

TWELVE HOURS TO LIVE!

By JACK WILLIAMSON

Captain David Grant is faced with a desperate choice when he is pursued by an implacable vandal in the interstellar void!



WEARILY, Captain David Grant paced the bridge, pausing at intervals to peer out with heavy-lidded eyes at the star studded blackness of interplanetary space, beyond the small round observation ports.

For three days the Queen of Night, Grant's rocket liner, had been pursued by the implacable

vandal of the interstellar void, the Black Hawk.

For three days Captain Grant had kept his great space-liner, with her rich cargo of uranium salts from the mines on the outer satellite of Neptune and her hundreds of passengers, ahead of the questing disintegrator rays of the Black Hawk only by burning his full battery of reaction-motors at their maximum power.

And the fuel was almost gone—word had just come from the rocket rooms that the last chest of the radio active protonite had been opened. In a few minutes the great liner would be at the questionable mercy of the Black Hawk.

Slowly the vibrant humming of the motors, which had filled the great ship with a vital under-current of sound, died away.

The black pointer which indicated reaction-pressure crept back across its dial toward zero.

The Queen of Night was no longer accelerating her speed.

Watching keenly with tired eyes, Grant saw a vague pink glow come into being in the jet, star-sprinkled sky behind.

"Done for!" he groaned.

The glow, he knew, was a fluorescent, electric discharge in the radioactive gases jetting from the rockets of racing ship. The Black Hawk was swiftly overtaking them!

"Man the rays!"

The Captain spoke the order into the black mouthpiece below the television screen. He tried in vain to keep hopelessness from his voice. For what chance had the two feeble ray tubes of the Queen of Night, against the powerful armament of the Black Hawk?

His mate's square face appeared on the screen.

"Man the rays it is, sir," came his voice.

Captain Grant turned quickly away, for he heard a light footstep and a match of gay song from beyond the bridge-room's entrance.

The avoilt metal door swung open suddenly, and a gay, laughing sprite danced through.

"Nell! Nell! Darling—" the captain cried and his voice suddenly choked.

The radiant being ran across to him, in a fragrant mass of gleaming red-gold hair.

It was Captain Grant's lovely bride, whom he had married just before the beginning of the voyage. He had not told her of the vandal pursuing them—it had seemed to him a crime to blast her joyous happiness with helpless anxiety.

"What's the matter, Dave dear?" came her voice, half smothered in his embrace. "You seem worried lately—and you've been busy in here for three days and nights. You must sleep!"

"Look!" the Captain said, and pointed out through a port.

A thin sword of green stabbed across the blackness of the sky, darting like a wicked blade toward the liner.

"Oh, it's lovely!" she cried. "What is it, a comet?"

EDITOR'S NOTE



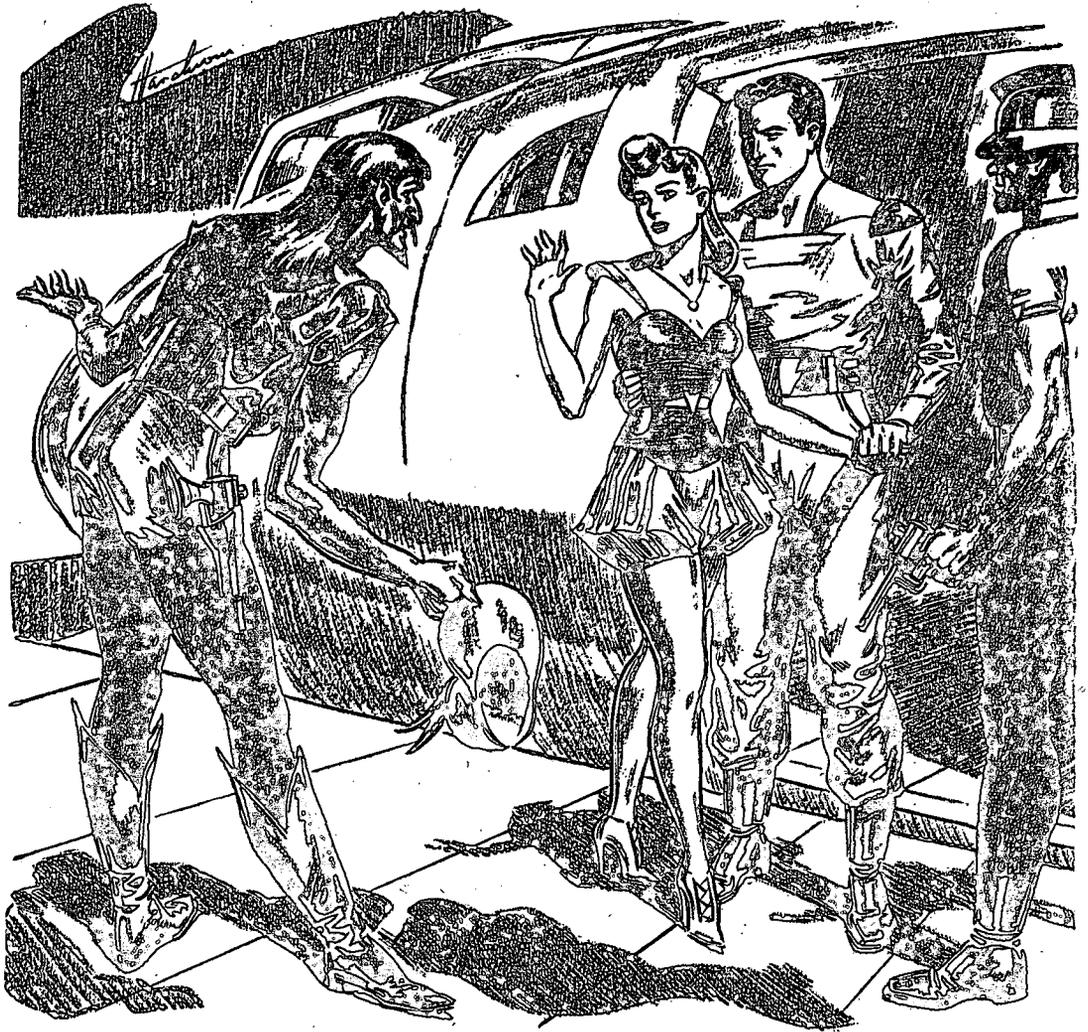
SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "Twelve Hours to Live!" by Jack Williamson, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFCTION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

In each issue we will honor one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

Nominate your own favorites! Send a letter or post-card to The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. All suggestions are more than welcome!



The space pirate bowed mockingly

His face grew white, his jaws set, lambent flame glowed in his blue eyes. His arms tightened fiercely about her.

"Nell, darling!" he cried.

He looked away, swallowed. In a moment he went on.

"I haven't told you, but the Black Hawk is after us. For three days we have been running for our lives. And it begins to look as if we had lost the race. You know it means—the Black Hawk! I didn't tell you; I didn't want you to worry."

Brown eyes looked up at him, wide with alarm.

"The Black Hawk! the pirate?" she cried. "But don't worry, Dave—I know you can fight him off!"

drew her close, kissed her shining mass of hair, her sweet face.

"Yes, we'll fight," he said fiercely. "We'll fight. And now you must go back below, dear. The bridge is too exposed, too dangerous."

"No, no!" she cried. "I'd rather stay with you."

Gently, he pushed her through the door.

Brushing the moisture from his eyes, he sprang back to the television screen, and began to give orders for the coming combat.

The humming song of the motors ceased. The indicator needle swung back to zero. The fuel was exhausted. The liner, drifting helpless, was completely at the mercy of the pursuing pirate.

And the pinkish glow in the sky behind grew more distinct, with the black outline of the pirate vessel in its center.

CAPTAIN GRANT'S eyes suddenly glistened, and he had to swallow again. He

Again and again, searching fingers of green flame reached out of that black ship. Green lances searching for the liner, to disintegrate the atoms of her armor into brown atomic dust, to cut away her walls so that the vital air would rush out, leaving passengers and crew asphyxiated in a frozen vacuum.

"Hold our fire," Grant ordered. "That's the only chance—wait until they are in easy range."

Minutes throbbed by.

The Black Hawk hurtled on toward the liner, until the sinister curves of its ebon hull were plainly visible.

Three times the green tongues of the pirate's disintegrating rays swept across the helpless ship. But the hull was not broken; the pirate sought to plunder rather than to destroy.

Captain Grant nervously paced the bridge. Each time the blasting green fire of the enemy rays had fallen upon them, he had turned uncertainly toward the television screen, with the order to fire trembling on his lips.

And each time he had checked himself.

"Wait, wait!" he had muttered again and again. "Not yet!"

At last the trim ebon length of the pirate vessel was close beside the liner, airfoils folded to her smooth hull, little jets of rosy flame hissing occasionally from her rockets to hold her in position.

"Do you surrender?" the query flicked from the heliograph of the enemy. A swinging mirror reflected the light of the distant sun.

"Fire!" Captain Grant shouted toward his television screen, by the way of answer.

The lone bow turret of the Queen of Night swung suddenly about. Twin narrow tongues of bright fire flashed from it like lances of emerald. The black hull of the pirate shone green where they struck.

A dreadful reply came from the Black Hawk.

Myriad arrowed rays leapt from her black length, sparkling jets of green radiance. They converged upon the silver-armored turret from which stabbed the two defensive beams.

Brown powder swirled away from the turret—neutronic dust, matter annihilated as such, when its electrons had been hurled into central protons by the ray.

The turret glowed green, crumpled, vanished.

A swirl of brown dust clouded the blackness of space.

Captain Grant groaned, and clutched the edge of an instrument panel until his knuckles shone white.

"Do you surrender?" The heliograph flashed again.

The captain made no move to reply. But

he was without resource. He could neither fight nor run. He could merely pace up and down the bridge like a caged animal, as he watched the tiny auxiliary rockets putting off from the pirate, and darting across toward the liner, under cover of the threatening rays.

He was helpless as they fastened themselves upon the liner with magnetic clamps, and began cutting openings through her hull. He could only have the ship's meager supply of hand arms served out, and the crew stationed to repel the invaders.

The fighting was bloody but hopeless. Half an hour later the Queen of Night was in the hands of the individual who gave the same grim name, the Black Hawk, to himself and his ship alike.

NELL had come back to the bridge. She and the captain had barred the door. They were in each others' arms when it was broken down.

To Captain Grant's surprise, he and his bride were treated with elaborate, though mocking, courtesy. They were conducted to one of the auxiliary rockets attached to the doomed liner, and transported across to the black ship.

When the little vessel had slipped through the airlocks of the larger one, and they stepped from it, the Black Hawk himself greeted them.

A tall man, suavely polite, immaculately attired. His hair was long, lustrous, silken, brilliantly black.

Even his eyes, cold and mocking, were black as jet.

He bowed deliberately to Nell, and seized Captain Grant's hand with effusive mocking cordiality.

"Congratulations, Captain," he cried in a voice that was low, cold, and toneless. "Your defense was excellent, considering the disadvantages under which you struggled. Your flight, with the clever twists to evade me! Your cleverness in withholding your fire to the last moment! You have given the most diverting hours I have had in months. I am deeply in your debt."

"Thank you," the Captain said, ironically. "I assure that I really owe you much," the Black Hawk insisted. "I see that you doubt my sincerity. To prove it, shall I grant some request for you?"

The lean, dark face of the pirate twisted into a cold, mocking smile that was almost a leer.

"Honestly, do you mean it?" the captain demanded, with eagerness and doubt mingled in his tone.

"Certainly. But name your wish."

"Will you spare my wife. Take her back to some civilized planet?"

For long seconds, the dark visaged man stared at the captain and his lovely bride. Suddenly he appeared to think of something that pleased him hugely, for his white teeth gleamed in a sinister smile, and his black eyes flashed diabolically.

"With all my heart!" his cold voice cried. "And since I fear the lady would find little joy in a life without you, I shall also set you at liberty!"

With tears of joy in his eyes, the captain grasped the Black Hawk's cold hand.

"Come," the pirate said. "Forget the favor, if such it is. You have earned it. Your wife will be shown to her rooms, and we shall watch the fate of those prisoners who were not so fortunate as yourself."

The Black Hawk led Captain Grant away through the rocket's maze of passages, and a servant guided Nell to the luxurious stateroom.

The Captain never forgot the horror of what followed.

The mocking, saturnine pirate conducted him into a domed room, whose curved walls and roof glistened with silvery brilliance.

The floor of that room was transparent crystal. Beneath was a large circular compartment, without visible openings. Its floor was covered with a curious red substance, in oddly shaped masses. Grant shuddered as he saw those crumbling red forms. They looked weirdly like decayed statues. They were horrible travesties of human shapes.

"The space below us," the Black Hawk explained, in his chill, mocking voice, "contains a certain variety of crimson fungus. The original spores came from the jungles of the third satellite of Neptune.

"The fungi, you know, are a group of thallophytic plants, of which molds and mushrooms are members. They are devoid of the chlorophyll to which green plants owe their color. Reproduction is largely by means of asexual spores. A characteristic is the great speed with which some varieties grow.

"This particular type has a peculiar avidity for human flesh, and grows with unprecedented speed. It amuses me to watch its development upon the bodies of my less fortunate captives. But watch the results for yourself!"

A panel had suddenly slid open into the space below the crystal floor. A man, stripped to the waist, whom the captain recognized as a luckless engineer from his crew, was thrown into the strange room. The panel instantly closed.

The naked man fell on his face in a cloud of red dust. In a moment he stumbled to his feet, coughing, gasping, strangling, beating wildly at his face.

The Black Hawk touched a lever that

seemed to close the circuit of a microphone. Instantly the captain heard a scream of insupportable agony from below.

The man below the crystal floor darted madly through the red dust, hammered wildly on the walls with bare fists, shrieking, moaning, pleading for aid, praying.

Suddenly his tortured body stiffened, grew rigid. Curious masses of scarlet filaments of hypha, resembling tufts of red hair, sprang from his nostrils, eyes and ears.

Crimson growth spread swiftly, until the body seemed covered with red fur.

And in a few moments it fell over, crumbling, with a crimson cloud of spores swirling about it.

"What do you think of my hobby?" The Black Hawk inquired with a taunting smile.

Captain Grant was sick with horror.

"You—you demon!" he choked.

Blind rage suddenly overcame his shuddering horror.

Clenching a fist, he swung abruptly upon the satanic pirate.

THE Black Hawk's hand came up swiftly, holding a tiny but deadly ray tube.

"You forget yourself, Captain," he said. "Remember that I promised to spare you and your wife from undergoing the little ceremony we just witnessed. Do not make me recall that promise."

The captain fell back before the menace of the weapon, suddenly weak and trembling.

"Let me out of this infernal place," he muttered.

The Black Hawk called a steward to show him to his room.

For a week Captain Grant and his wife were enforced guests of the pirate, treated with deliberate, if taunting courtesy.

The black rocket, laden with plunder, continued her restless cruise of the void.

Then, after a night of troubled sleep, the captain awoke to find Nell gone from the luxurious stateroom which they occupied.

At once, he sought the Black Hawk, who greeted him with his usual half-sneering politeness.

"Your wife is slightly unwell," his cold tone informed Captain Grant. "She has the attention of my specialists. You need fear nothing on her account.

"And you will be interested," he added, "to know that we are soon to part. In a few hours we enter the atmosphere of the planet Venus. You and your wife will be landed there today. I regret that I must lose your companionship."

"Whatever happens to me, please don't harm Nell," the Captain pleaded.

"My word is still good," the Black Hawk said coldly.

Several hours later, somewhat to the surprise of Captain Grant, the rocket landed on firm ground. He was assisted from the port, and looked about anxiously.

The slender black hull of the rocket lay on a bare sandy beach. Above it rose a barren gray rock. A vast waste of green-grey ocean stretched away in all directions. Dense gray clouds filled the sky.

The tall form of the Black Hawk stepped out beside him. "An island on the planet Venus," he said. "It's less than a thousand miles to the city of Thalong, from which aid can reach you."

"But my wife—" the captain cried.

"Here she is."

The Black Hawk pointed to two large chests, of a white, silvery metal, which the crew were busy lowering through the port. In a moment they lay side by side on the sandy beach.

"Your wife is in one of them," the pirate said, with a demoniac smile. "She is under a mild anaesthetic which will keep her sleeping for twelve hours. The chest contains sufficient air to last that long, and no longer. It contains also a supply of food and water, and a portable radio transmitter, with which you may summon aid. The chest is not locked. You have merely to lift the lid."

"And the other chest?" The Captain's voice was anxious.

"Ah! the other chest!" The Black Hawk smiled. "The other chest! It is filled with spores of crimson fungus. If you, by any unfortunate mistake, open it, a cloud of the spores will instantly fly out and settle on your skin. You will meet the fate of the man we watched through the crystal floor."

"Which chest—" Captain Grant cried, his voice trembling.

"Ah yes, which chest!" The Black Hawk's suave tone replied. "That is for you to decide. Remember your wife will live only twelve hours, if the chest is not opened. And goodbye, my friend."

Leaving Captain Grant shaken and speechless, the pirate of space sprang back through the port. Roseate flame hissed from the exhaust nozzles of the long black ship. It leapt up to vanish in the gray clouds.

The captain was left alone with the chests.

They seemed identical in every respect. The ornate pattern engraved in the silvery metal was the same on each chest. They were roughly three feet square by six in length.

The captain fell furiously to examining them. He could detect no faintest difference. He held his ear against each, in hope that some faint sound of breathing might reach him, to reveal which held his precious Nell. But he heard nothing.

He left the chests and walked anxiously

up and down the beach, gazing wildly over the desert of water, staring into the gray gloom of the sky. Many times his heart leapt, as he thought he glimpsed a distant rocket plane. And always it fell again, when he found his eagerness had deceived him.

He turned again to the bright chests, lying side by side on the white sand. He ran from the one to the other listening, feeling them, even tugging a little at the lids.

His brain was a wild chaos of wonder. Suppose the Black Hawk had tricked him? Suppose the chests were empty? Suppose both contained the fatal spores? Suppose his lovely Nell were in the one and the food and radio set in the other?

Again he walked up and down beside them, thinking madly. Hours went by, and he must soon release his wife or she would be suffocated.

Impulsively, he bent to raise the lid of the nearest. His eyes caught fine letters engraved on the edge of the silvery lid.

The Other One.

The Black Hawk had cut it there. A warning. Captain Grant ran to the other chest. But with his hand on the lid, he paused, trembling, his body clammy with a cold sweat.

Might the warning be false? Had the letters been cut there to cause him to open the deadly chest? Or did the pirate intend the words to save his life?

He ran back toward the first chest, he stopped, and collapsed in a trembling heap. Cold sweat chilled him; a strange dizziness came over him, his throat was dry; he trembled.

But the time was up—he must delay no longer. He tottered to his feet, ran back to the chest without the warning, tugged at the lid. Dizzy weakness overcame him.

"A trick," he muttered.

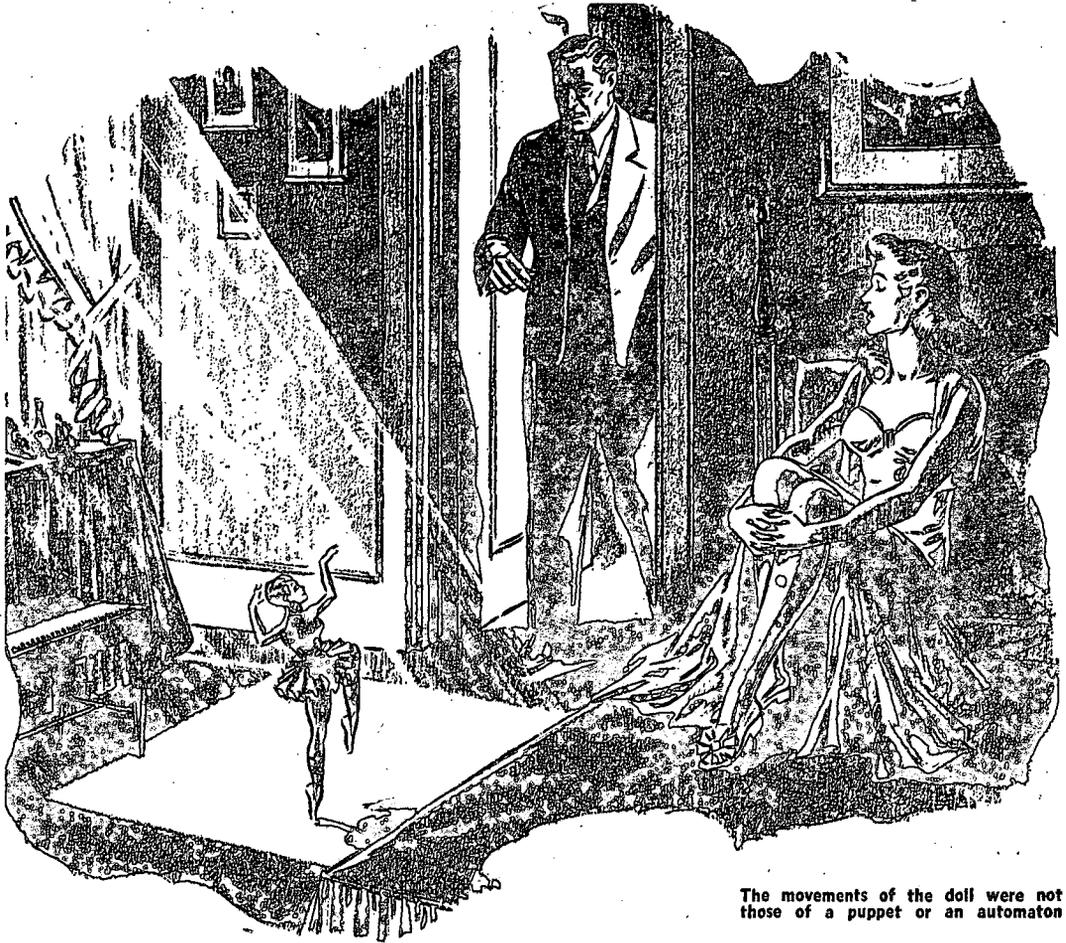
HE TURNED and staggered to the other, and grasped the lid. The inscribed words, "The Other One" caught his eye again. He recoiled as from a deadly snake.

He ran away from the chests, stumbling across the sand, eyes wild with fear. He imagined the swift red mould growing over him, choking him, converting him into a rotting, crumbling mass.

He would not open the chest! There was a fair chance that he would be discovered by some passing air-liner before he starved to death.

Then the hideous vision of the death of the scarlet fungus was dispelled by a picture of Nell as she had been on the recent wedding day. Happy, singing, gloriously lovely, devoted to him. She was in one of the chests,

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The movements of the doll were not those of a puppet or an automaton

THE DARK ANGEL

By HENRY KUTTNER

Tim Hathaway sensed that his wife was growing different—but it took him a long time to learn just why!

JUKE-BOX music roared through the smoky gin-mill. The old man I was looking for sat in a booth far back, staring at nothing, his shaking, veined hands gripping a tiny glass. I recognized him.

He was the one. He could tell me what I wanted to know. After what I had seen tonight, at the Metropolitan—

He was already drunk. His eyes were dull and glazed. As I slid into the booth beside him, I heard him mumbling something, over and over.

"The doll—Joanna, you shouldn't—Joanna—"

He was lost in the dream-world of alcoholism. He saw me, and he didn't see me. I was one of the phantoms of memory that thronged about him.

"Tell me about it," I said.

And even that, from a stranger, couldn't penetrate the mists that fogged his brain. The soul was gone from him. He reacted like a puppet to my words. Once or twice I had to put a few questions to him, but he

answered them—and went on—coming back always to Joanna, and the doll.

I was sorry for him. He was already damned. But it was my business to find out the truth about what had happened at the Metropolitan an hour ago.

"A long time ago," he said thickly. "That's when it started. The night we had that big snowfall, when—or even before that? I don't know."

He didn't know. Later, after the change had begun to be noticeable, he tried to remember, to dredge from his memory tiny incidents that might have been significant. Yet how was he to tell with any certainty?

Gestures, words, actions that might once have seemed perfectly normal were now, in retrospect, freighted with a subtle flavor of horrible uncertainty. But on the night of the snowstorm he had first begun to wonder.

He was forty then, Joanna thirty-five. They had begun to consider settling down to a comfortable middle age, and there was no reason why they shouldn't. Tim Hathaway had risen, in twenty years, from a junior clerk in an advertising firm to general manager, with a good salary and no worries worth mentioning.

They had an apartment in Manhattan, and a bad-tempered little Pekingese named Tzu-Ling. There were no children. Both Tim and Joanna would have welcomed a couple of kids, but it just hadn't turned out that way.

A nice-looking pair, the Hathaways—Joanna with her hair still jet-black, her skin smooth and unlined, and a fresh, sparkling vigor about her—Tim a solid, quiet man with a gentle face and streaks of gray at his temples.

They were beginning to be invited to dinners with the conservative set, but every so often they'd have a quiet binge to keep the grass green.

"But not too green," Joanna said, as the big sedan toiled down the Henry Hudson Parkway with flurries of snow racing toward the windshield. "That gin wasn't so hot."

"Cigarette, please, dear," Tim said. "Thanks. Well, I don't know where Sanderson gets his liquor, but I think he must dredge it up out of the East River. My stomach's rumbling."

"Watch that—" She spoke too late. Out of the blurry storm twin headlights rushed at them.

Tim swung the wheel desperately and felt the sick twisting of gravity that meant a bad skid. In a moment the sedan jolted and stopped. Tim cursed quietly and got out.

"Our rear wheels are in the ditch," he told

Joanna through the open window. "You'd better get out. Even with our lights on, a car wouldn't be able to see us till it was too late."

He contemplated the prospect of having the sedan smashed into a heap of junk, and it seemed the likeliest possibility. As Joanna's fur-coated figure joined him, he bent, gripped the rear bumper and heaved mightily. But he couldn't budge the car's enormous weight.

Grunting, he let go.

"I'll see if I can gun her out," he said. "Wait out-here a minute, Jo, and yell if a car comes."

"Okay."

HE played the clutch and gunned the motor. Then, with catastrophic suddenness, he saw the reflected gleam of headlights approaching.

It was too late to avoid a crash. He jammed his foot on the accelerator, felt the rear wheels skid around without traction—and suddenly, incredibly, the car *jumped*. There was no other word for it. Someone or something had lifted the sedan and thrust it forward on to the road.

Instinctive reflex made him jockey accelerator and steering-wheel. The other car sped by, missing him by a fraction. White-faced, Tim eased the sedan to the side of the road and got out.

A dark figure loomed through the snowy gusts.

"Joanna?"

There was a pause.

"Yes, Tim."

"What happened?"

"I—don't know."

"You didn't try to lift the car!" But he knew that was impossible.

Yet Joanna hesitated.

"No," she said suddenly. "There must have been solid ground under the snow back there."

"Sure," Tim said. He got a flashlight, went back to the ditch, and made a brief examination.

"Yeah," he said unconvinced.

They were both silent on the way home. Tim had caught a glimpse of Joanna's grease-smudged gloves.

A small thing—yet it was the beginning. For Tim knew quite well that the car had been *lifted* out of the ditch, and a frail woman of Joanna's build couldn't possibly have managed it.

But their doctor, Farleigh, an endocrinologist, talked to Tim a few weeks later.

"Tell Joanna to come in and see me," he said. "She hasn't been around for quite a while."