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A FEAST OF DEMONS

By WILLIAM MORRISON

Illustrated by DILLON

If you want my opinion, old Maxwell should have kept his big mouth shut ... and then El Greco could not have put Earth in a frame!

I

That year we were all Romans, and I have to tell you that I look awful in a toga and short sword, but not nearly as awful as the Greek.

You go to one of the big schools and naturally you turn out for the Class Reunion. Why not? There's money there, and good fellowship, and money, and the chance of a business contact that will do you some good. And money.

Well, I wasn't that fortunate—and you can say that again because it's the story of my life: I wasn't that fortunate.

I didn't go to Harvard, Princeton or Yale. I didn't even go to Columbia, U.C.L.A. or the University of Chicago. What I went to was Old Ugly. Don't lie to me—you never heard of Old Ugly, not even if I tell you it's Oglethorpe A. & M. There were fifty-eight of us in my graduating class—that's 1940—and exactly thirty turned up for the tenth reunion.



Wouldn't that turn your stomach? Only thirty Old Grads with enough loyalty and school feeling to show up for that tenth reunion and parade around in Roman togas and drink themselves silly and renew old school ties. And, out of that thirty, the ones that we all really wanted to see for sentimental reasons—I refer to Feinbarger of Feinbarger Shipping, Schroop of the S.S.K. Studios in Hollywood, Dixon of the National City Bank and so on—they didn't show up at all. It was terribly disappointing to all of us, especially to me.

In fact, at the feast that evening, I found myself sitting next to El Greco. There simply wasn't anyone else there. You understand that I don't refer to that Spanish painter—I believe he's dead, as a matter of fact. I mean Theobald Greco, the one we called the Greek.

I introduced myself and he looked at me blearily through thick glasses. "Hampstead? Hampstead?"

"*Virgil* Hampstead," I reminded him. "You remember me. Old Virgie."

He said, "Sure. Any more of that stuff left in the bottle, Old Virgie?"

I poured for him. It was my impression, later borne out by evidence, that he was not accustomed to drinking.

I said, "It's sure great to see all the fellows again, isn't it? Say, look at Pudge Detweiler there! Ever see anything so comical as the lampshade he's wearing for a hat?"

"Just pass me the bottle, will you?" Greco requested. "Old Virgie, I mean."

"Still in research and that sort of thing?" I asked. "You always were a brain, Greek. I can't tell you how much I've envied you creative fellows. I'm in sales myself. Got a little territory right here that's a mint, Greek. A mint. If I only knew where I could lay my hands on a little capital to expand it the way—But I won't bore you with shop talk. What's your line these days?"

"I'm in transmutation," he said clearly, and passed out face down on the table.

Now nobody ever called me a dope—other things, yes, but not a dope.

I knew what transmutation meant. Lead into gold, tin into platinum, all that line of goodies. And accordingly the next morning, after a certain amount of Bromo and black coffee, I asked around the campus and found out that Greco had a place of his own not far from the campus. That explained why he'd turned up for the reunion. I'd been wondering.

I borrowed cab fare from Old Pudge Detweiler and headed for the address I'd been given.

It wasn't a home. It was a beat-up factory and it had a sign over the door:

T. GRECO

Plant Foods & Organic Supplies

Since it was Sunday, nobody seemed to be there, but I pushed open the door. It wasn't locked. I heard something from the basement, so I walked down a flight of steps and looked out into a rather smelly laboratory.

There was the Greek. Tall, thin, wide-eyed and staggering, he appeared to be chasing butterflies.

I cleared my throat, but he didn't hear me. He was racing around the laboratory, gasping and muttering to himself, sweeping at empty air with what looked to me like an electric toaster on a stick. I looked again and, no, it wasn't an electric toaster, but exactly what it was defied me. It appeared to have a recording scale on the side of it, with a needle that flickered wildly.

I couldn't see what he was chasing.

The fact was that, as far as I could see, he wasn't chasing anything at all.

You have to get the picture: Here was Greco, racing around with one eye on the scale and one eye on thin air; he kept bumping into things, and every now and then he'd stop, and stare around at the gadgets on the lab benches, and maybe he'd throw a switch or turn a dial, and then he'd be off again.

He kept it up for ten minutes and, to tell you the truth, I began to wish that I'd made some better use of Pudge Detweiler's cab fare. The Greek looked as though he'd flipped, nothing less.

But there I was. So I waited.

And by and by he seemed to get whatever it was he was looking for and he stopped, breathing heavily.

I said, "Hi there, Greek."

He looked up sharply. "Oh," he said, "Old Virgie."

He slumped back against a table, trying to catch his breath.

"The little devils," he panted. "They must have thought they'd got away that time. But I fixed them!"

"Sure you did," I said. "You bet you did. Mind if I come in?"

He shrugged. Ignoring me, he put down the toaster on a stick, flipped some switches and stood up. A whining sound dwindled and disappeared; some flickering lights went out. Others remained on, but he seemed to feel that, whatever it was he was doing, it didn't require his attention now.

In his own good time, he came over and we shook hands. I said appreciatively, "Nice-looking laboratory you have here, Greek. I don't know what the stuff is for, but it looks expensive—it looks very efficient."

He grunted. "It is. Both. Expensive and efficient."

I laughed. "Say," I said, "you were pretty loaded last night. Know what you told me you were doing here?"

He looked up quickly. "What?"

"You said you were in transmutation." I laughed harder than ever.

He stared at me thoughtfully, and for a second I thought—well, I don't know what I thought, but I was worried. He had a lot of funny-looking things there, and his hand was stretching out toward one of them.

But then he said, "Old Virgie."

"That's me," I said eagerly.

"I owe you an apology," he went on.

"You do?"

He nodded. "I'd forgotten," he confessed, ashamed. "I didn't remember until just this minute that you were the one I talked to in my senior year. My only confidant. And you've kept my secret all this time."

I coughed. "It was nothing," I said largely. "Don't give it a thought."

He nodded in appreciation. "That's just like you," he reminisced. "Ten years, eh? And you haven't breathed a word, have you?"

"Not a word," I assured him. And it was no more than the truth. I hadn't said a word to anybody. I hadn't even said a word to myself. The fact of the matter was, I had completely forgotten what he was talking about. Kept his secret? I didn't even *remember* his secret. And it was driving me nuts!

"I was sure of you," he said, suddenly thawing. "I knew I could trust you. I must have—otherwise I certainly wouldn't have told you, would I?"

I smiled modestly. But inside I was fiercely cudgeling my brain.

He said suddenly, "All right, Virgie. You're entitled to something for having kept faith. I tell you what I'll do—I'll let you in on what I'm doing here."

All at once, the little muscles at the back of my neck began to tense up.

He would do *what?* "Let me in" on something? It was an unpleasantly familiar phrase. I had used it myself all too often.

"To begin with," said the Greek, focusing attentively on me, "you wonder, perhaps, what I was doing when you came in."

"I do," I said.

He hesitated. "Certain—particles, which are of importance to my research, have a tendency to go free. I can keep them under a measure of control only by means of electrostatic forces, generated in this." He waved the thing that looked like a toaster on a stick. "And as for what they do—well, watch."

El Greco began to putter with gleamy, glassy gadgets on one of the tables and I watched him with, I admit, a certain amount of suspicion.

"What are you doing, Greek?" I asked pretty bluntly.

He looked up. Surprisingly, I saw that the suspicion was mutual; he frowned and hesitated. Then he shook his head.

"No," he said. "For a minute I—but I can trust you, can't I? The man who kept my secret for ten long years."

"Of course," I said.

"All right." He poured water out of a beaker into a U-shaped tube, open at both ends. "Watch," he said. "Remember any of your college physics?"

"The way things go, I haven't had much time to keep up with—"

"All the better, all the better," he said. "Then you won't be able to steal anything."

I caught my breath. "Now *listen*—"

"No offense, Virgie," he said earnestly. "But this is a billion dollars and—No matter. When it comes right down to cases, you could know as much as all those fool professors of ours put together and it still wouldn't help you steal a thing."

He bobbed his head, smiled absently and went back to his gleamy gadgets. I tell you, I *steamed*. That settled it, as far as I was concerned. There was simply no excuse for such unjustified insults to my character. I certainly had no intention of attempting to take any unfair advantage, but if he was going to act that way....

He was asking for it. Actually and literally asking for it.

He rapped sharply on the U-tube with a glass stirring rod, seeking my attention.

"I'm watching," I told him, very amiable now that he'd made up my mind for me.

"Good. Now," he said, "you know what I do here in the plant?"

"Why—you make fertilizer. It says so on the sign."

"Ha! No," he said. "That is a blind. What I do is, I separate optical isomers."

"That's very nice," I said warmly. "I'm glad to hear it, Greek."

"Shut up," he retorted unexpectedly. "You don't have the foggiest notion of what an optical isomer is and you know it. But try and think. This isn't physics; it's organic chemistry. There are compounds that exist in two forms—apparently identical in all respects, except that one is the mirror image of the other. Like right-hand and left-hand gloves; one is the other, turned backwards. You understand so far?"

"Of course," I said.

He looked at me thoughtfully, then shrugged. "No matter. They're called d- and l-isomers—d for dextro, l for levo; right and left, you see. And although they're identical except for being mirror-reversed, it so happens that sometimes one isomer is worth much more than the other."

"I see that," I said.

"I thought you would. Well, they can be separated—but it's expensive. Not my way, though. My way is quick and simple. I use demons."

"Oh, now, Greek. *Really.*"

He said in a weary tone, "Don't talk, Virgie. Just listen. It won't tire you so much. But bear in mind that this is simply the most trifling application of my discovery. I could use it for separating U-235 from U-238 just as easily. In fact, I already—" He stopped in mid-sentence, cocked his head, looked at me and backtracked. "Never mind that. But you know what a Maxwell demon is?"

"No."

"Good for you, Virgie. Good for you!" he applauded. "I knew I'd get the truth out of you if I waited long enough." *Another* ambiguous remark, I thought to myself. "But you surely know the second law of thermodynamics."

"Surely."

"I thought you'd say that," he said gravely. "So then you know that if you put an ice cube in a glass of warm water, for instance, the ice melts, the water cools, and you get a glass with no ice but with all the water lowered in temperature. Right? And it's a one-way process. That is, you can't start with a glass of cool water and, hocus-pocus, get it to separate into warm water and ice cube, right?"

"Naturally," I said, "for heaven's sake. I mean that's silly."

"*Very* silly," he agreed. "You know it yourself, eh? So watch."

He didn't say hocus-pocus. But he did adjust something on one of his gadgets.

There was a faint whine and a gurgling, spluttering sound, like fat sparks climbing between spreading electrodes in a Frankenstein movie.

The water began to steam faintly.

But only at one end! That end was steam; the other was—was—

It was ice. A thin skin formed rapidly, grew thicker; the other open end of the U-tube began to bubble violently. Ice at one end, steam at the other.

Silly?

But I was seeing it!

I must say, however, that at the time I didn't really know that that was all I saw.

The reason for this is that Pudge Detweiler came groaning down the steps to the laboratory just then.

"Ah, Greek," he wheezed. "Ah, Virgie. I wanted to talk to you before I left." He came into the room and, panting, eased himself into a chair, a tired hippopotamus with a hangover.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Greco demanded.



"You?" Pudge's glance wandered around the room; it was a look of amused distaste, the look of a grown man observing the smudgy mud play of children. "Oh, not you, Greek. I wanted to talk to Virgie. That sales territory you mentioned, Virgie. I've been thinking. I don't know if you're aware of it, but when my father passed away last winter, he left me—well, with certain responsibilities. And it occurred to me that you might be willing to let me invest some of the—"

I didn't even let him finish. I had him out of there so fast, we didn't even have a chance to say good-by to Greco. And all that stuff about demons and hot-and-cold water and so on, it all went out of my head as though it had never been. Old Pudge Detweiler! How was *I* to know that his father had left him thirty thousand dollars in one attractive lump of cash!

II

Well, there were business reverses. Due to the reverses, I was forced to miss the next few reunions. But I had a lot of time to think and study, in between times at the farm and the shop where we stamped out license plates for the state.

When I got out, I began looking for El Greco.

I spent six months at it, and I didn't have any luck at all. El Greco had moved his laboratory and left no forwarding address.

But I wanted to find him. I wanted it so badly, I could taste it, because I had begun to have some idea of what he was talking about, and so I kept on looking.

I never did find him, though. He found me.

He came walking in on me in a shabby little hotel room, and I hardly recognized him, he looked so prosperous and healthy.

"You're looking just great, Greek," I said enthusiastically, seeing it was true. The years hadn't added a pound or a wrinkle—just the reverse, in fact.

"You're not looking so bad yourself," he said, and gazed at me sharply. "Especially for a man not long out of prison."

"Oh." I cleared my throat. "You know about that."

"I heard that Pudge Detweiler prosecuted."

"I see." I got up and began uncluttering a chair. "Well," I said, "it's certainly good to—How did you find me?"

"Detectives. Money buys a lot of help. I've got a lot of money."

"Oh." I cleared my throat again.

Greco looked at me, nodding thoughtfully to himself. There was one good thing; maybe he knew

about my trouble with Pudge, but he also had gone out of his way to find me. So *he* wanted something out of *me*.

He said suddenly, "Virgie, you were a damned fool."

"I was," I admitted honestly. "Worse than you know. But I am no longer. Greek, old boy, all this stuff you told me about those demons got me interested. I had plenty of time for reading in prison. You won't find me as ignorant as I was the last time we talked."

He laughed sourly. "That's a hot one. Four years of college leave you as ignorant as the day you went in, but a couple years of jail make you an educated man."

"Also a reformed one."

He said mildly, "Not too reformed, I hope."

"Crime doesn't pay—except when it's within the law. That's the chief thing I learned."

"Even then it doesn't pay," he said moodily. "Except in money, of course. But what's the use of money?"

There wasn't anything to say to *that*. I said, probing delicately, "I figured you were loaded. If you can use your demons to separate U-235 from U-238, you can use them for separating gold from sea water. You can use them for damn near anything."

"Damn near," he concurred. "Virgie, you may be of some help to me. Obviously you've been reading up on Maxwell."

"Obviously."

It was the simple truth. I had got a lot of use out of the prison library—even to the point of learning all there was to learn about Clerk Maxwell, one of the greatest of physicists, and his little demons. I had rehearsed it thoroughly for El Greco.

"Suppose," I said, "that you had a little compartment inside a pipe of flowing gas or liquid. That's what Maxwell said. Suppose the compartment had a little door that allowed molecules to enter or leave. You station a demon—that's what Maxie called them himself—at the door. The demon sees a hot molecule coming, he opens the door. He sees a cold one, he closes it. By and by, just like that, all the hot molecules are on one side of the door, all the cold ones—the slow ones, that is—on the other. Steam on one side, ice on the other, that's what it comes down to."

"That was what you saw with your own eyes," Theobald Greco reminded me.

"I admit it," I said. "And I admit I didn't understand. But I do now."

I understood plenty. Separate isotopes—separate elements, for that matter. Let your demon open the door to platinum, close it to lead. He could make you rich in no time.

He had, in fact, done just that for Greco.

Greco said, "Here. First installment." He pulled something out of his pocket and handed it to me. It was metallic—about the size of a penny slot-machine bar of chocolate, if you remember back that far. It gleamed and it glittered. And it was ruddy yellow in color.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Gold," he said. "Keep it, Virgie. It came out of sea water, like you said. Call it the down payment on your salary."

I hefted it. I bit it. I said, "By the way, speaking of salary...."

"Whatever you like," he said wearily. "A million dollars a year? Why not?"

"Why not?" I echoed, a little dazed.

And then I just sat there listening, while he talked. What else was there to do? I won't even say that I was listening, at least not with the very fullest of attention, because that thought of a million dollars a year kept coming between me and his words. But I got the picture. The possibilities were endless. And how well I knew it!

Gold from the sea, sure. But energy—free energy—it was there for the taking. From the molecules of the air, for instance. Refrigerators could be cooled, boilers could get up steam, homes could be heated, forges could be fired—and all without fuel. Planes could fly through the air without a drop of gasoline in their tanks. Anything.

A million dollars a year....

And it was only the beginning.

I came to. "What?"

He was looking at me. He repeated patiently, "The police are looking for me."

I stared. "You?"

"Did you hear about Grand Rapids?"

I thought. "Oh—Wait. A fire. A big one. And that was you?"

"Not me. My demons. Maxwell demons—or Greco demons, they should be called. He talked about them; I use them. When they're not using me. This time, they burned down half the city."

"I remember now," I said. The papers had been full of it.

"They got loose," he said grimly. "But that's not the worst. You'll have to earn your million a year, Virgie."

"What do you mean, they got loose?"

He shrugged. "Controls aren't perfect. Sometimes the demons escape. I can't help it."

"How do you control them in the first place?"

He sighed. "It isn't really what you would call controls," he said. "It's just the best I can do to keep them from spreading."

"But—you said sometimes you separate metals, sometimes you get energy. How do the demons know which you want them to do, if you say you can't control them?"

"How do you make an apple tree understand whether you want it to grow Baldwins or Macintoshes?"

I gawked at him. "Why—but you don't, Greek! I mean it's either one or the other!"

"Just so with demons! You're not so stupid after all, are you? It's like improving the breed of dogs. You take a common ancestral mutt, and generations later you can develop an Airedale, a dachshund or a Spitz. How? By selection. My demon entities grow, they split, the new entities adapt themselves to new conditions. There's a process of evolution. I help it along, that's all."

He took the little slab of gold from me, brooding.

Abruptly he hurled it at the wall. "Gold!" he cried wildly. "But who wants it? I need *help*, Virgie! If gold will buy it from you, I'll pay! But I'm desperate. You'd be desperate too, with nothing ahead but a sordid, demeaning death from young age and a—"

I interrupted him. "What's that?"

It was a nearby raucous hooting, loud and mournful.

Greco stopped in mid-sentence, listening like a hunted creature. "My room," he whispered. "All my equipment—on the floor above—"

I stepped back, a little worried. He was a strange man, skinny and tall and wild-eyed. I was glad he was so thin; if he'd been built solidly in proportion to his height, just then he would have worried me, with those staring, frightened eyes and that crazy way of talking. But I didn't have time to worry, in any case. Footsteps were thundering in the halls. Distant voices shouted to each other.

The hoot came again.

"The fire whistle!" Greco bayed. "The hotel's on fire!"

He leaped out of my room into the corridor.

I followed. There was a smell of burning—not autumn leaves or paper; it was a chemical-burning smell, a leather-burning smell, a henyard-on-fire smell. It reeked of an assortment of things, gunpowder and charred feathers, the choking soot of burning oil, the crisp tang of a wood fire. It was, I thought for a second, perhaps the typical smell of a hotel on fire, but in that I was wrong.

"Demons!" yelled Greco, and a bellhop, hurrying by, paused to look at us queerly. Greco sped for the stairs and up them.

I followed.

It was Greco's room that was ablaze—he made that clear, trying to get into it. But he couldn't. Black smoke billowed out of it, and orange flame. The night manager's water bucket was going to make no headway against *that*.

I retreated. But Greco plunged ahead, his face white and scary.

I stopped at the head of the stairs. The flames drove Greco off, but he tried again. They drove him off again, and this time for good.

He stumbled toward me. "Out! It's hopeless!" He turned, stared blindly at the hotel employees with their chain of buckets. "You! What do you think you're doing? That's—" He stopped, wetting his lips. "That's a gasoline fire," he lied, "and there's dynamite in my luggage. Clear the hotel, you hear me?"

It was, as I say, a lie. But it got the hotel cleared out.

And then—

It might as well have been gasoline and dynamite. There was a purplish flash and a muttering boom, and the whole roof of the four-story building lifted off.

I caught his arm.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

He looked at me blindly. I'd swear he didn't know me. His eyes were tortured.

"Too late!" he croaked. "Too late! They're free again!"

III

So I went to work for Theobald Greco—in his laboratory in Southern California, where we replaced some of the things that had been destroyed.

And one morning I woke up and found my hair was white.

I cried, "Greek!"

Minnie came running in. I don't believe I told you about Minnie. She was Greco's idea of the perfect laboratory assistant—stupid, old, worthless to the world and without visible kin. She came in and stared and set up a cackling that would wake the dead.

"Mister Hampstead!" she chortled. "My, but ain't you a sight!"

"Where's Greco?" I demanded, and pushed her out of my way.

In pajamas and bathrobe, I stalked down the stairs and into the room that had once been a kitchen and now was Greco's laboratory.

"Look!" I yelled. "What about *this*?"

He turned to look at me.

After a long moment, he shook his head.

"I was afraid of that," he mumbled. "You were a towhead as a kid, weren't you? And now you're a towhead again."

"But my hair, Greek! It's turned *white*."

"Not white," he corrected despondently. "Yellow. It's reverted to youth—overnight, the way it happens sometimes. I warned you, Virgie. I told you there were dangers. Now you know. Because —"

He hesitated, looked at me, then looked away.

"Because," he said, "you're getting younger, just like me. If we don't get this thing straightened out, you're going to die of young age yourself."

I stared at him. "You said that before, about yourself. I thought you'd just tongue-twisted. But you really mean—"

"Sit down," he ordered. "Virgie, I told you that you were looking younger. It wasn't just looks. It's the demons—and not just you and me, but a lot of people. First Grand Rapids. Then when the hotel burned. Plenty have been exposed—you more than most, I guess, ever since the day you walked into my lab and I was trying to recapture some that had got away. Well, I don't guess I recaptured them all."

"You mean *I*—"

He nodded. "Some of the demons make people younger. And you've got a colony of them in you."

I swallowed and sat down. "You mean I'm going to get younger and younger, until finally I become a baby? And then—what then, Greek?"

He shrugged. "How do I know? Ask me in another ten years. *Look at me, Virgie!*" he cried, suddenly loud. "How old do I look to you? Eighteen? Twenty?"

It was the plain truth. He looked no more than that. Seeing him day by day, I wasn't conscious of change; remembering him from when we had gone to school, I thought of him as younger

anyway. But he was forty, at the very least, and he didn't look old enough to vote.

He said, "I've had demons inside of me for six years. It seems they're a bit choosy about where they'll live. They don't inhabit the whole body, just parts of it—heart, lungs, liver. Maybe bones. Maybe some of the glands—perhaps that's why I feel so chipper physically. But not my brain, or not yet. Fortunately."

"Fortunately? But that's wrong, Greek! If your brain grew younger too—"

"Fool! If I had a young brain, I'd forget everything I learned, like unrolling a tape backwards! That's the danger, Virgie, the immediate danger that's pressing me—that's why I needed help! Because if I ever forget, that's the end. Not just for me—for everybody; because there's no one else in the world who knows how to control these things at all. Except me—and you, if I can train you."

"They're loose?" I felt my hair wonderingly. Still, it was not exactly a surprise. "How many?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. When they let the first batch of rabbits loose in Australia, did they have any idea how many there would be a couple of dozen generations later?"

I whistled. Minnie popped her head in the door and giggled. I waved her away.

"She could use some of your demons," I remarked. "Sometimes I think she has awfully young ideas, for a woman who's sixty if she's a day."

Greco laughed crazily. "Minnie? She's been working for me for a year. And she was eighty-five when I hired her!"

"I can't believe you!"

"Then you'll have to start practicing right now," he said.

It was tough, and no fooling; but I became convinced. It wasn't the million dollars a year any more.

It was the thought of ending my days as a drooling, mewling infant—or worse! To avert that, I was willing to work my brain to a shred.

First it was a matter of learning—learning about the "strange particles." Ever hear of them? That's not my term—that's what the physicists call them. Positrons. The neutrino. Pions and muons, plus and minus; the lambda and the antilambda. K particles, positive and negative, and anti-protons and anti-neutrons and sigmas, positive, negative and neutral, and—

Well, that's enough; but physics had come a long way since the classes I cut at Old Ugly, and there was a lot to catch up on.

The thing was, some of the "strange particles" were stranger than even most physicists knew. Some—in combination—were in fact Greco's demons.

We bought animals—mice, rabbits, guinea pigs, even dogs. We infected the young with some of our own demons—that was simple enough, frighteningly simple; all we had to do was handle them a bit. And we watched what happened.

They died—of young age.

Some vital organ or another regressed to embryonic condition, and they died—as Greco and I would die, if we didn't find the answer. As the whole world might die. Was it better than reverting past the embryo to the simple lifeless zygote? I couldn't decide. It was dying, all the same. When an embryonic heart or liver is called on to do a job for a mature organism, there is only one way out. Death.

And after death—the demons went on; the dog we fed on the remains of the guinea pigs followed them to extinction in a matter of weeks.

Minnie was an interesting case.

She was going about her work with more energy every day, and I'll be blasted if I didn't catch her casting a lingering Marilyn Monroe sort of look at me when Greco's back was turned.

"Shall we fire her?" I asked El Greco when I told him about it.

"What for?"

"She's disrupting the work!"



"The work isn't worth a damn anyhow," he said moodily. "We're not getting anywhere, Virgie. If it was only a matter of smooth, predictable rates—But look at her. She's picking up speed! She's dropped five years in the past couple weeks."

"She can stand to drop a lot more," I said, annoyed.

He shrugged. "It depends on where. Her nose? It's shortened to about a fifteen-year-old level now. Facial hair? That's mostly gone. Skin texture? Well, I suppose there's no such thing as a too-immature skin, I mean short of the embryonic capsule, but—Wait a minute."

He was staring at the doorway.

Minnie was standing there, simpering.

"Come here!" he ordered in a voice like thunder. "Come here, you! Virgie, look at her nose!"

I looked. "Ugh," I said, but more or less under my breath.

"No, no!" cried Greco. "Virgie, don't you see her *nose*?" Foolish; of course I did. It was long, beaked—

Then I saw.

"It's growing longer," I whispered.

"Right, my boy! Right! One curve at least has reversed itself. Do you see, Virgie?"

I nodded. "She's—she's beginning to age again."

"Better than that!" he crowed. "It's faster than normal aging, Virgie! *There are aging demons loose too!*"

A breath of hope!

But hope died. Sure, he was right—as far as it went.

There *were* aging demons. We isolated them in some of our experimental animals. First we had to lure Minnie into standing still while Greco, swearing horribly, took a tissue sample; she didn't like that, but a hundred-dollar bonus converted her. Solid CO₂ froze the skin; *snip*, and a tiny flake of flesh came out of her nose at the point of Greco's scalpel; he put the sample of flesh through a few tricks and, at the end of the day, we tried it on some of our mice.

They died.

Well, it was gratifying, in a way—they died of old age. But die they did. It took three days to show an effect, but when it came, it was dramatic. These were young adult mice, in the full flush of their mousehood, but when these new demons got to work on them, they suddenly developed a frowsy, decrepit appearance that made them look like Bowery bums over whom Cinderella's good

fairy had waved her wand in reverse. And two days later they were dead.

"I think we've got something," said Greco thoughtfully; but I didn't think so, and I was right. Dead was dead. We could kill the animals by making them too young. We could kill the animals by making them too old. But keep them alive, once the demons were in them, we could not.

Greco evolved a plan: Mix the two breeds of demons! Take an animal with the young-age demons already in it, then add a batch that worked in the other direction!

For a while, it seemed to work—but only for a while. After a couple of weeks, one breed or the other would gain the upper hand. And the animals died.

It was fast in mice, slow in humans. Minnie stayed alive. But the nose grew longer and facial hair reappeared; simultaneously her complexion cleared, her posture straightened.

And then, for the first time, we began to read the papers.

STRANGE PLAGUE
STRIKES ELGIN

bawled the Chicago *Tribune*, and went on to tell how the suburbs around Elgin, Illinois, were heavily infested with a curious new malady, the symptoms of which were—youth.

OAKLAND "BABY-SKIN"
TOLL PASSES 10,000

blared the San Francisco *Examiner*. The New York *News* found thousands of cases in Brooklyn. A whole hospital in Dallas was evacuated to make room for victims of the new plague.

And more.

We looked at each other.

"They're out in force," said Theobald Greco soberly. "And we don't have the cure."

IV

The world was topsy-turvy, and in the middle of it Minnie disappeared, talking hysterically about reporting us to the authorities. I don't mind admitting that I was worried.

And the experiments were not progressing. The trouble seemed to be that the two varieties of demons—the aging and the youthing—were not compatible; if one took up residence in a given section of an organism, the other moved out. The more numerous destroyed the weaker; there was no balance. We tested it again and again in the mice and there was no doubt of it.

So far, only the youthing demons were free. But when Minnie left us, it was only a matter of time. Our carriers—from Grand Rapids and from the hotel—had spread to California and the East Coast, to the North and to the South, throughout the country, perhaps by now through the world. It would be slower with the aging demons—there was only one of Minnie—but it would be equally sure.

Greco began drinking heavily.

"It's the end," he brooded. "We're licked."

"No, Greek! We can't give up!"

"We *have* to give up. The demons are loose in the Earth, Virgie! Those people in the headlines—they'll die of young age. So will others—even plants and animals, and bacteria, as the demons adapt to them. And then—why not? The air. The rocks, the ocean, even the Earth itself. Remember, the entropy of the Universe is supposed to tend to a maximum not only as a whole, but in each of its parts taken in isolation. The Earth's evolution—reversed. Spottily, and maybe that's worse, because some parts will evolve forward and others reverse, as is happening in my own body. Heaven help the world, Old Virgie! And not just the Earth, because what can stop them from spreading? To the Moon, the other planets—out of the Solar System, for that matter; to the other galaxies, even. Why not? And then—"

"GRECO."

An enormous tinny voice, more than human, filled the air. It came from outside.

I jumped a foot. It sounded like the voice of a demon; then I got a grip on myself and understood. It was a loudspeaker, and it came from outside.

"GRECO. WE KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE. COME ON OUT!"

I had a stabbing sensation of familiarity. "The police!" I cried. "Greco, it's the police!"

He looked at me wearily and shook his head.

"No. More likely the F.B.I."

Well, that was it. I got out—I didn't wait for permission from the Greek.

I stopped at the door, and three searchlight beams hit me right in the eye. There were cars all around the laboratory, but I couldn't see them, not after those lights went on.

I froze, stiff; wanting to make sure they understood (a) that I wasn't Greco and (b) that I didn't have a gun.

They understood, all right.

But they let me out.

They put me in one of the cars, with a slim gray-eyed young man in a snap-brimmed hat sitting politely and alertly beside me, and they let me watch; and what happened after that wasn't funny at all.

Greco didn't come out. They shouted at him over the loudspeaker and eventually he answered—his voice little and calm, coming out of nowhere, and all he said was, "Go away. I won't come out. I warn you, don't try to force your way in."

But he knew they wouldn't listen, of course.

They didn't.

They tried force.

And he met it in novel ways with force of his own. The door had locked itself behind me; they got a fence post for a battering ram, and the post burst into flame. They found an L-beam from an old bed frame and tried that, and they were sorry they had done it; the thing melted in the middle, splattering them with hot drops of steel.

The polite, alert young man beside me said, not so polite any more, "What's he doing, you? What sort of fancy tricks has he got in there?"

"Demons," I said crazily, and *that* was a mistake, but what else was I to do? Try to explain Maxwell's equations to a Fed?

They were trying again—there were fifteen or twenty of them, at least. They went for the windows, and the windows dissolved and rained cherry-red wet glass on them. They tried again through the open frames when the glass was gone, and the frames burst into fire around them, the blue smoke bleached white in the yellow of the flame and the white of the searchlights. They tried singly, by stealth; and they tried in clusters of a dozen, yelling.

It was hopeless—hopeless for everybody, because they couldn't get in and the Greek could never, never get out; for go away they wouldn't. Not even when, with *poof* and a yellow flare, the gas tank of one of the cars exploded. All that happened was that the man in the snap-brimmed hat and I leaped out, real quick; and then all the cars went up. But the men didn't leave. And then the guns began to go off without waiting for anyone to pull the trigger; and the barrels softened and slumped and spattered to the ground. But the men still had bare hands, and they stayed.

The Greek got wild—or lost control, it was hard to tell which. There was a sudden catastrophic *whooshing* roar and, *wham*, a tree took flame for roots. A giant old oak, fifty feet tall, I guess it had been there a couple of centuries, but Greco's demons changed all that; it took flame and shot whistling into the air, spouting flame and spark like a Roman candle. Maybe he thought it would scare them. Maybe it did. But it also made them mad. And they ran, all at once, every one of them but my personal friend, for the biggest, openest of the windows—

And leaped back, cursing and yelling, beating out flames on their clothes.

Jets of flame leaped out of every window and door. The old building seemed to bulge outward and go *voom*. In half a second, it was a single leaping tulip of fire.

The firemen got there then, but it was a little late. Oh, they got Greco out—alive, even. But they didn't save a bit of the laboratory. It was the third fire in Greco's career, and the most dangerous—for where previously only a few of the youthing demons had escaped, now there were vast quantities of both sorts.

It was the end of the world.

I knew it.

You know, I wish I had been right. I spent yesterday with Greco. He's married now and has a fine young son. They made an attractive family picture, the two healthy-looking adults, strong-featured, in the prime of life, and the wee toddler between them.

The only thing is—Greco's the toddler.

He doesn't call himself Greco any more. Would you, the way the world is now? He has plenty of money stashed away—I do too, of course—not that money means very much these days. His brain hasn't been affected, just his body. He was lucky, I guess. Some of the demons hit the brain in some of their victims and—

Well, it's pretty bad.

Greco got the answer after a while. Both types of demons were loose in the world, and both, by and by, were in every individual.

But they didn't kill each other off.

One simply grew more rapidly, took over control, until it ran out of the kind of molecules it needed. Then the other took over.

Then the first.

Then the other again....

Mice are short-lived. It's like balancing a needle on the end of your nose; there isn't enough space in a mouse's short span for balance, any more than there is in a needle's.

But in a human life—

Things are going to have to be worked out, though.

It's bad enough that a family gets all mixed up the way Greco's is—he's on a descending curve, his kid is on an aging curve, and Minnie—did I tell you that it was Minnie he married?—has completed her second rejuvenation and is on the way back up again.

But there are worse problems than that.

For one thing, it isn't going to be too long before we run out of space. I don't mean time, I mean space. *Living* space.

Because it's all very well that the human animal should now mature to grow alternately younger and older, over and over—

But, damn it, how I wish that somebody once in a while would *die*!

—WILLIAM MORRISON

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A FEAST OF DEMONS ***

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