

FRITZ LEIBER
OUR LADY
OF DARKNESS



Our Lady of Darkness

Fritz Leiber



But the third Sister, who is also the youngest—! Hush, whisper whilst we talk of *her*! Her kingdom is not large, or else no flesh should live; but within that kingdom all power is hers. Her head, turreted like that of Cybele, rises almost beyond the reach of sight. She droops not; and her eyes, rising so high, *might* be hidden by distance. But, being what they are, they cannot be hidden; through the treble veil of crape which she wears the fierce light of a blazing misery, that rests not for matins or for vespers, for noon of day or noon of night, for ebbing or for flowing tide, may be read from the very ground. She is the defier of God. She also is the mother of lunacies, and the suggestress of suicides. Deep lie the roots of her power; but narrow is the nation that she rules. For she can approach only those in whom a profound nature has been upheaved by central convulsions; in whom the heart trembles and the brain rocks under conspiracies of tempest from without and tempest from within. Madonna moves with uncertain steps, fast or slow, but still with tragic grace. Our Lady of Sighs creeps timidly and stealthily. But this youngest Sister moves with incalculable motions, bounding, and with tiger's leaps. She carries no key; for, though coining rarely amongst men, she storms all doors at which she is permitted to enter at all. And *her* name is *Mater Tenebrarum*—our Lady of Darkness.

Thomas De Quincy
“Levana and Our Three Ladies of Sorrow”
Suspiria de Profundis

THE SOLITARY, steep hill called Corona Heights was black as pitch and very silent, like the heart of the unknown. It looked steadily downward and northeast away at the nervous, bright lights of downtown San Francisco as if it were a great predatory beast of night surveying its territory in patient search of prey.

The waxing gibbous moon had set, and the stars at the top of the black heavens were still diamond sharp. To the west lay a low bank of fog. But to the east, beyond the city's business center and the fog-surfaced Bay, the narrow ghostly ribbon of the dawn's earliest light lay along the tops of the low hills behind Berkeley, Oakland, and Alameda, and still more distant Devil's Mountain-Mount Diablo.

On every side of Corona Heights the street and house lights of San Francisco, weakest at end of night, hemmed it in apprehensively, as if it were indeed a dangerous animal. But on the hill itself there was not a single light. An observer below would have found it almost impossible to make out its jagged spine and the weird crags crowning its top (which even the gulls avoided); and breaking out here and there from its raw, barren sides, which although sometimes touched by fog, had not known the pelting of rain for months.

Someday the hill might be bulldozed down, when greed had grown even greater than it is today and awe of primeval nature even less, but now it could still awaken panic terror.

Too savage and cantankerous for a park, it was inadequately designated as a playground. True, there were some tennis courts and limited fields of grass and low buildings and little stands of thick pine around its base; but above those it rose rough, naked, and contemptuously aloof.

And now something seemed to stir in the massed darkness there. (Hard to tell what.) Perhaps one or more of the city's wild dogs, homeless for generations, yet able to pass as tame. (In a big city, if you see a dog going about his business, menacing no one, fawning on no one, fussing at no one—in fact, behaving like a good citizen with work to do and no time for nonsense—and if that dog lacks tag or collar, then you may be sure he hasn't a neglectful owner, but is wild—and well adjusted.) Perhaps some wilder and more secret animal that had never submitted to man's rule, yet lived almost unglimped amongst him. Perhaps, conceivably, a man (or woman) so sunk in savagery or psychosis that he (or she) didn't need light. Or perhaps only the wind.

And now the eastern ribbon grew dark red, the whole sky lightened from the east toward the west, the stars were fading, and Corona Heights began to show its raw, dry, pale brown surface.

Yet the impression lingered that the hill had grown restless, having at last decided on its victim.

TWO HOURS LATER, Franz Westen looked out of his open casement window at the 1,000-foot TV tower rising bright red and white in the morning sunlight out of the snowy fog that still masked Sutro Crest and Twin Peaks three miles away and against which Corona Heights stood out, humped and pale brown. The TV tower—San Francisco’s Eiffel, you could call it—was broad-shouldered, slender-waisted, and long-legged like a beautiful and stylish woman—or demigoddess. It mediated between Franz and the universe these days, just as man is supposed to mediate between the atoms and the stars. Looking at it, admiring, almost reverencing it, was his regular morning greeting to the universe, his affirmation that they were in touch, before making coffee and settling back into bed with clipboard and pad for the day’s work of writing supernatural horror stories and especially (his bread and butter) novelizing the TV program “Weird Underground,” so that the mob of viewers could also read, if they wanted to, something like the melange of witchcraft, Watergate, and puppy love they watched on the tube. A year or so ago he would have been focusing inward on his miseries at this hour and worrying about the day’s first drink—whether he still had it or had drunk up everything last night—but that was in the past, another matter.

Faint, dismal foghorns cautioned each other in the distance. Franz’s mind darted briefly two miles behind him to where more fog would be blanketing San Francisco Bay except for the four tops thrusting from it of the first span of the bridge to Oakland. Under that frosty-looking surface there would be the ribbons of impatient, fuming cars, the talking ships, and coming from far below the water and the mucky bottom, but heard by fishermen in little boats, the eerie roar of the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) trains rocketing through the tube as they carried the main body of commuters to their jobs.

Dancing up the sea air into his room there came the gay, sweet notes of a Telemann minuet blown by Cal from her recorder two floors below. She meant them for him, he told himself, even though he was twenty years older. He looked at the oil portrait of his dead wife Daisy over the studio bed, beside a drawing of the TV tower in spidery black lines on a large oblong of fluorescent red cardboard, and felt no guilt. Three years of drunken grief—a record wake!—had worked that all away, ending almost exactly a year ago.

His gaze dropped to the studio bed, still half-unmade. On the undisturbed half, nearest the wall, there stretched out a long, colorful scatter of magazines, science-fiction paperbacks, a few hardcover detective novels still in their wrappers, a few bright napkins taken home from restaurants, and a half-dozen of those shiny little *Golden Guides* and *Knowledge Through Color* books—his recreational reading as opposed to his working materials and references arranged on the coffee table beside the bed. They’d been his chief—almost his sole—companions during the three years he’d laid sodden there stupidly goggling at the TV across the room; but always fingering them and stupefiedly studying their bright, easy pages from time to time. Only a month ago it had suddenly occurred to him that their gay casual scatter added up to a slender, carefree woman lying beside him on top of the covers—that was why

he never put them on the floor; why he contented himself with half the bed; why he unconsciously arranged them in a female form with long, long legs. They were a “scholar’s mistress,” he decided, on the analogy of “Dutch wife,” that long, slender bolster sleepers clutch to soak up sweat in tropical countries—a very secret playmate, a dashing but studious call girl, a slim, incestuous sister, eternal comrade of his writing work.

With an affectionate glance toward his oil-painted dead wife and a keen, warm thought toward Cal still sending up pirouetting notes on the air, he said softly with a conspiratorial smile to the slender cubist form occupying all the inside of the bed, “Don’t worry, dear, you’ll always be my best girl, though we’ll have to keep it a deep secret from the others,” and turned back to the window.

It was the TV tower standing way out there so modern-tail on Sutro Crest, its three long legs still deep in fog, that had first gotten him hooked on reality again after his long escape in drunken dream. At the beginning the tower had seemed unbelievably cheap and garish to him, an intrusion worse than the high rises in what had been the most romantic of cities, an obscene embodiment of the blatant world of sales and advertising—even, with its great red and white limbs against blue sky (as now, above the fog), an emblazonment of the American flag in its worst aspects: barberpole stripes; fat, flashy, regimented stars. But then it had begun to impress him against his will with its winking red lights at night—so many of them! He had counted nineteen: thirteen steadies and six winkers—and then it had subtly led his interest to the other distances in the cityscape and also in the real stars so far beyond, and on lucky nights the moon, until he had got passionately interested in all real things again, no matter what. And the process had never stopped; it still kept on. Until Saul had said to him, only the other day, “I don’t know about welcoming in every new reality. You could run into a bad customer.”

“That’s fine talk, coming from a nurse in a psychiatric ward,” Gunnar had said, while Franz had responded instantly, “Taken for granted. Concentration camps. Germs of plague.”

“I don’t mean things like those exactly,” Saul had said. “I guess I mean the sort of things some of my guys run into at the hospital.”

“But those would be hallucinations, projections, archetypes, and so on, wouldn’t they?” Franz had observed, a little wonderingly. “Parts of *inner* reality, of course.”

“Sometimes I’m not so sure,” Saul had said slowly. “Who’s going to know what’s what if a crazy says he’s just seen a ghost? Inner or outer reality? Who’s to tell then? What do you say, Gunnar, when one of your computers starts giving readouts it shouldn’t?”

“That it’s got overheated,” Gun had answered with conviction. “Remember, my computers are normal people to start out with, not weirdos and psychotics like your guys.”

“Normal—what’s that?” Saul had countered.

Franz had smiled at his two friends who occupied two apartments on the floor between his and Cal’s. Cal had smiled, too, though not so much.

Now he looked out the window again. Just outside it, the six-story drop went down past Cal’s window—a narrow shaft between this building and the next, the flat roof of which was about level with his floor. Just beyond that, framing his view to either side,

were the bone-white, rain-stained back walls—mostly windowless—of two high rises that went up and up.

It was a rather narrow slot between them, but through it he could see all of reality he needed to keep in touch. And if he wanted more he could always go up two stories to the roof, which he often did these days and nights.

From this building low on Nob Hill the sea of roofs went down and down, then up and up again, thinning with distance, to the bank of fog now masking the dark green slope of Sutro Crest and the bottom of the tripod TV tower. But in the middle distance a shape like a crouching beast, pale brown in the morning sunlight, rose from the sea of roofs. The map called it just Corona Heights. It had been teasing Franz's curiosity for several weeks. Now he focused his small seven-power Nikon binoculars on its bare earth slopes and humped spine, which stood out sharply against the white fog. He wondered why it hadn't been built up. Big cities certainly had some strange intrusions in them. This one was like a raw remnant of upthrust from the earthquake of 1906, he told himself, smiling at the unscientific fancy. Could it be called Corona Heights from the crown of irregularly clumped big rocks on its top, he asked himself, as he rotated the knurled knob a little more, and they came out momentarily sharp and clear against the fog.

A rather thin, pale brown rock detached itself from the others and waved at him. Damn the way these glasses jiggled with his heartbeat! A person who expected to see neat, steady pictures through them just hadn't used binoculars. Or could it be a floater in his vision, a microscopic speck in the eye's fluid? No, there he had it again! Just as he'd thought, it was some tall person in a long raincoat or drab robe moving about almost as if dancing. You couldn't see human figures in any detail at two miles even with sevenfold magnification; you just got a general impression of movements and attitude. They were simplified. This skinny figure on Corona Heights was moving around rather rapidly, all right, maybe dancing with arms waving high, but that was the most you could tell.

As he lowered the binoculars he smiled broadly at the thought of some hippie type greeting the morning sun with ritual prancings on a mid-city hilltop newly emerged from fog. And with chantings too, no doubt, if one could hear—unpleasant wailing ululations like the yelping siren he heard now in the distance, the sort that was frantic-making when heard too close. Someone from the Haight-Ashbury, likely, it was out that way. A stoned priest of a modern sun god dancing around an accidental high-set Stonehenge. The thing had given him a start, at first, but now he found it very amusing.

A sudden wind blew in. Should he shut the window? No, for now the air was quiet again. It had just been a freakish gust.

He set down the binoculars on his desk beside two thin old books. The topmost, bound in dirty gray, was open at its title page, which read in a utilitarian typeface and layout marking it as last century's—a grimy job by a grimy printer with no thought of artistry: *Megapolisomancy: A New Science of Cities*, by Thibaut de Castries. Now that was a funny coincidence! He wondered if a drug-crazed priest in earthen robes—or a dancing rock, for that matter!—would have been recognized by that strange old crackpot Thibaut as one of the “secret occurrences” he had predicted for big cities in the solemnly straight-faced book he'd written back in the 1890s. Franz told himself

that he must read some more in it, and in the other book, too.

But not right now, he told himself suddenly, looking back at the coffee table where there reposed, on top of a large and heavy manila envelope already stamped and addressed to his New York agent, the typed manuscript of his newest novelization—*Weird Underground #7: Towers of Treason*—all ready to go except for one final descriptive touch he'd hankered to check on and put in; he liked to give his readers their money's worth, even though this series was the flimsiest of escape reading, secondary creativity on his part at best.

But this time, he told himself, he'd send the novelization off without the final touch and declare today a holiday—he was beginning to get an idea of what he wanted to do with it. With only a flicker of guilt at the thought of cheating his readers of a trifle, he got dressed and made himself a cup of coffee to carry down to Cal's, and as afterthoughts the two thin old books under his arm (he wanted to show them to Cal) and the binoculars in his jacket pocket—just in case he was tempted to check up again on Corona Heights and its freaky rock god.

IN THE HALL, Franz passed the black knobless door of the disused broom closet and the smaller padlocked one of an old laundry chute or dumbwaiter (no one remembered which) and the big gilded one of the elevator with the strange black window beside it, and he descended the red-carpeted stairs, which between each floor went in right-angling flights of six and three and six steps around the oblong stair well beneath the dingy skylight two stories up from his floor. He didn't stop at Gun's and Saul's floor—the next, the fifth—though he glanced at both their doors, which were diagonally opposite each other near the stairs, but kept on to the fourth.

At each landing he glimpsed more of the strange black windows that couldn't be opened and a few more black doors without knobs in the empty red-carpeted halls. It was odd how old buildings had secret spaces in them that weren't really hidden but were never noticed; like this one's five airshafts, the windows to which had been painted black at some time to hide their dinginess, and the disused broom closets, which had lost their function with the passing of cheap maid service, and in the baseboard the tightly snap-capped round openings of a vacuum system which surely hadn't been used for decades. He doubted anyone in the building ever consciously saw them, except himself, newly aroused to reality by the tower and all. Today they made him think for a moment of the old times when this building had probably been a small hotel with monkey-faced bellboys and maids whom his fancy pictured as French with short skirts and naughty low laughs (dour slatterns more likely, reason commented). He knocked at 407.

It was one of those times when Cal looked like a serious schoolgirl of seventeen, lightly wrapped in dreams, and not ten years older, her actual age. Long, dark hair, blue eyes, a quiet smile. They'd been to bed together twice, but didn't kiss now—it might have seemed presumptuous on his part, she didn't quite offer to, and in any case he wasn't sure how far he wanted to commit himself. She invited him in to the breakfast she was making. Though a duplicate of his, her room looked much nicer—too good for me building—she had redecorated it completely with help from Gunnar and Saul. Only it didn't have a view. There was a music stand by the window and an electronic piano that was mostly keyboard and black box and that had earphones for silent practicing, as well as speaker.

"I came down because I heard you blowing the Telemann," Franz said.

"Perhaps I did it to summon you," Cal replied offhandedly from where she was busy with the hot plates and toaster. "There's magic in music, you know."

"You're thinking of *The Magic Flute*?" he asked. "You make a recorder sound like one."

"There's magic in all woodwinds," she assured him. "Mozart's supposed to have changed the plot of *The Magic Flute* midway so that it wouldn't be too close to that of a rival opera, *The Enchanted Bassoon*."

He laughed, then went on. "Musical notes do have at least one supernatural power. They can levitate, fly up through the air. Of course words can do that, too, but not as well."

“How do you figure that?” she asked over her shoulder.

“From cartoons and comic strips,” he told her. “Words need balloons to hold them up, but notes just come flying out of the piano or whatever.”

“They have those little black wings,” she said, “at least the eighth and shorter ones. But it’s all true. Music can fly—it’s all release—and it has the power to release other things and make them fly and swirl.”

He nodded. “I wish you’d release the notes of this piano, though, and let them swirl out when you practice harpsichord,” he said, looking at the electronic instrument, “instead of keeping them shut up inside the earphones.”

“You’d be the only one who’d like it,” she informed him.

“There’s Gun and Saul,” he said.

“Their rooms aren’t on this shaft. Besides, you’d get sick of scales and arpeggios yourself.”

“I’m not so sure,” he said, then teased, “But maybe harpsichord notes are too tinkly to make magic.”

“I hate that word,” she said, “but you’re still wrong. Tinkly (ugh!) notes can make magic too. Remember Papageno’s bells—there’s more than one kind of magic music in *The Flute*.”

They ate toast, juice, and eggs. Franz told Cal of his decision to send the manuscript of *Towers of Treason* off just as it was.

He finished, “So my readers won’t find out just what a document-shredding machine sounds like when it works—what difference does that make? I actually saw that program on the tube, but when the Satanist wizard fed in the rune, they had smoke come out—which seemed stupid.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” she said sharply. “You put too much effort into rationalizing that silly program.” Her expression changed. “Still, I don’t know. It’s partly that you always try to do your best, whatever at, that makes me think of you as a professional.” She smiled.

He felt another faint twinge of guilt but fought it down easily.

While she was pouring him more coffee, he said, “I’ve got a great idea. Let’s go to Corona Heights today. I think there’d be a great view of Downtown and the Inner Bay. We could take the Muni most of the way, and there shouldn’t be too much climbing.”

“You forget I’ve got to practice for the concert tomorrow night and couldn’t risk my hands, in any case,” she said a shade reproachfully. “But don’t let that stop you,” she added with a smile that asked his pardon. “Why not ask Gun or Saul—I think they’re off today. Gun’s great on climbing. Where is Corona Heights?”

He told her, remembering that her interest in Frisco was neither as new nor as passionate as his—he had a convert’s zeal.

“That must be close to Buena Vista Park,” she said. “Now don’t go wandering in there, please. There’ve been some murders there quite recently. Drug related. The other side of Buena Vista is right up against the Haight.”

“I don’t intend to,” he said, “though maybe you’re a little too uptight about the Haight. It’s quieted down a lot the last few years. Why, I got these two books there in one of those really fabulous secondhand stores.”

“Oh, yes, you were going to show them to me,” she said.

He handed her the one that had been open, saying, “That’s just about the most

fascinating book of pseudo-science I've ever seen—it has some genuine insights mixed with the hokum. No date, but printed about 1900, I'd judge."

" 'Megapolisomancy,' " she pronounced carefully. "Now what would that be? Telling the future from...from cities?"

"From *big* cities," he said, nodding.

"Oh, yes, the *mega*."

He went on. "Telling the future and all other sorts of things. And apparently making magic, too, from that knowledge. Though de Castries calls it a 'new science,' as if he were a second Galileo. Anyhow, this de Castries is very much concerned about the 'vast amounts' of steel and paper that are being accumulated in big cities. And coal oil (kerosene) and natural gas. And electricity, too, if you can believe it—he carefully figures out just how much electricity is in how many thousands of miles of wire, how many tons of illuminating gas in tanks, how much steel in the new skyscrapers, how much paper for government records and yellow journalism, and so on."

"My-oh-my," Cal commented. "I wonder what he'd think if he were alive today."

"His direst predictions vindicated, no doubt. He *did* speculate about the growing menace of automobiles and gasoline, but especially electric cars carrying buckets of direct electricity around in batteries. He came so close to anticipating our modern concern about pollution—he even talks of 'the vast congeries of gigantic fuming vats' of sulphuric acid needed to manufacture steel. But what he was most agitated about was the psychological or spiritual (he calls them 'paramental') effects of all that stuff accumulating in big cities, its sheer liquid and solid mass."

"A real proto-hippie," Cal put it. "What sort of man was he? Where did he live? What else did he do?"

"There's absolutely no indication in the book of any of those things," Franz told her, "and I've never turned up another reference to him. In his book he refers to New England and eastern Canada quite a bit, and New York City, but only in a general way. He also mentioned Paris (he had it in for the Eiffel Tower) and France a few times. And Egypt"

Cal nodded. "What's with the other book?"

"Something quite interesting," Franz said, passing it over. "As you can see, it's not a regular book at all but a journal of blank rice-paper pages, as thin as onionskin but more opaque, bound in ribbed silk that was tea rose, I'd say, before it faded. The entries, in violet ink with a fine-point fountain pen, I'd guess, hardly go a quarter of the way through. The rest of the pages are blank. Now when I bought these books they were tied together with an old piece of string. They looked as if they'd been joined for decades—you can still see the marks."

"Uh-huh," Cal agreed. "Since 1900 or so? A very charming diary book—I'd like to have one like it."

"Yes, isn't it? No, just since 1928. A couple of the entries are dated, and they all seem to have been made in the space of a few weeks."

"Was he a poet?" Cal asked. "I see groups of indented lines. Who was he, anyway? Old de Castries?"

"No, not de Castries, though someone who had read his book and knew him. But I do think he was a poet. In fact, I think I have identified the writer, though it's not easy to prove since he nowhere signs himself. I think he was Clark Ashton Smith."

“I’ve heard that name,” Cal said.

“Probably from me,” Franz told her. “He was another supernatural horror writer. Very rich, doomful stuff: Arabian Nights chinoiserie. A mood like Beddoes’s *Death’s Jest-Book*. He lived near San Francisco and knew the old artistic crew, he visited George Sterling at Carmel, and he could easily have been here in San Francisco in 1928 when he’d just begun to write his finest stories. I’ve given a photocopy of that journal to Jaime Donaldus Byers, who’s an authority on Smith and who lives here on Beaver Street (which is just by Corona Heights, by the way, the map shows it), and he showed it to de Camp (who thinks it’s Smith for sure) and to Roy Squires (who’s as sure it isn’t). Byers himself just can’t decide, says there’s no evidence for an extended San Francisco trip by Smith then, and that although the writing looks like Smith’s, it’s more agitated than any he’s ever seen. But I have reasons to think Smith would have kept the trip secret and have had cause to be supremely agitated.”

“Oh, my,” Cal said. “You’ve gone to a lot of trouble and thought about it. But I can see why. It’s *tres romantique*, just the feel of this ribbed silk and rice paper.”

“I had a special reason,” Franz said, unconsciously dropping his voice a little. “I bought the books four years ago, you see, before I moved here, and I read a lot in the journal. The violet-ink person (whoever, I think Smith) keeps writing about ‘visiting Tiberius at 607 Rhodes.’ In fact, the journal is entirely—or chiefly—an account of a series of such interviews. That ‘607 Rhodes’ stuck in my mind, so that when I went hunting a cheaper place to live and was shown the room here—”

“Of course, it’s your apartment number, 607,” Cal interrupted.

Franz nodded. “I got the idea it was predestined, or prearranged in some mysterious way. As if I’d had to look for the ‘607 Rhodes’ and had found it. I had a lot of mysterious drunken ideas in those days and didn’t always know what I was doing or where I was—for instance, I’ve forgotten exactly where the fabulous store was where I bought these books, and its name, if it had one. In fact, I was pretty drunk most of the time—period.”

“You certainly were,” Cal agreed, “though in a quiet way. Saul and Gun and I wondered about you and we pumped Dorotea Luque and Bonita,” she added, referring to the Peruvian apartment manager and her thirteen-year-old daughter. “Even then you didn’t seem an ordinary lush. Dorotea said you wrote ‘*ficción* to scare, about *espectros y fantasmas de los muertos y las muertas*,’ but that she thought you were a gentleman.”

Franz laughed. “Specters and phantoms of dead men and dead ladies. How very Spanish! Still, I’ll bet you never thought—” he began and stopped.

“That I’d some day get into bed with you?” Cal finished for him. “Don’t be too sure. I’ve always had erotic fantasies about older men. But tell me—how did your weird then-brain fit in the Rhodes part?”

“It never did,” Franz confessed. “Though I still think the violet-ink person had some definite place in mind, besides the obvious reference to Tiberius’s exile by Augustus to the island of Rhodes, where the Roman emperor-to-be studied oratory along with sexual perversion and a spot of witchcraft. The violet-ink person doesn’t always say Tiberius, incidentally. It’s sometimes Theobald and sometimes Tybalt, and once it’s Thrasyllus, who was Tiberius’s personal fortuneteller and sorcerer. But always there’s that ‘607 Rhodes.’ And once it’s Theudebaldo and once Dietbold, but three times

Thibaut, which is what makes me sure, besides all the other things, it must have been de Castries that Smith was visiting almost every day and writing about.”

“Franz,” Cal said, “all this is perfectly fascinating, but I’ve just got to start practicing. Working up harpsichord on a dinky electronic piano is hard enough, and tomorrow night’s not just anything, it’s the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto.”

“I know, I’m sorry I forgot about it. It was inconsiderate of me, a male chauvinist —” Franz began, getting to his feet.

“Now, don’t get tragic,” Cal said briskly. “I enjoyed every minute, really, but now I’ve got to work. Here, take your cup—and for heaven’s sake, these books—or I’ll be peeking into them when I should be practicing. Cheer up—at least you’re not a male chauvinist pig, you only ate one piece of toast.

“And—Franz,” she called. He turned with his things at the door. “Do be careful up there around Beaver and Buena Vista. Take Gun or Saul. And remember—” Instead of saying what, she kissed two fingers and held them out toward him a moment, looking quite solemnly into his eyes.

He smiled, nodded twice, and went out feeling happy and excited. But as he closed the door behind him he decided that whether or not he went to Corona Heights, he wouldn’t ask either of the two men on the next floor up to go with him—it was a question of courage, or at least independence. No, today would be his own adventure. Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!

THE HALL OUTSIDE Cal's door duplicated all the features of the one on Franz's floor: black-painted airshaft window, knobless door to disused broom closet, drab golden elevator door, and low-set, snap-capped vacuum outlet—a relic of the days when the motor for a building's vacuum system was in the basement and the maid handled only a long hose and brush. But before Franz, starting down the hall, had passed any of these, he heard from ahead an ultimate, giggly laugh that made him remember the one he'd imagined for the imaginary maids. Then some words he couldn't catch in a man's voice: low, rapid, and jocular. Saul's?—it did seem to come from above. Then the feminine or girlish laughter again, louder and a little explosive, almost as if someone were being tickled. Then a rush of light footsteps coming down the stairs.

He reached them just in time to get a glimpse, down and across the stairwell, of a shadowy slender figure disappearing around the last visible angle—just the suggestion of black hair and clothing and slim white wrists and ankles, all in swift movement. He moved to the well and looked down it, struck by how the successive floors below were like the series of reflections you saw when you stood between two mirrors. The rapid footsteps continued their spiraling descent all the way down, but whoever was making them was keeping to the wall and away from the rail lining the well, as if driven by centrifugal force, so he got no further glimpses.

As he peered down that long, narrow tube dimly lit from the skylight above, still thinking of the black-clad limbs and the laughter, a murky memory rose in his mind and for a few moments possessed him utterly. Although it refused to come wholly clear, it gripped him with the authority of a very unpleasant dream or bad drunk. He was standing upright in a dark, claustrophobically narrow, crowded, musty space. Through the fabric of his trousers he felt a small hand laid on his genitals and he heard a low, wicked laugh. He looked down in his memory and saw the foreshortened, ghostly, featureless oval of a small face and the laugh was repeated, mockingly. Somehow it seemed there were black tendrils all around him. He felt a weight of sick excitement and guilt and, almost, fear.

The murky memory lifted as Franz realized the figure on the stairs had to have been that of Bonita Luque wearing the black pajamas and robe and feathered black mules she'd been handed down from her mother and already outgrown, but sometimes still wore as she darted around the building on her mother's early-morning errands. He smiled disparagingly at the thought that he was almost sorry (not really!) he was no longer drunk and so able to nurse various kinky excitements.

He started up the stairs, but stopped almost at once when he heard Gun's and Saul's voices from the floor above. He did not want to see either of them now, at first simply from a reluctance to share today's mood and plans with anyone but Cal, but as he listened to the clear and sharpening voices his motive became more complicated.

Gun asked, "What was that all about?"

Saul answered, "Her mother sent the kid up to check if either of us had lost a cassette player-recorder. She thinks her kleptomaniac on the second floor has one that

doesn't belong to her."

Gun remarked, "That's a big word for Mrs. Luque." Saul said, "Oh, I suppose she said 'e-stealer.' I told the kid that no, I still had mine."

Gun asked, "Why didn't Bonita check with me?"

Saul answered, "Because I told her you didn't have a cassette player to start with. What's the matter? Feeling left out?"

"No!"

During this interchange Gun's voice had grown increasingly nagging, Saul's progressively cooler yet also teasing. Franz had listened to mild speculation about the degree of homosexuality in Gun's and Saul's friendship, but this was the first time he found himself really wondering about it. No, he definitely didn't want to barge in now.

Saul persisted, "Then what's the matter? Hell, Gun, you know I always horse around with Bonny."

Gun's voice was almost waspish as he said, "I know I'm a puritanized North European, but I'd like to know just how far liberation from Anglo-Saxon body-contact taboos is supposed to go."

And Saul's voice was almost taunting as he replied, "Why, just as far as you both think proper, I suppose."

There was the sound of a door closing very deliberately. It was repeated. Then silence. Franz breathed his relief, continued softly up—and as he emerged into the fifth-floor hall found himself almost face to face with Gun, who was standing in front of the shut door to his room, glaring across at Saul's. Set on the floor beside him was a knee-high rectangular object with a chrome carrying handle protruding from its gray fabric cover.

Gunnar Nordgren was a tall, slim man, ashen blond, a fined-down Viking. Right now he had shifted his gaze and was looking at Franz with a growing embarrassment that matched Franz's own feelings. Abruptly Gun's usual amiability flooded back into his face, and he said, "Say, I'm glad you came by. A couple of nights ago you were wondering about document-shredding machines. Here's one I had here from the office overnight."

He whipped off the cover, revealing a tall blue and silvery box with a foot-wide maw on top and a red button. The maw fed down into a deep basket which Franz, coming closer, could see was one-quarter filled with a dirty snow of paper diamonds less than a quarter inch across.

The uncomfortable feelings of a moment before were gone. Looking up, Franz said, "I know you're going to work and all, but could I hear it in operation once?"

"Of course." Gun unlocked the door behind him and led Franz into a neat, rather sparsely furnished room, the first features of which to strike the eye were large astronomical photographs, in color and skiing equipment. As Gun unrolled the electric cord and plugged it in, he said lightheartedly, "This is a Shredbasket put out by Destroysit. Properly dire names, eh? Costs only five hundred dollars or so. Larger models go up to two thousand. A set of circular knives cuts the paper to ribbons; then another set cuts the ribbons across. Believe it or not, these machines were developed from ones for making confetti. I like that—it suggests that mankind first thinks of making frivolous things and only later puts them to serious use—if you can call this

serious. Games before guilt.”

The words poured out of him in such an excess of excitement or relief that Franz forgot his wonder as to why Gun should have brought such a machine home—what he’d been destroying. Gun continued, “The ingenious Italians—what was it Shakespeare said? Supersubtle Venetians?—lead the world, you know, in inventing machines for food and fun. Ice-cream makers, pasta extruders, espresso coffee machines, set-piece fireworks, hurdy-gurdies...and confetti. Well, here goes.”

Franz had taken out a small notebook and ballpoint pen. As Gun’s finger moved toward the red button, he leaned close, rather cautiously, expecting some rather loud sound.

Instead, there came a faint, breathy buzzing, as if Time were clearing her throat.

Delightedly Franz jotted down just that.

Gun fed in a pastel sheet. Pale blue snow showered down upon the dirty white. The sound barely thickened a little.

Franz thanked Gun and left him coiling up the cord. Mounting past his own floor and the seventh toward the roof, he felt pleased. Getting that scrap of observed fact had been just the bit of luck he’d needed to start the day perfectly.

THE CUBICAL ROOM housing the elevator's hoist was like a wizard's den atop a tower: skylight thickly filmed with dust, electric motor like a broad-shouldered dwarf in greasy green armor, and old-fashioned relays in the form of eight black cast-iron arms that writhed when in use like those of a chained-down giant spider—and with big copper switches that clashed loudly as they opened and closed whenever a button was pushed below, like such a spider's jaws.

Franz stepped out into sunlight on the flat, low-walled roof. Tar-embedded gravel gritted faintly under his shoes. The cool breeze was welcome.

To the east and north bulked the huge downtown buildings and whatever secret spaces they contained, blocking off the Bay. How old Thibaut would have scowled at the Transamerica Pyramid and the purple-brown Bank of America monster! Even at the new Hilton and St. Francis towers. The words came into his head, "The ancient Egyptians only buried people in their pyramids. We are living in ours." Now where had he read that? Why, in *Megapolisomancy*, of course. How apt! And did the modern pyramids have in them secret markings foretelling the future and crypts for sorcery?

He walked past the low-walled rectangular openings of the narrow airshafts lined with gray sheet-iron, to the back of the roof and looked up between the nearby high rises (modest compared with those downtown) at the TV tower and Corona Heights. The fog was gone, but the pale irregular hump of the latter still stood out sharply in the morning sunlight. He looked through his binoculars, not very hopefully, but—yes, by God!—there was that crazy, drably robed worshiper, or what-not, still busy with his ritual, or whatever. If these glasses would just settle down! Now the fellow had run to a slightly lower clump of rocks and seemed to be peering furtively over it. Franz followed the apparent direction of his gaze down the crest and almost immediately came to its probable object: two hikers trudging up. Because of their colorful shorts and shirts, it was easier to make them out. Yet despite their flamboyant garb they somehow struck Franz as more respectable characters than the lurker at the summit. He wondered what would happen when they met at the top. Would the robed hierophant try to convert them? Or solemnly warn them off? Or stop them like the Ancient Mariner and tell them an eerie story with a moral? Franz looked back, but now the fellow (or could it have been a woman?) was gone. A shy type, evidently. He searched the rocks, trying to spot him hiding, and even followed the plodding hikers until they reached the top and disappeared on the other side, hoping for a surprise encounter, but none came.

Nevertheless, when he shoved the binoculars back in his pocket, he had made up his mind. He'd visit Corona Heights. It was too good a day to stay indoors.

"If you won't come to me, then I will come to you," he said aloud, quoting an eerie bit from a Montague Rhodes James ghost story and humorously applying it both to Corona Heights and to its lurker. The mountain came to Mohammed, he thought, but he had all those jinn.

AN HOUR AFTERWARD Franz was climbing Beaver Street, taking deep breaths to avoid panting later. He had added the bit about Time clearing her throat to *Weird Underground* #7, sealed the manuscript in its envelope, and mailed it. When he'd started, he'd had his binoculars hanging around his neck on their strap like a storybook adventurer's, so that Dorotea Luque, waiting in the lobby with a couple of elderly tenants for the mailman, had observed merrily, "You go to look for the e-scary thing to write e-stories about, no?" and he had replied. "*Si, Señora Luque. Espectros y fantasmas,*" in what he hoped was equally cockeyed Spanish. But then a block or so back, a bit after getting off the Muni car on Market, he'd wedged them into his pocket again, alongside the street guide he'd brought. This seemed a nice enough neighborhood, quite safe-looking really; still there was no point in displaying advertisements of affluence, and Franz judged binoculars would be that even more than a camera. Too bad big cities had become—or were thought to have become—such perilous places. He'd almost chided Cal for being uptight about muggers and nuts, and look at him now. Still, he was glad he'd come alone. Exploring places he'd first studied from his window was a natural new stage in his reality trip, but a very personal one.

Actually there were relatively few people in the streets this morning. At the moment he couldn't see a single one. His mind toyed briefly with the notion of a big, modern city suddenly completely deserted, like the barque *Marie Celeste* or the *luxe* resort hotel in that disquietingly brilliant film *Last Year at Marienbad*.

He went by Jaime Donaldus Byers's place, a narrow-fronted piece of carpenter Gothic now painted olive with gold trim, very Old San Francisco. Perhaps he'd chance ringing the bell coming back.

From here he couldn't see Corona Heights at all. Nearby stuff masked it (and the TV tower, too). Conspicuous at a distance—he'd got a fine view of its jagged crest at Market and Duboce—it had hidden itself like a pale brown tiger on his approach, so that he had to get out his street guide and spread its map to make sure he hadn't got off the track.

Beyond Castro the way got very steep, so that he stopped twice to even out his breathing.

At last he came out on a short dead-end cross street behind some new apartments. At its other end a sedan was parked with two people sitting in the front seats—men he saw that he'd mistaken headrests for heads. They did look so like dark little tombstones!

On the other side of the cross street were no more buildings, but green and brown terraces going up to an irregular crest against blue sky. He saw he'd finally reached Corona Heights, somewhat on the far side from his apartment.

After a leisurely cigarette, he mounted steadily past some tennis courts and lawn and up a fenced and winding hillside ramp and emerged on another dead-end street—or road, rather. He felt very good, really, in the outdoors. Gazing back the way he'd come, he saw the TV tower looking enormous (and handsomer than ever) less than a

mile away, yet somehow just the right size. After a moment he realized that was because it was now the same size his binoculars magnified it to from his apartment.

Strolling to the dead end of the road, he passed a long, rambling one-story brick building with generous parking space that modestly identified itself as the Josephine Randall Junior Museum. There was a panel truck with the homely label “Sidewalk Astronomer.” He recalled hearing of it from Dorotea Luque’s daughter Bonita as the place where children could bring pet tame squirrels and snakes and brindled Japanese rats (and bats?) when for some reason they could no longer keep them. He also realized he’d seen its low roofs from his window.

From the dead end, a short path led him to the foot of the crest, and there on the other side was all the eastern half of San Francisco and the Bay beyond and both the bridges spread out before him.

Resolutely resisting the urge to scan in detail, he set himself to mounting the ridge by the hard gravelly path near its crest. This soon became rather tiresome. He had to pause more than once for breath and set his feet carefully to keep from slipping.

When he’d about reached the spot where he’d first seen the hikers, he suddenly realized that he’d grown rather childishly apprehensive. He almost wished he had brought Gun and Saul, or run into other climbers of the solid, respectable sort, no matter how colorfully clad or otherwise loud and noisy. At the moment he wouldn’t even object to a transistor radio blating. He was pausing now not so much for breath as to scan very carefully each rock clump before circling by it, for if he thrust his head too trustingly around one, what face or no-face might he not see?

This really was too childish of him, he told himself. Didn’t he want to meet the character on the summit and find out just what sort of an oddball he was? A gentle soul, most likely, from his simple garb and timidity and love of solitude. Though of course he most likely had departed by now.

Nevertheless Franz kept using his eyes systematically as he mounted the last of the slope, gentler now, to its top.

The ultimate outcropping of rocks (the Corona? the crown?) was more extensive and higher than the others. After holding back a bit (to spy out the best route, he told himself), he mounted by three ledges, each of which required a leg-stretching step, to the very top, where he at last stood up (though rather carefully, bracing his feet wide—there was a lot of wind from the Pacific up here) with all of Corona Heights beneath him.

He slowly turned around in a full circle, tracing the horizon but scanning very thoroughly all the dumps of rock and all the brown and green slopes immediately below him, familiarizing himself with his new surroundings and incidentally ascertaining that there wasn’t another being besides himself anywhere on Corona Heights.

Then he went down a couple of ledges and settled himself comfortably in a natural rock seat facing east, completely out of the wind. He felt very much at ease and remarkably secure in this eyrie, especially with the sense of the mighty TV tower rising behind him like a protective goddess. While smoking another leisurely cigarette, he surveyed with unaided eyes the great spread of the city and Bay with its great ships tinier than toys, from the faintly greenish thin pillow of smog over San Jose in the south to the dim tittle pyramid of Mount Diablo beyond Berkeley and on to the red

towers of the Golden Gate Bridge in the north with Mount Tamalpais beyond them. It was interesting how landmarks shifted with this new vantage point. Compared with his view from the roof, some of the downtown buildings had shot up, while others seemed trying to hide behind their neighbors.

After another cigarette he got out his binoculars and put their strap around his neck and began to study this and that. They were quite steady now, not like this morning. He chucklingly spelled out a few big billboards south of Market on the Embarcadero in the Mission, mostly ads for cigarettes and beer and vodka—that Black Velvet theme!—and a couple of the larger topless spots for the tourists.

After a survey of the steely, gleaming inner waters and following the Bay Bridge all the way to Oakland, he set in seriously on the downtown buildings and soon discovered to his embarrassment that they were quite hard to identify from here. Distance and perspective had subtly altered their hues and arrangement. And then contemporary skyscrapers were so very anonymous—no signs or names, no pinnacle statues or weathercocks or crosses, no distinctive facades and cornices, no architectural ornament at all: just huge blank slabs of featureless stone, or concrete or glass that was either sleekly bright with sun or dark with shadow. Really, they might well be the “gargantuan tombs or monstrous vertical coffins of living humanity, a breeding ground for the worst of paramental entities” that old de Castries had kept ranting about in his book.

After another stretch of telescopic study in which he managed to identify a couple of the shifty skyscrapers, at last, he let his binoculars hang and got out from his other pocket the meat sandwich he’d made himself. As he unwrapped and slowly ate it, he thought of what a fortunate person he really was. A year ago he’d been a mess, but now—

He heard a *scrutch* of gravel, then another. He looked around but didn’t see anything. He couldn’t decide from what direction the faint sounds had come. The sandwich was dry in his mouth.

With an effort he swallowed and continued eating, and recaptured his train of thought. Yes, now he had friends like Gun and Saul...and Cal...and his health was a damn sight better, and best of all, his work was going well, his precious stories (well, precious to him) and even that terrible *Weird Underground* stuff—

Another *scrutch*, louder, and with it an odd little high-pitched laugh. He tensed himself and looked around quickly, sandwich and thoughts forgotten.

There came the laugh again, mounting toward a shrill shriek, and from behind the rocks there came dashing, along the path just below, two little girls in dark blue playclothes. The one caught the other and they spun around, squealing happily, in a whirl of sun-browned limbs and fair hair.

Franz had barely time to think what a refutation this was of Cal’s (and his own) worries about this area, and for the afterthought that still it didn’t seem right for parents to let such small, attractive girls (they couldn’t be more than seven or eight) ramble in such a lonely place, when there came loping from behind the rocks a shaggy Saint Bernard, whom the girls at once pulled into their whirling game. But after only a little more of that, they ran on along the path by which Franz had come up, their large protector close behind. They’d either not seen Franz at all or else, after the way of little girls, they’d pretended not to notice him. He smiled at how the incident had