

By ALLEN KIM LANG Illustrated by GAUGHAN

CINDERELLA

I

THE First Vice-President of the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company, the gentleman to whom Miss Orison McCall was applying for a job, was not at all the public picture of a banker. His suit of hound's-tooth checks, the scarlet vest

peeping above the vee of his jacket, were enough to assure Orison that the Taft Bank was a curious bank indeed. "I gotta say, chick, these references of yours really swing," said the Vice-President, Mr. Wanji. "Your last boss says you come on real cool in the secretary-bit."

"He was a very kind em-

STORY



What a bank!

*The First Vice-President was
a cool cat — the elevator
and the money
operators all wore earmuffs—
was just as phony as a
three-dollar bill!*

ployer," Orison said. She tried to keep from staring at the most remarkable item of Mr. Wanji's costume, a pair of furry green earmuffs. It was not cold.

Mr. Wanji returned to Orison her letters of reference. "What color bread you got eyes for taking down, baby?" he asked.

"Beg pardon?"

"What kinda salary you bucking for?" he translated, bouncing up and down on the toes of his rough-leather desert boots.

"I was making one-twenty a week in my last position," Miss McCall said.

"You're worth more'n that, just to jazz up the decor," Mr.

Wanji said. "What you say we pass you a cee-and-a-half a week. Okay?" He caught Orison's look of bewilderment. "One each, a Franklin and a Grant," he explained further. She still looked blank. "Sister, you gonna work in a bank, you gotta know who's picture's on the paper. That's a hunnerd-fifty a week, doll."

"That will be most satisfactory, Mr. Wanji," Orison said. It was indeed.

"Crazy!" Mr. Wanji grabbed Orison's right hand and shook it with athletic vigor. "You just now joined up with our herd. I wanna tell you, chick, it's none too soon we got some decent scenery around this tomb, girlwise." He took her arm and led her toward the bank of elevators. The uniformed operator nodded to Mr. Wanji, bowed slightly to Orison. He, too, she observed, wore earmuffs. His were more formal than Mr. Wanji's, being midnight blue in color. "Lift us to five, Mac," Mr. Wanji said. As the elevator door shut he explained to Orison, "You can make the Taft Bank scene anywhere between the street floor and floor five. Basement and everything higher'n fifth floor is Iron Curtain Country far's you're concerned. Dig, baby?"

"Yes, sir," Orison said. She was wondering if she'd be issued earmuffs, now that she'd become an employee of this most peculiar bank.

The elevator opened on five to a tiny office, just large enough to hold a single desk and two chairs. On the desk were a telephone and a microphone. Beside them was a double-decked "In" and "Out" basket. "Here's where you'll do your nine-to-five, honey," Mr. Wanji said.

"What will I be doing, Mr. Wanji?" Orison asked.

The Vice-President pointed to the newspaper folded in the "In" basket. "Flip on the microphone and read the paper to it," he said. "When you get done reading the paper, someone will run you up something new to read. Okay?"

"It seems a rather peculiar job," Orison said. "After all, I'm a secretary. Is reading the newspaper aloud supposed to familiarize me with the Bank's operation?"

"Don't bug me, kid," Mr. Wanji said. "All you gotta do is read that there paper into this here microphone. Can do?"

"Yes, sir," Orison said. "While you're here, Mr. Wanji, I'd like to ask you about my withholding tax, social security, credit union, coffee-breaks, union membership, lunch hour and the like. Shall we take care of these details now? Or would you —"

"You just take care of that chicken-flickin' kinda stuff any way seems best to you, kid," Mr. Wanji said.

"Yes, sir," Orison said. This

laissez-faire policy of Taft Bank's might explain why she'd been selected from the Treasury Department's secretarial pool to apply for work here, she thought. Orison McCall, girl Government spy. She picked up the newspaper from the "In" basket, unfolded it to discover the day's *Wall Street Journal*, and began at the top of column one to read it aloud. Wanji stood before the desk, nodding his head as he listened. "You blowing real good, kid," he said. "The boss is gonna dig you the most."

Orison nodded. Holding her newspaper and her microphone, she read the one into the other. Mr. Wanji flicked his fingers in a good-by, then took off upstairs in the elevator.

BY lunchtime Orison had finished the *Wall Street Journal* and had begun reading a book an earmuffed page had brought her. The book was a fantastic novel of some sort, named *The Hobbit*. Reading this peculiar fare into the microphone before her, Miss McCall was more certain than ever that the Taft Bank was, as her boss in Washington had told her, the front for some highly irregular goings-on. An odd business for a Federal Mata Hari, Orison thought, reading a nonsense story into a microphone for an invisible audience.

Orison switched off her mi-

crophone at noon, marked her place in the book and took the elevator down to the ground floor. The operator was a new man, ears concealed behind scarlet earmuffs. In the car, coming down from the interdicted upper floors, were several gentlemen with briefcases. As though they were members of a ballet-troupe, these gentlemen whipped off their hats with a single motion as Orison stepped aboard the elevator. Each of the chivalrous men, hat pressed to his heart, wore a pair of earmuffs. Orison nodded bemused acknowledgment of their gesture, and got off in the lobby vowing never to put a penny into this curiousest of banks.

Lunch at the stand-up counter down the street was a normal interlude. Girls from the ground-floor offices of Taft Bank chattered together, eyed Orison with the coolness due so attractive a competitor, and favored her with no gambit to enter their conversations. Orison sighed, finished her tuna salad on whole-wheat, then went back upstairs to her lonely desk and her microphone. By five, Orison had finished the book, reading rapidly and becoming despite herself engrossed in the saga of Bilbo Baggins, *Hobbit*. She switched off the microphone, put on her light coat, and rode downstairs in an elevator filled with earmuffed, silent, hat-clasping gentlemen.

What I need, Orison thought, walking rapidly to the busline, is a double Scotch, followed by a double Scotch. And what the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company needs is a joint raid by forces of the U.S. Treasury Department and the American Psychiatric Association. Earmuffs, indeed. Fairy-tales read into a microphone. A Vice-President with the vocabulary of a racetrack tout. And what goes on in those upper floors? Orison stopped in at the restaurant nearest her apartment house—the Windsor Arms—and ordered a meal and a single Martini. Her boss in Washington had told her that this job of hers, spying on Taft Bank from within, might prove dangerous. Indeed it was, she thought. She was in danger of becoming a solitary drinker.

Home in her apartment, Orison set the notes of her first day's observations in order. Presumably Washington would call tonight for her initial report. Item: some of the men at the Bank wore earmuffs, several didn't. Item: the Vice-President's name was Mr. Wanji: Oriental? Item: the top eight floors of the Taft Bank Building seemed to be off-limits to all personnel not wearing earmuffs. Item: she was being employed at a very respectable salary to read newsprint and nonsense into a microphone. Let Washing-

ton make sense of that, she thought.

IN a gloomy mood, Orison McCall showered and dressed for bed. Eleven o'clock. Washington should be calling soon, inquiring after the results of her first day's spying.

No call. Orison slipped between the sheets at eleven-thirty. The clock was set; the lights were out. Wasn't Washington going to call her? Perhaps, she thought, the Department had discovered that the Earmuffs had her phone tapped.

"Testing," a baritone voice muttered.

Orison sat up, clutching the sheet around her throat. "Beg pardon?" she said.

"Testing," the male voice repeated. "One, two, three; three, two, one. Do you read me? Over."

Orison reached under the bed for a shoe. Gripping it like a Scout-ax, she reached for the light cord with her free hand and tugged at it.

The room was empty.

"Testing," the voice repeated.

"What you're testing," Orison said in a firm voice, "is my patience. Who are you?"

"Department of Treasury Monitor J-12," the male voice said. "Do you have anything to report, Miss McCall?"

"Where are you, Monitor?" she demanded.

"That's classified information," the voice said. "Please speak directly to your pillow, Miss McCall."

Orison lay down cautiously. "All right," she whispered to her pillow.

"Over here," the voice instructed her, coming from the unruffled pillow beside her.

Orison transferred her head to the pillow to her left. "A radio?" she asked.

"Of a sort," Monitor J-12 agreed. "We have to maintain communications security. Have you anything to report?"

"I got the job," Orison said. "Are you . . . in that pillow . . . all the time?"

"No, Miss McCall," the voice said. "Only at report times. Shall we establish our rendezvous here at eleven-fifteen, Central Standard Time, every day?"

"You make it sound so improper," Orison said.

"I'm far enough away to do you no harm, Miss McCall," the monitor said. "Now, tell me what happened at the bank today."

Orison briefed her pillow on the Earmuffs, on her task of reading to a microphone, and on the generally mimsy tone of the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company. "That's about it, so far," she said.

"Good report," J-12 said from the pillow. "Sounds like you've dropped into a real snakepit, beautiful."

"How do you know . . . why do you think I'm beautiful?" Orison asked.

"Native optimism," the voice said. "Good night." J-12 signed off with a peculiar electronic pop that puzzled Orison for a moment. Then she placed the sound: J-12 had kissed his microphone.

Orison flung the shoe and the pillow under her bed, and resolved to write Washington for permission to make her future reports by registered mail.

II

AT ten o'clock the next morning, reading page four of the current *Wall Street Journal*, Orison was interrupted by the click of a pair of leather heels. The gentleman whose heels had just slammed together was bowing. And she saw with some gratification that he was not wearing earmuffs. "My name," the stranger said, "is Dink Gerding. I am President of this bank, and wish at this time to welcome you to our little family."

"I'm Orison McCall," she said. A handsome man, she mused. Twenty-eight? So tall. Could he ever be interested in a girl just five-foot-three? Maybe higher heels?

"We're pleased with your work, Miss McCall," Dink Gerding said. He took the chair to the right of her desk.

"It's nothing," Orison said, switching off the microphone.

"On the contrary, Miss McCall. Your duties are most important," he said.

"Reading papers and fairytales into this microphone is nothing any reasonably astute sixth-grader couldn't do as well," Orison said.

"You'll be reading silently before long," Mr. Gerding said. He smiled, as though this explained everything. "By the way, your official designation is Confidential Secretary. It's me whose confidences you're to keep secret. If I ever need a letter written, may I stop down here and dictate it?"

"Please do," Orison said. This bank president, for all his grace and presence, was obviously as kookie as his bank.

"Have you ever worked in a bank before, Miss McCall?" Mr. Gerding asked, as though following her train of thought.

"No, sir," she said. "Though I've been associated with a rather large financial organization."

"You may find some of our methods a little strange, but you'll get used to them," he said. "Meanwhile, I'd be most grateful if you'd dispense with calling me 'sir.' My name is Dink. It is ridiculous, but I'd enjoy your using it."

"Dink?" she asked. "And I suppose you're to call me Orison?"

"That's the drill," he said.

"One more question, Orison. Dinner this evening?"

Direct, she thought. Perhaps that's why he's president of a bank, and still so young. "We've hardly met," she said.

"But we're on a first-name basis already," he pointed out. "Dance?"

"I'd love to," Orison said, half expecting an orchestra to march, playing, from the elevator.

"Then I'll pick you up at seven. Windsor Arms, if I remember your personnel form correctly." He stood, lean, all bone and muscle, and bowed slightly. West Point? Hardly. His manners were European. Sandhurst, perhaps, or Saint Cyr. Was she supposed to reply with a curtsy? Orison wondered.

"Thank you," she said.

He was a soldier, or had been: the way, when he turned, his shoulders stayed square. The crisp clicking of his steps, a military metronome, to the elevator. When the door slicked open Orison, staring after Dink, saw that each of the half-dozen men aboard snapped off their hats (but not their earmuffs) and bowed, the earmuffed operator bowing with them. Small bows, true; just head-and-neck. But not to her. To Dink Gerding.

ORISON finished the *Wall Street Journal* by early afternoon. A page came up a

moment later with fresh reading-matter: a copy of yesterday's *Congressional Record*. She launched into the *Record*, thinking as she read of meeting again this evening that handsome madman, that splendid lunatic, that unlikely bank-president. "You read so well, darling," someone said across the desk.

Orison looked up. "Oh, hello," she said. "I didn't hear you come up."

"I walk ever so lightly," the woman said, standing hip-shot in front of the desk, "and pounce ever so hard." She smiled. O p u l e n t, Orison thought. Built like a burlesque queen. No, she thought, I don't like her. Can't. Wouldn't if I could. Never cared for cats.

"I'm Orison McCall," she said, and tried to smile back without showing teeth.

"Delighted," the visitor said, handing over an undelighted palm. "I'm Auga Vingt. Auga, to my friends."

"Won't you sit down, Miss Vingt?"

"So kind of you, darling," Auga Vingt said, "but I shan't have time to visit. I just wanted to stop and welcome you as a Taft Bank co-worker. One for all, all for one. Yea, Team. You know."

"Thanks," Orison said.

"Common courtesy," Miss Vingt explained. "Also, darling, I'd like to draw your attention to one little point.

Dink Gerding—you know, the shoulders and muscles and crewcut? Well, he's posted property. Should you throw your starveling charms at my Dink, you'd only get your little eyes scratched out. Word to the wise, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Sorry you have to leave so suddenly," Orison said, rolling her *Wall Street Journal* into a club and standing. "Darling."

"So remember, Tiny, Dink Gerding is mine. You're all alone up here. You could get broken nails, fall down the elevator shaft, all sorts of annoyance. Understand me, darling?"

"You make it very clear," Orison said. "Now you'd best hurry back to your stanchion, Bossy, before the hay's all gone."

"Isn't it lovely, the way you and I reached an understanding right off?" Auga asked. "Well, ta-ta." She turned and walked to the elevator, displaying, Orison thought, a disgraceful amount of ungirdled rhumba motion.

The elevator stopped to pick up the odious Auga. A passenger, male, stepped off. "Good morning, Mr. Gerding," Miss Vingt said, bowing.

"Carry on, Colonel," the stranger replied. As the elevator door closed, he stepped up to Orison's desk. "Good morning, Miss McCall," he said.

"What is this?" Orison demanded. "Visiting-day at the zoo?" She paused and shook

her head. "Excuse me, sir," she said. "It's just that . . . Vingt thing . . ."

"Auga is rather intense," the new Mr. Gerding said.

"Yeah, intense," Orison said. "Like a kidney-stone."

"I stopped by to welcome you to the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company family, Miss McCall," he said. "I'm Kraft Gerding, Dink's elder brother. I understand you've met Dink already."

"Yes, sir," Orison said. The hair of this new Mr. Gerding was cropped even closer than Dink's. His mustache was gray-tipped, like a patch of frosted furze; and his eyes, like Dink's, were cobalt blue. The head, Orison mused, would look quite at home in one of Kaiser Bill's spike-topped *Pickelhauben*; but the ears were in evidence, and seemed normal. Mr. Kraft Gerding bowed—what continental manners these bankers had!—and Orison half expected him to free her hand from the rolled-up paper she still clutched and plant a kiss on it.

INSTEAD, Kraft Gerding smiled a smile as frosty as his mustache and said, "I understand that my younger brother has been talking with you, Miss McCall. Quite proper, I know. But I must warn you against mixing business with pleasure."

Orison jumped up, tossing the paper into her wastebasket. "I quit!" she shouted. "You can take this crazy bank . . . into bankruptcy, for all I care. I'm not going to perch up here, target for every uncaged idiot in finance, and listen to another word."

"Dearest lady, my humblest pardon," Kraft Gerding said, bowing again, a bit lower. "Your work is splendid; your presence is Taft Bank's most charming asset; my only wish is to serve and protect you. To this end, dear lady, I feel it my duty to warn you against my brother. A word to the wise . . ."

"*N'est-ce pas?*" Orison said. "Well, Buster, here's a word to the foolish. Get lost."

Kraft Gerding bowed and flashed his gelid smile. "Until we meet again?"

"I'll hold my breath." Orison promised. "The elevator is just behind you. Push a button, will you? And *bon voyage*."

Kraft Gerding called the elevator, marched aboard, favored Orison with a cold, quick bow, then disappeared into the mysterious heights above fifth floor.

First the unspeakable Auga Vingt, then the obnoxious Kraft Gerding. Surely, Orison thought, recovering the *Wall Street Journal* from her wastebasket and smoothing it, no one would convert a major Midwestern bank into a luna-

tic asylum. How else, though, could the behavior of the Earmuffs be explained? Could madmen run a bank? Why not, she thought. History is rich in examples of madmen running nations, banks and all. She began again to read the paper into the microphone. If she finished early enough, she might get a chance to prowl those Off-Limits upper floors.

Half an hour further into the paper, Orison jumped, startled by the sudden buzz of her telephone. She picked it up. "*Wanji e-Kal, Datto. Dink ger-Dink d'summa.*"

Orison scribbled down this intelligence in bemused Gregg before replying, "I'm a local girl. Try me in English."

"Oh. Hi, Miss McCall," the voice said. "Guess I goofed. I'm in kinda clutch. This is Wanji. I got a kite for Mr. Dink Gerding. If you see him, tell him the escudo green is pale. Got that, doll?"

"Yes, Mr. Wanji. I'll tell Mr. Gerding." Orison clicked the phone down. What now, Mata Hari? she asked herself. What was the curious language Mr. Wanji had used? She'd have to report the message to Washington by tonight's pillow, and let the polyglots of Treasury Intelligence puzzle it out. Meanwhile, she thought, scooting her chair back from her desk, she had a vague excuse to prowl the upper floors. The Earmuffs could only fire her.

Orison folded the paper and put it in the "Out" basket. Someone would be here in a moment with something new to read. She'd best get going. The elevator? No. The operators had surely been instructed to keep her off the upstairs floors.

But the building had a stairway.

III

THE door on the sixth floor was locked. Orison went on up the stairs to seven. The glass of the door there was painted black on the inside, and the landing was cellar-dark. Orison closed her eyes for a moment. There was a curious sound. The buzzing of a million bees, barely within the fringes of her hearing. Somehow, a very pleasant sound.

She opened her eyes and tried the knob. The door opened.

Orison was blinded by the lights, brilliant as noonday sun. The room extended through the entire seventh floor, its windows boarded shut, its ceiling a mass of fluorescent lamps. Set about the floor were galvanized steel tanks, rectangular and a little bigger than bathtubs. Orison counted the rows of tanks. Twelve rows, nine tiers. One hundred and eight tanks. She walked closer. The tubs were laced together by strands of

angel-hair, delicate white lattices scintillating with pink. She walked to the nearest of the tubs and looked in. It was half full of a greenish fluid, seething with tiny pink bubbles. For a moment Orison thought she saw Benjamin Franklin winking up at her from the liquid. Then she screamed.

The pink bubbles, the tiny flesh-colored flecks glinting light from the spun-sugar bridges between the tanks, were spiders. Millions upon millions of spiders, each the size of a mustard-seed; crawling, leaping, swinging, spinning webs, seething in the hundred tanks. Orison put her hands over her ears and screamed again, backing toward the stairway door.

Into a pair of arms.

"I had hoped you'd be happy here, Miss McCall," Kraft Gerding said. Orison struggled to release herself. She broke free only to have her wrists seized by two Earmuffs that had appeared with the elder Gerding. "It seems that our Pandora doesn't care for spiders," he said. "Really, Miss McCall, our little pets are quite harmless. Were we to toss you into one of these tanks . . ." Orison struggled against her two *sumo*-sized captors, whose combined weights exceeded hers by some quarter-ton, without doing more than lifting her feet from the floor. ". . . your flesh

would be unharmed, though they spun and darted all around you. Our Microfabridae are petrovorous, Miss McCall. Of course, once they discovered your teeth, and through them a skeleton of calcium, a delicacy they find most toothsome, you'd be filleted within minutes."

"Elder Compassion wouldn't like your harming the girl, Sire," one of the earmuffed *sumo*-wrestlers protested.

"Elder Compassion has no rank," Kraft Gerding said. "Miss McCall, you must tell me what you were doing here, or I'll toss you to the spiders."

"Dink . . . Dink!" Orison shouted.

"My beloved younger brother is otherwise engaged than in the rescue of damsels in distress," Kraft said. "Someone, after all, has to mind the bank."

"I came to bring a message to Dink," Orison said. "Let me go, you acromegalic apes!"

"The message?" Kraft Gerding demanded.

"Something about escudo green. Put me down!"

SUDDENLY she was dropped. Her mountainous keepers were on the floor as though struck by lightning, their arms thrown out before them, their faces abject against the floor. Kraft Gerding was slowly lowering himself to one knee. Dink had entered the spider-room. With-

out questions, he strode between the shiko-ing Earmuffs and put his arms around Orison.

"They can't harm you," he said. She turned to press her face against his chest. "You're all right, child. Breathe deep, swallow, and turn your brain back on. All right, now?"

"All right," she said, still trembling. "They were going to throw me to the spiders."

"Kraft told you that?" Dink Gerding released her and turned to the kneeling man. "Stand up, Elder Brother."

"I . . ."

Dink brought his right fist up from hip-level, crashing it into Kraft's jaw. Kraft Gerding joined the Earmuffs on the floor.

"If you'd care to stand again, Elder Brother, you may attempt to recover your dignity without regard for the difference in our rank." Kraft struggled to one knee and remained kneeling, gazing up at Dink through half-closed eyes. "No? Then get out of here, all of you. *Samma!*"

Kraft Gerding arose, stared for a moment at Dink and Orison, then, with the merest hint of a bow, led his two giant Earmuffs to the elevator.

"I wish you hadn't come up here, Orison," Dink said. "Why did you do it?"

"Have you read the story of Bluebeard?" Orison asked. She stood close to Dink, keeping her eyes on the nearest spider-

tank. "I had to see what it was you kept up here so secretly, what it was that I was forbidden to see. My excuse was to have been that I was looking for you, to deliver a message from Mr. Wanji. He said I was to tell you that the escudo green is pale."

"You're too curious, and Wanji is too careless," Dink said. "Now, what is this thing you have about spiders?"

"I've always been terrified of them," Orison said. "When I was a little girl, I had to stay upstairs all day one Sunday because there was a spider hanging from his thread in the stairway. I waited until Dad came home and took it down with a broom. Even then, I didn't have appetite for supper."

"Strange," Dink said. He walked over to the nearest tank and plucked one of the tiny pink creatures from a web-bridge. "This is no spider, Orison," he said.

She backed away from Dink Gerding and the minuscule creature he cupped in the palm of his hand. "These are Microfabridae, more nearly related to shellfish than to spiders," he said. "They're stone-and-metal eaters. They literally couldn't harm a fly. Look at it, Orison." He extended his palm. Orison forced herself to look. The little creature, flesh-colored against his flesh, was nearly invisible, scuttling around the bowl of his hand.

"Pretty little fellow, isn't he?" Dink asked. "Here. You hold him."

"I'd rather not," she protested.

"I'd be happier if you did," Dink said.

ORISON extended her hand as into a furnace. Dink brushed the Microfabridus from his palm to hers. It felt crisp and hard, like a legged grain of sand. Dink took a magnifier from his pocket and unfolded it, to hold it over Orison's palm.

"He's like a baby crawdad," Orison said.

"A sort of crustacean," Dink agreed. "We use them in a commercial process we're developing. That's why we keep this floor closed off and secret. We don't have a patent on the use of Microfabridae, you see."

"What do they do?" Orison asked.

"That's still a secret," Dink said, smiling. "I can't tell even you that, not yet, even though you're my most confidential secretary."

"What's he doing now?" Orison asked, watching the Microfabridus, perched up on the rear four of his six microscopic legs, scratching against her high-school class-ring with his tiny chelae.

"They like gold," Dink explained, peering across her shoulder, comfortably close. "They're attracted to it by a

chemical tropism, as children are attracted to candy. Toss him back into his tank, Orison. We'd better get you down where you belong."

Orison brushed the midget crustacean off her finger into the nearest tank, where he joined the busy boil of his fellows. She felt her ring. It was pitted where the Microfabridus had been nibbling. "Strange, using crawdads in a bank," she said. She stood silent for a moment. "I thought I heard music," she said. "I heard it when I came in. Something like the sighing of wind in winter trees."

"That's the hymn of the Microfabridae," Dink said. "They all sing together while they work, a chorus of some twenty million voices." He took her arm. "If you listen very carefully, you'll find the song these little workers sing the most beautiful music in the world."

Orison closed her eyes, leaning back into Dink's arms, listening to the music that seemed on the outermost edge of her hearing. Wildness, storm and danger were its theme, counterpointed by promises of peace and harbor. She heard the wash of giant waves in the song, the crash of breakers against granite, cold and insatiable. And behind this, the quiet of sheltered tide-pools, the soft lub of sea-arms landlocked. "It's an ancient song," Dink said.



"The Microfabridae have been singing it for a million years." He released her, and opened a wood-covered wooden box. He scooped up a cupful of the sand inside. "Hold out your hands," he told Orison. He filled them with the sand. "Throw our singers some supper for their song," he said.

Orison went with her cupped hands to the nearest tank and sprinkled the mineral fishfood around inside it. The Microfabridae leaped from the liquid like miniature porpoises, seizing the grains of sand in mid-air. "They're so very strange," Orison said. At the bottom of the tank she thought she saw Ben Franklin again, winking at her through the bubbling life. Nonsense, she thought, brushing her hands.

DINK took her to the elevator and pressed the "Down" button. "Don't come up here again unless I bring you," he said. "The Microfabridae aren't dangerous, despite what my brother told you, but some of our processes might involve some risk to bystanders. So don't take any more tours above the fifth floor without me as your guide. All right, Orison?"

"Yes, Dink."

The elevator stopped. "Take the lady to her office," Dink told the bowing, earmuffed operator. "And Orison," he said, just before the door

closed, "I'm really not a Bluebeard. See you this evening."

Dink Gerding, wearing an ordinary enough suit, well-cut, expensive, but nothing extraordinary for a banker, called for Orison at seven. He'd look well, she thought, slipping into the coat he held for her, in a white uniform brocaded with pounds of spun gold, broad epaulettes, a stiff bank of extravagantly-colored ribbons across his chest; perhaps resting his right hand on theommel of a dress saber. "Dink," she asked him, "were you ever in the Army?"

"You might say I'm still in an army," he said, turning and smiling down at her from that arrogant posture of his. "I'm a corporal in the army of the gainfully employed; an army where there's little glamor but better pay than in the parades-and-battles sort. What makes you ask, Orison?"

"Because of the way you stand and walk, Dink," she said. "Like an Infantry captain from Texas."

"I'm flattered." Dink Gerding said, holding open the lobby door for her. "The car's just around the corner."

"I met your brother, Kraft, earlier today, just before he and the Earmuffs caught me up on eighth floor," Orison said. "He's no Texan, that one. A Junker, maybe. I'm afraid I don't much care for your brother, Dink."

"To be my elder brother is

Kraft's special misfortune," Dink said. "I understand he was quite loveable as a boy. Here's our transportation."

The car was a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith, splendidly conspicuous beside the curb of the Windsor Arms, reducing that nobly-named establishment by contrast to more democratic proportions. The ubiquitous Mr. Wanji, liveried in a uniform nearly as ornate as the one Orison had visualized for Dink, only his earmuffs clashing with the magnificence of his costume, sprang from the driver's seat, raced around the limousine and stood at attention holding the door for Orison and her escort. The front door of the Rolls was marked, she observed, with a gold device of three coronets. At the center of the triangle they formed was the single letter "D."

The Rolls negotiated the city streets with the dignity of the *Queen Elizabeth* entering a minor harbor. "I thought you bankers aspired to the common touch," Orison remarked. "I expected you to come for me in a taxi, or perhaps a year-old Ford you drove yourself."

"Wanji is a better driver than I. So I have him drive me," Dink explained. "We each do the work we're trained for. I assist Wanji in balancing his checkbook, for example. As for this car, it belongs not to me, but to my family.

My family owns most of the toys I play with." He paused. "I've been thinking, Orison, of acquiring a most valuable property for myself alone."

"A nice little seventy-meter yacht?" Orison inquired. "Or the island of Majorca, perhaps?"

"Something even grander," Dink said. "You, Miss McCall."

"But, Dink!"

The Rolls glided to the curb. Wanji jumped out and snapped open the door. "Sire!" he said, and saluted as Dink disembarked. Orison took Dink's hand and stepped to the curb, acknowledging Wanji's bow to her with a princess smile. She'd come a long way from the secretarial pool.

THE doorman of the restaurant, instructed as to the importance of these clients by their tableau at the curb, ushered Dink Gerding and Orison McCall into the presence of the maitre d'. When the doorman had been rewarded with a crackling handshake, the headwaiter led them through the crowd of groundlings as though they were accompanied by fife and drums. The table to which he bowed them, while not the most conspicuous, was without doubt the finest the management had to offer. The *Reserved* sign was swept aside with a gesture that indicated that there were no reservations where Mr. Dink Gerding

was concerned. Mr. Gerding justified the maitre's confidence in him with another green-palmed handshake.

"Dink," Orison whispered across the table. "That was a fifty-dollar bill you gave him."

"Yes, it was," Dink admitted. "I felt that fifty was enough."

"Quite enough," Orison assured him.

The wine-steward, wearing a chain that could have held a tub to mooring, absorbed Dink's instructions with the air of a chela attending the dying words of his guru. The two waiters poised themselves reverently at his shoulders, waiting the revelation of his order. "We'll begin . . ." Dink began.

"Dink, I'd like a lobster," Orison said.

"I'd not advise lobster," Dink said thoughtfully. "I'm afraid that lobster won't agree with you this evening."

"Dink, lobster is what I want," Orison insisted. "Haven't you heard of the Nineteenth Amendment?"

"Very well, feminist," Dink said. He turned to the waiter at his right. "The lady will have a lobster." He turned to the left. "As for me, a saddle of venison, and such accessory furniture as you may choose to accompany it." The waiters bowed and retreated.

"Why do you insist on being boss, even after banking-hours?" Orison asked.

"Being boss is not my nature, but is my training," Dink said. "It seems to me, Orison, that you American women resent the dignity of being served by an adoring man."

"I prefer dignities to be more democratic," she said. "Why, in any case, should you be exercised by my choosing lobster for dinner? My digestion is my own affair, isn't it?"

"**Y**OUR question," Dink said, resting his elbows on the table, "requires a two-part answer. *Imprimus*: everything you do interests me, Orison, inasmuch as you are my future bride. Please make no comment at this point. Allow me to enjoy for the moment the male privilege of unimpeded speech. *Secundus*: I once wished to be a doctor, had not my career been chosen by my father. I still pursue the study of medicine as a hobby. I didn't wish you to order lobster because I'm certain that you'll be unable to enjoy lobster."

"I've eaten it before," Orison said. "Except for the engineering difficulties in getting through the shell with all those little picks and nutcrackers and nail-clippers, I had no trouble to speak of. Dink, are you a foreigner?"

"What makes you think I may be?" he asked.

"The crest of your car, the earmuffs on most your staff at the Bank and the fact that

you seem to think a woman's opinion nothing more than a trifle. There's a beginning," Orison said.

"What's wrong with earmuffs?" Dink demanded. "Everybody wears earmuffs."

"Not everybody," Orison said. "Not in April. Not bank officials. Not indoors, in any case."

"Must report this to the Board," Dink said, taking a notebook from his pocket and scribbling. "Must find alternative. No earmuffs indoors."

Perfect, Orison thought, near tears. He's perfect. He'd sit astride that milk-white charger like a round-table knight, sturdy and lean and honest-eyed. Dink is perfect, she thought, except only that he's insane.

Dink tucked his notebook back into his vest-pocket. "If I were a foreigner," he asked, "would it make any difference to you?"

"Your nationality should concern me as little as my diet concerns you," Orison said.

"You said *should*," Dink pointed out. "That means that you are concerned with me. Therefore, I will formally invite you to marry me." He held up his hand as Orison began to speak. "I warn you, Orison, there are only two answers possible to my proposal. Only *Yes* or *Some day*."

"What if I said no?" Orison asked.

"I'd interpret it as *Some*

day," he said, and smiled.

"You know nothing about me," Orison protested.

"But I do," Dink said. "I know you're good. I know that you've fallen half in love with me, and I entirely in love with you, in this half-day in April that we've known each other."

"No," Orison said, gripping tightly the edge of the table.

"That means, *Some day*," he said.

The lobster arrived in post-mortem splendor, borne on a silver tray, brick-red, garnished with sprigs of parsley and geranium, served with the silver instruments designed for his dissection and the bowl of baptismal butter. "Oh . . ." Orison said, turning her eyes away from the supper she'd selected. "It's horrible!"

"You've no appetite for lobster?" Dink asked.

"I'd as soon eat boiled baby," Orison said, pressing her napkin against her lips.

"Take it away," Dink instructed the waiter. "The lady will have the same order as I." The crustacean, red but undismembered, was again borne aloft by the waiter to be returned to the scene of his martyrdom. "Try a little of the wine, Orison," Dink suggested, tipping a splash of the Riesling into her glass. "It will clear your head."

SHE sipped. "It helps," she admitted. "What do you suppose happened to me, Dink?"

It's as though all of a sudden I'd become allergic to lobster."

"In a sense you are, darling," Dink said.

"Such a strange thing," she said.

"Don't let these strange things worry you, Orison," Dink said. "Think this: for everything in the universe, there's an explanation. If you understand it or not, the explanation's still there, curled up in the middle of the mystery like Pinocchio in the belly of his whale. Just have faith in the essential honesty of the universe, Orison, and you'll be all right."

"A comforting philosophy," Orison said. "I can't imagine an explanation for my sudden distaste for lobster, though."

"Such things happen," Dink assured her. "I have a friend, for instance, who holds life in such reverence that he eats only vegetables. Isn't that strange? And he worries, this very good friend of mine, that perhaps vegetables have souls, too; and that perhaps it is no more moral to destroy them for his food than it is to roast and ingest his fellow animals."

"So what does this friend of yours eat?" Orison asked.

"Vegetables," Dink said. "But he worries about it. He's now proposing to confine his diet to cakes made from algae. His argument is that if vegetables have souls, algae have very small souls indeed; and that they suffer less in being

eaten than would, say, a cabbage or an apple. His guilt may be numerically greater, eating algae. But it will be qualitatively less."

"Has this micro-vegetarian friend of yours thought of psychotherapy?" Orison asked.

"Often," Dink said. "But he maintains that he's much too old to pour out his mind to a stranger; too set in his patterns to change. He fears most of all, he says, that he might be made uncomfortable in new ways."

"We all do," mused Orison.

"Do I make you uncomfortable in a new way?" Dink asked.

"You're strange," Orison said. "Your Bank is fantastic. All in all, this is the most peculiar day I've ever lived."

"I promise you, Orison, that someday you'll understand why the sight of lobster made you ill this evening, why so many of the people at the Bank wear earmuffs, why I seem foreign. You'll understand the work of the singing Microfabridae and you'll meet Elder Compassion; you'll know why Wanji was excited about the escudo green; and someday soon, this most of all I promise you, you'll love me, and be my wife. Hah! Here are the comestibles. Let's talk of topics less vital than love and earmuffs. Let's talk of the weather, and Mr. Kennedy, and the orchestra."

A BSTRACT of Transcript,
Monitor J-12, to U.S.
Treasury Department Intelli-
gence:

"Miss Orison McCall's report from Potawattomi, Indiana, was delayed by one hour. Contact was established at 00:10 hours. Details follow herewith:

"J-12: CQ, CQ, CQ, CQ.

"Miss McCall: If you'd been a minute later, I'd have been sound asleep, dreaming bad dreams.

"J-12: Is the job wearing you down?

"Miss McCall: It's exciting and mysterious. Nothing like Washington. The boss of Taft Bank appears to be a man named Dink Gerding. He's six feet tall and slim, his hair is clipped short as a dachshund's, and he walks like an Olympic skier. The other men at the bank bow when they meet him, and some of them get all the way down onto the floor when he's angry. Do you suppose this means something?

"J-12: Everything means something.

"Miss McCall: He said that. Dink did. For everything in the universe, he said, there's an explanation.

"J-12: Not so. I mean that everything that people do in banks is explainable. Not all the universe is logical — the tax-structure, for instance, or the ways of women.

"Miss McCall: I'm not required to put up with male chauvinism from a pillow, Mister, no banns having been published between us.

"J-12: Sorry, beautiful. Here are instructions from the Chief. He wants to know why some members of the Taft Bank staff wear earmuffs, and he wants details of what goes on upstairs. He wants you to get to know this Dink Gerding better. Over.

"Miss McCall: Roger, Wilco, and Aye-Aye. Meanwhile, get philologists working on this. The sentence, *Wanji e-Kal, Datto. Dink ger-Dink d'summa*, means, more or less, 'This is Wanji. I'd like to speak to Dink Gerding.' This message was received by me at Taft Bank this morning, evidently by accident. Check also possible meaning of the phrase, 'Escudo green is pale.'

"J-12: Will do.

"Miss McCall: Good night, then; wherever you are.

"J-12: Good night, beautiful. Out."

Report of Treasury Intelligence on six words of presumed foreign-language message:

"*Datto* may be Tagalog chief. *Summa* is Latin *sum*. Total message is nonsense in fifty languages. The clear message, *Escudo green is pale* probably a code. Escudo is Portuguese currency presently equal to U.S. \$0.348. End of Report."

Confidential report (on scratchboard) of Elder Com-

passion to H.R.H. Dink ger-Dink, Prince Porphyrogenite of Empire, Heir-Apparent to the Throne, Scion of the Triple Crown, Count of the Northern Marches, Admiralissimo of the Conquest Forces of Empire, Captain-Commander of the XLIIth Subversion-and-Conquest Task Force (Sol III):

"She whispered to her pillow, local time 2 A.M., 'I love him.'"

ORISON hadn't gone to sleep easily. She'd suppressed information from J-12, saying nothing to him about the Microfabridae, surely the most striking objective discovery of her two days' spying within the Taft Bank. More central in her thoughts than her disloyalty to the Treasury Department, though, was Dink Gerding. He'd told her that she was half in love with him. He was half wrong, she thought. "I love him entirely," she whispered, not knowing that J-12 — in carelessness, not subterfuge—had left the receiver-switch open to the pillow she'd made her confidante.

The Wall Street Journal greeted her the next morning, curled up in her "In" basket. She'd just switched on her microphone and said "Good morning" to her invisible listener when Mr. Wanji stepped from the elevator. His ears, she saw, were bare today. But

they were pink — a shocking, porcelain, opaque, Toby-mug shade of pink.

She looked away from this latest manifestation of peculiarity in banker's ears. "Good morning, Mr. Wanji," she said.

"Hi, doll," Wanji said. "The brain-guy says you don't have to read out loud any more. Just read quiet-like. Dig?"

"Yes, sir," she said. "Shall I take notes on anything in particular?"

"Naw," Wanji said. "The brain-guy, he remembers everything."

"The brain-guy?" Orison asked. "Is that Dink Gerding?"

"Naw. Dink's the boss. The brain-guy is the man who makes the wheels go round," Wanji said. He pressed the "Up" button of the elevator. As Wanji embarked, Orison observed that the elevator operator had the same shocking-pink ears.

Had those earmuffs been designed to hide this pinkness, the symptom of some rare and disfiguring disease? Orison returned to her newspaper, reading silently as ordered, wondering what obscure Pinocchio of sense was curled up in the belly of this whale of illogic. The elevator, she noticed with the housekeeping bit of her mind, was running much more than usual today, up and down like a spastic yo-yo. Whatever the mysterious business of the William Howard Taft Nation-

al Bank and Trust Company might be, there was a lot of it being done.

Her telephone buzzed. Orison switched off her microphone. "Miss McCall here," she said, feeling very efficient and British.

"This is Mr. Kraft Gerding," she was told. "I need you at the National Guard Armory right away, Miss McCall. Will you come right over?"

"Yes, sir," Orison said. She gathered up her purse and coat and pressed the elevator button. The operator ushered her into his car as though she were his queen, and the elevator the paramount plane of the royal flight. Standing behind him as he piloted them downward five floors, Orison studied the man's ears. They were that awful, artificial pink, as though enameled. Pancake makeup? Orison wondered. The ears, now the earmuffs were off, might be the clue to that fish-of-understanding she sought. Orison dampened a fingertip and applied it to the edge of the man's ear.

He turned and stared. "A fly," Orison explained. "I brushed it off."

"Oh. Thank you. Here's the street floor, Miss McCall."

"Thank you." Orison stepped from the lobby to Broadway, refusing to examine her fingertip until she was well beyond the shadow of the Taft Bank Building. Now she looked at it.

A sort of pink paint was showing there. And where she'd touched the elevator operator's ear to remove the makeup, the flesh beneath had shown a brilliant, eggplant purple.

ORISON was greeted at the National Guard Armory by Auga Vingt, mistress of malice. "How lovely of you to come right over, darling," she said. "Kraft is waiting for you in the office of Company C."

"Thank you, darling," Orison purred. She clutched her purse as she walked up the indicated stairway, Miss Vingt behind her.

Kraft Gerding was in full uniform behind a desk marked "Commanding Officer," but his was not the uniform of the U.S. Army. It was the sort that Mr. Wanji had worn as Dink's chauffeur, its splendor squared. "Good morning, Miss McCall," Kraft Gerding said, standing. "I'm so happy you could come. We need you here."

"What am I to do, sir?" Orison asked.

"Your presence is the full extent of your services required, my dear," he said. "You see, you're my hostage. My brother's interest in your welfare is so marked that I determined to seize you as collateral for his cooperation. We've begun a revolution, Miss McCall. You'll stay with us until victory. Colonel the Margravine Auga Vingt, Comman-

der of the Royal Refreshment Corps, will act as your hostess. Colonel, please take Miss McCall to her quarters."

"Now look here, bud!" Orison said.

"The proper address to Mr. Gerding is 'Your Royal Highness,' darling," Miss Vingt said, accompanying her point of protocol with a jab at the small of Orison's back. "Come along, darling."

"I'm not going anywhere until I've telephoned Dink," Orison said.

"Terribly sorry," said Colonel Auga Vingt. "Our telephone has just gone out of order." Two bravos wearing U.S. Army fatigues — surely the largest such uniforms ever sewn together — stepped into the room. They were enormous men, menacing, purple of ear. "Will you walk along like a good girl, or shall I have my pets carry you?" the odious Auga asked.

"I'll walk," Orison decided. "What's more, I'll sue."

"All in good time, darling," Auga Vingt said.

ORISON'S cell was large enough to be a ballroom, comprising as it did the entire basement of the armory. A cot had been unfolded in one corner, next to a parked half-track, and three olive-drab blankets were stacked upon it. "Home, darling," Colonel Vingt said.

"I hope you realize that kid-

napping is a Federal offense," Orison said.

"So is seizing an armory," her warden explained. "Of course, the U.S. Army doesn't realize we've got it, yet. They drill here only on Mondays." She turned and spoke quickly to the two guards, using what was apparently the same language Wanji had employed over the telephone. The guards bowed, then each chose a vehicle for his guard-post. One seated himself behind the wheel of a weapons-carrier, the other posting himself, cross-legged, on the steel hatch of a Sherman tank.

Auga Vingt turned to leave. "Hey," Orison said. "You're not going to abandon me here with these two gorillas."

"But, darling, I am!" the obnoxious Auga replied. "If you're worried about your virtue, rest easy, lamb. I can assure you that my thugs are safe as kittens, providing only that you make no attempt to escape. They are required, you see, to confine their romantic aspirations to members of the Royal Refreshment Corps of appropriate rank. Since they speak no English, nor any other tongue you're likely to have heard of, they won't be much company. But they will be loyal in their attendance."

"Let me out of here!" a man's voice shouted, the sound echoing among the ranks of tanks, half-tracks, weapons-carriers, and jeeps.

"Who's that?" Orison demanded.

"Your fellow-prisoner," Auga explained. "Until quite recently, he was Commanding Officer of C Company. Your keepers have strict orders not to let you two speak to one another. But I must get on with my duties, charming as I find your company. Good day, darling."

"Drop dead," Orison suggested.

AFTER the door had slammed behind Auga Vingt, and the key had chattered in its lock, she sat at the edge of her cot. The two guards watched her as casually as though she were just another item on the Motor Company's T.O.&E. This is what she got for playing it coy with Washington, Orison thought. If she'd clued J-12 in on the Microfabridae, she'd at least have been given some technical help. Then someone might have been there to blow the whistle when she disappeared from the Taft Bank Building. As things stood now, no one would know of her abduction until her pillow called tonight at eleven-fifteen and got no answer. A long time off, she thought. Perhaps she could get some help from the imprisoned commander of C Company, she thought. Orison stood and called out, "Hey, there! Can you hear . . ."

A large palm suddenly clos-

ed over her mouth. The guard who'd been seated atop the tank had sprung down and appeared beside her as suddenly as a circus trick. Experimentally, he removed his hand from her mouth. ". . . me?" Orison completed her query, and was shut off again.

"Five by five," the male voice answered. "Who are . . ." The other guard was gone now, and presumably stood beside the captain as his fellow stood beside Orison. There was silence for five minutes, Orison having trouble breathing, struggling until it became apparent that no action of hers would have the slightest effect on the mountainous bulk of her muffler. Then he removed his hand. Orison, out of breath, her lesson learned, stayed quiet. The guards resumed their seats aboard the rolling-stock.

There must be another way to signal her fellow-prisoner, Orison thought. Tapping? She clicked an S-O-S on the side of a jeep with her pen. Her guard appeared beside her as quickly as before, and took the pen to stick it in his pocket. She was, it appeared, effectively in solitary confinement.

Orison stood up to see if the guard minded. Apparently not. She walked about the huge basement. She'd never before seen so much military hardware outside an Armed Forces Day parade. Impressive, all this steel. A ramp led up to a

door the size of a barn-side, also steel, bolted. If she could get inside a tank, and close the hatch, and somehow get the monster up that ramp to ram that door, she'd make an impressive call for help, Orison thought. She put one foot atop a tank-tread when a large arm reached around her and set her aside. Her guard, silent-footed, had been following all through her tour.

Orison returned to her cot.

Great deal, she thought. From desk to dungeon in an hour and a half. She'd battled with shadows, earmuffed shadows, and had got herself set in an amateur jail guarded by a pair of purple-eared apes. Nothing to do but wait.

Four feet crashed onto concrete, two figures bowed till the palms of their hands brushed the floor. "*T'ink*," the newcomer said. The two guards backed to their vehicles and resumed their seats.

"Orison, my dear!" It was Kraft Gerding, all unction and teeth, advancing upon her like the loser at tennis, hand outstretched. "I hope you haven't been unduly discommoded," he said.

"**I** HAVEN'T been commod-
ed at all," Orison said. "No one showed me the way. Would you mind explaining this chivaree to me, Mr. Gerding?"

"I'd be delighted to explain, my dear," Kraft Gerding said,

bowing. "May I sit?" he asked, waving a hand toward her cot.

"You may fall on your dreadful face, for all I care," Orison said.

"You must learn to speak like a queen," Kraft said, seating himself on the cot beside her. "Otherwise, of course, you are perfect."

"Of course," Orison said. "I can't say the same for you."

"I grow on one," Kraft said. "You wonder, no doubt, how the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company became a battleground; why many of our employees have ears the color of day-old bruises; why Wanji was so exercised by the color of escudoes; and what the work is that the Microfabridae sing at. No?"

"Yes," Orison said.

"May I smoke?" Kraft Gerding asked, bringing a cheroot from an inner pocket of his fieldmarshal's uniform.

"Smoke, glow, burst into flame. It's all the same to me," Orison said.

Kraft Gerding lit his cheroot with the air of an acolyte igniting incense. Then, puffing, "Accident," he said, "has made you privy to a *coup d'etat*. Our Empire, you see, is based on porphyrogeniture. Thus my brother, Dink, is the Heir Apparent. I, his elder brother, conceived before our father became Emperor, am merely Margrave of the North,

Prince Royal of the House of Dink, Colonel-General of the Forces of the Triple Crown, Grand Duke of the Zilf Archipelago and Holder of the Keys to the Royal City of Chilif."

"How unassuming can you get?" Orison asked.

"Your un-knowledge is deeper than I bethought me," Kraft Gerding said, smiling, scooting a little wester on the cot. Orison moved one hips-breadth further to the west.

"Very well," Kraft said. "As a primer, thus: my brother Dink ger-Dink, heir through accident of tradition to the Triple Crown of Empire; I, his elder, better brother; and our officers and exiles—these latter common criminals, marked for men's contempt with purple ears—constitute the XLIIth Subversion-and-Conquest Task Force of the Empire of Dink. This mighty Empire, for your information, lies some distance off in the southern skies of Earth."

"How far off?" Orison asked.

"As far," Kraft Gerding said, "as all your men since Adam have run in pursuit of beauty." He scooted further west.

Orison made still further westering. "You come from some foreign planet?" she asked.

"No longer foreign, my dear," Kraft said. "Our planet, our triple footstool, welcomes young Earth to share

our ancient wisdom and relax under the shadow of our might."

"And I, young Earth, tell you, Kraft Gerding, to go sail a saucer," Orison said.

KRRAFT GERDING stood up. "Come with me, my dear. I'll show you the greenery that establishes me as Emperor Apparent of the planet Earth." He strode to a steel door, took a key from his pocket, and unlocked it. "Behold!" he said, flinging the door open.

Orison stepped into the basement room, a cube some fifty feet in each dimension. She found herself in a corridor between huge walls of bundled paper. Kraft Gerding, behind her, pried a packet from the wall and handed it to her. "This, my dear Orison, is the lever with which I'll overturn the Earth," he said.

The bundle was banded with a strip of paper bearing the legend, "\$5,000 in 50's." Each bit of paper in the bundle bore the portrait of President U. S. Grant. "This room," Kraft Gerding said, "contains some four hundred million dollars in U.S. currency. I intend with this money, and as much more as I need, to subvert and purchase a nation. The United States will then be the beach-head for the world."

"Counterfeits," Orison said.

"But perfect counterfeits," Kraft said. "The paper was manufactured by the master-

craftsmen of Chilif. The inks were compounded by the chemists of that same capital city of Empire. The plates were cut by twenty million engravers, the Microfabridae of the Storm-Planet, supervised by Elder Compassion, an ancient of the slothful race that inhabits the planet nearest our mother sun. This is but one of my treasuries. I have many such. There is the Threadneedle Room, filled with pounds-sterling, in ones, fives, fifties and hundreds. There are other rooms, boxes, trunks and trucks filled with all the currencies of Earth. I am ready now to purchase this planet from its owners. No violence, you see. Just subterfuge."

"It's violence enough, to ruin a planet," Orison said.

"It beats war," Kraft Gerding said, drawing on his che-root.

"And that disgusting Miss Vingt?" Orison asked. "What does she do in your forces of subversion?"

"Colonel the Margrave Auga Vingt is commander of the Royal Refreshment Corps," Kraft said. "You understand that it wouldn't do to allow our men, the purple-eared scum of three planets, to live off the land in the delicate matter of women. Colonel Vingt's Corps both maintains morale and prevents incidents of fraternization that Earthmen might deplore with their fists and guns." Kraft chuck-

led. "You'll be amused to hear that Auga Vingt has an ambition to become my Empress, once I have overthrown my brother's tyranny and taken over Earth."

"I must sit down," Orison said.

"By all means, my dear," Kraft said. He tipped over a stack of bundled twenty-dollar bills as a hassock for her comfort.

"COULD I have a cigarette?" Orison asked.

"Do." Kraft Gerding removed a pack from his pocket and lighted it for her, passing it from his lips to hers. Orison, hiding her feelings of distaste for this intimacy, drew on the cigarette. "Perhaps I might have a drink as well?" she asked. "All this is making me rather dizzy."

"It is dizzy-making," Kraft conceded. "In an instant, my pet." He strode from the treasure-room, shouting in his native language to the guards.

Orison tugged a twenty-dollar bill from one of the bundles on which she'd been sitting and held it to the tip of her cigarette, drawing to make it hot. The paper glowed, but the tiny patch of fire died out almost at once. She fumbled in her purse. There it was—her bottle of nail-polish remover. She splashed the aromatic fluid over the bundled money and again touched her cigarette to it. The paper

flared. Flames ran in upstream rivers through the stacks above.

Orison ran to the nearest jeep and turned the key. The gears were unfamiliar to her, but she mastered them sufficiently to get moving forward toward the steel doors. Up the ramp she rolled, her feet braced down hard on the accelerator, wedged into her seat. The jeep struck the steel doors and bounced back the ramp to the sound of a giant Chinese gong, its engine stalled. Groggy, Orison dismounted and ran to the door. She pounded on the steel with both fists, shouting for help.

An arm encircled Orison, and she heard behind her the door of the money-room slam shut. "The blaze will smolder itself out in a moment, my dear," Kraft Gerding said. He spoke to the guard who held her, and she was released. "I doubt that you've destroyed more than a million dollars' worth of your local paper with your prank," he said. "Five minutes' press-run. I've brought you a spot of brandy. I daresay you can use it. Arson is thirsty work."

He held out his hand. One of the purple-eared guards produced a silver tray with a decanter and two balloon-glasses, poured them a quarter full and presented the glasses to his chief, bowing deeply. Kraft took one glass, giving the other to Orison. "A

toast?" he asked. "To the success of my rebellion. To our inevitable marriage. And to the health of our progeny, who are, my dear, to inherit the Earth. A shotgun toast," he said.

Orison dashed her brandy toward his face. Kraft turned, catching the shower against his left ear, where it trickled down to stain the braid of his epaulette. He glared and raised his hand in a most unchivalrous gesture, then stopped himself. One of the guards produced a silken cloth to blot him dry.

"The word 'shotgun' was perhaps ill-chosen," Kraft said. "The spirit you show, dear Orison, is a quality most appropriate to the future Empress of Earth."

"Keep away from me," Orison said.

"**O**UR ceremony of betrothal is simple," Kraft said. He put his sword-arm about her waist. "You need only hear me say the words, 'I, Rex-Imperator, take thee to wife,' and then bow, in the presence of witnesses of my choosing. You'll be as noble as any princess conceived in the Purple Chamber of the Palace of Chilif."

"I'd rather die than marry you," Orison said.

"You've established the parameters of the possible rather neatly, my dear," Kraft Gerding said. "You will be-

come my wife, and Empress-Apparent of Earth, or you will shortly be the loveliest corpse on this fair planet. My will is heaven's law, you understand. My word carries the sanction of two suns, and my anger breeds massive destruction. I ask of you your one slight person. In return, I offer to share with you my greatness. You will rule with me in the palace I have chosen—I forget its name, but it is presently used as the tomb of the lady who invented the brassiere—the Taj Mahal, that's it. Perhaps we could rename it. Answer quickly, now; great deeds are deeds of impulse: marry me!"

"You're mad," Orison said.

"When a man has the power I have, he cannot be called a madman, for his mind shapes the world to his dreams. There is then, you see, no disorientation," Kraft said. "You've had a good ten seconds now to decide. Shall I call my wedding-guests or my executioner?"

"Dink will never let you marry me," Orison said.

"His suit has come so far as that?" Kraft said. "No matter. I'll destroy him."

"Please leave me, Your Excellency," Orison said. "I need time to think."

"I am clay in your lovely hands," Kraft said, bowing. "I grant your wish."

"If I might ask another boon, Your Excellency," Ori-

son said, "I'd like to talk with Dink."

"And so you shall," Kraft promised her. "Tomorrow, perhaps. With my brother in chains and you in the regalia of an Empress." He bowed again, and left her. The doorlock clicked after him. The two huge guards closed in on either side of Orison and led her back to her cot. When she had seated herself, they withdrew to their perches on the Army vehicles.

VII

IMIGHT as well have joined the Marine Corps instead of the Treasury Department, Orison thought, resting her fists on her knees. She had no weapons now, nothing to help her break out from this steel-shuttered cellar. What's more, the only clear evidence she had of the crime these extraterrestrials were plotting was a single counterfeit twenty-dollar bill wadded up in her hand. It looked entirely genuine, she thought. It was perhaps too perfect for her purpose. It was quite possible that this bill could be established as a counterfeit only by the unlikely discovery of a genuine note with the same serial-number. The paper-makers and chemists of Chilif, the engraving millions of Microfabridae, had done their work too well.

Suddenly, across Orison's

field of regard there danced dozens of brilliant, five-pointed stars—over the weapons-carriers and the tanks, the jeeps and the two lolling guards, the concrete floor and the steel doors. Orison rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes, but the stars were still there. "Don't worry," someone said. "I painted the stars on the backs of your eyes only to get your attention." The stars disappeared, and Orison heard again the music of the Microfabridae, a singing almost unhearable.

"Who's that?" Orison demanded, her voice uncertain.

"Don't speak. You'll frighten the guards," the mysterious voice said. "We have had long association, Orison. It was I who, so close in empathy with you, prevented your eating lobster, for example. Earth's lobster is a distant relative of mine. I could not see you ingest one without feeling deep qualms. And it is to me you have been reading, filling my mind with knowledge and amusement while I was engaged in the dull work of projecting the images of currency to the Microfabridae at work at their printing-plates. I am known as Elder Compassion, and I am your friend."

"And Dink's friend?"

"His especially," the voice said. "Our business right now is to help you escape. We must know exactly where you are, Orison."

"I'm in the basement of the National Guard Armory," Orison said softly. "Where are you?"

"I'm on the ninth floor of the Bank building," Elder Compassion said. "Yes, that means telepathy, of a weak and uncertain sort. I am not one of the true telepaths, those gold and mighty minds I can hear trumpeting in the night. I can but whisper, and eavesdrop a bit in minds that let me. And is the fact that I speak within your ear and listen to the currents that make words within your mind so much more mysterious than your pillow that whispers?"

"TELL me what to do," Orison said.

"Look at the entrance of your basement," Elder Compassion said. Orison stared at the steel doors at the top of the ramp. "Yes, Dink. You're in the right place." The inner voice ceased for a moment; and into Orison's mind flashed a picture of those doors seen from outside. An automobile was parked a dozen feet from the door. Dink's car! Wanji was at the wheel and Dink, grandly uniformed, was beside him. A pink, animate thread dipped down from the trunk of the Rolls and began working its way toward the steel doors. Microfabridae, Orison guessed. Then the picture in her mind flicked off, and she was alone again.

She watched the doors at the top of the ramp.

For ten minutes or so, there was nothing new to be seen. Then—a pinpoint of light, a tiny movement. "Look away," Elder Compassion said within her. "We don't want to make your guards suspicious."

From the corner of her eye Orison could see the thin pink line approaching the Sherman tank upon which one guard was sitting, at ease but alert. The line of Microfabridae split into two columns, and one set out toward the second guard, seated in his weapons-carrier, facing the little room where C Company's commanding officer was imprisoned.

Orison knotted her fists to keep from screaming, reminding herself that these creeping things weren't spiders. She heard, faint at first, but growing at the edge of her consciousness, the song of the Microfabridae. The twin columns were thicker now. It seemed impossible that the guards hadn't yet seen them. A living thread oozed up the side of the tank and busied itself a moment at the guard's ankles.

"What's going on?" the captain, Orison's fellow-prisoner, shouted from his hidden cell.

"Mmmmf," the guard assigned to the captain replied. Then he was entirely silent.

Orison stood. Her own guard was strapped to the steel of his tank by a hundred

strands of Lilliputian thread. A thin net of the stuff, fine as angel-hair, covered his mouth. The second guard, in the weapons-carrier, was bound in the same manner. He stared at Orison and moved his jaw, but could say nothing. "They'll not be injured," Elder Compassion told her. "It is impossible for me to allow a living being to be hurt. Now, go look at the man who just called out."

Orison went to the cell where the Captain was, avoiding as she walked the pools of Microfabridae scattered about the floor. The man stood in a barred room, evidently designed as the toolroom of the motor-pool, his hands around the bars. "Good afternoon," he said. "What's going on here?"

"We're getting out," Orison told him.

ASK him if he can drive a tank," Elder Compassion whispered to Orison. "Those steel doors are too well built to be quickly opened by our little locksmiths."

"Can you drive a tank, Captain?" Orison asked.

"Miss, I piloted one of those M4E8 Sherman's across Europe sixteen years ago. I've still got the strength to pull a landrel. But you'll have to get me out there to do it; because there isn't room in this cell."

"I'll get you out," Orison promised.

"You want the Microfabridae to chew through the lock?" the voice-in-her-head asked gently.

"That's what I had in mind," Orison said.

"I know," Elder Compassion said. "Please look at the lock, so that I may direct our little friends to it."

Orison gazed at the lock. A line of Microfabridae snaked up the steel door-frame and entered the keyhole. From inside the door came a chattering sound, like a clock gone berserk. Then the crustacea reformed and marched down the door to the floor. Orison pressed the door-catch. The eviscerated lock gave way.

The captain stepped out to stare at the Microfabridae. "Miss," he said, "you and I could make a fortune with a team of those trained termites. There isn't a bank in the country that could stand up against us."

"It's been thought of," Orison said. "Help me get this man down from the tank, please, and we'll be on our way." Between them they lifted the cocooned guard, wrapped like a larva in Microfabridae silk, to the cot, the little workers snipping with their chelae the threads that had bound him to the steel.

"Can you unlock the steel doors?" Orison asked.

"I don't have the key," the Captain said.

"Then we'll have to go

through them," Orison said. "Can we do it?"

"We've got thirty-five tons to roll up that ramp," the captain said. "If we can't bust out with a punch like that, shame on us. Seems kind of rough on the taxpayers to bulldoze through that expensive door."

"If we don't make it out of here, those taxpayers may find themselves paying their thirty per cent to someone less friendly than Uncle Sam," Orison said. She clambered up the side of the tank and tugged at the hatch.

"Let me," said the captain. He opened the hatch and dropped inside. "You sit here to my right. We're going out the hard way, and buttoned up." He closed the hatch, then reached over his left shoulder to tug the master battery switch, squeezed together the twin butterfly switches on the panel and grabbed hold of the steering-landrels. "Hold on, Miss. We're headed for sunlight."

THE Sherman's thirty-five tons were rolling along at ten miles an hour when its bow met steel. Concrete splinters flew from the sides of the door, which crumpled as the tank fisted into its middle. The door broke free of its supports and slammed outside, forming a deckway over which the treads of the tank crunched. The captain killed the engine and opened the hatch. He

boosted Orison out, and followed her.

"Orison! Over here!" Dink Gerding shouted. Orison leaped from the tank and ran toward the Rolls-Royce. "Get down!" Dink shouted again. He ran to seize her, and threw her to the ground. "And stay down!" He was up, drawing his sword. There was a crash. A smear of lead appeared on the concrete beside Orison. Dink, bellowing rage, was running down the ramp into the armory basement, his sword raised.

Kraft Gerding stood at the head of his troops at the foot of the ramp. In hand he had an Army .45. He shouted to his men, a dozen purple-ears, dressed in fatigues, each as big and ugly as the two who'd been guarding Orison and the Captain. They strained forward to follow him—but fell like ten-pins, tripped up by strands of web knitted between their ankles by fast-working Microfabridae. "Don't stop him, Elder Cousin!" Dink shouted, his words evidently meant for the mysterious brain-guy, Elder Compassion, in the ninth floor of the Taft Bank Building. "This I must do," Dink said.

Kraft Gerding dropped the automatic and slicked his sword from its scabbard. The blade, Orison saw, rising to her feet, was by no means an ornament. It looked most naked and competent. Dink

advanced upon his brother, each holding his sword at the ready like scorpions ready to do battle. "It would distress me to wound you, elder sibling," Dink said.

"*Lese majesty* or no, my liege," Kraft shouted, "I intend to chop you to stew-meat!" Their blades met and clashed, the swordsmen taking the shock of their contact with skillful springing of their arms and shoulders. Behind the clash of steel, Orison heard a new sound, the scream of a siren. A second siren called out, and both grew louder. "The police!" Wanji shouted. "Stop it, Sires!"

The captain stood beside Orison. "I've seen *Hamlet* played," he said, "but the sword-fight was nowhere near so violent as this. Who are these two nuts, anyway?"

"My fiance, and the man who, if he lives, will be my brother-in-law," Orison said.

"Excuse me," the captain said.

ORISON gripped the captain's arm and tried not to cry out at Dink's danger. Kraft parried his brother's blade, raising it high and to his right. Then he went in like a flash, hacking his edge down toward the juncture of shoulder and neck. Dink fell aside. Kraft's sword bit concrete. Dink flipped his sword in a jeweled arc, slamming Kraft's blade from his hand

to spin end-over-end through the air like a drum-majorette's baton. Kraft's sword slammed to the pavement. In an instant a pool of Microfabridae had covered it, binding the steel to the concrete with strands of their angel-hair.

Dink advanced on his brother, backing him against the bulk of the Sherman tank.

Kraft Gerding stood with his hands at his sides, his face composed in dignity, waiting for the coup de grace. "Bind the traitor, Elder Cousin," Dink said, addressing an ear not present. Microfabridae, obedient to the command they alone heard, rolled in little waves across the steel door and knit Kraft in a web from ankles to larynx. The police were very near now, their sirens dying as they slowed to halt. Dink sheathed his sword. "Wanji!" he called. "Put him in the car. It is time that we withdraw." Wanji ran up to the cocooned figure, saluted, and dumped Kraft Gerding across his shoulder like a giant spool of silk. The Microfabridae flowed to the Rolls and pooled themselves somewhere in its trunk. "To the Bank, Wanji," Dink ordered, seating himself beside his driver. Orison sat in the back, next to the trussed-up Kraft.

Police appeared, whistling and brandishing their revolvers. One occupied himself with kicking at Kraft's

grounded sword, tied to the pavement by tendrils tougher than steel wire. Another guarded the ankle-bound purple-ears, obviously unable to believe what he was seeing. "You in the car there, stop!" a police officer shouted. Wanji, erect and unheeding at the wheel, took the limousine around the corner of the armory and down the street toward the Bank.

"You'd have done better, brother, to have killed me," Kraft Gerding said, strait-jacketed in silk.

"Killing would seem appropriate, although our Elder Cousin declares it unlawful," Dink said over his shoulder. "Your crime is treason against the Triple Crown, attempted assassination of the Heir Apparent, mutiny and kidnap. What punishment would you mete out to an officer so turpitudinous, were you Defender of the Crowns?"

"I would have him put to death in a manner befitting his station," Kraft said. "I would not bind him like a sausage and pelt him with taunts."

"Perhaps you can gain a special dispensation from Elder Compassion, allowing me to grant you a properly noble death," Dink said. "We'll ask him, if you like."

THE William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company was closed, the os-

tensible reason given by an easel set up in front of the glass doors of the front entrance: "National Holiday: Birthday of Millard Fillmore." One of the loyalist Purple-Ears materialized behind the glass as the Rolls rolled up to the curb, and unlocked the doors.

Wanji and the guard carried Kraft Gerding between them into the bank-lobby, Dink relocking the doors behind them. A knot of spectators gathered on the sidewalk outside, shading their eyes, examining with much conversation the sign, the purple-eared guard, the uniformed Wanji and Dink and the figure trussed up like a rolled carpet on the parquet floor. "I think this busts up your counterfeiting ring, Dink," Orison said. "What now?"

"That is, darling, precisely the question I want to ask our brain-trust, Elder Compassion," Dink said. "He is both our leader and in a sense our warden, you see. He came with us to Earth to guarantee that we in no way violate the principle of reverence for life in our conquest of your planet."

The elevator appeared, piloted by another of the Purple-Ears. "Nine," Dink snapped. Wanji and the guard towed the packaged Kraft aboard.

The anteroom into which the elevator door opened on

ninth floor smelled of ozone and dryness. Faint music vibrated the desert air. "Bach?" Orison asked.

"Scarlatti," Dink said. "His music consoles Elder Compassion for the violence of men. Here — you'll need these." He handed Orison a pair of almost opaque goggles, the sort that welders wear. "Come on," he said, tugging Orison through a door.

Even with the heavy goggles, the room beyond was brilliant beyond belief, a Sahara summer-solstice noon in brightness. The floor was covered by tons of sand, duned up against the windows in waves that would have disheartened a camel. The music now was almost as oppressive as the heat and the light. Great booming gouts of sound came from every direction. Suddenly, as though responding to Orison's mental protest, the music stopped. The lights dimmed somewhat.

"We have come, Elder Cousin," Dink announced to the sand.

"I speak to the lovely woman," an interior voice said to all of them. "Do not fear me, Orison, though I will seem to you a most hideous worm. My world nestles next its sun. I, made to fit a homeworld that would seem a Hell to you, could hardly be expected to conform to green Earth's standards of beauty. Reflect, Orison, that I wish you well."

SOMETHING dragged itself across a dune. "My God!" Orison whispered, gripping Dink's right arm with both her hands.

"Orison, this is my mentor and my dearest friend," Dink said. "His name is Elder Compassion. He is older than the language you speak. And he is, though housed in strange flesh, a Man of Good Will."

The thing that squatted across the mid-room dune was twelve feet long from the tip of the arched scorpion-telson to the twin pincers that formed a chitinous mustache beneath its mouth. It stared at her with a pair of compound eyes the size of hub-caps. "I'll not weary you further with squeezing words into your minds," the interior voice said. "Bring me the writing-boards, Son and Cousin."

"Cornet!" Dink snapped. "Bring scratchboards."

"Sire!" A young officer ran back to the anteroom and came back with a stack of blackened boards, one of which he set up in the sand before the monster, glancing nervously over his shoulder at the lance-like tip that quivered in the air above him. "It is a fearsome thing, this killing-tool my body is equipped with," the voice said, "and embarrassing. It is rather as though your good Gandhi had been forced to carry a sub-machine gun through life." The cornet scrambled out of

way through the sand, and the giant sting lowered itself to the scratchboard.

The words he inscribed into the blackness were written in a delicate italic, hardly larger than human penmanship: "My son, she is lovely."

"It is gracious of you, Elder Cousin, to recognize beauty in a form so unlike your own species," Dink said, bowing.

There was a mental chuckle. "Her mind, you clod!" the monster sketched in the scratchboard. "Her lovely, lovely mind."

"I am pleased that you ratify my choice of wife, Elder Cousin," Dink said.

"She will assist you in the most difficult task ever a scion of the Triple Crown had to accomplish, Son and Cousin," Elder Compassion wrote. "She will aid you in preparing the Golden Worlds to accept Coca-Cola."

"Your meaning, Elder Cousin, is hidden from my poor understanding," Dink said.

"I mean this," Elder Compassion sketched on his scratchboard. "You came for conquest bearing with you the seeds of violence, and thus defeat. You came to subvert Earth by pandering to Earth's greed. You were yourself, through the agent of your greedy brother, rendered impotent. Violence has been done. We must now retreat, making such amends as we can. In the years that will soon be upon

us, Earth's men will follow us to the Golden Worlds, where you, as Emperor, and Orison, Empress, will greet them."

"To the ship, then?" Dink asked. "What will we do with the rebels? With Kraft, my brother?"

"They have earned the payment of exile," Elder Compassion wrote. "We will leave them here."

DINK turned to the young officer. "Cornet, assist our Elder Cousin to the ship," he ordered. He turned to two of the purple-ears. "Take Kraft to the vault," he said.

Orison spoke to the monster. "Sir," she said, "you spoke of making amends for the damage you have done. You must first of all destroy the paper with which you'd hoped to ruin us."

"I'll give those orders, Orison," Dink said.

"What will be done about the counterfeit money you've already spent, financing your subversion?" she asked.

Elder Compassion was writing on his board. "Three miles beneath this city lies a vein

of gold," he wrote. "The Microfabridae are this minute plumbing the earth to reach it. We will leave full payment for our fiscal sins."

Dink took Orison's hand. "You'll come with us?" he asked.

"I will, Dink."

"Then I, Rex-Imperator, Son of the Triple Crown, Prince Porphyrogenous of Empire, take you to wife," he said.

"If you're sure this is quite legal," Orison said, "I do."

"There are voices all about us," Elder Compassion spoke in their minds. "The traitor, Kraft, is in the vault, bound and seated in the midst of wealth. We must go, or there will be more violence."

"The moment the Microfabridae have left their golden payment for our folly, Elder Cousin, guide them to the ship," Dink said. "I long to show my Princess her dominions."

"She is the first," the voice spoke again. "The first of the irresistible conquerors from Earth."

END

