

The preacher wasn't what he seemed — and the girl seemed what she wasn't — but the birds . . . they were dangerously, terrifyingly real!

An Old Fashioned Bird Christmas

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THE Reverend Clem Adelburg had come out to cut some mistletoe. He tucked the hatchet tightly in the band of his trousers and shinned up the knobby trunk of the apple tree. When he got high enough, he saw that two ravens were seated on the apple tree branches, eating the mistletoe berries. There were always ravens around the cabin nowadays; he chased them away indignantly, with many loud whooshes. Then he felt a twinge of remorse.

"O Lord," he prayed among the branches, his face upturned toward the dramatic cloudscape of an Arizona winter, "O Lord, bless this little experiment of thy

servant. O Lord, grant that I wasn't wrong to chase away those darned ravens. Yes, Lord."

He sighted up at the branches. He chopped with the hatchet. Three branches of mistletoe fell down on the sheets of newspaper he had previously placed at the foot of the tree. He climbed down.

It was beginning to get dark. Mazda would have supper ready. There was a premonitory rumble and then the sound of *Silent Night*, played on an electric xylophone, filled the sky.

The Reverend Adelburg frowned. The noise must be coming from Parker; the municipal Christmas tree there would be thirty-five feet tall this year, and

already he could see the red glow of Parker's municipal Christmas street-decoration project in the southern sky. Well. If the Lord continued to bless him, and if his next few sermons had the effect he hoped they'd have, he might be able to change the character of Parker's Christmas celebration. The Forthright Temple, in Los Angeles, was a long way from Parker, but his broadcasts were receivable here, too.

He went in the kitchen. Mazda was cooking something on the oil stove, an oil lamp burning dimly on the table beside her. The kitchen smelled good.

"Hello, Clem," she said, turning to face him. She smiled at him. "Did you get the berries for the tea?"

"Yes, dear." He handed her the three branches of mistletoe. "Make it good and strong this time, dear. I just want to see if there's anything in my little idea."

"About mistletoe being the common element in all religions? Sure."

HE watched her as she went to fill the teakettle at the sink. She was a tall woman, with masses of puffy ginger hair and a very fair skin. Her figure was excellent, though rangy, and he always enjoyed watching her.

Most of the time Mazda's being in the cabin seemed so ordinary,

so fitting (she was remarkably domestic, when you got to know her), that he simply didn't think about it. But there were moments, like the present, when her physical immediacy seemed to catch him in the solar plexus. Then he could only stand and look at her and draw deep, surprised breaths.

It wasn't so much his living with her, in the technical sense, that troubled him. He hadn't even tried to feel guilty about that. It seemed at once so extraordinary and so perfectly natural, that it wasn't something his conscience could get a grip on. No, it was Mazda's being in the cabin at all that was the surprising thing.

Where had she come from, anyhow? He'd gone outside one morning early in September, meaning to walk up and down in the sand while he put the finishing touches on his sermon for next week, and there she had been, sitting quietly under a Joshua tree.

She couldn't have been there for more than ten minutes. Her skin, as he had come to know later, was extraordinarily sensitive to sunlight, and she was wearing the skimpiest Bikini imaginable. She'd have been sunburned all over if she'd been there for any length of time. And how had she got there? There'd been no

sign of a car in any direction, and he hadn't even heard the noise of a plane or a copter in the sky. Had she walked over from Parker? In a Bikini? Five miles?

He knew so little about her—no more now, really, than he had known on that first day when she had said, "Hi," and gone in the house. It wasn't that she was close-mouthed or sullen. She just didn't talk about herself. Once only, when he had been elaborating his idea that the use of mistletoe might be the common element behind all religion, had she come out with anything that might be a personal remark. He'd spoken of the use of mistletoe in classical paganism, in druidism, in Christian festival, in the old Norse religion, in Zoroastrism—

Her lower lip had begun to protrude defiantly. "There's no mistletoe in Zoroastrism," she had cut in sharply. "I know."

Well? It wasn't much for the fruit of more than three months.

He couldn't help wondering about Mazda sometimes, though he didn't want to fail in Christian charity. But he knew he had his enemies. Could she possibly be a Retail Merchants Association spy?

THE teakettle was beginning to hum. Mazda gave the pot of string beans on the stove a stir with a wooden spoon. "How did

you come out with your sermon, Clem?" she asked.

"Eh? Oh, splendidly. The ending, I really think, will have an effect. There are some striking passages. The ravens were quite impressed." He smiled at his little joke.

"Ravens?" She turned to face him. "Were there ravens outside when you were rehearsing your speech?"

"Yes, indeed. We have ravens all the time here now. There were even ravens in the apple tree when I was cutting the mistletoe."

Her eyes widened. "Oh . . ." she said thoughtfully.

"I fear I chased them away a little too vehemently," he said, becoming serious. "Ravens, after all, are the Lord's creatures too."

"Not *those* ravens," Mazda said.

There was a very brief pause. Mazda fingered the wooden bracelet on her left wrist. Then she said, "Listen, Clem, I know you've talked about it, but I guess I'm just dumb. Why are you so down on modern Christ-mases, anyway?"

"My dear, if you'd ever attend the Temple services—" the Reverend Adelburg said in gentle reproof. "But I'll try to make my point of view, which I humbly trust is also the Lord's point of view, clear to you." He began to talk.

He was an excellent talker.

Phrases like "star in the darkness," "the silent night of Bethlehem," "pagan glitter," "corruption," "perversion," "true values," "an old-time America," "myrrh," "frankincense" and "1776," seemed to shimmer in the air between them. Mazda listened, nodding from time to time or prodding the potatoes in the saucepan with a two-tined kitchen fork.

AT last he appeared to have finished. Mazda nodded for the last time. "Um-hum," she said. "But you know what I think, Clem? I think you just don't like lights. When it's dark, you want it to be dark. It's reasonable enough—you're a different guy once the sun goes down."

"I don't like the false lights of modernity," the Reverend said with a touch of stiffness. "As I intend to make abundantly clear in my sermon tomorrow."

"Um-hum. You're a wonderful talker. I never thought I'd get fond of somebody who didn't like light."

"I like some kinds of light," said the Reverend Adelburg. "I like fires."

Mazda drew a deep breath. "You'd better wash up before supper, Clem," she said. "You've got rosin on you from the apple tree."

"All right, dear." He kissed her

on the cheek and then—she had seductive shoulders, despite her ranginess—on the upper arm.

"Mmmmmmm," Mazda said.

When he had gone into the pantry to wash, she looked after him slantingly. Her caramel-colored eyebrows drew together in a frown. She had already scalded out the teapot. Now she reached into the drawer of the kitchen table and drew out a handful of what looked like small mushrooms. They were, as a matter of fact, mescal buttons, and she had gathered them last week from the top of a plant of *Lophophora Williamsii* herself.

II

SHE cut them up neatly with a paring knife and dropped them into the teapot. She put the mistletoe berries in on top of the mescal buttons. Then she filled the teapot with boiling water. When the Reverend got back from his washing, the teapot was steaming domestically on the table beside the string beans.

He said grace and poured himself a cup of the tea. "Goodness, but it's bitter," he observed, sipping. "Not at all like it was the first time. What a difference putting in more mistletoe has made!"

Mazda looked down. She passed him the sugar bowl. He sweetened the tea lavishly. "You

haven't set a cup for yourself, dear," he said, suddenly solicitous.

"There isn't much tea. You said to make it strong."

"Yes, honey, but if there's any good in the tea, I want you to share it. Get another cup."

He looked across the table at her, brightly and affectionately. There was a faint flush in Mazda's cheeks as she obeyed.

Supper was over and Mazda was washing the dishes when the Reverend Clem said suddenly, "How fast you're moving, Mazda! I never saw anything like the way you're getting through those dishes. I can hardly see your hands, they're moving so fast."

"Fast?" Mazda echoed. She sounded bewildered. She held up a spoon and polished its bowl languidly in the light of the oil lamp. "Why, I'm not moving fast. I've been standing here by the sink for hours and hours, washing one dish. I don't know what's the matter with me. I wish I *could* move fast."

There was a silence. Mazda had finished the dishes. She took off her apron and sat down on the floor, her feet out straight in front of her. Almost immediately the Reverend Adelburg slid off the chair where he had been sitting, and flopped down on the floor parallel to her. Both their legs were stretched out.

"What lovely hands you have,

Mazda," he said. He picked up one of them from her lap, where it was languidly lying, and turned it about admiringly. "Your fingers remind me of the verse in the Canticles—'Fair are my love's palms as an eel that feedeth among lilies. And the coals thereof hath a most vehement flame.' They're even colored like eels, purple and gold and silver. Your nails are little dark rainbows. The Lord bless you, Mazda. I love you very much."

He put his arm around her. She let her head decline on his shoulder, and they both leaned back against the wall. "Are you happy, dear?" he asked her anxiously. "As happy as I am? Do you have a dim sweet bird sense of blessings hovering over you?"

"Um-hum," Mazda answered. It was obviously difficult for her to talk. "Never felt better." A grin zig-zagged across her face. "Mus' be the mistletoe."

THE effects of peyote—mescal button—intoxication are predictable. They run a definite course. None the less, the response to a drug is always somewhat idiosyncratic. Thus it was that the Reverend Clem Adelburg, who had drunk enough peyote infusion to keep a cart horse seeing beatific visions for twenty-four hours, reached, about six o'clock in the morning, the

state of intense wakefulness that succeeds to the drug trance. By the time the copter came from Los Angeles to take him to the Temple, a little after eight, he had bathed, shaved and dressed, and was reading over his sermon notes.

He went into the bedroom where Mazda was lying to bid her good-by. (Sometime during the night they had managed to get to bed.) He bent over and kissed her tenderly on her loosened mouth. "Good-by, dear. Our little experiment certainly had results, didn't it? But I feel no ill after-effect, and I trust that you will not, either. I'll be back about eleven tonight."

Once more he kissed her. Mazda made a desperate effort to rouse herself from the rose and opal-hued heaven she was currently floating in. She licked her lips. "Clem . . ." she said.

"Yes, dear?"

"*Be careful.*"

"Certainly, dear. I always am. Yes."

He patted her on the shoulder. He went out. Even in her paradise, which was at the moment blue and silver, she could hear the noise of the copter as it bore him away.

Mazda's drug dreams came to an end with a bump about twelve o'clock. She sprang out of bed and ran to the window. The

Reverend Adelburg was gone, of course. And there wasn't a raven in sight.

OVER in Los Angeles, the Reverend's sermon was going swimmingly. From his first words, which had been the arresting sentence, "The lights are going out again all over the world," he had riveted the attention of his listeners as if with stainless steel rivets. Even the two troops of Archer Eagle Scouts in the front rows, who, with their scoutmaster Joe Buell, were today's Honor Guests, had been so fascinated that they had stopped twanging their bowstrings. The Reverend had swung thunderously from climax to climax; by now at least half his audience had resolved to disconnect its radio when it got home, and throw away the electric lights on its Christmas tree. Now the Reverend was approaching the climax of climaxes.

"In the sweet night of the spirit, bless us, O Lord! Yes, Lord, it's good to be dark—in the sweet silence of the stable let the little flame of—bless us, Lord!—let the little flame—My *Gosh!* Good Lord!"

Forthright Temple is ventilated, and partly lighted, by a clerestory in the middle part of the building. Through this clerestory eight large black birds flew rapidly.

Two of them headed straight for the Reverend Adelburg's eyes. Four of them attacked the Temple's not very bright electric lights. The other two made dive after dive on the helpless congregation's head.

Women were screaming. Handkerchiefs waved. Hymnbooks rocked and fluttered through the air. The organist burst into a Bach chorale. The bewildered choir began singing two different songs.

When the ravens had first swooped down upon him, the Reverend Adelburg had dived under the lectern. From thence—he was a man who was used to authority—he began shouting orders to the troops of Archer Eagle Scouts in a clarion, stenorian voice.

"Young men! Listen! Shoot at the birds! Shoot—at—the—birds!"

There was a very slight hiatus. Then bowstrings began to twang and arrows to thud.

Eight pagan ravens are no match at all for the legitimate weapons of two troops of Archer Eagle Scouts. The ravens dived valiantly, they cawed and shrieked. In vain. Inside five minutes after the shooting started, there remained no trace of the birds' incursus except a black tail feather floating in an updraft, eight or ten hymnbooks with

ruffled pages and some arrows on the floor.

For a few moments the scouts scurried about collecting arrows. Then the Reverend Adelburg summoned them up to the lectern, where he was standing. He finished his sermon with a troop of Archer Scouts drawn up on either side of him, like a body guard.

"That was a wonderful sermon, wasn't it," said the lady from Iowa as she and her husband walked toward their parked car. "I never heard anything like it before. He really spoke better after the birds came in than he did earlier . . . I think tomorrow I'll go down town and see if I can get some little oil lamps to burn in the patio."

"Wonder what sort of birds those were," her husband said idly. "They were mighty big for crows."

"Crows! Why, they were ravens; haven't you ever seen pictures of ravens? I wonder what made them go in the Temple. Ravens always seem such *old-fashioned birds*."

III

"I betrayed my Company for you," Mazda said. She hiccupped with emotion. "I'm a rat. As far as that goes, you're a rat too. We're *both* rats."

"What company is that?" the Reverend asked with innocent curiosity. He yawned. They had been sitting in the tiny living room, arguing, for hours, ever since he got back from the Temple, and by now it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

"The PE&G. Why? Did you ever suspect?"

"I thought perhaps the Retail Merchants Association sent you. I never understood how you happened to be sitting under that Joshua tree."

Mazda laughed scornfully. "The Retail Merchants? Those boffs? Why, I don't suppose they have more than three secret agents in the whole Los Angeles metropolitan area. They couldn't stop a baby from crossing a street on a kiddy car. Their idea of hot tactics is to hire a big newspaper ad.

"No, I'm a PE&G girl. I've been one of their top people for years. That's why I know what you're up against."

She took an earnest step toward him. "Clem, I don't think you have any idea of how serious this is," she said. "But they'll stop at nothing. They can't possibly let you get away with it. Why, last December after your old-fashioned Christmas sermons, power consumption was off 27% all along the whole Pacific slope, and it didn't get back to normal

until late February. People just didn't use much electricity. The Company didn't pay any dividends at all on its common stock, and if the same thing happens this year, they'll have to skip-payments on the preferred! That's why I was sent to stop you at all costs."

"How were you supposed to stop me?" the Reverend inquired. He put the tips of his outstretched fingers together thoughtfully.

"I was supposed to seduce you, and then call the broadcasters in. You know, moral turpitude. But I convinced them that it wouldn't work. Congregations aren't so touchy about things like that nowadays. It wouldn't have worked."

"Mazda, how *could* you?"

"I don't know how I could," Mazda replied with spirit. "I could have had a nice clean-cut electronics engineer . . . or one of those cute linemen up on a pole . . . and then I had to fall for a Reverend with his collar on backwards. Somebody ought to examine my head."

The Reverend Adelburg let this pass without comment. "What was the alternate plan?" he asked.

"I promised them I'd keep you from delivering any more old-fashioned Christmas sermons. That's what the peyote was for."

"Peyote? When?"

She told him.

"Oh. Then it wasn't the mistletoe," he said when she had finished. He sounded rather annoyed.

"No, it wasn't the mistletoe. But I guess I didn't give you enough peyote. You delivered the sermon anyway.

"Clem, you think that because the ravens made that silly attack on you in the Temple, that that's the sort of thing the Company has up its sleeve. It's not. The ravens were acting on their own responsibility, and they're not awfully bright birds. The Company can do lots better than that when they want to."

"What do you think they'll try next?" the Reverend inquired. His jaw had begun to jut out.

"Well, they might try to get you for moral turpitude after all, or stick an income tax evasion charge on you or accuse you of dope smuggling. I don't think they will. They don't want to give you any more publicity. I think they'll just quietly try to wipe you out."

For a moment Mazda's self command deserted her. She wrung her hands. "What'm I to do?" she whimpered. "I've got to save you, and you're as stubborn as a mule. I don't know any magic—or at least not nearly enough magic. The whole Company will be against me as soon

as the ravens are sure I ratted on them. And there's just no place in the world today for anybody who's in conflict with the PE&G.

"I wish I hadn't been such a dope as to fall in love with you."

THE Reverend Clem Adelburg got up from the chair where he had been sitting and put his arm around her. "Cheer up, my dear," he told her solemnly. "We will defeat the company. Right is on our side."

Mazda gave a heroic sniffle. She smiled at him mistily. "It's not just the PE&G, of course," she said. "Sometimes I think *they* have agents everywhere."

"Not the PE&G?" the Reverend cried. He let his arm fall from around her. He had a sudden nightmare vision of a whole world united against him—a world in which the clouds semaphored secrets about him to the dolphins in the Pacific waves. "What is it, then?"

"Why, it's *Nous*."

"I never heard of it."

"Very few people have. But *Nous*, *Infinite*, is the company from which the PE&G gets its power.

"*Nous* is a very strange outfit. It operates on the far side of 3,000 A.D., and selling power is only one of the things it does. When you're a top agent for the Com-

pany, like I was, you hear all sorts of stories about it—for instance, that it's responsible for maintaining the difference in potential between the earth and the ionosphere, or that the weather on Venus is a minor Nous project—stuff like that. I've even heard agents say that Nous is G—but I don't believe *that*. I know about Mithras, myself."

"I thought the PE&G made its own power," said the Reverend. He was still struggling with the first part of Mazda's remarks.

Mazda laughed. "I don't mean any disrespect to the Company, but what makes you think that? The Company's a bad opponent, but outside of that, witchcraft, or sorcery, or ravens, is all they're capable of.

"All the really hot developments in power, the electronic stuff, comes from after 3,000 A.D. Nobody in the present has brains enough to work out a germanium transistor, for example. Nous helps them. People nowadays are dopes. They can't work buttons on pants, or open a package of chewing gum unless there's a paper ribbon to help them.

"That's beside the point, really. The thing I'm trying to make clear, Clem, is that Nous is a bad outfit to come up against.

"I was supposed to go outside at one-thirty this morning and have the ravens pick me up under

the Joshua tree. They were going to take me back to headquarters by air raft. If it—"

"IS that how you got here in the first place?" the Reverend inquired. "By air raft?"

"Yes. As I was saying, if I'd done that, the Company would have accepted that my failure with the peyote was just a mistake. But I didn't do it. I couldn't bear to leave a chump like you all alone to face the Company, and by now they must be beginning to realize that I've ratted on them. It won't be very long before the real trouble begins.

"Now, listen. There are two things you can do. The best one would be for you to go outside and talk to the ravens. If you promise them on your word of honor as a Christian gentlemen that you won't deliver any more anti-light sermons—I can't see why you don't like light, anyhow; light's wonderful—if you promise them that, they'll let you go." She paused hopefully.

The Reverend gave her a look.

"Well," said Mazda. "Then we'll have to make a break for it.

"While you were in the wash-room, I called the Temple copter." She indicated the short-wave radio on the other side of the little stone fireplace. "It'll be here any minute. I think—well, we'll

try to get through," she said without much hope.

The Reverend looked at her in silence for a moment. Fatigue had made shadows under her eyes, but they only made her look glamorous and desirable. She had never been more beautiful. She had betrayed her company for him; he loved her more than ever. He gave her a hug.

"Nix, my dear," he said. "Nix."

"N-n-n-n-?"

"Nix. Never." His voice rang out, booming and resonant. "Run away from those devils and their ravens? Flee from those pagan night-lighters? Never! I *will* not." He advanced toward the radio.

"What are you going to do?" Mazda squeaked.

"I'm going to contact the TVA," he said without turning. "You have to fight fire with fire."

"Public power?" Mazda breathed. Her face was white.

"Public power! Their line will be open all night."

He turned his face toward the rafters. "O Lord," he boomed reverently, "bless this radio message. Please, Lord, grant that in contacting a radical outfit like the TVA I'm doing aright."

IV

THE noise of prayer died away in the ceiling. He pressed a key and turned a switch. For a

moment the room was utterly quiet. Then there was a soft flurry and plop at the window.

The ravens, after all, were not deaf. They too had heard the Reverend's prayers.

Mazda spun round toward the sound. Before she could decide what to do, there was a series of tinkles from the chimney. It ended in a glassy crash. Something had broken on the stone hearth.

Mazda screamed.

"Keep back!" she yelled at the Reverend, who had turned from the radio and was leaning forward interestedly. "Keep back! Don't breathe! *Damn* those birds!" She was fumbling wildly with the wooden bracelet on her left wrist.

"What is it?" he asked. He advanced a step toward the shards of glass on the hearth.

"Get back. It's a germ culture bomb. Parrot fever. I'm going to purify it. Stand back!"

The Reverend Adelburg discounted most of this warning as due to feminine hysteria. He drew back a fraction of an inch, but still remained leaning forward, his eyes fixed on the glass.

Mazda gave a moan of desperation. "I've got to do it!" she yelled. She slid her bracelet toward her elbow and gave it a violent twist.

A strictly vertical flash of lightning appeared between the ceiling

and the hearth. It was very bright, and accompanied by a sizzling noise. A second later a sharp chlorine-like smell filled the air.

Mazda's artificial lightning died away. The room returned to its normal dim illumination. A faint curl of smoke floated above the pieces of broken glass on the hearth of the fireplace. There was no doubt that Mazda had purified the germ culture effectively. But the Reverend Clem Adelsburg was stretched out on the floor flat on his back.

MAZDA ran to him. She tore open his white shirt front and laid her head on his chest. His heart was still beating, and his hands and feet were warm. But he was completely out—outer than any of the neon lights he had been trying to put out.

Mazda got up, rubbing her hands. She couldn't move him, and she didn't know what she ought to do for him. She hoped he'd be all right. She knew he had a strong constitution. She went into the kitchen and got a towel.

She came back with it and tied it to the poker. Carrying this home-made flag of truce in front of her, she opened the door and went out into the night.

It was a dark night. From under the Joshua tree a darker shadow

detached itself. "'Llo, Mazda," a harsh voice said.

"Hello," she replied. There was a glitter of beady eyes in the darkness around her. "Listen here, you birds," Mazda said slowly, "we've always been on good terms, haven't we? We've always got on together well. Are you really trying to do me and my boy friend in?"

A bird cleared its throat. There was a noise of talons being shifted uneasily. "Well . . . no, Mazda. We like you too," somebody said.

"Oh, yes? Is that why you dropped the parrot-fever bomb? Were you going to drop a dead parrot down the chimney and make it look as if we'd died a natural death? I wouldn't call that bomb exactly a friendly thing."

"The bomb was just a warning," said the harsh voice that had spoken first. "We knew you'd purify it. We have confidence in you. We don't want to do you any harm personally. You can always get another boy friend."

"I want this one."

"You've had better ones."

"Yes, I know. But this is the one I want."

There was a silence. Then a bird said, "We're sorry, Mazda. We only do what we're sent out to do."

Mazda drew a sharp breath. "Hell's Canyon," she said deliber-

ately. "Rural electrification cooperatives. *Public power.*"

THERE was a sound as of somebody's tail feathers being plucked distractedly. "Mazda, I wish you wouldn't," said the chief raven in a wincing voice.

"I will, though. I'll get in touch with the public power people. I don't care about the ethics of it. I'm in love."

"Haw!" the raven jeered harshly. It seemed to have regained its aplomb. "That lightning flash of yours burned out every tube in the radio. You couldn't send a message to Parker to ask for a stick of chewing gum. You're through."

"We'll give you half an hour. During any of that time you can come out unhurt. But after that you're in for it too. This time we're serious."

"What are you going to do?" Mazda cried.

"You'll find out."

Mazda went back to the house.

The clock on the mantelpiece read twenty minutes to three. The ravens would probably give her a few minutes' grace, so she had until ten or twelve minutes after the hour. Mazda knelt down by her consort and began to chafe his hands. When that didn't help, she ran to the kitchen, got a handful of red feathers from the chicken they had had for lunch

yesterday, and began burning them under the Reverend's nose.

At seven minutes to three the Reverend's eyelids fluttered and the noise of a copter was heard in the sky. Mazda listened with strained attention, her eyes fixed on her consort. She longed to run to the window, but she was afraid of alerting the ravens. She could only wait.

The copter appeared to be having difficulties. The whoosh of its helix changed pitch, the motor stuttered and coughed. Once the noise seemed to recede; Mazda was afraid the plane was going away entirely. She fingered her wooden blast bracelet nervously. But the copter returned. It landed with a thump that was almost a crash.

The copter door opened and somebody jumped out. There was a sound of squawks, caws and rapid fluttering. A vigorous male voice said, "Ouch! *Ouch!* Birds! What the bloody hell!" More fluttering. Then sandaled feet thudded rapidly along the path. Somebody pounded at the door.

MAZDA ran to open it. The man who stumbled across the threshold was a dark, stocky Indian who wore white duck pants and red glasses, and carried a three-foot bow slung across his back. He was bleeding freely from half a dozen peck marks on his



Virgil
Finlay

shoulders and breast. "Lord Mithras," Mazda said prayerfully, "it's Joe Buell! Joe!"

"Mazda! Why didn't you show a light? What are you doing here? What is all this?"

Mazda told him. Joe listened intently, frowning more and more. "My word, what a mess," he said when she had finished. He pushed his red glasses up on his nose. "Has the Reverend come to yet?"

They turned around. Clem's eyes were open, but he was still lying on the floor. As they watched, he slowly closed his eyes again. "I guess he's not ready yet," Mazda said.

She looked at the clock. It showed two minutes to three. "Let's get him up and walk him," she said harriedly. "It might help him to get back to normal. Oh, Mithras, how late it is!"

The Reverend Adelburg was limp and slippery, but they managed to get him to his feet. As they guided his rubbery footsteps about the room, Mazda said, "I haven't seen you since you were in Canada, Joe. Those nights in Saskatchewan! I didn't know you were one of the Reverend's men."

"Since 1965," Joe answered briefly.

"How come? I thought you danced Shalako at the pueblo one year."

"I did. But you should see

Halonawa now. There's a red and purple neon sign twenty feet high over the plaza. It reads, 'Welcome to Halonawa, Home of the Shalako.' After that I joined up with the Rev. A nice dark Christmas seems a wizard idea."

He plainly didn't want to pursue the subject further. Mazda said, "If the Reverend revives in time, what'll we do?"

"Can you pilot a copter?"

"I can drive a car."

"A copter's really easier." He gave her directions. "The motor's missing a little, but I don't think you'll have any trouble. Orient yourself by Parker and the dam. The dam's just north of us.

"If the Rev comes to in time, make a break for it with him in the plane. I'll create a diversion by climbing out the window and shooting at those bloody birds. I owe them some arrows, at that."

"I wish I knew what they had in mind," Mazda said.

V

AT five minutes after three the Reverend's willow-withy body stiffened. His eyes opened. He raised his head and looked about him. "What a lovely day," he said in a pleasant, conversational voice.

Mazda's face puckered. For a moment she seemed about to burst into wild tears. Then she

blinked her eyes and shook her head defiantly. "He hurt his head when he fell, that's all. He'll be all right later. He's got to be all right. And he may really be easier to handle this way than if he wasn't goofed. He's a stubborn man."

Joe had gone over to the table and was putting out the lamp. He handed his red glasses to Mazda. "Makes piloting easier," he said. Then he opened the window on the left and swung himself out of it. He gave a high, passionate battle cry. There was a rush of feathers and some frenzied squawking. Joe's bow began to twang.

Mazda grabbed the Reverend by the hand. "Nice Christmas," she hissed. "Come along." Bent forward, one arm raised to shield her eyes, she pulled him after her at a run toward the door.

The night had grown darker. The sky was heavily overcast. None the less, she could make out the improbable shape of the copter. "Hurry!" she said to Clem Adelburg. "Run!"

Wings buffeted around her. Claws struck at her face, her cheeks, her hair. The Reverend Adelburg gave a cry of pain; Mazda had to use her free arm to wipe her own blood from her eyes. Then they were in the copter and the door was slammed.

She turned the switch. The

motor gave a cough and started. Mazda was trembling with excitement, but she followed Joe's instructions. Slowly the copter rose.

She had put on the red glasses before they left the house. As her eyes grew used to the darkness, she made out the glimmer of the river in front of her and the flat surface of Parker dam. She wanted to go west, toward Los Angeles. The copter climbed a little. She tried to turn.

Wings whizzed by her. Mazda grinned. She twisted the blast bracelet on her wrist. The tiny receptor within it vibrated. There was a flash of light, and the bird plummeted to the ground.

When it hit the sand there was a faint concussion. The floor of the copter shuddered. After a second the smell of almond extract tinged the air.

The bird had been carrying a cyanide bomb.

Mazda sent the copter a little higher. Her mind was a kaleidoscope of tumbling fears. The possibility of more bombs, of explosive bombs, of a kamekazi attack on the copter's propeller, played leap-frog in her brain. And what about Joe? Dear Joe, he'd been wonderful in Saskatchewan. Had they got him yet?

She looked back anxiously at the cabin. Joe had vaulted up on the roof and was standing with one foot planted on either

side of the ridge pole, like a Zuñi Heracles. The thick clouds behind him had begun to be tinged with light from the rising moon; she could see that though his bow was ready and he had an arrow drawn nearly back to his ear he wasn't shooting. His eyes were fixed intently on the sky.

She followed the direction of his gaze. Very high up, so high that they looked no bigger than crows, seven of the big black birds were flapping rapidly northward in single file.

FOR the next five minutes or so nothing at all happened. The copter plodded steadily westward toward Los Angeles, down low, along the line of the aqueduct. This apparent quiescence on the part of her opponents unnerved Mazda more than a direct attack would have done. She couldn't believe that the PE&G would let her and Clem escape so easily.

Suddenly along the sky in front of her there passed a vast flash of light. For an instant the desert was as bright and white as day. Then the darkness closed down again and thunder crashed.

Mazda's hands shook on the controls. The storm that was coming up might, of course, be merely a storm. Or it might have been sent by the Company. But if Nous . . . but if Nous . . . but if Nous, that enormous and some-

how enigmatic power that operated from the far side of 3,000 A.D. . . . if *Nous* had decided to stretch out its arm against her and Clem, there wasn't a chance in the world that she and the Reverend would continue to live.

There was another prodigious lightning flash. The desert, the aqueduct, a line of power poles, a small square building, burned themselves on Mazda's eyes. When darkness came back the Reverend, who had been sitting quite calmly and quietly beside Mazda all this time, stirred. "Wonderful fireworks," he said approvingly.

Mazda's eyes rolled. "Clem, baby," she said despairingly, "what'll I do?" She looked around as if hunting an answer. Then the bottom of the heavens dropped out.

The heaviest precipitation recorded to date in a cloudburst is two and a half inches in three minutes. What fell on the copter now was heavier. Inside of two seconds after the avalanche of water had begun to pour from the sky the copter was down flat on the ground, as if it had been pushed into the sand by a giant hand.

The noise inside the cabin was deafening. It was like being a dried pea shaken within a drum. It beat along the body like hammers. Mazda, looking up open-

mouthed, saw that the copter ceiling was beginning to bulge.

The downpour—the cataract—stopped as suddenly as it had begun. There was a minute of dazed silence in the cabin. Then Mazda, pushing hard against the door in the warped copter body, got it open and scrambled out.

THE copter was deep in the sand. One blade of the propeller had been broken off entirely. The other hung limply parallel to the shaft.

Mazda stood shivering. She took off her red glasses absently and dropped them on the sand. The sky had cleared. The moon was almost up. She reached inside the cabin and caught Clem Adelburg by the wrist. "C'mon," she said. She had seen a building, just before the cloudburst. They might be able to take cover in that.

She struggled over the sand with the Reverend following docilely at her heels. The building, once reached, turned out to be a Company substation, and Mazda felt a touch of hope. She could get in, despite the *Danger* and *No admittance* signs, and the ravens might be deterred, even if only slightly, by their respect for Company property.

The substation door would open to a verbal signal. Mazda twisted her blast bracelet twice

on her arm, inhaled, and swallowed. "Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte," she said carefully.

Nothing happened. She cleared her throat and began again, a couple of notes lower. "Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte." There was a faint click. "Calaveras, Colusa, Contra Costa, Del Norte, Fresno—"

The door swung wide. Mazda's enumeration of the counties of California had worked. She took the Reverend by the hand and led him through the opening. "Stanislaus, Sutter, Tulare, Tuolumne, Ventura, Yuba, Yolo," she said. The door closed.

It was much darker inside the substation than it had been outside on the white desert, and the air was filled with a high humming that sounded, and actually was exceedingly dangerous. Mazda put her arm around Clem's shoulders. "Don't move, baby," she said pleadingly. "Don't touch anything. Stay close to Mazda and be quiet."

The Reverend coughed. "Certainly, my dear," he said in quite a normal voice, "but would you mind telling me where we are? And what has been happening?"

MAZDA went as limp as if she had been coshed on the head. She clung to him and babbled with relief, while the Reverend stroked her soothingly on the hair

and tried to make sense out of her babbling.

"Yes, my dear," he said when she had finally finished. "Do you hear a noise outside?"

"What sort of a noise?"

"A sort of whoosh."

Mazda drew in her breath. "Shin up to the window and look out," she ordered. "Look out especially for birds."

He was at the high, narrow window only an instant before he let himself down. "There was only one raven," he reported, "but there were a number of birds like hawks, with short wings. There seemed to be humps on their backs."

Even in the poor light of the substation Mazda visibly turned green. "Goshawks!" she gasped. Then she began taking off her clothes.

Dress, slip, panties went on the floor. She stood on one foot and removed her sandals alternately. She began going through her hair and pulling out bobby pins. She took off her blast bracelet and added it to the heap.

"What are you doing that for?" the Reverend inquired. It seemed to him a singularly ill-chosen time.

"I'm trying to set up a counter-charm, and I have to be naked to do it." Her voice was wobbling badly. "Those birds—those birds are goshawks. I've never known

the Company to send them out but once before. Those lumps on their backs are portable nous projectors. They're trying to teleport us."

"Teleport us? Where to?"

"To—to the Company's cellars. Where—they attend to people who believe in public power. They—oh—I can't talk about it, Clem."

She crouched down at his feet and picked up a bobby pin. "Don't move," she said without looking up. "Try not to think."

SHE began to scratch a diagram around him on the floor with the pin. He coughed. "Don't cough," she cautioned him. "It might be better to hold your breath."

The Reverend's lungs were aching before she got the diagram done. She eyed it a moment and then spat carefully at four points within the hexagram. A faint bluish glow sprang up along the lines she had traced on the floor.

Mazda rose to her feet. "It'll hold them for a few minutes," she said. "After that . . ."

The Reverend raised his eyes to the rafters. "I'm going to pray," he announced. He filled his lungs.

"O Lord," he boomed powerfully, "we beg thy blessing to preserve me and Mazda from the power of the ravens. We beg thy blessing to help us stay here and

not be transported to the PE&G's cellars. Bless us, O Lord. Preserve us. And help us to make thine old-fashioned Christmas a living reality. Amen, O Lord. Amen!"

Mazda, too, was praying. Hands clasped over her diaphragm, head bowed, lips moving silently, she besought her bright divinity. "Mithras, lord of the morning, slayer of the bull of darkness, preserve my love and me. Mithras, lord!"

Prayer is a force. So is magic. So is the energy from nous projectors. These varying forces met and collided in mid air.

The collision made a sort of vortex, a small but uncomfortable knot in the vast, conscious field potential that is the Infinite part of Nous. There was momentarily an intense, horrible sense of pressure and tension in the very air. The substation hummed ominously. Then, with a burst of energy that blew out every generator from Tacoma to San Diego, the roof came off.

(The PE&G crews worked overtime on the repairs, but there were too many wrecked generators. All along the Pacific slope, and as far inland as Provo, Utah, it was as dark a Christmas as even the Reverend would have wished.)

There was a pause. The noise of breaking timbers died away. The Reverend Adelburg and

Mazda were looking upward frozenly, mouths open, necks outstretched. Then a gigantic hand reached in through the hole in the roof. A gigantic voice, even bigger than the hand, said in enormous and somehow Oxonian accents, "Very well. Take your old-fashioned Christmas, then."

IT was just before sunrise on December 21st. The Christians, who would be strangled at dawn the next day and then burned in honor of the solstice, were gibbering away in their wicker cages. There were three cages full of them. Great progress was being made in stamping out the new heresy. The Christians would make a fine bright blaze.

The druid looked up at the cages, which were hanging from the boughs of three enormous oak trees, and nodded with satisfaction. His consort, Mahurzda, would find it a hard job strangling so many people. He'd have to help her. It would be a pleasant task.

Once more he nodded. He tested the edge of the sickle he was carrying. Then the druid who had been—would be—would will have been—the Reverend Clem Adelburg hoisted up his long white robe and clambered up in the nearest of the oak trees to cut the sacred mistletoe.

— MARGARET ST. CLAIR