natural purpose." He strode to the door and turned to Twembly. "That will be forty per-cent for you, Twembly. Twenty-five per-cent to me and fifteen per-cent to Dr. Trumble for his services. The remaining twenty per-cent will be divided among the staff for overhead. Good-night." The door slammed.

Twembly shook his head. "Robbery!" He glanced at Bradley. "And you started out as my private account That body will be in your apartment when you return. I'll be seeing you—and soon I hope. The physical samples from your body will be kept alive in a culture and used as a nucleus for your psychic hook to function."

Bradley roused himself. "What happens if I say those words?"

"If you do—one of the Collectors that handles Our accounts will appear and inform you that you have one hour left before We collect. That's another one of those new regulations that I don't approve of. They warn you—and by the time We get it—the psyche is in a pretty tenuous condition from worry." His fat face grew solemn. "It's not like the old days. Come on, I'll put you in a taxi." Twembly led him to the door.

Bradley halted as Twembly locked the door and stared at the secretary who was closing her desk. "Is she a demon too—in human flesh?"

"Please—not demon. She is Darkonian."

Twembly pocketed the key. "We need office help who understand the situation so We can pay off. Coming along?"

"You go ahead." Bradley reeled against the door.

Twembly shrugged a fat shrug and waddled off.

Mentally, Bradley made an effort to squeeze his brain. He had to get a grip on himself, to try and find out more about this situation. Things had gone a trifle too fast and they didn't seem just right The blond secretary might be of some assistance. He walked up to her, swaying slightly.

"I beg your pardon."

"The name's Twinkle," she said, powdering her nose.

"Twinkle?"

She dimpled "Mary Twinkle."

BRADLEY watched her smooth her lip-stick with the tip of her little finger.

"Does everybody's name around here start with a T?" he asked her.

"Yes, that's wrong." She maneuvered a hat onto her head that looked like a salad. She stuck things in it.

"Wrong?" he said unsteadily.

Mary Twinkle's blue eyes twinkled and she laughed. "I mean that's right. You see, to a Darkonian, right is wrong and wrong is right. It gets confusing sometimes when I forget I'm talking to a human." She began to straighten the seams in her stockings. "Every agent's name, on this planet, starts with a T because it's supposed to make the bookkeeping simple." She shrugged and manfully picked up an oversized purse. "Me—I'd prefer the alphabet system."

Bradley studied her. "Are you really a devil in human flesh?"

"Darkonian," she corrected

"Really?" Bradley tried to look properly awed.

"There's a difference," she sniffed "That demon stuff is superstition. Anyway, what'd you expect—jinni?"

She started to walk down the corridor, and Bradley stumbled ahead of her to tug at the handle of a square green door.

Faintly, he could hear a low buzzing sound seeping through the door. And the continuous snap and crackle of tiny electrical relays.

Twinkle slowed. She looked at him with a curious smite.

"Yon don't want to go in there, do you? Not yet—anyhow?"

Bradley pulled at the handle. "I didn't come in this way, but it's all right."

"For your information, that's the room where all the office help relax in Their natural bodies," said Twinkle in a soft voice. "Especially you might not like it when We get paid."

Bradley snatched his hand away as if the handle had suddenly become infected.

"That's where We go when We have a little fun. These facsimile human bodies we wear get boresome. They are so limited and fragile." She turned to the right and her high heels made clicking noises like a typewriter. "You'll find out what's in there someday!"

Bradley caught up with her. "That's what I want to talk to you about. I just joined the firm—as a client, it seems. I would like to clarify a few things."

Twinkle pressed the elevator button. Her awning-like eyelashes dipped and then raised as she looked Bradley over.

"You're either awfully drunk or awfully trusting to make any bargains with Mr. Tramble about anything. I know! But I'll discuss it with you—or anything, over a platter of drinks. You got enough dough on you for the Skyline Club?"

"I have," replied Bradley as the elevator door roared open. "You see, I made a little money from a book I wrote about the origin of jazz music. I used to go to the Skyline Club several nights a week to listen to the band there and gather material."

"No kidding?" murmured Twinkle and smoothed her skirt down firmly over her hips as she entered the elevator. "You are rather good looking. Do tell me more..."

THE Skyline Club was high. So were the prices. So were the people—and Twinkle. But Professor Bradley was low, quite low.

There was a dance floor, a band, table-cloths and tables, and smoke and noise.

"Hey there!" Twinkle finished her fourth Martini and reached over to pat Bradley's hand. "Now don't be down-spirited, Professor. Maybe if you took a drink you'd feel better or maybe I shouldn't have told you all about that stuff. Brace up now!"

Professor Bradley snapped his mind back into an awareness of where he was. His face was strained.

"I was thinking about that parasite situation you told me about. It scares me."

He looked around for his untouched drink and downed it with a gulp. It made him gag. "What's the name of that planet again, the one you come from?"

"Darkonia," said Twinkle. "It's one of the inner planets revolving around the star you call Polaris—the North Star. I'm not so dumb, Professor. I've absorbed a lot

about science and history. Our first space ship landed here on Earth seven thousand years ago."

"Why didn't you let us humans know about it?"

WITH a smile Twinkle looked at Bradley in a compassionate manner. "We can't. Our evolution of race has a different basis than your carbon-protoplasmic life cycle. Since we developed as a parasitic-race, we are forced to live off the vital life force of our intelligent hosts. If we hadn't been permitted to come here to Earth, Our race would have disintegrated."

"But it's a frightening thing to realize." Bradley hesitated. His voice sank to a whisper. "It's awful to learn another race has lived among us humans for thousands of years without us knowing it—as parasites. That's shocking!"

"What's so strange or shocking about it?" countered Twinkle. "You have the same situation here on Earth among almost every branch or species of life that covers the globe. Your oceans are crowded with swarms of parasitic fish that attach themselves to other fish and will die if the attachment is broken. They get their nourishment and life-power that way. They can't help it That's the way their metabolism is set up. You have the same thing among your Earthian plants and flowers, such as orchids and the mistletoe on your trees, and small ticks that live on warm- blooded animals, and I don't know how many other hundreds of insects. Those are proven, scientific facts you, yourself, know and can't deny. Is it so strange to accept the fact similar relationships must exist among organisms higher up the evolutionary scale, between you humans and Us?"

Bradley repressed a shudder. "How do you do it? Why should you victimize us humans?"

"Our real bodies are rather tenuous in nature, almost like a mist to your eyes, and like all life processes it is electrical in nature. Our science is well advanced and, long ago, We discovered that the sub-electronics, which form the basic life force, are really the main key to every cause and effect that goes on in the Universe. You humans have already discovered the Law of the Conservation of Energy. Everything that exists will always exist in one form or another. Right?"

"Right," said Bradley somberly.

"All right," said Twinkle. "You humans have intelligence—and so do we. Intelligence can never die and just disappear. That's the law. The sub-electronic pattern of intelligent life is too complex to be created artificially. All of our science and Our lives are based on it. We use it the same as you use crude, raw electricity in your civilization."

"But we don't use electricity to keep us alive."

"Oh, no? You get it in another form from your food, don't you? Just as we cannot manufacture artificially what is necessary to keep Us alive, neither can you."

Bradley looked at her. "You sound very sober."

"My human body—although an imitation—might not be sober, but my mind is. Don't you see what I'm driving at? It's really not complicated at all."

"Perhaps," said Bradley slowly. "Our human bodies can't absorb chemicals or life forces direct. We have to go about it in an involved cycle of letting a seed absorb those things. Then we plant the seed and the seed continues to absorb the

necessary chemicals and energy from the ground and the sun through photosynthesis and grows into a plant. Then we humans either eat the plant direct and absorb that particular vitamin, or whatever you want to call it. Or else we feed the plant to a warm-blooded animal and there it is changed into proteins and so forth in order that our own bodies can absorb the necessary elements for us to live."

"On the other hand We Darkonians can absorb all We need to live, and keep Our science functioning, from you," answered Twinkle. "That's logical, Professor, you must admit. All life forms, in some degree or other, live off the products of other life forms. The plants and steers don't know the what or why of these things you humans are doing to them either."

Bradley shivered in spite of himself. "Tell me about those rings."

"Hey, there's Steve Benton," Twinkle cried. "He's one of the trumpet men in the band." She fluttered her free hand at someone behind Bradley. "Yoo-hoo, Stevie— come here!"

A slim, dark-haired musician walked over to the table and was introduced. He smiled at Bradley and pulled up a chair to sit down.

"So you're Bradley," he said enthusiastically. "I read that book of yours and it was solid, pops. I used to see you in here and wonder what you were doing copying off stuff. Why don't you sit in a set? You play trumpet, don't you? You can take my stand— I'm on second."

"Well, really!"

"Go on, Hux, show 'em a few things."

STEVE Benton peered over his shoulder at the musicians climbing back on the stand.

"It'll be okay, man," he said to the professor. "We usually have sessions on Sunday night. A lot of the boys sit in. There's not many ickies in the joint on Sunday night."

Bradley brightened. "I'd like to try something. Do you play the Blues?"

"Are you kidding?" Steve seemed hurt.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Sure, we play the Blues. What style you mean?"

"It's something different I've discovered in some old manuscripts. It has the usual twelve-bar cadence, but the harmonic sequence is unorthodox."

"New Orleans?"

"Not quite. I know all Blues are based on old Negro music, but this goes farther back than that. Extreme primitive, you might say. Can I try it?"

Steve waved carelessly. "You tell the piano man. He can fake or follow anything. My horn's on the stand."

"Thanks." Bradley finished his drink and made his way between crowded tables to the bandstand. What Twinkles had told him had given him a jolt and he was anxious to divert his thoughts. Also the chance to play with a professional orchestra thrilled him, for he'd never had such an opportunity before. Furthermore it would be an excellent opportunity to try out a certain melody he'd discovered in the "Old Music" section of the library. These experienced musicians would be quick to sense and provide a good background in some sort of ad-lib

fashion. This would fix the melody firmly in his ear. Strange that he had never screwed up courage to sit in a jam-session before. Could those drinks be having more of an effect than fee estimated?

The piano man listened to his instructions.

"Okay, pops. You start it after I take four bars and well follow you. How about B-flat? Good?"

Bradley nodded and climbed on the stand. He picked up Steve's trumpet, jiggled the valves a few times and opened the spit-key.

He blew bubbly noises to clear horn. He heard the piano man start a four-bar vamp. Bradley rubbed his lips with the back of his hand, and began to play as people started for the dance floor.

The first moaning note had barely emerged from the horn when Bradley felt a sharp pain sweep over him in a sickening wave of white-hot anguish. He wrenched the instrument from his lips and clutched the piano. His bracelet was tingling, and his stomach was an agonized knot. His strength gushed out of him like blood from a artery.

He gritted his teeth as he felt a vicious pull. It tugged as if a sharp-pointed hook was buried deep within his vitals. The darkness behind his closed eyes sparkled with flashes of red. Amid his pain he had a frightful thought.

Dr. Trumble's Bookkeepers were checking up on him already.

Chapter IV

Twinkle's Melting Point.

UNDER the shock of the discovery and the sharp mangling sensation of the psychic barb in his chest, Professor Bradley nearly dropped the instrument he was holding. For a short time he had almost forgotten about the Darkonians and the bargain he had made. Now the memory returned to his mind with redoubled force.

"What's the matter, hunk?" The piano man was yelling at him. "Go ahead and take it." Rhythmically, the pianist had continued vamping.

Bradley nodded and force his body into an upright position. He squeezed the horn in a firm grip. AS he raised it to his lips again, he noticed with a desperate sense of shock that his body was drenched with perspiration.

Anger surged through him like a revitalizing flood. He would play, hook or no hook. He saw that the dancers were shuffling as usual, two and two, each huddled in their own private world of rhythm.

His trumpet carved a melodic design into the pounding vamp. Low and throbbing it was. A softly moaning melody that began to weave restlessly. Vibrating sensuously, panting and crying. The smoke-stupefied atmosphere shivered as if invisible tears were dropping slowly, unseen, unwanted.

The piano man killed his vamp. He closed his eyes, deliberately imprisoning his senses in an alert universe of sound, His left hand sought out a bass pattern. The pattern became alive, prodding. The bass man listened a few bars and joined him. The trombone section rocked in their chairs and extended their slides to pick up

the low counter-pattern, punctuating it with a whipping rhythmic riff as the drummer kicked his metallic jungle of instruments into life with a savage pounding.

Bradley's eyes were closed. The pain was fading. The trumpet was throbbing against his lips. Wailing endlessly, over and over again.

The piano man's right hand now set the harmony and inspired the saxes with an idea as the trumpets pounded with a stinging bite into a screaming lick all their own.

It was old, that melody, and evil somehow. Crawling melodically in an out of that bedlam of rhythmic sound. Bradley could feel uneasy gooseflesh ripple over him like a hairy blanket of with thousand of tiny pattering feet as the musicians' ideas began to unify and develop. Bradley played louder. Perspiration was running down his neck. The band background was solid now, and rhythmic. It mauled the air with an invisible paw, arousing instincts that were old and shriveled and almost forgotten.

Bradley let himself go. The trumpet slurred into a primitive sound, siding down and down and then up—up in a taunting laugh, wild and savage. The music was getting wild, twisting itself—snarling in an unholy chuckling mirth. Pulling and straining, the melody stung Bradley's lip muscles as it sucked itself into life from his breath, hot and warm.

"Bradley!"

It was Steve shaking him.

"You'd better take Twinkle home. She's sick, I think."

In a redd daze, Bradley put the horn down and stumbled off of the bandstand as the musicians went rhythmically on, engrossed in the now living thing they had started.

"Solid, man, solid!" the bass man yelled to him.

Bradley nodded in a dumb fashion and threaded his way back to his table. He saw Twinkle standing up, clutching at the back of a chair for support. She looked lily-white around the ears. Bradley tightened himself to reality. He felt sober—very, very sober.

Twinkle sneezed. "Get me out of here," she managed to say. "Take me home—quick."

The check was paid. The doorman bowed. The checkered taxi-door slammed. Bradley wilted back in the seat and looked at Twinkle with gloom in his face.

"Dr. Trumble's Bookkeepers just made me realize what an efficient organization I've had the misfortune to entangle myself with. Patriotic motive or research reasons or not, I realize now that 'the hair of the dog' seems to have distorted my common sense."

"That horrible music," said Twinkle. "Horrible."

She shivered and rolled down the window.

"Voodoo music," replied Bradley absently.

"Well you shouldn't have played it!" she snapped. "I can hardly hold myself together."

THE taxi hummed along. Twinkle began to move the blue ring as if it hurt her.

"My foot feels funny," she said.

Bradley had been silent.

"You look human," he said abruptly. "Why?"

Twinkle shrugged. "It is necessary so that we may live among you peaceably. These rings we wear pick up the power needed to hold these imitation bodies stable. It's some form of a complex force-field that is generated behind the green door in Our laboratories downtown and is broadcast by a process somewhat similar to the elementary experiments you humans are performing now in small-scale units of broadcasting power. Our first experiments were crude too. In fact, we made so many blunders at first that you humans still remember and speak of such things as superstitions of the Dark Ages."

"What?"

Twinkle laughed a short laugh. "We used to deal more openly with humans for right of access to their life forces in exchange for favors. Since We came from Darkonia—we were sometimes referred to as *D-men*. It might sound like the word *demon*, but we aren't. Demons don't exist. Such a belief is extremely ignorant and unscientific."

Bradley motioned to the ring. "How does that thing work?"

A pained look flitted across Twinkle's face. "You must realize, Professor Bradley, that the universe is a big place occupied by thousands of different races of intelligent beings of all shapes and sizes. Some of them are quite young in their development, like you humans. But some are much older than even We Darkonians. Naturally many of the stronger races would try to exploit the lower races unfairly if some sort of Control hadn't been established."

This explanation staggered Bradley.

"Control?"

"Yes," Twinkle's voice sounded almost sad, "There is a Control that keeps the universe running on an orderly basis toward some unguessable ultimate destiny. Only Control knows what will be the final result. Even We Darkonians must abide by a certain pattern of regulations which were laid down for Us long, long ago when Our mental and scientific achievements advanced Us to the point where Control thought it necessary to come into contact with Us. No race is perfect. We Darkonians have Our weak points that We can change. That's another reason why We are forbidden to reveal any scientific discoveries to you humans. Each race must fight its own way up the ladder of evolution. I think you call it 'Survival of the Fittest'."

"You're evading my question about the ring."

"No, I'm not," she countered. "You just won't be able to understand all of it. But I'll try."

She held the ring up for him to see, and the passing street lights glinted on its cool blue surface.

"It really contains an extremely tiny electronic circuit somewhat similar to one of your radio sets. In Our laboratories the vital life forces, which We have obtained legally, are broken down into their basic sub-electronic particles. They are different from other electronic vibrations, having a cohesive force of intelligence, and have a tendency to cling together. Consequently they can be stored in delicate

crystalline tubes something like you store an electrical potential in a condenser or tube or battery.

"But I still don't see how you use them."

"The storage tubes are exceptionally sensitive to vibrations and have a function similar to your own radio tubes," she went on. "By that I mean a small electrical potential can be amplified and increased to the point where you can use it in all manner of ways. That is what we do with your human psyches. They are powerful and—"

Her voice stopped unexpectedly.

"But what about the human's actual consciousness or ego?" asked Bradley.

Twinkle let out a scream.

"My foot! It's dissolving!"

"What?" Bradley's mind did a flip-flop.

Twinkle clutched him. "You've got to get me back to the office. Quick!"

Bradley glanced at her and gasped. Her face seemed to be blurring and wavering as if he were looking at her through a broken glass lens, A faint mist, cloudy and swirling, outlined her figure with an alien halo.

"It was that horrible music you played." Her words were becoming jumbled and indistinct. "It did something to my ring. I'm not picking up enough power. If you don't get me back to the office I won't be able to hold myself together. My force field is fading. A tube must have gone bad."

BRADLEY hardly heard her. He was beginning to shiver. A chilly dampness, as if borne on the breath of an icy wind was now starting to sweep through the interior of the cab. Twinkle's face was dissolving into—a—a—rainbow cloud!

The brakes and rubber tires squealed suddenly against the pavement. They squeaked louder than the taxi-driver as the cab jolted to a halt.

The front door slammed. The driver fled. He must have been watching. Rear-vision mirrors sometimes reveal strange sights.

"Twinkle!" Bradley collapsed against the far end of the rear seat. "Don't do that!"

The Professor stared at her in horror.

The sudden dampness released into the cab was bad enough, but this was ghastly. Was Twinkle dying?

"Don't!" he croaked.

Sluggishly the thing squirmed against him.

"Hux." Her thought seemed to burn into his reeling brain. "Help me. I can't hold myself together. That music nearly finished me."

Professor Bradley gagged, He managed to reach for the door handle.

"Hux!" The thought seared into him like a flashing white-hot rivet. "Don't leave me. I'm helpless."

Bradley's skin was twitching and crawling as if his body were infested with hairy little caterpillars. He flung open the door and tumbled out to the hard pavement, just as a policeman came stalking up.

"What goes on here, bud?" The policeman jerked Bradley to his feet. "What made the driver run away from you like that? They don't usually run off and leave their hacks deserted. Something funny must be going on—"

He looked into the interior of the cab. His eyes widened; they threatened to pop out from his head. Then he fainted! Yes, he definitely fainted!

"Hux!" Winged by desperation a message seemed to crackle into his brain, "Jump into that seat and drive me out of here."

Professor Bradley's jaw clamped shut. Wooden-faced, without looking into the cab, he settled himself in the empty seat. After all, he thought grimly, the date had been his idea. He shifted gears, let in the clutch.

"Drive down to the office." Twinkle's thought was electric with urgency. "I'll have to go up to the room behind the green door."

"What do you mean by the office?" Bradley asked aloud.

"Where you were today." Her thought came to him distinctly. "Except for my right leg I can hold myself together. My right leg doesn't integrate the way it should so I'll have to go there to pick up some stable essence."

"Oh," replied Bradley blankly as he sent the checkered cab along the darkest streets. Block succeeded block. Whatever had possessed him to get tangled up in things like this? His scattered thoughts were dashing recklessly up and down their thought corridors trying to get back to their proper cells. Some of the crowded crossroads were jamming in straggling confusion.

Bradley knew he was sober. It all seemed like a dream—but that thing in the back seat wasn't a dream—it was a nightmare! Also that agonizing little pain way down inside of him—psychic hook? Suppose they really had a legal claim on his psyche? Also the body—suppose it really was in his apartment at this moment? Then again, suppose he said those three words?

Bradley shivered. He should have known whisky would distort his judgment. He ought to send his judgment to the dry-cleaners and have the spots removed.

"Stop here, Hux," cut in her thought. "Right past this street- light. We can go up the back way. There's a private elevator."

Bradley switched the life out of the car. He got out and avoided looking back as he walked up to the building. He heard the taxi door slam and then the thing that was part Twinkle and part thing approach. He heard the click of a high heel—click, then—squish, then—click, then squish—click—squish—click—squish. Was that Twinkle walking?

"Miss Twinkle!", Bradley heard himself say in a strained voice. "I think I had better go."

"Oh, no," came her ruthless message. "I might need you and I forgot my hat in the cab. Will you get it for me?"

PROFESSOR BRADLEY'S knees were shaking. Realization flooded through him that for the last ten minutes he had been holding himself at bow-string tension. Now a reaction was setting in. Weakness engulfed him.

"I'm afraid," he muttered. "I'm not able to get your hat—"

A warning bell clanged into furious activity inside his skull. Good heavens?

"Able?" And "hat?"

Those words! Suppose he had said "ink?"

Professor Bradley sagged into the dark doorway. The shattering impact of the desperate warning his brain jammed into his already overtaxed nerve channels had tensed him for several heartbeats, and now that reflexive functions were

beginning to meter the excess sugar and adrenaline in his blood back to normal, he felt empty, and limp, like a wet gunny-sack.

His nervous system was jangling with tangled cross-currents like a Chinese telephone exchange. It had had enough. It wanted to go away and lie down and play dead for a while.

Bradley felt Twinkle bundle him into the elevator while his mind tried delicately to withdraw its feet from the yawning abyss it had so narrowly stepped into. The elevator whined up and up.

The door opened. Click—squish—click—squish.

Bradley's tired mind protested. It didn't mind her following so much except for the squish part. Why couldn't she walk right? Click—squash—click—squash. It would be less gruesome.

The square green door.

"Push in on the handle," Twinkle's thought came. "Then pull!"

Bradley obeyed. The heavy door swung outward, and he staggered. The same alien mist that had almost floored him in the cab swirled through the opening like the breath of a passing garbage-wagon. It made him dizzy.

"Don't go away." Bradley caught Twinkle's message as she slithered around the edge of the door. "You can drive me home in that taxi as soon as I get myself together again. I've got enough essence left over from a client that paid off last week to do it nicely. It won't take long."

Bradley stared at the green door that Twinkle had left slightly ajar. Should he wait—or go now to that pretty little institution over the hill—the one with the high fence around it? He could ask for a trial fit in the straightjackets they were wearing this season! How could he stand here and accept such a conversation—if a voice in your attic could be called a conversation—like this and keep from chewing his finger-nails off clear up to the elbow? He didn't know. It must require self-control to manage such stresses on the sanity.

Bradley wished he smoked. Men were always supposed to smoke at a time like this, weren't they? Here he was waiting for a blond secretary to pull herself together by doing something with psychic essence left over from somebody, somehow, somewhere!

The back of his mind was tossing the idea around that it—the mind—must be composed of some remarkable gadgets to accept remarkable things as unremarkable. What was going on behind that square green door anyhow? Essence? Vital force?

"Ii-oooh-eeee!"

From behind the door came a distressing mental effect!

Silent screams! Could there be such things as silent screams?

Bradley shuddered. It wasn't exactly explainable but the screams were all the more terrible because they were unuttered.

The screams tasted sour and felt cold. Bradley didn't know which of his sensory channels was receiving the evidence of that alien agony, but it was horrible. It set his teeth on edge. The suffering that he sensed behind the green door washed into him like a suffering which is beyond human flesh to endure.

Again it came!

"I-oooh-eeee-ah!"

Somehow, Bradley managed to stagger into the elevator and start it going down. He was alone. He was pressing on the floor to make it drop faster. So that was what Twembly meant when he said he "never saw a human yet who liked it!"

Now, as a brutal reminder, when he lurched outside into the cool air of early dawn one of Mr. Tramble's broadminded bookkeepers sent him sprawling to the pavement with a vicious tug on the psychic hook.

Just to see what he was doing!

Chapter V

Up in Bradley's Room.

PROFESSOR Huxley J. Bradley inserted the key into the door of his apartment, and hesitated. His mind was clear now, in fact it was entirely too clear. His head ached with squadrons of midget dive-bombers swooping in and around the convolutions of his brain with all the noisy clatter and roar of what was a super-nova hangover.

No matter. He shook his head in annoyance. Suppose that body was in his apartment? Suppose Dean Fritterton knew that the faculty now had a professor of music who came in mornings, furnished complete with a hangover-hungover, a psychic hook, and an extra body at no additional charge to the University? Bradley made a squint face and pushed the door ope. He looked around the living-room. Then he walked nervously into the bedroom.

At the doorway he stopped short with a gasp of surprise.

It was there all right. A body was reposing on the bed.

Bradley flinched. By a desperate effort he took a second look. They had delivered a body all right! But it was a girl—long black hair, slim and—he stumbled to the bed and jerked the coverings hurriedly over the figure. A body would catch cold lying around with so few clothes on. They should have at least furnished it complete with accessories. Although he had noticed the middle finger of the right hand was furnished with one of the blue rings.

This was impossible—absolutely impossible! He'd better get that thing out of here before the maid came in to clean up. It was getting late, and if the faculty ever heard that he had a—girl in his room! Even if the body was imitation, no one would believe it wasn't alive.

Bradley collapsed into a chair. He began to crack his knuckles. The amazing little gadget in the back of his mind that persisted in looking on all this as normal whirred busily until it popped up with something.

"Just don't get excited," it said. "Don't get upset. Be calm and accept things."

Clear thought, Bradley decided, would be possible and solutions arrived at. Otherwise, it might become a situation of run—don't walk, to the nearest psychiatrist. Very well.

Bradley decided he'd better phone Tramble and try to call this entire thing off. He better tell Tramble he didn't want to play any more. Bradley fished in his pocket for the card Tramble had given him. It read:

TRAMBLE, TRUMBLE AND TWEMBL
Attorneys at Law
Ravenswood 7668
For night calls: Long Beach 8292

Bradley whirred the dial phone.

"Hello... Mr. Tramble? ... This is Professor Bradley... Sorry to wake you up so early in the morning... I found that body like you said I would in my apartment... yes, but I've decided to call the entire thing off... Yes... What? ... But Mr. Tramble! ... Wait, Mr. Tramble! What do you mean—a bargain's a bargain? ... That's absurd... But it's a girl, Mr. Tramble."

Bradley listened impatiently.

"What?" he yelled. "You listen to me. Suppose I did say something different... Yes, but not that different... Now wait a minute—you can't do this to me... Mr. Tramble—Mr. Tramble!"

Furious, Bradley rattled the hook. He smashed the receiver into place.

"Hangs up on me," he muttered, "the dirty little Darkonian!"

He glanced in irritation at the shrouded figure on the bed. Somehow, he had to get that thing out of here. He couldn't very well carry it out over his shoulder like a sack of vegetables. Not in its present state of *déshabillé*. He clenched his jaw.

The dial made whirring noises like a metallic rattlesnake.

"This is Bradley again... Now wait a minute... All right, so I'm sorry I woke you up. You promised me a new body and this thing doesn't fulfil your part of the contract. What good is a dead body? ... What do you mean, it's not dead? ... Well how can I use it. Look, Tramble, you promised!—Oh? ... Oh! ... Hm-m-m... Yes, that might help, but, now wait—don't hang up—Tramble—"

Bradley slammed the receiver back in the cradle as the line again went dead. He cracked his best knuckle. Tramble said for him to just concentrate and his bracelet would give him power to transfer his mind into the new body. Astounding! It would be a good trick if it would work. At least he could walk the body out of the apartment and check it in a hotel for a time. Then he'd be able to transfer his mind back into his own body and, after he attended his classes, he could decide what to do next.

Very well, he'd try it. But first he'd have to concentrate.

QUIETLY Bradley's lanky body relaxed in the chair. He closed his eyes. Concentrate... ugh... ugh... uuuggghhh!

Hang it, nothing seemed to happen—except he felt chilly and his hangover was gone.

He opened his eyes and his mind exploded into spinning skyrockets when he saw himself sprawled in the chair across the room, head down, arms and legs drooping.

Good heavens! He'd killed himself!

Then, the skyrockets abruptly subsided as he realized he was over here lying in bed under a cover. Also he felt very, very peculiar, for the garments he was

wearing were strange—one of them too tight and the other loose, flimsy and silken. How odd!

Bradley swung a leg from beneath the covers and stopped. For a shattering moment he just stared at the leg.

What a leg it was!

He inspected it in tingling surprise. It was hairless and smooth and comely. It certainly wasn't an imitation, either.

Professor Bradley sucked in his breath. Quickly, he looked up at the ceiling. He must be careful.

Awkwardly, but with deliberation, he wrapped the pink cover around him and got up and walked over to the mirror. The reflection was that of a girl. Long flowing black hair and astounded wide-set eyes stared back at him. The reflection, was decidedly pretty. It was easy on the eyes. Very!

A wry thought came. He had a new body, and what a body! He pulled the cover closer about his supple figure. It would never, never do to let that cover slip—not in front of the mirror. Fake body or not. Not until he got used to the idea—if ever. Now to walk out of here and check in a hotel, transfer back to his own proper form, and get this mess settled once and for all.

Bradley sat down as disgustedly as the trim body would allow him on the edge of the bed. He couldn't check into a hotel clad mainly in a bedcover. Now what?

The practical part in his mind almost made clicking noises for five seconds. Then he had a solution. He'd change back to his own body and go out and buy some clothes. Would the bracelet, still on his own wrist, work both ways? Probably! Check... Concentrate... Uuuggghhh!

Thu-u-d!

Professor Bradley, himself again, hangover and all, straightened up in the chair as he heard a body fall heavily to the floor. It was the girl—sprawled flat on the carpet. Hang it! He'd have to be more careful of his various bodies during the changeover process. Otherwise the wear and tear might prove considerable.

That bedcover—he should have fastened it.

Bradley felt his face redden as he lifted the dangling figure onto the bed and covered it up again. He looked at his watch. There should be some clothing stores open soon. He'd get some warm breakfast, some female garments and—

His mind refused to go further for the moment He'd buy the clothes first and then worry.

He left the apartment, fastening the door carefully behind him.

"Yes, it was a fine day," he said to the elevator boy.

"Good morning," he told the stiff-shirted manager in the marble lobby. Later he ordered "Orange juice, ham and eggs, buttered rye toast and coffee," at the drugstore and then drank water until Finklestein's store opened up.

Bradley looked at the weathered sign:

**CLOSING OUT SALE THIS WEEK ONLY!
THIS TIME WE MEAN IT!
FAMOUS FASHIONS**

He buttoned his brown tweed coat, pushed through the door and walked up to the floorwalker.

"Beg your pardon, but I would like to purchase some"—Bradley hesitated, and then plunged—"some female dresses such as women wear."

The floorwalker looked at Professor Bradley like floorwalkers look at people. "What sort of clothes, young man?" he inquired. "We have many departments." His voice became dreamy as he droned: "Sports, evening wear, afternoon clothes, business frocks, tailored wedding, returnable wedding garments, fitted riveting-overalls, bargain bucking specials, and smart suits for slick chicks, junior miss or matron." He steadied himself, took a breath. "Perhaps I can help you. Who are they for?"

"Why, they're for—a friend." Bradley's teeth had caught the word "me" just in time. He'd have to watch himself. Plain facts would never do. He looked imploringly at the floorwalker. "I want a complete outfit. Lipstick and everything."

THE floorwalker nodded his head in floorwalker fashion.

"I understand, young man." He beckoned to a notebook-carrying salesgirl. "I'll appoint her a Personal Shopper and she will be able to assist you with your selections. A Finklestein service, free of charge." He clucked to the red-headed salesgirl. "Miss Muir, kindly help this gentleman with his purchases." He bowed, and walked off like floorwalkers sometimes do.

Miss Muir moistened the end of her pencil.

"If you will give me some idea as to what you have in mind?"

Bradley's mouth felt dry as if it were full of surgical cotton.

"Anything—anything that females wear. Just so I can get out of here. Cash."

"We can visit the suit department first," suggested Miss Muir. She led the way. "Several dresses, perhaps?"

"No, only one. You don't understand. It's for me, and I'll only need it long enough to get out of a mess."

"I realize I'm buying them for you," countered the Personal Shopper in a smooth monotone. "But I must have some idea as to size. What size do you think?"

Watching her, Bradley's mind struggled desperately with this problem. Then as he gazed at Miss Muir, his eyes suddenly brightened.

"When I'm a girl, I think I wear something just about your size," he blurted out.

Miss Muir stiffened. She clutched her notebook as she moved carefully to the opposite side of the Bargain Sale on Odd-Sized Girdles counter.

"What did you say?" Her voice sounded strained.

Bradley shot a wild glance down between the Special Clearance counter and the Slightly Soiled Irregulars counter to the door. If only he could get out of here!

"I don't know what I mean," he chattered, very much flustered. "I'm a trifle upset—lobster last night and all that. I want a complete outfit so that a girl can sneak out of my room and check into a hotel without causing a scandal. You see, she's up in my apartment in bed and everybody knows I'm a bachelor." He stopped, turned scarlet and floundered.

"Eeeee—eek!"

It was a squeaky squeal, complete with an uprising inflection, a crescendo, and uplifted eyebrows. Plainly Miss Muir was shocked.

"No, wait!" Bradley reached into his pocket for that stuff that has such a soothing effect upon all excited females. "Here is some money. Buy me an outfit that will fit you and keep the change."

Miss Muir's round mouth relaxed into an oval.

"Well!" She fluffed her red hair. "I didn't realize. I was—that is—shall we continue?"

"Continue," breathed Professor Bradley. "By all means, continue."

Her pencil made busy scratching noises. "You will need a smart frock, coat, blouse, shoes and stockings, and lingerie.

"Lingerie?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing." Bradley looked at his nails. "Continue."

"You'll want a hat, gloves, purse, and girdle."

Bradley cleared his throat.

"Yes, shoes. You brought your ration book, I trust. Did you say cosmetics?"

"Cosmetics?" His voice quavered uncertainly.

"Lipstick, powder, rouge. Will you be giving her a compact, too?"

Bradley snatched out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. He nodded.

"I'll have to have some idea of what she looks like. You must tell me the coloring of her eyes, hair and skin, you know."

Bradley squinted his eyes shut and then spoke through clenched teeth.

"Dark hair, pretty eyes—dark eyes, brown perhaps. Red lips and white teeth." He opened one eye. "I mean she's pretty, darned pretty."

"Skin?"

"Soft skin, very white, firm and smooth." He coughed as the shopgirl looked at him with new interest. "Uh-h, medium."

Miss Muir started to say something, paused, and chewed her pencil.

Bradley gestured nervously.

"How much longer will this take?"

She flashed him a smile.

"You say she's just my size?"

"Oh!" Professor Bradley looked at Miss Muir in a judicious manner. "You're not at all bad either, yourself. Yes, I should say just about your size would be perfect"

Miss Muir snapped her notebook shut.

"You sit down over there and I'll have the outfit ready for you in a jiffy." She looked him over from head to toe approvingly and then hurried away.

Chapter VI

One Body Too Many.

SELECTING a chair, Bradley sat down. He decided which fingernail offered the greatest chewing prospects and began to nibble at it.

"So far, so good," he thought.

What time was it? It should be about time for Tramble's Bookkeepers to fiddle with his heart-strings, or their psychic equivalent. It was beginning to look as if they didn't check up every hour, on the hour. In the meantime he should give some attention to not saying those three words, "able," "ink" and "hat."

He shuddered. Life Psyche, Incorporated were playing the game to keep all the marbles. Also that hat episode last night had been a close thing. But how could he have said "ink," too, and make sense. The idea was silly unless you had a macabre sense of humor. Probably would be best to try to figure out what sort of sentences could possibly include their use and then avoid saying them aloud. His incisor teeth had completed their devouring work on all available fingernails and he had a good hangnail going when Miss Muir staggered up with an armload of string-throttled bundles.

"There!" she said. She dumped them in his lap, hesitated and reluctantly vanished behind the Special Today Only counter.

Bradley took a last bite at the now stinging hangnail, hugged the packages, lumbered through the door, hurried to the apartment lobby.

"Good morning," he again said to the stiff-shirted manager, told the elevator boy, "Second floor," for practise, unlocked the door with a third hand somehow, and ambled into the bedroom. The body was still there, just like he'd left it.

He mangled the packages in a manner calculated to expose their innards—frothy innards. Bewildered, he spread the feminine intricacies around the room, draping them over chairs and lamps and furniture. He pivoted slowly on his heel.

There were so many things, and some of the articles seemed complex, tricky. He should have asked for a set of instructions. Did mothers give little girls home courses on how to manage them? Regardless of that, this was post-graduate stuff.

Professor Bradley propped himself in the chair with the studiousness of an engineer laying a bridge foundation. He was taking chances on breaking any bones by falling off seats. Hm-m- m. Perhaps a spread-eagle position had a higher safety factor. Was it logical? It was. He spread-eagled.

Concentrate... *uuuggghhh!*

Success.

Ah! His hangover had disappeared and again he was feeling chilly. Once more he was lying on a bed.

Bradley squirmed to his delicate feet and avoided looking in the mirror as, without benefit of bedcover, he approached the clothing. He peered around. Where should he start?

Hm-m-m. First this—how did they do it? Feet first or head first? Feet first seemed logical. A logical approach should accomplish wonders. It was the logic of an orderly mind. He stepped through the thing and began to pull. It was thick, heavy and rather tight. He pulled. Then wrestled with all his strength. Not so good. He sat down. Surely there must be a simpler way. Wiggling might do it. Therefore, he must try again and wiggle.

He pulled and wiggled. That almost did it but not quite. Women must indeed be clever creatures. They probably did it every day. Well, practically.

Bradley was still struggling when Mr. Tramble's Bookkeepers took a look-see with a yank on the psychic hook. Bradley bit his lip as the tearing hook forced a

sobbing moan through his set teeth. His muscles jerked. The results must have been as surprising to the Bookkeepers as it was to Professor Bradley.

The painful stimulus and his agonized contortions were just what he needed. As the pain subsided, he noticed the contrivance was around his hips. It snuggled there. He tested it with curious fingers and it made a satisfying slapping noise. Yes, it was an interesting gadget.

"Now—this? Easy."

This strange thing—or was it plural?— went on easily. Hm-m-m. One arm through here and the other through here. Now what? Evidently it was intended— Good heavens! It fastened in the back! Of all the absurd ideas! Did they take him for a contortionist? To blazes with it. He wouldn't wear it He didn't need it anyhow. This long thing was better. Headfirst would do it. Correct.

NOW Bradley allowed himself a look in the mirror. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Now for the skirt and blouse. The blouse was sort of frilly and thin. But that high-grade stuffing made a difference.

Hm-m-m. These slippers were a trifle tight. Yet a person can't have everything. It was like trying to walk on stilts. Now— now, he'd try to walk in the blame things.

Bradley inched across the floor like a tight-rope performer.

Who-oo-oops!

Professor Bradley got up painfully from the floor.

The finishing touches came next He'd have to use lipstick and stuff. He sat down before the mirror. This should be no trouble at all. It ought to be easy. He had seen enough women do it in plenty of public places to know how. A light stroke would work wonders, back and forth.

Lop-sided.

Oh well, he'd put more on the other side. Bah, it slipped! Good heavens! It looked as if someone with an inaccurate knowledge of throat-cutting had taken a swipe at him. Well, he'd rub it off and try again. Ah, that was better. Girls wore a lot of lipstick sometimes.

The hair came last on the program. It was lucky Trumble had furnished her with a nice hair-do before making delivery. Really, those jet black wavy tresses, smooth and shiny and silken under the electric lights were something to look at. Professor Bradley got quite a thrill admiring general design and effects. Then he moved over and ransacked the bundles again. Surely Miss Muir must have included one of those hairnets, a snood? Ah, she had. He tried it on and studied the effect. Bradley had to admit he looked stunning. All that he now needed was a hat. Where was the hat?

Bradley poked a finger somewhere into a small feminine contrivance and held it aloft dangling on one finger. It was evidently a hat and it did a good job of dangling. But the designer must have used an Ouija board when he dreamed this one up. It had a queer fourth-dimensional shape and might have fitted a midget, but it was the right color for it matched the dress.

How in the name of logic did they tell front from back? Um-m-mmmm. That didn't make much difference.

Bradley tensed the muscles of his tapering thighs and stood up. He leaned on the dresser for support. He'd have to practice walking in these slippers. There was sense in walking on your anklebone most of the time. Women walked around like this every day. So could he.

Painfully, Professor Bradley tottered almost to the bed before a doubt nagged him. Could he walk? He collapsed on the bed.

What was the difference? All he had to do was totter a short block and get his— or her—body checked into a hotel, change back and hurry to his classes. Then he could call up Tramble and be firm about matters. Yes, he'd call this thing off! It was bad enough to be risking his life-essence to grab a body the Army would take—but to exchange it for a soft feminine chassis was too much!

He had to admit it was a rather well designed model though. The only trouble was it had turned out to be the wrong gender.

The telephone burped. Bradley grabbed it.

"Hello, yes," he said. "This is Professor Bradley's apartment." His delicate eyebrows arched, "Eh? What do you mean you're certainly surprised? Who am I? ... But Dean Fritterton, I'm sorry I missed my first class... Yes, this is Professor Bradley... Who's a hussy? Wait a minute—"

Bradley groaned and hung up. Now he was in for it! Dean Fritterton had called to find out why he wasn't at his morning class, and he'd answered the phone in a girl's voice, from his apartment—at this hour, when he should be at work. A "hussy" the Dean had called him. This demanded action, immediate and definite.

Bradley hobbled out of his apartment and rang for the elevator. A frizzle-haired maid stared at him curiously but Bradley ignored her. His mind was doing flip-flops. He'd check in at the nearest hotel and if that concentration stuff worked at long-range—

The elevator boy's mouth fell open, "Going down?"

Professor Bradley managed to keep his ankles from turning. Hadn't the lazy button-pusher ever seen a girl before? He adjusted the chow-mein hat and successfully balanced himself out of the elevator, out of the lobby, down the street and into a hotel half-a-block away before the virginal high-heel muscles in his legs trembled and decided they had had enough of the outrage. They called a strike. Bradley fell down.

A gentleman helped Bradley to his shapely feet in a manner that was perhaps a wee bit too chivalrous and not at all platonic. His method, so to speak, was quite foreign to the best principles of knight-errantry.

PROFESSOR BRADLEY'S masculine nervous system, at first relieved at finding itself vertical, took three short seconds to decide that it had been insulted and the consequently wild swing was unladylike and missed the gentleman. Since high heels don't provide proper foundations for launching round-house swings, the professor ended on the sidewalk again. He had a drafty feeling.

Bradley straightened out his skirt, yanked off his shoes and marched into the hotel and up to the goggle-eyed clerk. "I want a room."

The clerk's eyelids managed to stretch enough to blink once over his distended eyes. He gulped.

"I beg your pardon, Miss. Are you all right?"

"Do I or don't I get a room?"

The clerk recovered and consulted his rack. "If you are asking for a theatrical rate, and have no baggage, we demand payment in advance."

Automatically, Professor Bradley reached for where his wallet should be. He jerked his hand away as if he had burned it. It was a startling sensation.

"Ah-h—I can get you the money later."

The clerk's mouth was an amazed O. Then he tightened his lips.

"Sorry, we're full up. No rooms."

Bradley had a flashing impulse to throw one of the shoes at the clerk. He restrained himself, for shoe coupons don't grow on trees, and put the shoes on. His feet ached. He reeled out of the lobby, blundered along the sidewalk and finally managed to stagger into his own apartment house lobby. He heard someone screaming.

"He's dead I tell you—he's dead!" said the voice. "Poor Professor Bradley! He's just sitting there in his chair so peaceful like. I went in to clean up after that girl came out and when I spoke to him, he didn't answer. He's dead—oo—ooh!"

The frizzle-haired maid had an excellent voice for hysterics and the manager was making soft clucking noises with his tongue as he fanned her with the classified telephone book.

Bradley edged past the switchboard. He heard the excited operator calling the police. On tip-toe, he had just started to sneak up the stairs when he heard the maid let out a squeal.

"There she is—that girl—going up the stairs. I saw her come out of the Professor's apartment."

Bradley ripped off the high-heels and sprinted up the steps. His stocking feet made thudding noises. Good heavens! This was getting serious. He slammed against his apartment door. It was locked. Hang it the key was inside! He heard the elevator whining up from the first floor and started back down the steps. If he could go around to the rear and climb in the window everything would be all right.

The elevator door clanged open.

"Hey, you!" It was the elevator boy, and he was looking determined.

Professor Bradley raced for the main floor three steps at a time. In transit, he forgot others might be trying to cut him off and he went skidding into the stiff-shirted manager and the maid who were just starting up the stairs.

The tangle was quite involved. When Bradley finally succeeded in extricating himself from the struggling heap, he fought his skirt into a less alarming position and climbed to his feet.

"No fair," he mumbled to the fascinated manager, and picking up his slippers, he scooted out of the lobby.

A police squad-car was unloading at the curb as he went whizzing through the door.

"Hey!" said two policemen.

But Professor Bradley poured on the coal. His little feet twinkled and he kept going. Now what was he going to do? He couldn't just run and run. He had to get some money—get his own body—get to his classes—get Tramble to listen to reason—get organized about not saying those three words—and get away from the police. It seemed he had to do a phenomenal amount of getting! Yet the biggest

"get" of all was—getting some ideas as to what and how. He twinkled around the corner...

BRADLEY needed a nickel. Dejected, he was leaning against the corner drugstore's window with the slippers under one arm. The pavement felt warm in the morning sun. Somehow, he had to get a nickel and call his apartment house. If he didn't prevent the police from removing his original body he might never be able to get it back. They might embalm it!

If he could scare up a nickel he could call and say he was Professor Bradley's private nurse, that the professor was subject to fainting spells, or something.

Hurrying pedestrians, still yawning from the ever-unpleasant task of wrenching their unwilling bodies out of soft beds, passed the disheveled girl with nothing more than sleepy glances. What if a girl did decide to carry her shoes these days? Maybe she lost her ration book.

Bradley tried to crack his female knuckles. They wouldn't crack. Minutes limped by while his mind clanked in fury with the problem of the nickel. His eyes narrowed as he saw a well dressed girl hiking toward him. She walked as if she were late, but he stopped her.

"I beg your pardon. This is unusual, but I've lost my purse and," he removed the chow-mein hat, "I'd be glad to sell you this for a dollar."

Suspiciously, the girl looked the hat over. Her eyes flickered only for an instant as she opened her purse and pulled out a dollar.

"Are you sure you aren't making a mistake," she said.

"I'm sure," replied Bradley. Taking the dollar, he hurried into the drugstore for some change. He phoned.

"Hello. This is Professor Bradley's nurse speaking... What? ... The coroner? ... To the morgue for an autopsy?" His voice cracked. "This is outrageous. He can't do that. Why, I'd object very much to an autopsy." He groaned. "Never mind."

He hung up. The receiver felt slippery in his moist fingers. Good grief! An autopsy! They had to cut bodies up into little chunks to do that, didn't they?

He raced through the door and flagged a yellow-cab. The breeze, buffeted by the swarming traffic, gave the short skirt an alarming air-conditioned principle. The tires revolved in a lordly manner toward the morgue at the conservative pace approved by the driver to be proper for the conservation of their rubber flesh while Bradley simmered in the slow boil of his own impatience.

Chapter VII

Girl Problem.

BY the time the taxi had pulled up before the squat graystone building, Bradley had completed half-a-dozen gory mental pictures of his body as various samples of mince-meat. Where did black-markets get their illegal meat anyhow?

"That's two-bits, girlie," grunted the driver as he opened the door. "Probably ain't nobody here during lunch hour. Want me to wait?"

Bradley hesitated, and then nodded as he stepped out. "Pay you after I pick up—something." This was going to be complicated.

He rang the bell and waited impatiently while the stoop-shouldered, gray-haired old man creaked open the metal door. Bradley pushed in.

"I'm a private nurse," he said. "Did they bring a Professor Bradley down here?"

"Yep, just got another one," replied the old man in a bored voice. "Wouldn't know the name off-hand. Coroner decided to knock off for lunch before he takes a whack at him."

"Then he didn't start yet!" breathed Bradley. He could hear echoes playing cops-and-robbers with their voices in the distant dark corners. What a gloomy place it was.

"Nope, not yet," said the old man and started down the narrow corridor. "Suppose you wanna see him." He forced a black door open and continued in a tired voice, "Been here thirty-three years and it's always the same. Bring 'em in—go out to lunch—come back—and chop 'em open. Same old routine—nothing ever happens in this morgue. I get awful tired associatin' with stiffs all the time." He pointed to a sheet covered slab. "I guess that's the one you want."

Professor Bradley dragged the sheet away with a muscle-tensing expectancy. The shock of seeing his own pale face, a dishwater gray, grinning vacuously at the ceiling almost unnerved him.

"Dead like all the rest," mumbled the old man.

"No—no," Bradley stuttered. "He's j-just—somewhat—er—inert."

"I wish he wasn't." The old man's sigh was wistful. "I go to picture shows and see things always happening in morgues. Bodies disappear." His voice trailed off. Then plaintively he went on. "Nothing ever happens in this morgue! All of 'em is as dead as ice-box turkey. Thirty-three years it's gone on." He sighed.

Bradley's heart jumped and he had to swallow it. "You mean you wouldn't mind if a body—uh-h—didn't stay dead or something?"

"I wouldn't mind if they all got up and did a jitter-bug. At least it would be something to talk about. I got an undertaker friend who's always bragging me deaf with talk about a body he had once that tried to tell him it wasn't dead."

"Perhaps I could help you," said Bradley cautiously. "But what would the authorities say?"

"Pshaw—who cares?" The old man's eyes began to shine. "Is that body one of them zombies I hear about? Can you really do something? I got lots of bodies."

"Ill try," replied Professor Bradley in as casual a voice as he could manage. He lifted his lithe form up on an empty slab. The marble felt cold through the thin dress. He relaxed and closed his pretty eyes.

Concentrate—*uuuggghh!*

Wow!

Dizzy, Bradley had no doubt that he was back in his own body, with a horrible hangover. He popped up and squeezed his head between his hands. Ugh!

The old man shuffled over. "Well, I'll swan!" he said cheerfully. "She said she could do it and she did. Wait'll I tell this!" He cackled in glee.

"It's nothing at all," said Bradley and slid off the slab. "You don't mind if I take her with me, do you? She usually feels slightly unglued after managing these

things." He hoisted the limp girl to his shoulder. The burden made his knee-joints feel as if they needed oiling.

"Not at all," chuckled the old man. "Tell her to come back any time." He led the way to the front door. "This is the most fun I've had since they brought in those Siamese twins to see what made them stick."

BREATHING heavily, Professor Bradley tottered down the steps with his shoulder-load of dangling female. He wrestled the flopping portions of the girl into the waiting taxi.

"Take us to Eight-Fourteen Sunnyside," he told the petrified driver, "and no conversation." He fumbled in his pockets. Empty. Darn it, they had emptied his pockets. He opened the purse for the ninety-five cents and waited until the cab jolted to a halt. He jangled the money into the driver's hand.

"Keep it," he said, and maneuvered the girl over his shoulder again.

The stiff-shirted manager, hands clasped behind him, was standing by the elevator as Bradley pressed the button with his free hand.

"Good afternoon, Professor Bradley." The manager smiled a pleasant smile. "I'm glad to see that you have recovered from your death." His jaw dropped. He clapped his hand against his forehead. "What am I saying?"

The elevator door clanged open as the manager recovered.

"See here, Bradley, you can't come in here carrying drunken girls," he sputtered.

"It's a hobby," returned Bradley hurriedly and stepped into the elevator.

"Let me into my apartment with a passkey," he said to the startled elevator boy after the door had closed.

The elevator boy's trembling hand hit the key-hole on the fifth try. Bradley closed his apartment door with a firm push. He dumped the girl on the divan.

"Professor Hux Bradley, I presume?"

Bradley jumped. He turned around.

He was confronted by an animated ball of fat. It was another fat man. This one really was fat. He had rolls of it. His bald head and pinkish jowls shook as he waddled forward to shake hands.

"Hardy Blossom, is my name," he told the professor.

Bradley closed one eye. "Blossom? Didn't you once telephone me?"

"Yes, yes," said Blossom in that hearty tone of voice formerly used by the now extinct vacuum-cleaner salesman. "I called you as soon as I read your advertisement in yesterday's paper. Too bad you were busy at the time. Now we can get down to business—eh?"

"Good heavens!" exploded Bradley and sank into a chair. "Another one!"

"Eh?" said Blossom in alarm. "What did you say?"

"You're too late," replied Bradley wearily.

Blossom's red cheeks turned purple. "You haven't closed any deal?"

"Yes, much to my regret."

"Not—" Blossom's voice was choked— "Life Psyche, Incorporated?"

Bradley nodded.

"Those scoundrels! Those cheap dirty conniving Darkonians!"

Blossom's jowls shook as he paced the room. His short jerky gestures pummeled the air.

"Underhanded! Unethical! Unfair! Professor Bradley—" He stopped and shook a fat finger under Bradley's nose. "If you had only waited! If you had only done business with me I'm sure you would have been better satisfied. What a bargain I would have given you if I had known that firm was after you. What was the deal?"

Bradley nodded toward the girl on the divan. "That—for my life-essence. What are you so excited about? I'm the one that's in trouble."

"Trouble!" Blossom snorted as he walked over to inspect the girl. "You don't know what trouble is." He poked an experimental finger into the rumpled girl. "It's not bad—for a run of the mill model." He turned to Bradley with an air of exasperation. "If you had only waited to see me.

"I still don't—"

Blossom's voice was deliberate as he lowered himself heavily to a footstool.

"Professor Bradley, Life Psyche, Incorporated and myself are in the same field of business. Competitors you might say, although I come from a star cluster near Betelgeuse; of course, as far as most humans are concerned, I'm in the tomato business. We sell very nice tomatoes if you should ever want a case. But—" he started to again shake his finger at Bradley— "Tramble has been building up a human essence surplus with his underhanded business tactics and it is beginning to hurt the market. Some of the other operators and myself are afraid he might get a monopoly on this planet if we don't do something about it. It's not right Life forces from this planet are considered extremely desirable by the connoisseurs of my region of space. And besides, Earthian life forces are fairly stable and hold up well under the problems of storage and transportation. I do all exporting business, you see. Now tell me—what was the bargain?"

Chapter VIII

Demon Collector.

QUICKLY Bradley explained. Blossom was fairly quiet until he came to the part about the three words he must not say.

"Ice on the hinges of Zandu!" swore Blossom. "Do you mean he used that old one on you? You should have had legal advice. That dictionary trick was voted out of existence when I was a mere youkarf. It's illegal. Where's the phone? I want to talk to Tramble."

Blossom took up the phone.

"Hello—get me Tramble. Never mind who... Hello—Tramble? It's me—Blossom. I've just talked to Professor Bradley. B-r-a-d-l-e-y. Bradley! Don't try to play innocent—he's one of your new accounts—what? Now listen, Tramble—What? ... No, you listen to me. You didn't file any notification of a completed matrix... How do I know? Why, freeze you, I check with the Bureau every morning and that's more than you do. I know—I know—that's no excuse... trouble getting help myself—Yes, but just the same you were trying to get by on that old illegal dictionary trick and the client hasn't got a chance."

"Hey!" said Bradley.

Blossom frowned at Bradley to keep him quiet. "I could report you, Tramble," he continued. "Yes. What? Well."

Blossom's lower lip protruded as he paused.

"Yes, you can do me a favor and I'll forget it," he went on. "A sub-jobber of mine unloaded a shipment of essence on me that I'm afraid isn't very stable and won't keep. How about taking it off my hands? You've got a bigger staff and can turn it over quickly. Okay? And thanks. How are things otherwise? Um-m-m, you like it? Well I think I'll try an athletic type of human shape like yours next time. This fat man stuff is jolly, but it's unhandy sometimes. Okay—okay, Tramble. Give me a buzz."

Blossom hung up.

"Nice Darkonian, that Tramble, in a few ways. But a sharp business head, very sharp."

Blossom heaved himself to his feet and walked over to the girl. He removed a curiously-shaped instrument from his pocket and fastened it like a locket around her throat.

"What are you doing?" asked Bradley nervously. "I've got to get rid of that body and go to my classes."

"A couple of things."

The tip of Blossom's pink tongue peeped through his tightened lips. It wiggled from side to side with each slow movement of his fingers as he closed the clasp. "I'm getting even with Tramble and helping you at the same time."

He straightened up with an effort.

"I can't afford to let Tramble get your psyche too soon. It'll teach him a lesson and I've fixed it so you can hold out a little longer. You'd never be able to concentrate on not saying those words with an extra body underfoot all the time. Anyhow, I've got a life essence that's been giving my staff trouble and I'd like to get rid of it until Tramble collects from you. This extra body of yours will make a home for this troublesome psyche and give my staff a rest until you pay off."

Bradley wet his lips. "You sound as if I didn't have a chance."

"A chance?" Blossom clucked as if in pity. "You didn't think you did have a chance, did you? Anyhow, this body will now do lots of interesting things. I'm installing a vital life force that I got in a trade from Tramble when he took over her original body for an experiment. She's a trouble maker, I tell you. She's never satisfied—always wanting her own body back. Maybe this one will satisfy her."

He withdrew a piece of paper from his pocket and placed something in it. He twisted the paper into a taper and lighted it. A greasy smoke writhed upward and he held it under the girl's nose.

Bradley's middle section fluttered in and out like an accordion as he saw the girl's body quiver. Her eyes blinked open and she held up her hands to look at them. She cocked her head. She began an examination of her person in detail. Bradley flushed.

"Hey, quit it," he told her in a weak voice.

"They're always curious." Blossom shrugged and started for the door. Bradley gasped.

"Good heavens! Tell her to do that in the next room!"

"She's your problem now," Blossom said lightly. "I must be going, Professor Bradley."

"Wait a minute," broke in the girl in a heated tone. "I want to talk to you, Blossom."

With a sinuous movement she jumped to her feet and started toward him. "What's happening to my real body, you over-stuffed ghoul?" She was angry. Bradley again noticed her chest. It stuck out.

"Good-by," said Blossom hurriedly and slammed the door.

BRADLEY saw the girl bite her full under-lip. Her furious breaths were deep and full, stretching and wrinkling the thin blouse in an interesting manner in accordance with the law of textile tension and its relationship to its underlying foundation. She looked like a satin-smooth jungle cat, sleek and nice, and the tailored skirt fitted where it touched. Bradley permitted the pressure of his held breath to escape in a low whistle. With some life in it that body looked different.

The girl swung around. Her black, hair nestled against a rounded shoulder. Her eyes frisked Bradley. "Hello," she said.

"Uh—hello."

"I want two things from you," she said. "A drink comes first."

"A drink," repeated Bradley and floundered into action. Some of the whisky splashed into the glass and he put it on the table beside her. He felt a bit dizzy as her finger wiggled at him to edge closer.

She pulled him down on the divan and expertly pinioned his arm behind him.

"Now give me a kiss," she murmured. Her breath smelled like a violet. She kissed him...

Bradley struggled up. His toes tingled.

The girl watched him over the edge of her glass while his capillaries adjusted themselves. He felt as if he had brushed his teeth with a power-driven lawnmower—with soft blades. "Now look here," he said at last. "I don't even know your name."

"Judy." She had moist red lips.

"Judy—what?"

"Judy." She waved her hand. "Judy Bradley if you want to get married."

"Married?"

"Well, it's something to do," countered the girl. "And I have been up here for some time, I imagine. The neighbors might talk, you know."

"Good heavens! This is getting worse all the time."

Judy pouted. "If you saw my real body you wouldn't think things were getting so worse. I'll bet you'd want to marry me then. You should see me in a sweater. A sweater's better!"

"Sweater's better?"

"Sweater's better!" Judy nodded.

"Life Psyche, Incorporated took my body for an experiment of some sort, and, since they didn't have any legal claim on my essence, I was forced to exist as an elemental." She wrinkled her nose. "It's hard to explain. Anyhow, I raised all plain and fancy trouble where they had me and nobody liked me."

"I think you're rather nice."

Judy extended a slim leg and sniffed. "This isn't the real me. I want my own body back before whoever got it completely ruins it. It attracts men like flies! I know!" She sighed. "I got awfully bored floating around with no body. Where I was, it was a long time, between kissing and drinking, I tell you." She put the drink down and her level eyes bored into him. She beckoned to him. "Come here!"

Professor Bradley inched down on the edge of the divan. He intended to say something. But he didn't say it. He couldn't say it—with Judy kissing him again and holding both of his arms.

As operations proceeded, it became evident that Professor Bradley hadn't devoted much study to the art of kissing and breathing through his nose at the same time, because he started to turn red and purple as if he were strangling and Judy had to slow down to let him breathe.

"Now see here!" he managed to protest "I've got to go to school."

Judy looked down at him calmly, but didn't relax the firm hold she had on him.

"You're going to school, all right but it's going to be private instruction."

"My classes are waiting."

"I think you'll find my classes more interesting." Unperturbed, she settled down to the serious business of proving it.

IT was so interesting Bradley didn't struggle long, for he discovered he had nostrils.

"Now wait a minute," he said, drawing back. "I want to talk to you."

A catalyst is something that speeds up reactions and you still have it. Therefore, a kiss must be a form of catalyst. It speeds up reactions and you still got it. Anyhow, a man and a girl will sometimes discover that the finished product can be termed Love.

Bradley and Judy talked for three hours before they discovered they had a product.

Of course, the interval of time during which mutual histories and wishes and dreams are swapped and exchanged, does wonders for stabilizing the finished product. They stabilized.

Judy sighed. "I've read about love at first sight. It's nice."

"If only we get your real body back and I could get out of this silly bargain with Tramble, we could get married and so forth," Bradley said thoughtfully.

"Mostly so forth," breathed Judy.

"But what worries me is how to do it," continued Professor Bradley, undaunted. "Probably it wouldn't be legal to marry you in this body you have now."

Judy tilted her glass and tried to shake a small hunk of ice that persisted in sticking to the bottom down into her waiting mouth.

"I'm yours to command." Her eyes had an impish expression. "What does the Master command?"

"That settles it." Bradley was firm. "Put your drink on that table and—"

Who-oo-osh!

A blinding flash of smoke and flame blasted across the living-room like the puff of an old-time photographer's flash-pan.

Bradley jumped up. His eyes smarted and acrid fumes stung his nose. What was this? He twisted his shoulder in alarm as he felt the jerk of the psychic hook, digging deep into his nerve centers. The pain, this time, was intense.

Agony shimmered over him in throbbing waves as the hook pulled tighter and tighter. The pressure was unrelenting. It did not subside. Bradley ground his teeth. This was too much!

"Professor Hux Bradley?"

A Darkonian who was a stranger to Professor Bradley had appeared in the room, near the taboret. He was a tired-looking fellow and he was making an adjustment of his ring in a bored manner.

Wisps of greasy black smoke eddied around him and made him cough as he then checked something in a tattered notebook.

"As collecting agent for Life Psyche, Incorporated, I am hereby authorized to inform you that you are legally in debt to the aforementioned party for your essence. Said essence is to be collected by said party of the first part within one hour." He sneezed and started to fade away.

"Hey, what sort of a bargain is this?" shouted Bradley angrily. "I didn't say those three words agreed upon."

The agent flickered in a vague way.

"Oh, yes, you did," he replied in a tired voice. "The word ink is in 'drink'—hat is in 'that'—and able is 'table.' That's all, brother."

With this he vanished as Bradley lunged at his nebulous shape and caught empty air.

Bradley groaned. His tortured stomach-muscles were screaming and pulling at him to double over and relieve some of the tension. The psychic hook wasn't kidding this time. It hurt, with no let-up in the tension.

Sweat, like from hidden springs, was popping out all over him.

Professor Bradley sagged to the floor and let his muscles pull his knees up under his chin. The agony was building in volume with each passing second as if an invisible but remorseless fishing line were pulling and dragging him in a predetermined direction. So, the pained thought came, Tramble had tricked him. If the psychic hook got any worse he knew he would go begging to Tramble for relief.

So this was it!

HIS mind kept sliding off somewhere—retreating from itself. He felt Judy pouring a drink down his throat. Then she was tugging him into an upright position. Through a red haze, he saw that she was fighting to remain calm, but he could feel her fingers tremble as she smoothed his sweating forehead. He heard her talking down at him as if she were way, way off on a distant mountain peak.

"You've got to do something, Hux!" she kept crying. "They can't do this to us—now. Hux—can you hear me?"

Bradley tried to keep from fainting. She wanted him to do something, his thought tried to tell him despite its dizziness—and his world was a sinking thing of blackness and red flashes of pain which made him feel weak and nauseated. In vain, his mind tried to withdraw from beneath the descending oblivion of a slow whirlpool of blackness that spiraled down and down—stupefying his brain into nothingness.

There was a long blank lull in his thought. Then he became aware he was thinking again, ever so slowly. His mind felt like a sluggish pool of stale rain-water—stagnant except for little drops of ideas that pattered hopelessly down one by one and didn't cause a ripple. What could he do? How much time had passed? The pain surged at him like an incoming tide.

"Hux—Hux, darling!" Her distant voice sounded as if she had been crying. "Can you hear me? You've only another half hour."

A half hour! He felt an angry strength sweep through him. He sat up despite the quivering of his muscles. He ought to go down there and blow the whole office to blazes.

Splash—went the puddle of his mind. The idea bit him so forcefully he almost forgot his pain. His brain settled. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of that before? And he should take Judy along too!

He stumbled to his feet and dragged Judy into the bedroom. His eyes kept blurring as he picked up the witch-doctor horn and limped over to the doorway. Maybe he would swing Tramble a tune—if he could work the doorway! The wrenching hook dragged at him as he made sure the wire with the Christmas-tree bulbs Twembly had originally stuck there was intact. He pursed his lips and tried to whistle.

"Hux," breathed Judy fearfully, "what are you doing?"

"Hush up, Judy!" Bradley said. "Don't interrupt me."

Bradley looked first at the girl, then at the door. Drops of perspiration oozed out on his forehead—drops of agony.

"If I can only do this, we're in the clear," he told her. "If I don't do it, we're goners!"

Summoning all of his fortitude, he pursed his lips and began to whistle.

Chapter IX

Psychic Twister.

AGAIN the pain of the hook returned but Bradley kept on whistling. Up and down the scale he went, trying to find the proper pitch and sequence. In one hand he was holding the witch-doctor horn, clutching it in frenzied desperation. If only he could strike on that strange melody, the correct series of vibrations he had heard Twembly use to start the Pick-up to working! He whistled until his lips were dry, but the doorway remained an ordinary doorway.

Bradley continued to sweat. The minutes scrambled by. He was probably too tense. It would be better to relax his mind and let his musical ear take charge of remembering the melody. His ear began searching its tonal memory.

His ear whistled—up and down, then down and up. The doorway flickered—for an instant. He almost had it. His ear pursed his lips in the proper pattern and he whistled. Again—and the writhing tentacles of inky blackness sprouted.

He took a firm grip on the horn.

"Come on," he said and dragged Judy with him as he stepped through. The blackness was heavy with a fluid solidity as of a sweeping current that moves—somewhere.

The sticky darkness snapped away. Hand in hand, they stood in the mahogany-walled waiting room. It was deserted. Bradley pulled Judy with him down the corridor toward the square green door. He didn't need directions. The hook was dragging him like a guiding compass.

He hesitated before the green door, looking at Judy. Her face was pale and her eyes wide with questioning.

"It may be a stupid idea," he gritted through pain-clenched teeth, "but if Darkonians, or their equipment, are allergic to Voodoo music on a modern trumpet I don't think it will do them any good at close range on a real witch-doctor horn. Stick close to me." He opened the door and almost strangled as the thick fog of the room beyond clogged his lungs. A low humming sound drummed at his ears. He heard Judy follow him, coughing, into the purplish-tinted fog that swirled around them.

Dimly, through the mist he could see banks and tiers of delicate glass tubes pulsing with inner blue lights.

Bradley's spine contracted into tight spirals of uncertainty as he sensed a something of squirming agony wash over him from somewhere. The agony wasn't his—he had his own. Something was being tortured here in this blue-purple grayness, but he wasn't sure how he knew. The something's agony seeped into him on all his sensory channels. It was an alien sensation that made him weaker than he should be. He realized he wasn't very brave—just desperate.

He put the horn to his lips as he felt Judy huddle up to him. His lips tensed. He began to play a soul-wrenching melody—and the stunning shock of the fearsome vitality in that ancient song as it sucked itself into life from his breath made him aware that the witch-doctor horn was now serving a purpose that had far more possibilities at this sort of thing than the most modern of trumpets. The tonal scale of this horn was not exactly correct. Most of the notes were off-key. The notes sounded alien, *outré*.

For a short second, the fog quivered. Then it writhed as a nebulous shiver vibrated through the twisting streamers. A bedlam of unintelligible thoughts lashed through Bradley's mind.

Judy huddled up close to him as vague shapes loomed up in the swirling mist and fell away. Bradley put his entire body into feeding life into the hideous melody that poured from the instrument.

"Stop that!"

It was a mental command so violent, so intense, that his mind screamed. Bradley's music faltered. His mind wrenched out an answering thought.

"Release me from this hook!"

Brutally, the psychic hook jerked and twisted in a savage effort to pull him to his knees. Bradley strained against his agony. He poured a wild melody through the horn. He could see that the fog had withdrawn far enough to enclose Judy and himself in a small bubble of crystal-clear air.

Illustration:

A crystal bubble of air protected Bradley and Judy

The damp fog kept its distance, roiling and seething as if it were alive and didn't like his music. All around him, faintly, he could see the crystal tubes glowing with ever greater and greater brilliance.

"Put—down—that—horn!"

The shattering impact of the thought almost short-circuited his brain. The bullet-like blow of each word reminded him dizzily of Tramble.

GRIMLY Bradley stiffened his legs against the weakness that was sapping his strength. His lips were tiring. His lungs felt lined with fire from the effort of his intense blowing. He tightened his mind and radiated his stubborn thought.

"Destroy my matrix," he mentally commanded.

"Nonsense!" crashed the thought. "Stop that!"

Bradley jammed the mouthpiece harder against his tired lips. He played louder and higher.

The blue-purple-tinted fog was beginning to swirl faster now. It went around and around, as if in answer to some unguessable mandate. The bubble contracted.

A snake-like tentacle of mist writhed along the floor toward Judy. She grabbed Bradley's arm in alarm—and the gesture jerked the horn from his lips—choking the melody into silence.

On the instant, the heavy fog rolled forward. Vague things squished toward them as Bradley felt a vise-like mentality snap shut like a steel trap on his spinning brain. He tried to lift the witch-doctor horn to his mouth. His motions were heavy and drugged as if he had no power of command over them.

"Hux!" screamed Judy.

Something had dragged her down, fighting frantically, into the swirling mist.

Bradley collapsed into a sodden heap on the hard floor. Slime oozed up his leg. The touch was like the searing burn of molten steel. He forced his lips down to the mouthpiece and blew a desperate screeching melody through the instrument. High and shrill. He felt the slime retreat in haste as the melody drove the fog back like a battering-ram.

He struggled to his knees in the wavering bubble of clear air and saw that Judy was gone. The song, crying from the bell of the instrument seemed to absorb some of the savage fury that choked him.

Judy was gone!

His eyes began to sting and burn. The ancient melody he played was a sighing pulse beat of rage and despair. And then Bradley heard several of the crystal tubes explode into shattering fragments. His bracelet felt hot.

"Bradley!" came the furious thought. "You're upsetting my entire staff!" The thought vibrated with an unholy anger. "Get that instrument out of here!"

In answer he played higher and higher until unexpectedly, he felt his bracelet burn his wrist and then loosen to slide to the floor.

Bradley tensed himself, and abruptly—the twisting hurt of the psychic hook vanished.

"Get out!" thundered the command.

Bradley almost stopped playing in sheer relief.

"That girl—I want her safe," he flashed out the counter- thought. "And with her original body—you've been using it."

Enclosed in the bubble of air, playing determinedly, he continued to advance through the sluggish fog. Once, twice, three times he heard more crystal tubes explode with tinkling noises.

The queer jumble of alien thoughts intensified as if an unknown conflict of wills raged in the shivering mist. Bradley knew he couldn't play much longer. The muscles of his lips were beginning to refuse to obey.

"So be it!" sneered the thought. "You can have her! Good riddance!"

The alien mind withdrew with a last convulsive flash of utter hate.

Bradley didn't dare stop playing until he saw an emaciated shape stagger toward him. His heart threshed a wild tattoo on his ribs as recognition crawled through him.

It was the tottering figure of a girl, wrinkled skin and bony arms that were in the act of adjusting Judy's clothes around its skinny body. The thin face was lifted imploringly to him, "Hux!" a cracked voice gasped.

Bradley's mind reeled. A satanic chuckling of obscene glee blasted his brain as he pulled the half-fainting girl through the door and slammed it behind them. He couldn't bring himself to look at her as he dragged her to the elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor. He clutched the witch-doctor horn in desperation as the elevator descended. His mind sickened within him. What had they done to her?

"Hux!" her voice kept repeating. "Oh, Hux!"

The night air smelled clean and fresh as he pulled her close to him on the sidewalk. Her head was buried in his shoulder. She was sobbing softly. "Wait, Hux—wait!"

A WAVE of pity smothered Bradley. He mustn't let her know how dreadful she looked. He mustn't let her see a mirror until he could get a doctor. He pressed her close to his still breathless chest. Maybe the proper rest and vitamins would help her. He began to talk, soothingly, into her ear.

"It's all right now, honey," he murmured. "I should have seen the way out sooner. They dreaded the same thing the old violin makers dreaded to find in the instruments they made—sympathetic vibrations. When a violin is cheaply or incorrectly made, a certain note or harmonic tone will set the entire instrument vibrating in sympathy, as it is called, and will amplify that one note so much louder than the rest that it is called a 'Wolf Howl!' When this is the case the entire instrument is worthless and must be destroyed."

"Oh, Hux," she murmured. "Don't go away. Wait!"

"They won't hurt you now, honey," he said. "Just as the proper series of notes from the human voice can shatter a vase, so did something in that combination of witch-doctor horn and ancient witch-doctor melody uncover a hidden or forgotten weakness in those Darkonians. Everything in life, just as in music, is made up of some sort of vibration, and since all those tubes were sensitive to vibrations and intended to amplify vibrations, something went wrong for Them. Those old witch

doctors thought they were driving evil spirits out of the sick with their weird music. They did accomplish strange, things, but they didn't know why or how."

Professor Bradley noticed an odd change was occurring. Judy's body seemed to be rippling and swelling. A vibrating quiver was shaking her from head to foot! An unexpected thought came to him. Judy was like a flower. This was how a rose would feel if he held a young bud—unfolding—in his hand. Her body was warmer—and softer. He looked down. He saw something intriguing.

He felt the girl push him away. He stepped back. It wasn't Judy exactly. Unfamiliar. But she had the impish tilt of Judy's head and that same sly look when she spoke.

"See Judy, now?"

She lifted soft round arms over her head. She turned slowly on her heels like a tantalizing thing out of one of his special secret dreams. Her laughter was throaty like only Judy's laughter was throaty. She wrinkled her nose. "What did I tell you?" she murmured. "You like?"

"Good heavens!" said Bradley.

Fascinated, his gaze traveled up and down a line perpendicular to the sidewalk while his right hand waved down a passing taxi with a gesture that was entirely reflexive.

"Good heavens!" he said again as Judy wiggled into the taxi. "We're going to buy a sweater."

"And a marriage license—quick!" she directed the driver.

Bradley looked at her in a daze. "You looked so—er—unexpanded!"

"They didn't experiment with my body after all," explained Judy cheerfully. "They sort of had it in storage and when I got me back in where I belonged, I suppose it was like putting the juice back in a dried apple."

Her left eye winked "It makes a difference."

"It makes me—" started Bradley and then yelled: "Look out!"

He caught a fleeting glimpse of a delivery truck swerving directly in front of their speeding cab. Frantic, the driver jammed on the brakes. Bradley had a startled look at the sign on the skidding truck, Blossom Tomatoes, before there was a mind-splitting crash and everything dissolved into nothingness...

When the ambulance arrived, the interne saw a fat man evidently trying to revive two unconscious figures in the back seat of the wrecked cab by the queer method of burning pieces of twisted paper under their noses. He pushed the fat man away and practiced what he had been learning in medical school.

Stretchers groaned, sirens screamed, hospital doors banged and the interne checked in his wares to the chief surgeon before he went out on another call.

LATER, the interne approached the surgeon in charge.

"What about that young couple who were in that taxi that got smashed by the tomato-truck?" he asked.

"They're okay. Shaken up a bit. They seem a trifle confused about what's happened during the last few days. It's probably partial amnesia from shock, but not serious. They're young and in love—they'll get over it. But you know," he mused, "they both have a strange fixation—the young fellow especially."

"Strange?"

"They both say if they don't get a marriage license quick—so they can go on with their classes—they're liable to go crazy. The fellow wants to buy a sweater immediately. A white one."

"He must be crazy."

Suddenly, the surgeon chuckled "Perhaps he's not crazy. You'd probably understand if you were—"

He broke off and looked at the interne.

"Weren't you in the X-ray lab when the girl was brought in?"

"No."

"He's not crazy."

"Oh," murmured the interne enviously.

