

fiction **By RON GOULART** RACCOONS, OF something like raccoons, skittering on the skylight woke him and he reached out for Melissa, but she wasn't there. Perry Enkert reached again, rubbed his eyes and swung out of the low, wide bed. He went barefoot over the rug and reached for the light switch. The lights went on before he got there. "Knock it off," he said and grabbed the wardrobe closet open. Melissa's guitar and amplifier weren't there. Perry yanked on a pair of chino pants and an old turtleneck and ran from the third-floor bedroom.

Going down the carved wooden stairs, he bumped against the inset shelves and knocked off a shoe box full of glass balls. The balls hopped and rolled ahead of him. "Melissa," he called. "I thought you weren't angry."

The first-floor music-room door was open and Perry glanced in. The turntable of the hi-fi system was still spinning, but Melissa was not in the room. The floor was scattered with albums and tapes. The turntable slapped a new record on and a Viennese waltz, rich with violins, filled the room. "No kidding around," Perry said to the phonograph, and it stopped playing. "Don't do anything more. I'm handling this."

While he was finding a flashlight in the hall closet, one of his late uncle's black cloaks fell off its hook. He let it lie and hurried outside. "Melissa," he called again. A gentle wind was sweeping across the grounds of the estate and leaves were spinning off the trees. Willow leaves, probably, if they weren't oak.

Perry searched his way around the three-story Victorian house, then headed for the sway-back greenhouse

at the rear of the estate. There were high trees, oaks and redwoods, probably, thick around the glass-and-metal greenhouse. To his left, all the lights in the trees went on. "Damn it," said Perry, waving his illuminated hand. "I've got a flashlight." The lights flicked off.

Then the greenhouse blossomed with light and he saw Melissa Dankworth sitting inside on one of the old white tables. Her hands were resting on her knees and her guitar and amplifier were packed and on the table beside her. She had a tall thin glass balanced on her left knee. She was wearing Levis and a chambray shirt.

"Melissa," Perry said, stepping into the greenhouse. "I thought you weren't mad."

"Look at this," the girl said. She was tall, with a smooth tan and long gentle blonde hair. Her breasts had an upright, angry look under the blue chambray of her shirt. "This is supposed to be *pousse-café*, but everything sank to the bottom." She held the glass of murky liqueurs up to him. "The problem is, the kitchen isn't laid out right, or the liquor cabinets. What did your uncle do if he wanted to mix a drink?"

"Built a machine to do it, I guess," said Perry. "I only inherited, took over, this place a couple months ago, Melissa. Why'd you get out of bed?"

The girl said, "You don't have any shoes on."

"I dressed in haste."

"Your uncle," said Melissa. "And this dumb house of his, with a name of its own. Lofthouse, for Christ's sake. Why name a place Lofthouse?"

"You want it named Joel or Buddy?" Perry turned off his flashlight.

"I haven't seen either (continued on page 217)

A MAN'S HOME IS HIS CASTLE... until it starts making a play for his girl



A MAN'S HOME IS HIS CASTLE

(continued from page 119)

of them since 1971," said Melissa. She sipped from the glass. "Boy, this tastes dreadful."

"You're just looking for an argument."

"No, I'm not. I never argue anyplace but with you, anyway. This is an odd house, Perry. You know. I don't have to list the odd stuff that's happened to me here. Who wouldn't argue?"

Perry looked away from her. The greenhouse was full of bins of wild petunias. "Well," he said.

"When Joel had his group and I toured with them and we went to all the junior colleges and played and told kids about what a great beat Gregorian chants had, then I never got into any arguments. Nor when I was with Buddy's electrified polka band."

Perry paused to listen to something outside. "What's that whinnying?"

"What do you think?"

"That's a horse," said Perry. "That's what it is. That's a horse whinnying in back of the greenhouse."

Melissa said, "I'm going horseback riding."

"At three in the morning?"

"See, now you want to argue."

"No, not me. You're free to do what you want. You're uniquely autonomous, which is why I love you. Where'd you get the horse?"

"That fellow who runs the fire department here in town in his spare time lent me the horse. He just brought it over and left it a few minutes ago."

"I thought you didn't like him."

"I can change my mind about what I like. Maybe someday I'll even like your Lofthouse," said Melissa. "Anyway, I'm not having any affair with this fireman. He just wanted to lend me a horse."

Perry said, "I understand. Out here in the country, it's not like San Francisco and people are much friendlier. Nobody would lend you a horse in San Francisco."

"I'm going riding now," said the girl. She emptied her glass and jumped from the white table. "When I get mounted, you can help me by handing up my amp and my guitar."

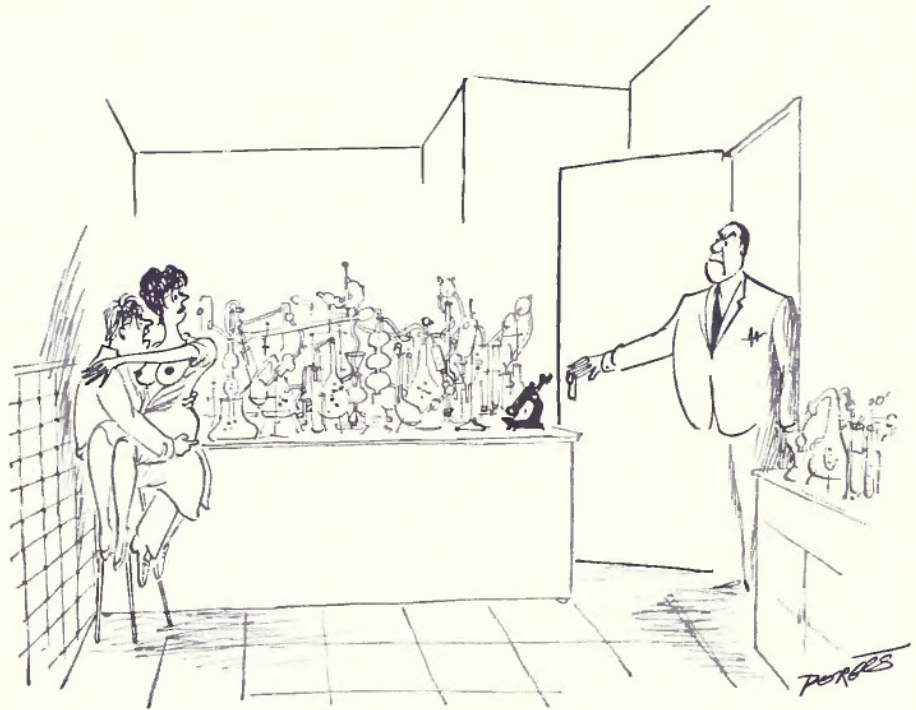
"Taking them with you?"

"I may be gone a day or so," said Melissa. "It has nothing to do with you, Perry. I'm just basically restless." She turned and walked the length of the greenhouse and out.

After Melissa had ridden off, Perry wandered back to Lofthouse. The front door opened before he got his hand on the knob, but he didn't say anything. Up in the bedroom, he stretched out on his back, his clothes on. On the glass above him, the raccoons were still skittering and pecking in. Or maybe they were chipmunks.

. . .

Two days later, when the mailman's



"I suppose this will cancel our research grant!"

copter landed on the front acre of the estate. Perry was in the second-floor shower stall, talking to Lofthouse. The mailman blew the trick horn he had mounted on his ship and the sound of spinning propellers stopped. "Maybe there's a letter from Melissa," Perry said. "I'll get back to you." He buttoned his blazer and stepped out onto the blue-mosaic floor of the bathroom.

"I'm not trying to intrude," said Lofthouse, "but you're doing the whole business wrong. It's no wonder Melissa keeps running off."

Perry hunched one shoulder and turned again toward the shower stall. "She was running away from me before I even inherited this place and moved in. What I'm trying to do now doesn't involve her habit patterns." He slid back the rippled vinyl door of the stall.

"You don't have to call me 'this place,'" said the small speaker grid set in between the hot and cold toggles. "We've known each other almost two months and I've sure done enough to help you. That's my trouble, always doing things for people and getting left out. Never invited to parties, nobody sends me keepsakes on important holidays."

"People don't invite houses over to parties."

"I'm a mansion. Eight bedrooms. Garage space for a dozen cars. Near to transportation."

"Don't try to sell me," said Perry. "I already own you. Now I have to go catch the mailman."

"I'll be right here whenever you have the time," said Lofthouse.

"This is your idea," said Perry. "There are speaker grids in twenty other rooms, but you insist on talking here in the john this week."

"It adds to the sense of conspiracy," said the house. "I can see you don't like it. Old Lofthouse can't pick the right place for anything. Always there when you need him, but never gets a thank you or a how-de-do."

The mail horn played its patriotic medley again and Perry ran across the long bathroom. "I suppose I should thank you for turning Melissa to stone last week."

"You don't even understand magic, anyway," said Lofthouse. "Or cybernetics. That's one of your problems."

"How-de-do," Perry said and dived into the hallway.

On the vast thick lawn, Floyd Dell, the postman, was standing with one cowboy-booted foot against the right front tire of his copter. Behind him, the sycamores and birches and probably pines, though Perry wasn't quite sure of the pictures in the paperback tree guide he'd bought, bobbed gently in the warm summer wind.

"Your late uncle sure knew a lot of wackies," said Dell, tapping a handful of airmail letters against his low-hanging stomach. "Lot of webfoots and schrabs. I always thought he was a brilliant man, not because of his Ph.D. or his degrees in science but because he had hunches that got him in trouble with the setup." Dell fluttered the mail. "He's been dead and gone near six months and they still write him from the remote spots of the

Satin Sheets and Pillowcases



Chosen exclusively by the Conrad Hilton Hotel for their Imperial and Bridal Suites! Washable acetate satin in Gold, Black, Mint, Lilac, Orchid, Pink, White, Blue or Red!

SHEET SETS (2 straight sheets, 2 cases)	
dbl. Set (90x108)	\$15.90
Twin Set (72x108)	15.90
Queen Set (90x122½)	19.45
King Set (108x122½)	21.45
3 ltr. monogram on cases	1.50

For fitted bottom sheet, add \$2.25 to double or twin price; \$3.00 to queen price; \$4.00 to king price. Send check or m.o. 50% deposit on C.O.D.'s.

SCINTILLA INC. 4802 N. Broadway PL-8
Chicago, Illinois 60640
"Satin Originals for 20 Years."

CARRY IT...

ONE DROP FRESHENS YOUR BREATH INSTANTLY!



Binaca®
CONCENTRATED GOLDEN BREATH DROPS



NEW FROM CHAP STICK®

New Chap Stick® Lip Salve. Soothing, cooling relief for cold sores and fever blisters.

© 1968, Miller-Morton Company, a subsidiary of A. H. ROBBINS COMPANY



COMPLETE LIGHT SHOW

In the dark, The i Machine travels with you beyond plain walls into a bursting rainbow of blending color patterns that never repeat. With twinkle-strobe effect, 200 sq. ft. of wall and ceiling dissolve into a panorama of revolving abstract color shapes that bring music to your eyes and color to your music. Complete with 5 replaceable bulbs.

Revolving Multi-Color Lamp

\$10⁹⁵ PLUS \$1.00 HANDLING

The i Company • Dept. 11
Box 5005 • Pittsburgh, Pa. 15206

world. Every goof scientist and computer lover and machine freakie. I bet you didn't run into people like this when you still worked over in San Francisco, before you inherited your uncle's joint here and could afford to quit."

"Oh," said Perry, "we had computers at Synthetic Groceries."

"Message here from your girlfriend, too," Dell mentioned and handed him the mail.

The postcard from Melissa was on top of the pile. On its face was a color photo of the city-hall plaza in Oakland, California. The message, in Melissa's left-leaning printing, read, "Been sitting in with Flax. Guitar on the friz but borrowed an electric banjo. Love you, of course. Back home Tuesday. Melissa. Or Wednesday at the latest."

"Miss Dankworth is off pursuing her musical career again, I see," said the postman. "A lovely girl. You ought to marry her and settle down. How old are you, anyway? Thirty?"

"Only twenty-eight," Perry told him. Oakland was only two hours away from the town of Windfield, where the estate was. "Maybe I could drive over and look for her."

"Leave her be," said Dell. "Too much running around going on these days, anyway. Here it is 1973 and nobody remembers the lessons of our ancestors. Take your damn time, I say. Look at me; I'm no speed demon. All these geeks live around here in Windfield on their estates. They're always on the rush. Come summertime and everybody goes off to Europe. Me, I take eight or nine hours every day just to deliver the mail. Would our ancestors have built a house like this one of your uncle's?" Dell waved at the three-story Victorian. "All full of gadgetry and gimmickry. Not that he wasn't a brilliant man, though some said he went beyond the borders of science into the realm of sorcery. Always offered me a cold beer on a hot day."

Perry kept looking at the enormous white mansion. "Funny, huh," he murmured.

"You mean because the house has moved over to the right some hundred feet?" asked Dell, catching the thought.

"Yes," said Perry. "It's on top of the rock garden now. I didn't know Lofthouse did that. No mention of it in the instructions my uncle left behind."

"Nobody, not even your late, brilliant uncle, knows everything this house can do," the postman told him. He poked two fingers at the covered-wagon decoration on his tie. "Sometimes it moves back up into the woods behind there."

"How can it do that?"

"I think your uncle put it on wheels," said Dell. He swung himself back up into the mail copter. "Give my regards to Miss Dankworth. I heard that Flax guy play once back in '71 at the San

Francisco Culture Fair. Flax and his Mechanized Mojos. Sounded like a bunch of goofs and webfoots, but they kept the beat."

"Happy landings," Perry said and returned to Lofthouse as the copter took flight.

. . .

Lofthouse decided to talk to Perry in the third-floor library the next morning. "Here it is Wednesday and she isn't back," said the computerized house.

Perry poked an orange pip out of his juice and kept watching the back grounds of the estate from the library balcony. Butterflies and silver gnats danced over the thick foliage. Or maybe they were fruit flies. Perry had to check again in his insect paperback. "I don't see why a computer needs so many speaker outlets," he said.

"Your uncle, Dr. L. J. Mawger, thought of me as much more than just a computer," said Lofthouse from the grid near the balcony coffee urn. "All that gadgetry in the basement is simply a part of me. I am the whole house and I can do anything."

"You left seeds in the orange juice."

"That's really trivial, replied Lofthouse. His thin voice had a tendency to swoop down at the end of sentences. "Think of my major achievements. I am a perfect house, rich with servomechanisms. Best of all, thanks to Dr. Mawger's pioneering brilliance, I am one of the few computer systems capable of doing magic." Lofthouse gave a swooping chuckle. "Imagine your uncle being able to work out the basic elements of sorcery and magic by taking advantage of the computer. You see, alchemists and warlocks in the past didn't have enough time to explore. When you're messing with black magic, too much trial and error can be deadly to the individual sorcerer. You send for Belphegor and get Beelzebub by mistake and you've got a nasty situation on your hands. When you're doing business with demons, you should be cautious."

"I know, you told me that six weeks ago, when you introduced yourself to me," said Perry. "Seems like a lot of trouble for, so far, small results."

Lofthouse said, "You aren't getting as much fun out of this as Dr. Mawger did. That's one of your problems."

"Yes, but you implied I could use some of this magic to win Melissa," said Perry. "All those centrifugal pumps and giant blenders down in the basement. All the thousands of punch-card philter recipes you sorted through. You couldn't even come up with a workable love potion to use on Melissa. Doesn't seem like very efficient sorcery to me."

"She never drank it. Don't blame me if she threw the wineglass at your head."

"Yes, but that's not the point," said Perry. "You're supposed to be a triumph of science and sorcery and you can't

even keep the girl I love from running off to join an electronic musicians' group; and God knows how her guitar got broken."

"Well, if you'd left her a statue, she wouldn't have run off." said Lofthouse's balcony grid. "That was a fine spell. Did I ever show you that stretch of tape? I illuminated it, like the monks and warlocks used to do. That's a quality touch, a Lofthouse touch. Your run-of-the-mill computer doesn't have the imagination for that."

"What good does Melissa do me turned into a statue on the lawn with a bow and arrow and some deer chasing her?" asked Perry. "You didn't even use first-rate marble."

"A girl such as Melissa enhances any medium," said the house. "Marble, bronze, iron have their cold, harsh value enhanced and expanded by such as Melissa. There's a fevered sensuality that flickers about her and she radiates a sharp, warm fascination. Long-legged girls are wonderful. Proud, lean and high breasted, glowing with languid fire. The very sound of a name like Melissa suggests—"

"Drop that," said Perry. "Where'd you dredge up all that kind of talk?"

"Programed in," said Lofthouse. "Anyway, she'll be home in an hour and you can try again to get her to stay."

Perry got up out of his wicker sun chair. "How do you know that?"

"Well, I can monitor the future sometimes," admitted the house. "Though in this hot weather, the crystal balls don't always work. I never have liked the summer heat in Windfield. Come summer, everybody ought to take off for Europe."

"Crystal balls?"

"There's a bank of them linked in with my system."

"Then you can tell me if I'm eventually going to succeed."

"With what?"

"Melissa, obviously."

Lofthouse said, "No. I can't get a clear picture of that yet."

Perry bent toward the waist-high speaker grid. "Look, if she's coming back, we'll try one more spell tonight. And this stuff has got to start working, because I'm having a more and more difficult time explaining to Melissa, without actually mentioning magic, what's been happening. It's hard, for instance, to explain to someone why they turned to marble."

"Get her to sit in the black armchair in the first-floor music room after dinner," said the house.

"Why?"

"In the light fixture over it, Dr. Mawger installed over one thousand magic wands, collected from all times and climes."

"A thousand magic wands in that little light fixture?"

"We miniaturized them," explained the computerized house. "I'll start the incantation tapes going down there in the music room now, to prepare the atmosphere. There, by the way, is one real advantage of electronic magic. Imagine in the old days having to incant all that dull Latin, and backward. Now I just loop it and run it in reverse."

"What kind of spell are you planning to use on her?"

"I'll retrieve something out of the spell banks that'll make her more affectionate and more loyal. There she is downstairs."

From below came the sound of a 12-string guitar being dropped onto a hardwood hallway floor.

• • •

Somewhere on the dark night lawn, Perry bumped into the trunk of a hemlock or, more probably, a giant sequoia. The darkness stretched up all around him. Far and away to the left glowed the small high windows of the topmost tower of a tree-surrounded yellow gingerbread mansion. Perry lowered his gaze and felt around the base of the tree with a tentative foot. He got himself onto one of the white-stone paths of his late uncle's estate. The pebbles glowed pale blue, grating and slithering underfoot. "Melissa, are you out here?" Perry

called. The collision with the tree had apparently closed his left nostril. "Don't let the nasal voice fool you. It's me, Perry. Come on back inside, Melissa."

Something skittered in the tangle of hedges at his left. Perry moved toward it and the rosebushes. Branches rustled and rose petals showered down on his head. "Are you up in one of these damn trees, Melissa?"

All grew quiet and silence rolled round him. Perry strained to see up into the interlacing of branches and vines above him. He sighed, continued on, tripped over a sundial. "Sit down on a bench and relax. She'll be OK," said Lofthouse.

"Have you got a speaker out here, too, you nitwit?"

Lofthouse said, "Implanted right under the inscription, TIME IS THE SUREST CURE."

"Can't you bring off one spell?" asked Perry, tilting toward the small grid in the speckled marble.

"Sometimes the spells get mixed. My retrieval system is eccentric. Having to put all those cabalistic signs on tape has a side effect, I think. Which is only my opinion and I wouldn't debate with brilliant men such as your late uncle."

"You said this spell would make



"How's this for a switch? Boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy lives happily ever after."

Melissa affectionate and loyal."

"Well, cats are affectionate and loyal."

"Couldn't you have warned me about the cat business?"

"I didn't intend it," said Lofthouse from the sundial. "What's a tape bank know about affection? One kind is the same as the next to some of my dumb components."

"What kind of cat is she, anyway?"

"Look it up in your cat book."

"Never mind. I have to find her," said Perry. "Then I hope you can come up with a way to work that cat spell off her."

"American short-hair cat," said Lofthouse. "Anyway, it should wear off by itself in a few minutes. I checked back and that particular cat spell is a short-term one. Witches used to cast them just as samples."

"I still want to locate her," Perry strode across the clearing.

"To my way of thinking, which I believe is true," said Lofthouse, "you're using the wrong kind of magic on the problem."

Perry took a further step, then stopped. "Oh, so?"

"My feelings now are," said the voice of the computer, "that you ought to approach Melissa with the more outgoing kind of sorcery. You know, showers of gold coins, piles of rich furs manifested out of the air, sudden appearances of precious gems, beds of roses, flights on moonbeams. Stuff like that."

"Can you work that any better than what we're doing now?"

"My specialty," said Lofthouse, his voice swooping. "Your late uncle often approached girls, particularly long, languid blondes, that way. For himself."

"No," decided Perry. "That's too superficial. What I believe in is an inward change."

"You really," said Melissa behind him, "ought to get a repairman to look at this house, Perry. Turning me to stone and now into a calico cat. That's for certain a malfunction, if you had a warranty."

"Not calico, American short hair," Perry said to the willow blonde. "Where are your clothes?"

"Back in the music room, remember?" said Melissa. In the moonlight, her very tan skin shone a warm, dusky rose. She scratched her lowest rib, nudging her left breast with the inside of her elbow. "Was that the computer you were talking to?"

"More or less." Perry hunched out of his jacket. "Here."

"It's not cold. Why don't you ask that damn thing to repair itself? Every time I'm here for more than a few hours, we have some kind of odd accident."

"Patience," said Perry. "Every house takes getting used to."

Melissa put her palms on her buttocks and backed against a plum tree. Little yellow plums fell on them. "I do appre-

ciate your coming out to look for me. Though, in fact, I felt pleasant as a cat. Free and autonomous."

"I thought you might stray out onto the roadway and get flattened by a Mercedes or a caterer's truck," said Perry. "Sure you don't want the coat?"

Melissa hitched it off his outstretched hand, spun and spread it on the thick grass. "Can you turn off the speaker out here?"

"I guess." Perry moved from the naked Melissa to Lofthouse's grid. "Turn this off out here. Don't listen, don't look."

"I know my place," said Lofthouse in a metallic whisper.

"It's off," Perry told the girl.

"Gadgets take away your sense of privacy sometimes," said Melissa, lowering herself onto the coat. "I was telling that to Flax just Monday evening and he got up and unplugged his Fender bass."

"No music anecdotes," said Perry, as he dropped beside her.

Melissa fingered on the coffee urn and said, "I've got little prickly marks all over my backside."

Perry had just entered the downstairs kitchen with the morning mail. "Maybe it's nervous tension."

"No, it's from the grass last night," she said. "Little minute prickly marks. What kind of grass is that?"

"I'll have to look it up."

"You're not very sentimental this morning."

"I have," Perry said, showing her an envelope, "to go into San Francisco this afternoon and meet with some of my uncle's other heirs. They like to have these meetings about the assorted pieces of the estate every few weeks."

"I thought this here, Lofthouse, was the estate."

"No, I told you about the money and stocks and interests in businesses he left." Perry smiled. "That coffee urn's burning. Is there enough water in it?"

"I assumed Lofthouse added water automatically."

"Not always," said Perry.

"There are a lot of other things I have to attend to," said the house from a speaker grid over the wall stove.

"Is that him?" asked Melissa. She scratched her shoulder and her left breast fell out of her terry kimono. "He has an interesting voice. I don't guess I've heard him speak before."

"I'll talk to you later," Perry said to Lofthouse.

"You can chat in front of me," said Melissa. She retied her pale-yellow robe.

Perry told her, "This meeting with the relatives will probably mean I'll have to stay in San Francisco overnight. My aunt Arden, you recall I told you about her with the purple-tinted hair, she usually insists on a late supper after

the business meeting and my staying over there. You'll stay here?"

"Oh, sure," said the tanned girl. "I'm not in a roaming mood at the moment. You and Lofthouse talk. I'll go take my shower."

When Melissa was gone, Lofthouse said, "The more I reflect on it, the surer I am you're using the wrong approach. A girl like that, so intense and aware of the tactile nature of the world. You ought to switch to the gold-and-furs approach. Want to try?"

"Right at the moment, all I want is a cup of coffee," said Perry.

• • •

Friday, at a little after three in the afternoon, Perry returned from the overnight meeting and drove up the white-pebble driveway, across a thickly planted acre. It wasn't until he had trouble finding the garage that he realized the house was not there. Only new grass, short and bright green, stretching over the quarter of an acre Lofthouse had occupied. He got out of his Mercedes sedan and closed its door. He walked carefully around the outline of the house as he remembered it. "Melissa," he called, not loud.

The popping sound of the mail cop-ter grew overhead and Perry turned to see Floyd Dell dropping toward the front lawn. Perry walked down to meet the postman. "I don't suppose you've seen my house around the neighborhood anyplace?" he asked the emerging Dell.

"Saw your girl, Miss Dankworth, at the post office yesterday evening pretty near closing time," said Dell, rubbing an envelope across his stomach.

"I stayed overnight in San Francisco," said Perry. "Is that letter from her?"

"Special delivery," the postman said and gave him the letter. "What's she say?"

Perry didn't bother to keep it private. He read, "Just a note to let you know I got to talking to Lofthouse and I find him fascinating. Showers of gold, piles of furs, buckets of rare and precious gems. Not to mention traveling anywhere in the world." He didn't tell me about that. 'By the time you read this, I'll be in Italy someplace on an acre Lofthouse bought. We're flying over some way I don't quite understand. I don't know exactly how Lofthouse does what he does. You probably understand better. Some kind of magic, he says.'" Perry folded the letter and inserted it back in its envelope. He nodded his head once. "My girlfriend ran off with my house and they're living together in Italy."

"This time of year, everybody around here goes to Europe," said the postman. He trotted back to his cop-ter and flew away.

