

That man who thinks he is Napoleon—is it possible that at some time the gap between his mind and the real Napoleon's was briefly bridged, If so, might it be possible somehow to bridge that gap again . . . ?

NAPOLÉON'S SKULLCAP

by Gordon R. Dickson

CARL LEHMAN SAT GAZING AT the device on the white tablecloth between himself and Sean.

It was a simple band of copper, soldered to form a ring, with two more arching bands soldered to its upper edge at the four points of the compass to form a domed cross. There was clearance between the two arching bands at the point where they crossed, one above the other; and here they had been cut and fitted with small vanes, of the same width as the bands themselves, that rotated around a wire axis and wavered and turned with the lightest touch or breath. It was a tinsel device, a toy, the sort of thing anyone could throw together in his basement workshop in fifteen minutes. Carl touched one of the vanes, with a thick-boned forefinger, and it trembled, turning away from the touch, above the white tablecloth in the brilliant sunlight from

the window. He felt a small shiver inside.

"What is it?" asked Carl gruffly, for he did not like puzzles.

"It's a lever," said Sean Tyrone.

Carl frowned, his thick-boned, almost brutal-looking face bent above the device. He was refusing to play straight man, continuing to try to puzzle the thing out by what he could see of it. Sean smiled a little, looking away from their restaurant table, here in the quiet, expensive upstairs dining room of the Club Chateau, and out through the window down the long slope of the hill to the Ford Dam and the ice-locked Mississippi. And Carl noted the glance.

It was the twentieth of February, in the paralyzing depths of the Minnesota winter. The sidewalks, yards, the streets and even the steep river-banks were sheeted with an iron coat of frozen snow. The sun above blared out of a

cloudless sky, filling the world with blinding brilliance, but no heat. Piled up against the dam and stretching back along both banks, the ice lay slagged and tumbled like broken glass; and in the narrow center channel where the current of the river kept it open, the water rolled, secret and black as fresh-poured asphalt in contrast with the whiteness of the ice.

—It was, thought Carl, with that one part of his brain not busy with the device, a strange, bright, sterile, steam-heated time of year, in which life seemed to beat all the more fiercely for being confined to indoors. Everyone appeared furiously stimulated by the shocks that came with each step into the killing cold without, and later reentry into the heat within. Even with thermostats set high, the walls were cool to the touch, and windows cooler yet. Seated where he was, Carl could feel the cold breath of the season through the window upon his left arm. Sean turned his green eyes, his dark, thin face, back to Carl.

"Give up?" he said.

Carl scowled. He was a short, thick, broad man in his late twenties; and ancestors of his who had looked the same as he had been brought by the legions in chains to Rome to be pitted against wild beasts in the Coliseum. He did not look like a thinking man but he knew himself to be one.

"You said, a lever?"

"That's right," said Sean. "A psychic lever. You remember what the man said—'Give me a lever large enough—'"

"I know," said Carl. "It's the word 'psychic' I want to hear explained. Is this one of your wild hares?"

"I suppose you'd call it that," said Sean, grinning.

"Why can't you stick to the law?"

"Because there's more to the world than courts. I've told you that before."

Carl touched one of the little vanes again with his forefinger.

"What does it do?" he asked.

"That's what I'd like to show you," said Sean. "Tell me, do you have anything like a Napoleon up at that summer resort of yours?"

Carl frowned.

"Rest home," he said.

"Rest home, then," said Sean. "I never can remember the proper euphemism. Anyway, the place where you keep your psychotics. I want one that thinks he's Napoleon, or Ghengis Khan, or Nero. Do you have one like that, Doctor?"

"And don't call me 'doctor.'"

"Why not? Has your doctorate been withdrawn for malpractice?"

"It's not in the field of medicine. We don't call clinical psychologists doctors."

"You mean *you* don't, Carl."

"All right, then. I don't." Carl did not raise his voice. He laced

his stubby fingers on the tablecloth in front of him by his martini glass and sat immovable.

"But about the Napoleon—" said Sean.

"I think you know we have a guest at the home who imagines himself Napoleon," said Carl. "I mentioned him to you last fall; and you know I know you don't forget anything. What would you want with him?"

"I want to try out the psychic lever on him," said Sean. "There's a man in the east who has a theory about his particular kind of delusion. He suggests that maybe your psychotic got that way because at one time, for one moment, he had a sudden flash of actual identification with the real Napoleon—"

"Over a hundred and fifty years?"

"How do we know it can't happen?" said Sean. "And that moment of contact with a far superior mind knocked him silly, leaving him only with the *idee fixe* that he is Bonaparte."

"And what," asked Carl, "is your psychic lever supposed to do? And what makes you think it'll do it?"

"Bridge the gap between the two minds again," answered Sean. "And it'll do it, because it's worked for me."

Carl frowned.

"Oh—I don't mean the way it will for him," said Sean, cheerfully. "I've spent the past four

months experimenting with machines like this. Putting them on my head and trying them out as memory aids. I'd put one on and try to remember some place I knew as a child—or some person. This one helps. It actually helps." He pushed it a little toward Carl with one finger. "Try it, if you want."

Carl kept his fingers locked together.

"And you want to try it on this disturbed man up at the Home," he said. "What for?"

"Why, if it works," said Sean, leaning forward, "he'll be in contact with Napoleon's mind again. He'll *be* Napoleon." His eyes glowed like green fire under their black brows. "It'll be like talking to Bonaparte himself. Don't look like that, Carl! If I could put the lever on myself and do it myself, I'd do it myself. But I'm not capable of bridging the gap. Only someone who could do it once before might be helped to do it again." He paused, staring at the other man. "How about it? What do you say?"

"I say," said Carl, unlacing his fingers and taking a deliberate drink from his martini glass, "you wasted the money to take me to lunch here. I won't let you in, of course."

"You don't believe it," said Sean. He pronounced the words like a statement, but it was a question.

"I do not."

"You don't think it will work."

"I know it won't," said Carl, calmly. "I've known you fourteen years, Sean. It's always been one thing or another—one wild idea taking over from the one before. This is that psi business you were so hot about last summer, and you've been so quiet about lately, isn't it? This last's the underground stage, the most dangerous of the lot. I recognize it all right; and I've been expecting you to come up with something like this."

"But you're sure nothing will happen," persisted Sean. "All right, what's the harm in trying it on this man?"

"You don't understand professional ethics," said Carl. "And you ought to, being a lawyer. It's not just that I'm bound to refrain from doing harm to my patients —"

"Oh, *now* they're patients."

"—I'm bound to do only that to and for them I'm convinced will do them good. This experiment of yours not only won't do George Larsen any good, it might disturb him further and do him some positive harm."

"George Larsen?" Sean pounced on the words. "That's his name?"

"So take your own crazy chances—but don't involve me," wound up Carl. "Or anyone I'm responsible for."

"Look," said Sean, urgently, "what's he like?"

"Like? Who?" Carl finished off his martini, and Sean, without turning his head, held up two fingers and wiggled them. The waiter, a dry, thin old man, was immediately at the side of the table.

"Two more martinis?"

"Yes—you know who I mean, Carl," said Sean, answering the waiter and talking on to Carl all at once, his lean, tall body hunched tensely forward over the edge of the table. The waiter went silently off. "'George Larsen' you called him. What's he like?"

"That second martini's the limit. No more now," said Carl. "What do you want to know for?"

"What harm would it do—?"

"All right." Carl shrugged. "He's not too old—early thirties. Rather small. Used to be a drug-gist."

"But, I mean, what's he like?"

"How do I know what he's like?" asked Carl, angrily. "If I knew what he was like, maybe I could help him. That's a word that doesn't mean anything. He's a man who couldn't stand being what he actually was, so he's retreated to being somebody else who doesn't have his problems."

"He hasn't been committed?" asked Sean.

"No, no. None of them we have, are. They come voluntarily. It's a private institution, the Rest Home. He wouldn't even be there, if he didn't have an older brother

in the paper-box manufacturing business that could afford it."

Sean shook his head and glanced again for a moment, down out the window at the ice of the river, with its great moving volume of dark waters hidden from his sight. When he looked back, he said, "I'd like to meet him."

The waiter came back with their fresh drinks. After he had set them down and gone, Carl answered.

"I'm sorry. No. Not that either."

"Well—let's order," said Sean, turning and picking up the oversize gold-printed menu.

They ordered, and later on their lunches came. But as they ate, Sean returned to the subject and hammered away at it.

"—Just let me look at him," he said. "I just want to meet him, that's all."

Until finally, worn out, "All right!" Carl said, over the coffee. "You promise me, it's just to look? No monkey business?"

"None. Nothing," said Sean, fervently. Carl drank his hot coffee without looking, burnt his tongue and swore.

"I ought to know better, damn it. Always, you talk me into these things. But I warn you—you pull something—"

"You can trust me," said Sean. But his eyes glittered in his thin, dark face, Carl thought, like sunlight reflected from the ice on the river.

It was two days later that Carl took Sean up to see George Larsen. Carl led Sean down a wide pleasant corridor on the second story of the rest home, which was one of the old river-road mansions rebuilt and redecorated, and into a large room which combined the elements of bedroom and living room.

The room was wide enough to dwarf the bed, which was hospital style but covered with a cheerfully ruffled yellow bedspread. None of the rest of the room's furnishings hinted at anything else than a room in an ordinary home. The four wide windows in the outer wall opposite the entrance gave a view of a clear and empty sky, turning now to the dark blue of evening, for it was after four and the early winter day was withdrawing its sunlight. Inside the room, a ceiling light behind a glass shade was alight. It, and a tall desk lamp, shed a warm yellow illumination over the red-carpeted floor, a couple of easy chairs, and another, straight, chair at a writing desk by the windows. Outside the windows, a sentinel row of icicles hung long and heavy from the wide eaves, as if they had been there undisturbed for many years.

A short man with a rather large head, greying hair, and a prematurely wrinkled face, had been writing at the desk as they came in. But he put down his pen, got

up and came toward them politely.

"George," said Carl, "this is an old friend of mine—Sean Tyrone. He wanted to meet you. Sean, this is George Larsen."

"A pleasure to meet you." George Larsen nodded his big head, but made no move to take the hand Sean held out to him. "Sit down, Tyrone. You, too, Lehman."

The simple pomposity of the disturbed man touched Carl. It was his one failing in his work, he considered, that he felt too deeply for those he worked with. He glanced sharply at Sean, for this was the sort of weakness Sean was quick to spot and quicker yet to gibe at. But Sean was anything but laughing. He had taken one of the easy chairs, as George Larsen had taken the other, and was losing no time about charming the little man. A stream of cheerful chatter was already bubbling out of him. Not only that, but Larsen was thawing under it. Carl had a sudden twinge of emotion, that he recognized with a start of surprise as something close to jealousy.

He remembered how he had worked to reach through to the disturbed Larsen the first few weeks. The man had been antagonistic, withdrawn, huddling over his delusion like a child with a cherished plaything. The interviews Carl had had with him had

been filled with awkward, suspicious silences. And now Sean, capitalizing on the breach Carl had already made in Larsen's defenses, was pouring himself into Larsen's confidence like a thoughtless river through a broken dam. Blast him, thought Carl, looking at Sean's dark Gaelic face, animated now by the talk, and he's so damn capable. If he'd only put his talent to real ends, instead of into these wild fantasies . . .

His anger shook Carl to the point where he got up to hide it, and stepped across to the windows, leaving the other two talking. Behind him, he could hear Sean leading Larsen on to speak as Napoleon. Carl looked down at the broad, snow-clad lawn below, spread out under the towering pines of the grounds. It would be spring in a few weeks, he thought, and then suddenly everything would be breaking out at once; earth-patches showing raw through the melting snow, water running loudly in the gutters, under a fresh, clean sky flecked with puffy clouds—and at night a damp, wet wind from the south, stirring the soul of a man even as it stirred the buried seeds in the ground with the call of new life.

With spring, and its call to the blood, Sean might drop this crazy interest of his. He ought to be married, thought Carl, thinking of his own wife and two children, but he—

—an abrupt cessation of voices behind him, a sudden silence, rang abruptly and frighteningly on Carl's ears. He spun around.

Sean was standing, tall over Larsen. And Larsen himself, still seated, was lifting uncertain hands to his oversize skull on which gleamed, in the deceptively gentle glow of the yellow room-light, the 'psychic lever' Sean had shown Carl at the lunch table, two days before.

Carl moved without thinking. He did not stop to ask himself from what pocket Sean had produced the thing, out of his slacks or the thick tweed sports jacket he was wearing. Half-blind with rage, he took three swift strides across the carpet, and snatched the device from Larsen's head, just as the little man's fingers were closing upon it.

Larsen made an odd noise somewhere between a grunt and a cry, and staggered to his feet. His hands dropped down and Carl had one quick glimpse of his blank and thunder-smitten eyes, and of a thin line of dark red beads springing suddenly up on one forefinger that had been hooked into the device when Carl had torn it away. Then Carl had swung about and was herding Sean out of the room with the whole wide, heavy-boned weight of his body.

"We'll see you later, George," said Carl, with trained calmness; and then he and Sean were out

through the door, and Carl swung it shut behind him.

Carl flapped his hand back down the way they had come, and they went off side by side, not talking, back along the corridor and down the stairs to the entrance hall, where Sean's coat hung with others on a long rack shoved back against the white-painted wall of the entrance alcove.

Sean put on his storm coat and hat without saying anything; but when he turned about, there was a strange dark gleam of triumph in his eyes, and at the sight of it Carl felt the anger leak out of him in helplessness. He shoved the device, bent now, into Sean's hands, and jerked his hand at the door.

"Go on," he said, putting his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders as if against the cold.

Sean watched a second, smiling, then turned about and opened the heavy front door onto the dying day and the throat-crisping chill. He stepped out, putting the psychic lever into his pocket, and pulled the door shut, heavily, behind him.

For the week following (and this Carl found out later) Sean went on a bat. He had no cases coming up in court in that time, and for all the other things that he needed to do, he set aside the morning of the day after he had

met Larsen and called up everyone who needed to be called; and charmed them into putting their business off for the present. Then, for the rest of the week he ran—not doing any one thing to excess, never completely drunk, never completely sober, never completely mad, never quite sane, but adding so many things together that they totalled to excess. He would come rolling into a bar, lean, well-pressed and shaven, his eyes glinting, and half-insult, half-joke the drinkers about him into laughter. Then, when they were warming to the party, he would finish his drink and break away—alone, always alone. And out the door into the gripping cold, into his green-and-white Jaguar, with the top buttoned tight against the wind, and with the motor snarling fling himself over the looping highways to the next restaurant, bar, or small-town beer joint, where the whole performance would be repeated again. He ranged east into Wisconsin, glanced off Milwaukee, cut back north through Superior and Duluth, up the North Shore of Lake Superior into Canada, back down across through International Falls to the hard-drinking mining towns of the Mesabi Range, west to Fargo, back south to Brainerd and the Gull Lake resort area, and then, as if by instinct in one drumming night run, home, with the Jaguar wide open most of the way and scream-

ing on the banked curves in the moonlight.

He fell into bed and slept for twelve hours.

When he woke, he felt drained and exhausted, but calm. Cheerfully, he got up and went back to the usual routine of his life. For a number of weeks following he was a perfectly normal, conscientious bachelor lawyer. He got rid of one girl friend and acquired another, and he traded the Jag in on a Mercedes-Benz.

Meanwhile, with the suddenness of the north, winter broke suddenly into spring. The temperatures jumped. The ice vanished from streets and river and the sky went high and blue with only a few egg-white fluffs of clouds riding in it under the newly hot sun. Buds swelled on the pussy-willows and the elm trees, and, suddenly, one lunch time, Sean stepped into a phone booth in a bar and called up Carl at the Home. At the other end, Carl picked up the phone on his desk and started at the unexpected sound of Sean's voice coming out of the receiver.

"Hi there, old buddy," it said. "Remember me? How about lunch?"

"Damn you," said Carl, deliberately. He took the phone away from his ear to put it back in its cradle, hesitated, and placed it back against his ear once more. At the

other end, he heard Sean laugh.

"—carrying a grudge."

"I'm not carrying a grudge," said Carl. But in the same moment he felt it again—his own weakness where the other man was concerned, his own inability to resent Sean's outrageousness. It's because I can't help admiring him, he said to himself—in spite of it. He became conscious Sean was still talking. To continue to make a fuss about something that happened that long ago would be ridiculous.

"—how about it, then?" Sean was saying, cheerfully.

"You pay for the lunch!" growled Carl.

"My pleasure," said Sean, and hung up.

They got together for lunch at a new place Sean had discovered. The steaks were excellent; and Sean was at his most entertaining. It was not until Sean had asked the question and Carl had already begun to answer it that he recognized that the whole lunch invitation had been leading up to this very moment.

"He's—what do you want to know for?" snapped Carl.

"Why, I'm interested!" said Sean, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "Any reason why I shouldn't be?"

"I suppose not," muttered Carl. "Well," he answered grudgingly, "As a matter of fact, he's better. We're discharging him."

"Better?" Sean had leaned forward. His green eyes were alight.

"As a matter of fact, he is. I want some more coffee," said Carl, pretending to look around for the waitress and stretching out his little revenge of withholding information Sean wanted. Instantly he recognized what he was doing and was ashamed of it. He turned back and said hastily, generously, "No, no—he really is very much better. He's lost his delusion—"

"You mean that he was Napoleon?"

"Of course that's what I mean. He seemed rather confused for a while after—after that damfool trick of yours," Carl remembered to growl. "But bit by bit he seemed to come to a better recognition of his surroundings. He was almost eager to be set straight on things. Except—" Carl frowned—"that he's no longer interested in pharmacy. Doesn't want to discuss it, and in fact he doesn't even seem to remember much about it. But—"

"I want to see him," said Sean.

"Oh no you don't!" Carl jerked upright in his chair and glared across the table.

"Be reasonable." Sean laid one hand palm-up on the white tablecloth. "What kind of harm can I do him? Besides, from what you said, maybe what I did before was part of what helped him back to himself. I didn't do him anything but good last time, did I?"

"I'm not so sure about that—"

"Come on, Carl! Just to say a few words to him. I won't bring any psychic levers. You can search me beforehand."

Carl shook his head, angrily gulped the coffee that remained in his cup, and all the time knew he was fighting a losing battle. By the time lunch was over, it had been arranged for him to take Sean up to see George Larsen the next day at noon.

George, when Carl led Sean into his room at the home, was very little different in appearance from the man Carl had introduced Sean to in February. Against his own will, Carl found himself studying the changes in hopes of seeing something new, now that the catalytic person of Sean was once more in the room with the man. But there was little to see that he had not already noted.

Primarily, Larsen was more natural now, in appearance. Less stagy. He no longer posed with hand inside his coat or shirt, seemed in other ways to be more sure of himself. Certainly he was more active. He was almost continually in movement, pacing the room, darting quick glances out of his black eyes—unusually keen glances, too, as Carl had discovered many times—at his visitor. He said he remembered Sean, shook hands politely, and thanked him a little dryly for whatever share he had had in a patient's recovery.

"—Though I don't remember much about it," said Larsen. "That device you put on my head—like a crown, was it not?"

"More like a coronet," said Sean smiling—and for a second, out of his long knowledge of Sean, Carl received the sudden feeling that the answer held more to it than appeared on the surface.

"No—I remember," said Larsen. "The top was closed in—like a crown. I remember well. Several times, for my amusement, I've tried to reconstruct the shape of it; but my memory fails me. It would be necessary to see it again. Perhaps, if you described it—?"

Carl opened his mouth. But Sean spoke smoothly.

"Let's see . . . No, I'm afraid I can't remember exactly, myself," he said, and shook his head regretfully. "I tossed it out after that. It was just a toy, you know."

"Oh, but of course! A toy," said Larsen.

"Let's see . . ." Sean frowned. "I guess I've got an old diagram lying around someplace. If I run across it, I could mail it to you. What's your address, here?"

"No, not here," said Larsen, quickly. "I'll be leaving shortly. And then—a small room, someplace. Probably in the University district. A brother of mine has arranged permission for me to use the University library. I'll send you the address, as soon as I'm moved in."

He and Sean looked at each other, and once again Carl had the feeling that more had been meant than was said. This time, some sort of agreement had been reached, he thought. Carl felt the hairs on the back of his neck stir uncomfortably.

"Well, we just dropped by—" he said abruptly; and the moment the words were out of his mouth, he realized how they must sound; and he expected them both to turn on him in surprise at his attempt to end a conversation that had hardly begun. But, to his own surprise and some alarm, neither of them seemed put out at all. It was as if they had said what they wanted to say and were ready enough to part.

"So—that's that," the same jealous feeling impelled Carl to say as they walked away from Larsen's room together, he and Sean.

Sean looked at him and smiled. As he and Carl separated at the front door of the Home, he spoke about something else.

"How about going fishing next month on the weekend the season opens?" he said. "We could sit around in the boat and do a bit of talking. Cabbages and kings—new gods for old. That sort of thing."

"I'm sorry," said Carl, brusquely. "I've got too much to do these days."

Afterwards, he wondered at

himself. He had always liked fishing, and he was not that busy. But something inside him seemed to have taken a moral stand against Sean. Prosaically and doggedly, the way he did such things, he put the matter out of his mind and went back to his work.

Meanwhile, George Larsen had left the Home. He was living in a single room in a college rooming house. His paper-box manufacturing brother was not pleased at having to support a man who—if he had not, for some foolish reason he would not explain, refused to go back to the work he had done for years—could otherwise have been supporting himself quite well as a pharmacist. George, Carl learned from the brother, who called him up once or twice for advice on handling the ex-patient, spent most of his time reading up on religions. Particularly Buddhism.

"—He's become a sort of religious nut," the brother complained. Carl made soothing remarks.

"Possibly it's only transitory," Carl said.

"Well, he better transitory out of it in a damn hurry, is all I've got to say!"

Around the beginning of April, George himself began calling Carl. George was trying to locate Sean, and he had been having difficulty. It seemed Sean was never at home or in his office; and Sean had never sent George the promised dia-

gram for the psychic lever. When Carl answered that he had as little chance of locating Sean for George as any one of the city's other half-million citizens, George's manner showed a change it had never exhibited at the Home. His voice became cold and cutting with exasperation, and he came perilously close to ordering Carl to produce Sean forthwith. Then he seemed to recollect himself, apologized, and hung up.

On impulse, Carl called up Sean's office and left a message that he'd like to go fishing on the season opener, after all.

He hardly expected Sean to fulfill his original invitation, but two weeks later, he found himself with his friend on one of the upstate lakes, pipe between his teeth and his minnow-baited hook twelve feet down under the boat, waiting for hungry walleye pike.

"George Larsen called me a couple of times," he told Sean, when the conversation gave him a chance to slip the information in. "Wants to get hold of you."

Sean's fingers, busy packing a pipe of his own, stilled suddenly.

"Oh, yes," he said. And his fingers went back to work. "I did forget to send him that diagram, didn't I?" He packed the pipe tightly, put his pouch away. "Got a match?"

Watching him, Carl handed over a wooden match. Sean lit up. He did not seem inclined to talk

about George. But, after a few minutes, he pulled up his line to check if the minnow had been eaten off it by some soft-mouthed fish, and dropped it overboard again.

"You know . . ." he began; and stopped.

"What?" asked Carl. —And then, suddenly, he had eyes only for the float attached to his line, which had just twitched half-under the surface.

"I wonder how far a man is supposed to go . . . ?" he heard Sean say.

Carl looked up sharply from his float, expecting to find the mocking light of some new joke in Sean's eyes. To his surprise, Sean's face was cold serious, and heavy with a weariness that unexpectedly made him look older, as some heavy burden might prematurely age a man.

"'How far—?' How far with what?" asked Carl, staring.

"How far, I mean, with fiddling with the gears of life," said Sean with a seriousness that was not at all like him. Carl gave him a long, hard look.

"I don't understand you, Sean," he said.

"I mean—how far should anyone go? Or let another man go? Suppose," said Sean, "you knew you could give me the means to change me into a devil—the real Devil, I mean, Satan, himself. Would you do it?"

Carl grunted sourly.

"You're bad enough the way you are," he said.

Sean laughed suddenly—and as suddenly was sober again.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "No, I don't suppose you, being the sort you are, would have any trouble making a decision like that. But there's something in me that can't help it. I've always had to risk things . . . two feet more beyond the fence . . . ten miles more over the speed limit And now—"

"Whoops—hey! I've got one!" shouted Carl, suddenly. His float had shot under, the tip of his rod was arced toward the water and the razor edge of his line was cutting the water to froth as the fish below rushed and spun. His reel whined as line went out. "That's no walleye—that's a northern—" The line sang off his reel and the fish broke water, tail-walking, thirty feet from the boat. "Look at him! Look at the size of him!"

"Fifteen pounds, anyway!" Sean was leaning over the side of the boat, himself, frantically reeling in his own line, his eyes shining. "Don't lose him. Hang on! Hang on if he kills you!"

Carl hung on. Twelve minutes later the big northern pike was gaffed and brought inboard where he lay gasping until Sean killed him with a single blow from the metal handle of the gaff.

"—Now," said Carl, taking off his khaki cap and wiping the sweat

from above his eyes. "Now, what was that you were saying?"

"Nothing," said Sean. He laughed without warning. "Nothing. I guess I was just asking a question; and first thing I knew I'd answered myself." He leaned back to start the motor on the boat. "Let's head in. We aren't going to top that northern of yours the rest of this afternoon—and I want a drink."

The next day they returned to the city. Sean was reckless as ever—but Carl sensed something different about his recklessness this time. As if Sean was not so much defying accident and death in his usual manner, as courting it under the guise of playing with it. The notion struck Carl so strongly that a couple of days after he got back he phoned Sean, and was told by Sean's secretary that Sean was busy with personal business and could not be reached.

Still disturbed, Carl tried to get in touch with George Larsen; but Larsen's landlady informed him that the former pharmacist spent his days at the university library, and it was not likely that he would be home until five that evening.

Carl hung up and tried to put the matter out of his mind the rest of that day. But around four in the afternoon, Sean called.

"Hi!" said Sean's voice, cheerfully enough over the phone. "Just about through for the day?"

"Pretty close. Why?" asked Carl.

"Like you to take a short drive with me."

"Where to?"

"No questions, huh?" said Sean. "I'll explain it afterward—if you still want an explanation. I'll swing around and pick you up in my car in about fifteen minutes."

"Well—" Carl looked at his desk, which still had work upon it; then made a quick decision based on the way he had been feeling all day. "All right. I'll be outside."

He was waiting in the soft spring shadows as the Mercedes-Benz pulled into the curb a handful of minutes later. He climbed in beside Sean, not without banging his knee on the dashboard. He swore.

"Why don't you get a decent car?" he growled. Sean laughed.

"Take some weight off," he said. He pulled the car away from the curb.

"I suppose I'm not supposed to ask any questions, yet?" said Carl. "I hope this doesn't mean I eat dinner at ten o'clock tonight."

"You'll eat on time," said Sean. "As for questions—well, wait and see. Oh, by the way—" His voice became casual. "I've been doing a little legal work for myself for a change. Making out a will. I didn't realize how much property I'd accumulated. Got you down for chief legatee and trustee of the balance."

"I don't need your blasted money," said Carl, stiffly.

"Then you can put it into good works. I've stipulated one in my will—the kind of odd research I've always done."

"I wouldn't make a fool of myself doing that sort—"

"You don't have to. Just back anybody else who will." Sean broke off suddenly. "Ah, this looks like the neighborhood. It must be right around here."

"What?" said Carl, and then realized that they had driven down into the University district. Apartments, and old houses divided up to hold roomers, were thick about them. "You aren't hunting George Larsen, are you?"

"That's right," said Sean, absently, peering out the car window. "—There's the address." He pulled the Mercedes to a stop before a tall, brown, shingle-sided dwelling about fifty years old. "Come on."

He was out of the car himself, and halfway up the walk to the front steps of the building before Carl could emerge from his surprise and follow. They came up to the front door together. Sean opened it and led the way into a narrow hall, from which a varnished wooden stairway with a heavy polished balustrade rose to a bay window of stained glass, changed direction there sharply for another flight, and disappeared out of sight overhead.

Sean knocked at a brown door close at hand in the hallway. It

opened and a pleasant-looking, aproned woman in her fifties looked out at them.

"Yes? I'm the landlady."

"George Larsen's room?" Sean said, smiling. "I'm Mr. Sean Tyrone. He may have—"

"Oh yes, Mr. Tyrone!" She smiled back. "He said, if ever you came, to go right up. Third floor, room nine. Just go right in, the door isn't locked."

"Thanks," said Sean, and led the way up the steep stairs where the air smelled faintly of forgotten meals. Carl followed.

Four flights, and two floors, up, they came on the door—like all the other sad brown doors in this place, but with the metal numeral 9 affixed to it. Sean turned the knob and they went in.

The room had a military cleanliness and simplicity. A bed, a nightstand, a chest of drawers—a tall bookcase jammed with books, a flag of France on the wall, and a U.S. war surplus Marine saber in its faded canvas-and-metal sheath, hung on nails on the wall. Suddenly remembering what George Larsen's brother had said over the phone, Carl went to the bookcase. The brother had been quite right. There were no books in the bookcase that did not deal with the great religions in one way or another. And most were concerned with Buddhism, and the life of Buddha.

Everything in the room was

strictly, almost rigidly, in place.

"No point in staying, come to think of it," said Sean. "I only dropped by to leave him something, anyway."

"Well, as long as we're here, I'd like to see the man—"

"No. No, I've got to get going. Come on, Carl—I'll explain as we go." Sean took two rapid steps to the door and held it open. Carl hesitated, sadly puzzled, but with the presentiment that had been with him all day heavy upon him. He turned to leave the room—but, as he crossed it, he noticed a small package, about the size of a shoe box, sitting on the desk. It had not been there before.

"Is that—" he began, pointing at it. But Sean interrupted him hastily, pulling him out and closing the door behind him.

"Yes. Never mind it now. It's just—" Sean, at the landing of the stairs leading down, checked so sharply that Carl ran into him from behind.

"What is it?" Carl's voice rang loud in the still hall.

"Shh—" Sean held up one hand for silence. Carl listened. In the absence of the sounds they had been making, he could hear the front door two flights below close sharply. Another door opened.

"—Oh, Mr. Larsen— That Mr. Tyrone you told me about's upstairs. He and another man—" It was the landlady's voice.

"Thank you." It was Larsen.

"Shh—this way!" Carl felt Sean's fingers digging into his shoulder with unnatural force, turning him. "Up the stairs, around the corner. Shh . . ."

Numbly, wondering, Carl obeyed. He felt caught, suddenly, as if in a dream, where everything was a little too absurd to be real. They went together, softly and silently halfway up the stairs to the floor above—around the angle where one flight changed to the next. Standing there, hidden, so close together they could hear each other breathing, their ears registered the sound of light feet briskly mounting the bare steps of the stairway. The sound came up to the landing below them, stopped, and there was a further sound of a doorknob being turned.

The door below them was flung open. A noise, too choked-off to be a cry, too emotion-laden to be merely an exclamation, reached their ears. There was the sound of two more rapid steps and then the noise of ripped paper and cardboard.

"Now!" hissed Sean. He went down the steps quietly but two at a time, with great speed. Carl, taken by surprise, stared after him for a second, and then leaped to follow. He caught up with Sean just before Sean reached the still-open doorway of the room. For the first time, Carl understood.

"Sean!" he shouted, grabbing one well-tailored arm. "Don't be a damn fool! Don't risk—"

Sean spun about suddenly in mid-stride; and his arm shot out in a shove with an astonishing strength behind it. Caught off balance, Carl was flung back, tripped and fell. Sprawling ingloriously, for the first time it came home to him, in great bitterness, what he himself truly was, and always had been, and never admitted to himself. The cautiousness in him, the cowardice that had kept him from taking the sort of chances Sean had always taken. In that one split second, he drained the bitter cup of self-knowledge to the dregs. And saw Sean, head up, turn from him and pass into the room.

For the space of one heartbeat, then, there was silence; and then from the room there erupted a cry almost unhuman in its mixture of pain and ecstasy. A strange and mingled cry that should have been made by one voice, but sounded almost like two voices matched together. Scrambling to his feet, Carl launched himself at the open doorway.

He turned the corner into the room's interior, and checked, as if he had run up against the brink of a pit, whose further depths were too far down for the eye to plumb. Across the room, with Sean's 'psychic lever' upon his head, George Larsen lay curled on the floor. His face was wiped clean of human expression. His eyes were closed. Only, for a second—and either it was not there, or it faded

so fast Carl could not afterwards be sure he had seen it—the shadow of another visage seemed momentarily imposed upon it. A visage whose eyes were slightly slanted, whose features were rounded, smoothed and cast into an expression of terrible serenity.

—Then, it was only the face of George Larsen, relaxed to utter emptiness. As his body, too, lay breathing but empty in foetal position upon the floor.

But it was not alone in the room, the shape that had been

George Larsen. The also breathing and mindless body of Sean Tyrone rested in frozen adoration before the empty vessel of flesh that lay curled before the desk. Sean's face stared straight ahead, with a look of raptness and wonder fixed movelessly upon it. Sean's arms were half-outstretched, his palms open and up as if in a gesture of offering. And he was down upon his knees—in kneeling position.

—As fits a man who, living, has gazed upon the face of a god, alive.



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